

Reflections on “Giorno della Memoria”

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On January 27, the “Giorno Della Memoria” (or Holocaust Memorial Day), will be celebrated in Italy for the 15th year, perhaps enough to make a provisional assessment and some reflections. Meanwhile in New York City, a civil ceremony will take place outdoors, in front of the Italian Consulate. Starting in the morning and extending into the day, we will read the names of each one of the roughly 9,000 Jews deported from Italy and the Italian occupied areas.

Over the past seventy-one years, European nations have dealt in



different ways with education, memorialization and remembrance of the Shoah. In 1999 Germany and France —following efforts by the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, an intergovernmental organization— established January 27 (the day of the liberation of Auschwitz) as a Remembrance Day for the victims of Fascism and Nazism.

In July 2000, the Italian Parliament, following a proposal by Senator Furio Colombo, established Giorno Della Memoria on the same date. Subsequently all countries of the European Union followed through. In 2006 the United Nations adopted January 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The long and uneasy path that brought to the approval of this law —as well as it’s ambiguous formulation— is an indication of a divided historical consciousness on the subject among Italian political parties.

In broad brushstrokes, one can think of the post war era as divided into three phases: a first period of prolonged silence about the Italian participation to the Shoah, a second period leading up to the establishment of Giorno Della Memoria, followed by a third period— the present time— when, according to some, the yearly ritual, high sounding rhetoric, and overexposure, risks robbing the commemoration of its intended meaning.

The horrors of the Shoah were made possible by regimes that turned citizens into “subjects”. One of the Fascist mottos was “credere, obbedire, combattere” (believe, obey, fight) an exhortation that translates into a renunciation of the fundamental responsibilities of a full citizen. Fascist laws were meant to be applied blindly. They required citizens to give up any critical thinking and improvised behavior. The Fascist abhorred improvisation. If one thinks of improvisation in the broadest terms —as the capacity we all have to perceive, think and act in real time— one realizes that this covers almost everything we do, all day, spontaneously, each day of our life. Further, improvisation is the universal human response to emergencies. So the Fascists laws that brought about the outrage of the Shoah, demanded, among other things, that we give up this distinguished feature of our humanity.

The first questions that comes to mind are, how can a society gain historical awareness about events that its educational system, public opinion and legislators largely ignored for half a century? And further,

can a new national recurrence, modify collective memory of the recent past?

Perhaps one must begin by reflecting on the distance between history and memory.

Collective memory is the shared pool of knowledge and information in the memories of a social group. It is passed from one generation to another, and is a mental construct. Different groups construct and elaborate their own collective memories, that is, the Italian Jewish minority preserves a different collective memory from that of the die hard Fascists of the Italian Social Republic. Collective memories are formed through interpretation of inner realities, opinions and perceptions.

History on the other hand, is a rigorous social science that adopts shared sources and methodology to inquire into the past. Although historians are influenced by their own loyalties, their findings are based on the critical examination of sources and on the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods. In other words historical findings are what is commonly referred to as “facts”.

During the past fifteen to twenty years a remarkable new generation of Italian historians has done extensive research on the Fascist regime, the persecution and deportation of the Jews, as well as and on the behavior of the Italian Army in Italian occupation areas. Their findings point to among other things, first to the responsibility of the Fascist Regime in the persecution of the Jews and later the Italians’s participation/collaboration in the Nazi deportation and extermination of the Jews from Italy. The researchers at the Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea in Milan have ascertained that fifty per cent of the documented arrests of Italian Jews were carried out by Italians.

And yet the wealth of new data and new interpretations of events brought to light by historians has not impacted significantly the Italian public opinion, who by and large continues to believe the Shoah to have been caused and carried out by the Nazis.

Therefore perhaps, Giorno della Memoria faces the tall order of bridging the gap between conflicting collective memories and historical facts. It is uncertain to what degree this has begun to happen, or can happen,

yet we remain steadfast in our belief that Giorno della Memoria can be a tool toward that aim.

We are aware of the risk of turning the commemoration into a display of rhetoric, in putting together unrelated things and on shifting the focus away from what actually occurred in Italy to Italians by Italians. This occurs each time a self-absolving comparative yardstick is used, by which the Shoah in Italy was but a footnote to the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis in other countries.

We feel that the challenge of Remembrance Day in the coming years is, while stressing the unique circumstances that brought about the Shoah, to also realize that the societies in which the extermination of the Jews and other groups took place was made up of people like us. Today, political, religious and ethnic intolerance and the plight of millions of refugees, bring about the resurgence of similar conditions.

Among the diverse initiatives spanning from roundtables, book presentations, and film screenings, we are most proud of the establishment of a civil ceremony we have been holding yearly on January 27, outdoors, in front of the Consulate. There, starting in the morning and extending into the day, we read the names of each one of the roughly 9,000 Jews deported from Italy and the Italian occupied areas. By simply pronouncing out their names, we feel we give them back a dignity that deportation and a tattooed number had robbed them of. We are not asking participants to remember them, but rather to pay homage with a simple solemn gesture. If this reading can do little for the dead, we feel it certainly enriches our collective human experience.

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