



Giving voice to “Memoirs and Memories” at the Calandra Institute

Marina Melchionda (February 05, 2009)

Each victim has a different experience of the Holocaust. The Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, welcomed four eminent speakers who shared their stories, sentiments, and memories with the large audience gathered for the last event of the week dedicated to Remembrance Day.

The last event organized this year to commemorate Remembrance Day was hosted and organized by the Calandra Italian American Institute. “Memoirs and Memories” featured four speakers of different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds who recounted their own personal and professional experiences of the Fascist persecution of Jews. The Institute, said [Dean Anthony Julian Tamburri](#) [1], had several reasons to organize an event of this kind: first, because it is dedicated to the research and promotion of all things having to do with the Italian American experience; second, because, although the majority of Italian Americans are Catholic, there are still many who practice other religions such as Judaism; and third, because promoting a more intimate knowledge of Italy and its culture and history certainly contributes to the institute’s mission.

People began arriving at 10:30 a.m. From i-Italy’s office I could hear the chatter in the hall. I noticed many familiar faces that I had met earlier in the week at various events organized in conjunction with Remembrance Day. The [Consul General Francesco Maria Talò](#) [2] and [Stella Levi, member of the Board of the Primo Levi Cente](#) [3], were among them. I felt proud to be sharing this kind of experience with them. It was as though we had all taken a journey together and I think that the event organized by the Calandra Institute was the fitting end. During the previous events we had analyzed the Holocaust from diverse points of view, from the historical and academic to the sociological and political. Now it was time for individuals to come forward and share their personal experiences and sentiments. This is the reason why we celebrate this day each and every year, and why we will continue to do so. We could read hundreds of history books and elaborate on dozens of theories, but if we don’t feel the necessary empathy, if we don’t believe that what happened to the Jews more than forty years ago has inevitably affected the lives of the rest of us as well, then everything we are doing is useless. History is not made up of books, dates, and battles. It is made up of our own personal experiences. The death of all those victims, the exile, the separation of entire families – they are the Holocaust. On Friday, January 31, the Calandra Institute gave voice to those people.

Before the symposium started the Consul General Talò gave an overview of the activities and events organized during the week to commemorate Remembrance Day. His were words of praise towards



the directors of the various Italian institutions and academic centers who cooperated in this common effort, in the spirit of the so-called “Sistema Italia” (Italian System). The first speaker, introduced by moderator Vincenzo Pascale ([Rutgers University](#) [4]), was John Locicero. In his long career as a Democratic politician in New York, during which he held many important positions such as President of the Village Independent Democratic Club and one of Mayor Koch’s chief political operatives, he had the chance to interact with the Jewish community of New York. With a very funny and moving speech, he also retraced his youth in the East Village where he lived with his family next door to his grandmother’s house. There he would hang out with kids from different races and cultures, including Jews. “We never asked about each other’s faith or backgrounds. We just played.” Yes, that’s what children do. Is it necessary to emphasize racial and cultural differences? Can’t we just live in peace without creating this kind of (non-existent) problem? This seemed to be the point behind his words. He noticed that as the years passed and he became an adult, he saw the xenophobia around him: “Fascist propaganda was growing stronger and stronger in the Italian American community. Not that we supported Mussolini and his racist ideas, but our people had a different kind of ‘Jewish problem.’ Jews who managed to escape from Nazi Europe and come to America were almost considered to be intruders. In the middle of the Depression they were coming to our cities and taking our jobs. For the most part, this is the way they were viewed at the time.”

More than an observer, Professor [Robert Zweig \(Borough of Manhattan Community College](#) [5]) experienced the tragedy of the Holocaust within his own family. His parents were both Jewish: his German father survived Auschwitz and along with his Neapolitan mother they immigrated to the United States in 1946. He shares these memories in his autobiography *Return to Naples: My Italian Bar Mitzvah and Other Discoveries*. He read an excerpt of his book in which he describes his mother’s difficulties in her native land; she continued to love Italy even though she was rejected and treated like a stranger there. His life is a journey into the past and present of the Jewish community in Naples where he visited his grandmother for three months every year until he turned 15. He was completely fascinated by the city, by the people who lived there, and by the Jewish community that attended his bar mitzvah. His memories have the bitter aftertaste of melancholy.

The first part of the conference saw us curious and anxious to hear the next testimonies. After having tasted a slice of kosher pizza gently offered by the Calandra Institute, at 1:00 pm we all returned to the conference room. The Italian Jewish journalist Gianna Pontecorboli and Simona McCray-Pekelis were waiting for us. As for the others, they were introduced by moderator Pascale, who competently directed the whole symposium.

Gianna Pontecorboli had a rich debate with people from the public. A lady, as an example, recounted the generosity of the Italian people who helped her family escape. Her husband’s family in Sardinia managed to hide in the mountains near Cagliari, aided by peasants from the surrounding area. “They considered us Italians; in their eyes we were their fellow citizens and they felt the need to protect us. I think this is very indicative of the Italian attitude in general,” she said.

Mrs. Pontecorboli had experienced the generosity of Italian people too: thanks to their kindness, she and her family were able to get false IDs and hide from the Nazis. With a soft smile on her face she recalled: “It was very hard to convince my sisters that our name was no longer Pontecorboli but Prosperi.” Of course, there had been people who betrayed their Jewish neighbors and friends but, as she remembered, most “normal people” were willing to help. Although her memories were painful she left us with hope and a hint of optimism.

[Professor Stanislao Pugliese, Hostra University](#), [6] closed the symposium with his essay “Primo Levi and the Double Bind/Bond of Memory.” Although he didn’t personally suffer the tragedy of the Holocaust, it has become the focus of his research. Levi committed suicide as Pugliese was about to graduate. He had just finished reading *A Survivor in Auchwitz*, an account that deeply shocked and moved him. From that time on Levi “haunted” him. He decided that he was a good ghost to have



around because “Levi reminded me of things that we should always keep in mind.”

The essay is an introduction to a forthcoming collection entitled *Answering Auschwitz: Primo Levi’s Science and Humanism After the Fall*. According to Professor Pugliese, the Holocaust is the second fall in humanity’s history. (The first took place in the Garden of Eden.) Levi, he explained, was stuck in an impossible double bind. On the one hand, there was the necessity of recording and recounting an event for which he felt he didn’t have the proper conceptual and linguistic tools. On the other, the difficulty of translating his memories into words had to be overcome in order to use his experience as a weapon against possible future “falls.”

He ended by quoting an excerpt of an article written by Levi in the *Corriere della Sera* (1974), the leading Italian daily newspaper:

“We must remember that every age has its own Fascism. And we see the sign whenever the concentration of power denies the means and possibility to act according to one’s free will. There are many ways to reach this point: not just through the terror of police intimidation but by denying and distorting information, by undermining the system of justice, by paralyzing the education system, by spreading nostalgia for a world where order reigns and the security of the privileged depends on the forced labor and the forced silence of men.”

(Edited by Giulia Prestia)

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- [2] http://www.consnewyork.esteri.it/Consolato_NewYork/Menu/II_Consolato/II_Console/
- [3] <http://www.primolevicenter.org/About.html>
- [4] <http://www.rutgers.edu/>
- [5] <http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/news.jsp?id=498>
- [6] http://people.hofstra.edu/Stanislaw_Pugliese/