



Italy and the memories of the Holocaust: the Auschwitz paradox.

From the myth of innocence to a selective remembrance

(in light of the memories of the Holocaust in the Netherlands)

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According to the world ranking of number of visitors carried out by the Auschwitz Museum, Italy consistently holds one of the top positions. This is mainly thanks to the phenomenon of the Memorial Trains, which have taken on unmatched dimensions in Europe since 2002. It is an initiative fueled by good intentions, idealism and political activism, which seem to draw strength from a common belief, that has evolved into an unquestionable dogma. People want to learn about history, understand it and draw moral lessons for the present. The method considered more effective today is an educational group visit to the remains of the Birkenau crematoria. In other words, the dual objective of imparting good instruction on the history of the Holocaust and of inducing a sense of responsibility in the young participants of today is provided by observing the depths of the horror in which humans could directly participate at the site of the catastrophe.

However, despite this desire, animated by the best intentions, no national museum dedicated to the Holocaust (although three are now being planned) yet exists in Italy nor does a documentation center on the crimes of Fascism. Moreover, little is known about the important locations related to the persecution of Jews in the peninsula and, as a consequence, they are rarely visited. These places include Ferramonti di Tarsia in the Calabria region, the largest internment camp under the Mussolini regime and Fossoli di Carpi, one of the main transit camps from which over a third of Italian Jews (including Primo Levi) were deported to Auschwitz. According to the World Monuments Fund the latter risks closure because of its state of abandonment.

The "Auschwitz paradox" which marks the memory of the Italian Holocaust can be summarized in the clear disproportion between the centrality and redundancy that the recollections of this event have occupied in Italian public discussions for at least a quarter of a century. It also includes the partial and selective view that the transmission of this remembrance continues to confirm in the collective consciousness. This tragedy seems to have been inherited as a foreign body in the history of the nation, through the compliance of the Republic of Salò with the Nazi occupiers, rather than being fully attributable to the choices and political responsibilities of the nation itself.

Preferring lessons on the Birkenau gas chambers, or moreover, concentrating the historical story on the end of the event rather than on its beginning risks not only confusion in the narration of the Italian Holocaust, but also making those chapters of history previous to the deportations from Italy to Auschwitz (and other camps) seem less important. As no Jews under Italian dominion were either handed over to the Germans or deported before autumn of 1943, an explanatory paradigm persists according to which the enactment of the anti-Semitic laws sanctioning the exclusion of Jews from the national community and the dispossession of their assets and their rights, adopted independently by the Fascist state, would have coincided, all in all, with not such a tragic period.

If the historic-graphical research showed that the two phases of the Italian Holocaust, that of the legal and social persecution (1938-1943) and that of the physical persecution of Italian Jews (1943-1945), were quite distinct and non-overlapping, it is also true that the methods of transmitting this tragedy, history textbooks used in schools to start with, not always adequately highlighted and understood that the success of the policy of deportation was also the result of the bureaucratic efficiency of Fascism. By isolating and registering its Jewish citizens, the Italian regime cultivated its hatred for years, broke the bonds of solidarity existing between Italian Jews and non-Jews and, as a result, facilitated the task of the German occupiers who provided complete lists of the victims.

Despite the presence of omissions in some history books and school textbooks, the proclamation of the 1938 racial laws is no longer subject to amnesia or to historical understatement. However, a self-exculpatory narrative scheme remains rooted in the Italian collective memory. This scheme nurtures a strange process, which, on one hand, invokes the duty of remembrance and increases the mass tours to Auschwitz and, on the other, avoids totally dealing with a past of which we are ashamed for the general indifference in which the Italian Jews were abandoned to their own fate.

In addition, there is an altogether naive or liberal vision of the national history, under which the salvation of two thirds of the local community depended on the general attitude of Italian benevolence. This is stereotypical of a good portion of common opinions, even beyond borders and in certain areas of the academic world. However, if the number of Jewish survivors (nearly 80%) seems to accredit this tragedy, even at international level, as being smaller than that of other countries, it must be noted that the persecution was carried out both by the Italian Fascist authorities and Germans with great determination. It is true that the deportation was delayed and only part of the country was involved geographically, however, the fact that the majority of the captured Jews were destined for Auschwitz with no return cannot be overlooked.

The salvation of more than two-thirds of the local community was certainly the work of decent and kind-hearted Italians, but it also depended on several factors which must be analyzed historically and with greater attention than has already been carried out in hasty literary or film reconstructions. In the same way, specific elements of the Italian Holocaust in respect to those of other Jewish communities, in particular the Netherlands where 80% of the Jews were deported and killed, should be studied and understood.

Despite the great amount of documentation available today, the progress of historiography and the publication of numerous local studies highlighting the different contexts and methods of the

persecutions from region to region, the transmission of the Holocaust in Italy continues to be substantiated with symbolism, idealism and fictionalized accounts of reality that make the awareness of Italian responsibility, made up of silences, denunciations and complicity, increasingly opaque and distant in the collective consciousness.

Can some parallels be drawn with the extremely different history of the Holocaust in the Netherlands in order to better understand if the situation in Italy represents an exemplary case or even a constant feature of the Western European memory?

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