

## **Being a Fascist Jew in Autumn 1938: Self-portrayals from the “Discrimination” Requests Addressed to the Regime**

*by Enrica Asquer*

### **Abstract**

*This article investigates how Fascists qualified as belonging to the “Jewish race” reacted to the proclamation of the “Laws for the Defense of the Race” and, in particular, how they tried to take advantage of the special legal treatment called “discrimination”, that allowed them to avoid some of the effects of the anti-Semitic legislation. In fact, together with its persecutory measures, the Royal Decree of November 17, 1938, granted some slight dispensations to “Jewish” Italian citizens who could prove to have special merits in the military, political or economic spheres. Drawing on a sample of Milanese Jews’ personal dossiers submitted to the General Directorate for Demography and Race in 1938-1939, this article analyses the self-portrayals strategically devised by those who declared themselves Fascists, in order to illustrate the ‘good Fascist’ reference profiles they crafted and, indirectly, the varying conceptions of Fascism and Nation which had been at the basis of their closeness to the regime.*

### **Introduction**

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### **Introduction**

On December 14 1938 the Milan based lawyer Franco Segré sent a succinct letter to the Ministry for Internal Affairs, General Directorate for Demography and Race.<sup>1</sup> In the form of a list, he set out his many personal civil, political and military merits and he attached seven supporting documents. The goal of the letter was to request express “access to the benefits of discrimination<sup>2</sup> as set out in article 14 of Royal Decree Law of November 17, 1938-XVII and retain his right to serve his country in the party rank and file, militia and royal air force.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a research which started in 2013 within the framework of a research program devoted to the topic “Models of Minorities’ Integration” funded by Compagnia San Paolo Foundation (Turin) and coordinated by Luciano Allegra at the University of Turin. I would like to thank Luciano Allegra and the other members of the research group for giving me precious suggestions during our seminars and discussions. I also thank Michele Sarfatti for encouraging me and reading everything I wrote on this subject.

<sup>2</sup> The meaning of the word in this context will be explained in this first section.

<sup>3</sup> Franco Segré to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, Demographics and Race Division, Milan, December 14, 1938, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (from now on ACS), Ministero degli Interni (from now on MI), Direzione Generale per la Demografia e la Razza (from now on Dgdr), Divisione Razza (from now on Dr), bundle 254, f. 17953 DIS, Segré Franco, son of the late Remo and Emma Calvo, and his wife Cesarina Volterra. For every citation from sources the translation is mine.

Born in Milan in 1901 “of Israelite (Jewish) parentage and Israelite in religion from birth,” Segré presented himself as a Fascist right from the start. He had joined the *Fasci di Combattimento* in 1921. In August 1922, with the blackshirts of the local *Sciesa* group (Milan centre), he had taken part in the assault on the headquarters of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!*. As a member of the *Pensuti-Aviatori Fascisti* Group, whose directorate he had joined since its foundation, he had carried out “the first Italian parachute jump with an Italian parachute and officially in a blackshirt (Blackshirt Pensuti action for the *Ala Italiana* rally).” He had also taken part in the March on Rome in October 1922, and later he had joined the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*, of which he had been squad leader of the second *University Legion* in Milan. He could also boast of important military experience in Eastern Africa and Spain as reserve lieutenant in the Air Force: two reports, drawn up by the military command under whom he had acted, highlighted his qualities as a “highly cultured, deeply intelligent officer of great courage, [...] a fraternal and sociable comrade” with “his subordinates’ interests at heart,”<sup>4</sup> “keen to make his contribution to the greater strength of the Air Force,” and “always willing and whole-hearted in carrying out orders with no limit to his spirit of self-sacrifice.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite his great many merits, both “Fascist and patriotic,” in the Autumn of 1938 Segré had been expelled from the Fascist party and struck off the Milan bar register. Like many other Italian citizens declared “of Jewish race,” he had been plunged into a dramatic scenario in which his citizenship rights were threatened. In the face of such a risk and together with a great many other citizens – around 8,512 of them, both Fascist and otherwise<sup>6</sup> –, he attempted to take advantage of “discrimination,” a privileged treatment set out in article fourteen of the Laws for the Defense of the Race. This legal mechanism provided some slight dispensations from the persecutory effects of the law, especially in material and patrimonial terms: precisely, it could suspend the prohibition of being guardians of non-Jewish minors (Art 10.b), of owing or managing any business with more than 100 employees or which received defense contracts (art. 10.c), of owing land that had a taxable value of more than 5,000 lire or urban buildings worth more than 20,000 lire, of keeping on working for a private insurance. On the contrary, it did not soften other restrictive measures, such as the exclusion from any state employment, including in the education sector, from the Fascist Party and from the military service, in peace and wartime.<sup>7</sup> Only partially, it applied to professional restrictions stated by the law

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<sup>4</sup> Captain Pilot Renato Tombari, *Informative report A.O.I. (Oriental Italian Africa): Lieutenant Segré Franco*, Mai Edagà Airport, June 20, 1937-XV, *ivi*.

<sup>5</sup> Major Pilot Guido Pelegatti, *Personal Notes, Recall to active duty for exigencies O.M.S. (Military Operations Spain)*, Lieutenant Air Force Segré Cav. Franco, Pilot with brevet of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, Lonate Pozzolo, September 25, 1937-XV, *ivi*.

<sup>6</sup> Until the 1<sup>st</sup> June 1942, that is to say at the end of the most intensive period of the dispositive application, the requests sent to the General Directorate for Demography and Race were 8,512 (of which 341 coming from Italian Jews who resided in the colonies). Around 15,887 were the individuals concerned (of which 548 resided outside Italy). Cfr. ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, Affari diversi 1938-1944, b. 6, f. 23, sf. *Statistica delle domande presentate per province, tabella Discriminazioni, Italia*.

<sup>7</sup> “Discrimination” could apply to this latter restriction (art. 10, letter a) in theory, but not in practice. In the totality of the cases I considered, the document containing the positive ruling explicitly mentioned article 10, letters b, c, d, e and article 13, letter h.

of June 29, 1939-XVII, n. 1054, concerning in particular skilled professions (lawyers, physicians, etc.).

“Discrimination” could be applied to those who submitted a documented application and through this proved to be particularly meritorious in the military, political or socio-economic sphere. In particular, it was first of all volunteers, decorated soldiers and invalid veterans of the Libyan War, World War One and the two Fascist wars in Ethiopia and Spain, who could hope for “discrimination.” The Fiume legionnaires, early Fascists – members of the movement and the party from 1919 to 1922, or those who joined since the second half of 1924 and who had thus remained loyal to the party during the crisis following the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti – could also offer a valuable personal dossier in order to obtain the special status granted by “discrimination.” In addition to these worthy cases, considered “ordinary” and assessed by a commission which worked at the heart of the General Directorate for Demography and Race, the law also set out an additional path for those whose cases were “exceptional” in various terms – both civil and otherwise. Their petitions had to be assessed on a case by case basis by a special commission.

The status of “discriminated” had to be applied for normally to the provincial prefecture of residence, together with a letter setting out one’s individual and, often, family profile highlighting the elements held to be most effective in convincing the examining officials. In order to corroborate one’s case, many documents were attached: Fascist party membership cards, certificates showing donations of gold to the nation and local PNF headquarters, certificates of enlistment with the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* or proof of having taken part in the March on Rome; proof of citizenship and professional merit in the economic, social or scientific fields such as proof of charitable work of various sorts, membership cards and receipts for donations to cultural associations, references, letters of thanks and appreciation for roles and activities performed, newspaper excerpts and obituaries. The Prefect was responsible for examining the paperwork, gathering whatever information was available on applicants and assessing their merits on the basis of enquiries with other local bodies, the police station, the *Carabinieri* and the local Fascist federation. A bulky dossier, made up of the letter and its attachments, the report of the provincial head of the party (*federale*) and, lastly, the Prefect’s summary report, was thus sent to the General Directorate for Demography and Race for assessment. A final decision was then issued, in time frames which were often anything but brief, and the appropriate prefecture notified.

This procedure was followed in Franco Segrè’s case too, a positive ruling was issued only in November 1941. However, according to the way in which the Royal Decree was usually interpreted, he was not reintegrated into the Army as well as into the Party. In the meantime, in July 1939, under threat of close surveillance by the police for an ill-judged opinion on Fascist justice, Segrè escaped to Chile.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The story is told by his son Enrico Segrè Valdebenito in *Lontano da Campanario*, (Naples: Autorinediti 2008), 339-342.

His dossier is one of the 1,424 “discrimination” applications sent to the Regime by Milanese citizens of “Jewish race.”<sup>9</sup> His application is one of the 102 personal dossiers elaborated by Milanese Fascist “Jews” which this paper draws on. The discursive construction of the application letters and the self-portrayals that emerge from them will be the object of my analysis in the pages which follow.

### “Discrimination”: a topic kept to the sidelines

In the context of the ample historical debate which has analyzed the practical and ideological genesis of the anti-Semitic policy in the Italian context, as well as the implementation of restrictive measures adopted on the eve of the Final Solution,<sup>10</sup> the exemption mechanism called “discrimination” has been kept to the sidelines.<sup>11</sup> The limitations imposed by the accessibility of the sources, for privacy reasons first of all, have certainly played a role. However, a common tendency of historians to underestimate the weight of the “discrimination” has also contributed to this silence.

In some way, this is perfectly understandable. “Discrimination” applied for limited periods and had limited impact especially if viewed in the light of the Final Solution. In the aftermath of the law and with the succession of circulars defining its implementation, the highly restrictive applicability confines of this legal mechanism were soon revealed. Moreover, the status of the “discriminated” in no way proved to be capable of protecting Italian Jews just a few years later, when the new phase of the “assault on Jewish lives” began,<sup>12</sup> in autumn 1943.

“Discrimination” was also an understandably complex matter from the point of view of the commemorative reworking carried out later by those directly involved in it. Especially after the Shoah, it probably became “a delicate subject,”<sup>13</sup> mentioned only some time later and with some embarrassment or feelings of guilt: “Naturally we were *discriminati*,” remembers Carla Ovazza,

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on the procedure and an overview of the Milan case see Enrica Asquer, “Autobiografie di supplica: alcune considerazioni sulle richieste di ‘discriminazione’ degli ebrei milanesi, 1938-1943,” *Società e storia* 151 (2016): 97-135.

<sup>10</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, (Turin: Einaudi 1993), Michele Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronaca dell’elaborazione delle leggi del 1938*, (Turin: S. Zamorani Editore 1994); Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy. From Equality to Persecution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, *L’Italie fasciste et la persécution des juifs*, (Paris: Perrin, 2007); *Storia della Shoah in Italia. Vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni*, eds. Marcello Flores, Simon Levis-Sullam, Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, Enzo Traverso, (Turin: Utet 2010).

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Michele Sarfatti, “Characteristics and objectives of anti-Jewish Racial Laws in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943,” in *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-945*, ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (New York: Cambridge University Press 2005), 72.

<sup>12</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy*, 178-211.

<sup>13</sup> “In accounts written after the war it is difficult to find references to individuals who had applied for, or obtained discrimination (...). It is, as I have had the occasion to note, a delicate subject. After a balanced judgment of the situation, those who were granted ‘discrimination’ believed they had betrayed group solidarity and have sometimes mistakenly been blamed for having done so” (translation mine). Mario Jona, “Le leggi razziali e gli ebrei,” in *Le leggi razziali antiebraiche fra le due guerre mondiali. Atti del convegno*, Accademia Galileiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, Padua, 23-24 October 2008, eds. Oddone Longo and Mario Jona, (Florence: Giuntina 2009), 13-50; 44-45.

niece of Ettore, Turin based founder of the periodical *La Nostra Bandiera*, a publication by Jews close to the Regime. “Ignorant as we were,” she continued, “we were delighted. When I think back it’s absolutely scandalous that we fought for that, but it’s true.”<sup>14</sup> Probably, it may be noticed, such reluctant accounts have implicitly had the effect of setting the record straight to combat what happened in the immediate post-war era when, in a climate of highhanded pacification, “discrimination” was exploited to the advantage of a sympathetic representation of Fascism, as a sign of its ability to preserve the “privileges” of “respectable” citizens. As Silvia Falconieri puts it, the “good Italian” myth of an imperfect totalitarian regime, generally more lenient than German Nazism, found in the exemption mechanism a theoretical and practical foothold.<sup>15</sup>

It is no coincidence that, together with this crucial mention contained in Falconieri’s work, a precious reference to “discrimination,” which merits further research attention, can be found in Enzo Collotti’s work devoted to the anti-Semitic laws.<sup>16</sup> In the framework of a fundamental innovative interpretation which has seen Italian Fascism and its anti-Semitic policies as an independent trajectory which cannot simply be attributed to the supposed subordination of the Italian Fascist Regime to Nazi Germany, Collotti has recognised the importance of studying the effects of “discrimination” especially from the point of view of those directly affected by it and with the aim of producing a more sophisticated assessment of the violence perpetrated by the Regime. In particular, perceptions of the “moral” implications of applying for exemption and the risk of internal divisions being created within the Jewish community emerge from Collotti’s considerations as precious pieces in a jigsaw which has still to be fully completed.

“Discrimination” and the exemption mechanism can also be interesting for scholars focusing on the political and cultural history of citizenship. In the light of a culturalist re-interpretation of the Risorgimento, new interest arose in connecting pre-Fascist and Fascist nationalistic and racist narratives: from this point of view, as underlined by Alberto Banti,<sup>17</sup> “discrimination” implies a crucial emphasis on the military involvement and self-sacrifice in national wars as a key qualification of a good citizen. But this was not an original element introduced by Fascism, since it relied on the long tradition of the patriotic discourse.

A part from those references, only rarely have the “discrimination” dossiers been analyzed systematically by scholars. A partial exception is Iael N. Orvieto’s work,<sup>18</sup> which does not focus specifically on “discrimination,” but aims at

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Stille, *Benevolence and Betrayal. Five Italian Jewish Families under Fascism*, (New York: Picador, 1991), 75.

<sup>15</sup> Silvia Falconieri, “Riparare e ricordare la legislazione antiebraica. La reviviscenza dell’istituto della discriminazione (1944-1950),” in *Riparare, risarcire, ricordare. Un dialogo tra storici e giuristi*, eds. G. Resta and V. Zeno Zencovich, (Naples: Editoriale Scientifica 2012), 139-154.

<sup>16</sup> Enzo Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei: le leggi razziali in Italia*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza 2004), 94.

<sup>17</sup> Alberto Banti, *Sublime madre nostra. La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza 2011), 177.

<sup>18</sup> Iael N. Orvieto’s “Lettere a Mussolini: gli ebrei italiani e le leggi anti-ebraiche,” *Rassegna mensile di Israel*, XLIX/1 (2003): 321-346. A similar analysis is contained in Iael N. Orvieto, “The Impact of Anti-Jewish Legislation on everyday life and the Response of Italian Jews, 1938-1943,” in *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule*, 158-181. The historiographical value of these letters

offering a first overall examination of the letters sent by Jews to the leader of the Regime via his *Segreteria Particolare*. Referring only to the documents accessible at the time she wrote, when scholars were not allowed to examine “discrimination” dossiers for privacy reasons, Orvieto classified the requests for “discrimination” as ‘petitions’ together with many other different kinds of requests explicitly addressed to Mussolini. To this typology she added ‘declaratory’ letters, containing opinions by Jews on the racist laws, and requests to enlist in the army sent in 1939 and 1940 by individuals who wished to continue to serve the nation. With reference to “discrimination” applications, she profitably mentioned both material and “moral” interests behind the requests, thus connecting these sources to the general problem of how deeply Italian Jews were wounded by anti-Semitic laws and how they reacted. As these sources brilliantly suggest, the emotional dimension of belonging to the national community is not negligible among the many reasons for applying for “discrimination” and we can imagine that the intersection between material and ‘immaterial’ motivations was particularly strong in the case of parents with children, who applied also in order to save them both from the restrictive measures and the stigma related to Racist Laws.<sup>19</sup> More work still needs to be done on that, as well as on the entire administrative and political process of “discrimination,” which Orvieto, focusing only on the letters contained in the *Segreteria Particolare*, could not examine in depth.<sup>20</sup>

### Letters applying for “discrimination” as a source

“Discrimination” was emblematic of a perverse logic of domination based on a discretionary dynamic, incidentally aiming to silence those – moderate Fascists, the Vatican and the Savoy court – who were pushing, for the most part opportunistically, for limitations on persecution<sup>21</sup>. For instance, as Robert A. Maryks proved in his critical edition of 44 “discrimination” and “aryanization” requests<sup>22</sup> sent to the General Directorate by Catholics recognised by the Regime as “of Jewish race,” through the good offices of the Jesuit Pietro Tacchi Venturi the Vatican put a lot of effort into trying to obtain the

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has also been highlighted by Alberto Cavaglion, *Il senso dell’arca. Ebrei senza saperlo: nuove riflessioni*, (Naples: L’ancora del Mediterraneo 2006), 51-52.

<sup>19</sup> See the story of Bruno Segre and his father, Emanuele, in Enrica Asquer, “Autobiografie di supplica.”

<sup>20</sup> A new generation of scholars is beginning to approach these sources with a fruitful perspective. As far as I know, together with me, Florence Largillière, PhD candidate at the Queen Mary, University of London, is conducting her research on the “discrimination” requests, focusing on Fascist and conservative Jews. In particular, for her Research Master (*Les réactions des ‘juifs’ fascistes face aux lois raciales de 1938 en Italie: récits d’une intégration nationale achevée?*, Mémoire de Master, Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2013) she worked on *antemarcia* Fascist Jews’ letters and files and then continued adding the letters of veterans of the Great War (*Discourses of Italian Jews Faced by the Racial Laws of 1938*, MPhil, University of Cambridge, 2014). Her PhD dissertation will include a chapter on “Conservative Patriotic Jews and the Nation. A Comparative Study of France, Germany and Italy from 1918 to 1940.”

<sup>21</sup> Matard-Bonucci, *L’Italie fasciste et la persécution des juifs*, 170.

<sup>22</sup> In this context the term Aryanization indicates the procedure through which individuals who had submitted a documented request could obtain to be qualified as not belonging to “the Jewish race”.

“discrimination” for many Jews converted to Catholicism that were nonetheless affected by the anti-Semitic laws.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, “discrimination” was a way of justifying the unjustifiable to public opinion: inserting a racial criteria into citizenship and thus re-writing the national history, of which Fascism claimed to be utmost exponent and guardian, whilst at the same time rooting out one part of it – the Italian Jews. But how could the concept of defending “the Italian race” from a supposed threat by citizens who were to all intents and purposes fully integrated into national history be justified?

Whilst it is essential to keep a sense of this powerfully paradoxical dimension in any analysis of these sources, it is also true that the discrimination letters are a gold mine for anyone seeking to analyse the self-image of those who wrote these letters and thus the words they chose in their attempts to convince the authorities of the legitimacy of their claims. There is nothing random about the choice of words used in these letters as they are very revealing of the patriotic narratives current in Italy in 1938-9.

If this is true of all those, Fascist or otherwise, who applied for “discrimination,” the case which I will be examining in this paper – that of “Jewish race” citizens who were card carrying members of the Fascist party writing to a Regime which appeared not to recognise them as an integral part of its history – is also of further interest in the light of the still unquestionably embryonic research on Fascist Jews.<sup>24</sup> What is the ideal Fascist reference profile used? What image of Fascism comes out of these letters? The fact that these applications were the product of a specific emotional state, presumably anxiety and, sometimes, desperation, does not limit their usefulness as a source: what I am attempting to do here is not merely to mechanically capture the “Fascism of the Jewish Fascists,” but rather to take the opportunity to look at the various images of Fascism brought into play precisely on this occasion by those writing. The more persuasive the image had to be, the more we are accessing a credible and thus not random repertoire, first and foremost for the authorities. But the evaluation as to whether this repertoire was likely to be credible to the Regime was always that of those writing such letters and presumably those advising them. In actual fact, applicants had to take account of inputs from the establishment, but they did so in a personal and original manner. These sources thus are the result of a “narrative transaction,” to quote Natalie Zemon Davis,<sup>25</sup> and tell us something of the idea that those writing and those who contributed to these letters indirectly had of Fascism.

Now, what is interesting about the individuals of Jewish religion or culture or family tradition – and these were not automatically those qualified as belonging to the “Jewish race” by the Regime who will necessarily be considered here – is

<sup>23</sup> Robert Aleksander Maryks, “Pouring Jewish Water into Fascist Wine”: *Untold Stories of (Catholic) Jews from the Archive of Mussolini’s Jesuit Pietro Tacchi Venturi*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Luca Ventura, *Ebrei con il duce. “La nostra bandiera” (1934-38)*, (Turin: S. Zamorani Editore, 2002); using a biographical approach, Ilaria Pavan, *Il podestà ebreo. La storia di Renzo Ravenna tra fascismo e leggi razziali*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> *Fiction in the Archives. Pardon tales and their tellers in sixteenth-century France*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

not that these applicants had some sort of specific and different relationship with Fascist ideology and practice from other Italians. The relationship Jews had with Fascism was the same as that of other Italians, with the same range of varying attitudes and objectives.<sup>26</sup> The specific nature of the Jewish case in this matter is rather a question of the paradoxical state in which they found themselves, whatever their personal attitude to the Regime, while facing the anti-Jewish Fascist laws. They had emerged from the widest, however non-linear, range of integration trajectories in post-unification Italy but were all swept away by the same tragic destiny in the autumn of 1938. How did they react? Which narratives did they use? As we will see, for example, emphasising their decision to marry out or convert to Catholicism, together with declarations of total estrangement from Jewishness was one potential way for this minority group to display their adherence to a Regime which had brought an end to religious equality with the signing of the Lateran treaty in 1929 and whose new laws on Israelite communities in 1930-1<sup>27</sup> had imposed harsher institutional limitations making it increasingly difficult for Jewish people to shape diverse and varied identities. In these respects, applicants' narratives reveal a minority group view of what Fascism was in the 1930s.

Jews formally closest to the Regime in 1938 had a specific situation too. Declaring their support for a nationalist ideology increasingly suffused with "Italian race" rhetoric was evidently a strong contradiction. How did they face that? Rationalising a sense of belonging to the nation based on beliefs, feelings, family history and one's own actions rather than racial purity was a shared key element of their strategy. For some of them, especially for those truly closest to the Regime, these features were also an integral part of a specific way of being Fascist and Jew in 1938.

This article is an integral part of a wider ranging research into Italian anti-Jewish laws exemption procedures which has thus far considered the Milan case study, in order to analyse the documentation sent to the General Directorate by individuals qualified as belonging to "the Jewish race" living in the city of Milan and connect it to more general considerations on integration processes affecting Milanese Jews after legal emancipation. Within a randomly chosen starting sample of 170 applications, around 20% of a total of 858 Milan applications now kept at the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*,<sup>28</sup> for the purposes of this article I focused exclusively on the 102 dossiers filed concerning individuals who had been Fascist party members until the anti-Jewish laws were implemented.

To provide an overall framework, it can be pointed out that only 21.6% of the applicants considered here were women and 78.4% men; more than half (63%)

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<sup>26</sup> Many agree on this: Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy* 15-16; 66-67; Matard-Bonucci, *L'Italie fasciste et la persécution des juifs*, 51-57.

<sup>27</sup> R. D. 30th October 1930, n. 1731, *Norme sulle Comunità israelitiche e sulla Unione delle Comunità medesime* and R.D. 19th November 1931, n. 1561, *Regolamento per l'applicazione del Regio Decreto 30 Ottobre 1930*.

<sup>28</sup> As I said before, 1424 applications were made in Milan in actual fact, but only 858 dossiers survived due to considerable quantitative gaps in the General Directorate for Demography and Race files. For the history of the archive, see Lucilla Garofalo, "La Demorazza: storia di un archivio," *Italia contemporanea*, 272 (2013): 374-401.



were born in the last 25 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in the 1880s and 90s, and 37% in the twentieth century. Half of them (53%) joined the PNF in 1932 and 1933. With regard to their social profile, a topic on which it is necessary to be very cautious because the data are very incomplete, just to give a general glance it can be said that around 25.9% had a liberal profession (first of all they were lawyers); a not insignificant share (17.6%) worked in the industrial sector, especially in managerial positions; 11.8% were professors (school and university); finally, only 10.6% were merchants and 9.4% private employees (bank and insurance).

Before showing some relevant examples of the applicants' narratives, two brief concluding remarks are necessary. Whilst, as historians have highlighted,<sup>29</sup> the formal party membership can hide many different attitudes to the Regime, it is difficult to underestimate the specific situation of the applicants who were not members of the Fascist party. Both from what anthropologists would call an "etic" point of view, i.e. general and objective, and from an "emic" perspective, namely from the subjective point of view of those involved, there was clearly something unusual about non-party members writing to the Regime post November 1938 claiming to be deserving patriotic citizens. On the contrary, PNF card carrying members shared a condition supposedly favourable and that is why they might be considered as a specific case-study.

Party membership, however, will not prove on its own sufficient to throw light on the form taken by the support of Fascism (real or declared) even of the individuals considered here. The nature of their involvement was diverse, and the tone of the letters which I will look at varied too, as an analysis of some interesting case studies will show. With regard to the narrative construction, I will divide the applications into three groups, which more or less correspond to different typologies of applicants: those born in 1880s and 1890s; those born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; women.

Moreover, even if the archival condition of the sources makes it difficult to demonstrate, the applicants' narratives considered here are to be seen in the context of the specific features of Milanese Fascism, which constitutes a case of a not especially successful conquest of mass support until well into the 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

### **Fascist features: patriotism, assimilation and autarchy**

“Inspired by the fundamental principles of the power of the race, which draws its origins from the greatness of Rome which has been and will be

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<sup>29</sup> A great deal of work has been done on the subject of popular consent for the regime: see at least Simona Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani sotto il regime 1929-1943* (Rome-Bari: Laterza 2009<sup>2</sup>); Paul Corner, "Fascist Italy in the 1930s: Popular Opinion in the Provinces" in *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism, Communism*, ed. Paul Corner (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 122-146; from a different perspective, Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices. An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (London: Vintage 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Ivano Granata, "PNF: organizzazione del consenso e società milanese negli anni Trenta," in *Storia di Milano*, vol. XVIII, *Il Novecento*, t. 1 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Treccani 1995), 624-648; Id., "Il fascismo e le sue basi sociali," in *Storia d'Italia. Le Regioni dall'Unità ad oggi. La Lombardia*, eds. Duccio Bigazzi, Marco Meriggi, (Turin: Einaudi 2001), 947-984.

a beacon of light for all peoples from Caesar to Mussolini, the Fascist government has issued laws for the defense and strengthening of the race with R.D.L. 17=II=1938=XVII.

There are those, like the undersigned, whose origins are undeniably racially Jewish but whose personal beliefs, spiritual education and life lived in the absolute dogma of Italian and Fascist faith, cannot and must not be so considered but rather as pure Italian in heart and race.”<sup>31</sup>

Salvatore Marsiglio, born in 1888 and employed at the Milan offices of *Assicurazioni Generali Venezia*, introduced his “discrimination” application in a much loftier tone than that used by Segré. From a family of “patriots and workers” who “have never professed the Jewish religion” he recalls his “father’s pride in the name Umberto which his parents had named him in homage to the “good king” [“Re Buono”] and “how his father boasted of having named the first of his sons Vittorio Emanuele (...) in homage once again to the “victorious king” (“Re Vittorioso”). In terms of his private life, he went on, “before the advent of Fascism, and solely by conviction and the constant inspiration of his (Catholic) wife,” he had transformed his “atheism” into a profound, intimate “Christian faith,” thus formally taking his leave of an Israelite community which he had joined only after the 1930 law on his mother’s request as she wished to be buried next to her husband. Whilst in the public sphere, he added, his activities had been “limited to those demonstrations of patriotism and civil solidarity which every good Italian, like himself, feels and must feel” (including support for the Associazione Dante Alighieri, the Red Cross, *Pro Esercito* and the foundation of the *Museo di Guerra* in Rovereto), his professional work in the insurance field could be presented as a “holy work whose vital importance both for individuals and for the Nation he felt to the full.” It was only at the end of this self-celebratory prose that Marsiglio refers to his political activities:

“With all his energies absorbed by work the undersigned took no part in political activities in the belief that the best policy for the Nation is working honestly for it. But when, soon after the advent of Fascism, he understood that the Fascist party was much more than a political Party and truly the Fascio of all the activities, strength and feelings of the Nation, the undersigned also adhered to it in both spirit and action. He joined in 1925, in fact, and had the honour and the pleasure to be on good Fascist terms with the Grande Maestro di Mistica, Arnaldo Mussolini.”<sup>32</sup>

The image of himself which Marsiglio presents – and which I have chosen from the many possible case studies – brings together some of the elements to be found in other letters: a national history brought to full fruition in Fascism to which he feels bound in an emotional, deep rooted way; references to the logic of race and his – somewhat contradictory – denial of the influence of his own Jewish “origins” to which he paradoxically juxtaposes the power of “belief,” “education” and “life experience”; his interpretation of his professional life as

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<sup>31</sup> Salvatore Marsiglio to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, General Directorate for Demography and Race, Milan, March 9, 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 138, f. 8871DIS. Emphasis mine.

<sup>32</sup> Salvatore Marsiglio to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, General Directorate for Demography and Race, Milan, March 9, 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 138, f. 8871DIS.

emblematic of his service to the Nation. The passage on Fascist membership and his negative view of pre-regime political involvement, another recurring theme coherent with the Regime's anti-liberal rhetoric, would seem in this case to be intended indirectly to justify the writer's choices which, in contrast to Segré, show limited real involvement in any party activity and posts whatsoever. What comes across most is thus an image of Fascism as the supreme expression of the Nation's "actions," "power" and "sentiments"; it required devotion and the sharing of some fundamental values, but not necessarily full-blown personal political involvement.

A similar theme comes across in the letter of another applicant for "discrimination," elderly Moise Elia Levi, born in Trieste in 1867 and a party member since 1932, who asked for special dispensation in the name of exceptional merit, firstly, as he had "grown up in a pure Italian environment with a lofty irredentist spirit." Having escaped to Milan during World War One, his letter recounts, he had borne the suffering of these "tough war years" together with other refugees from Trieste and saw "Fascism" as having brought his "long nurtured dream," [namely] the inclusion of Trieste in the Italian state," to fruition as "a victorious reality to the joy of" his "old patriotic heart."<sup>33</sup> To "explain the family's merits in the national context," moreover, he added that his wife Rosa Levi had always shared his patriotic activities and in 1935 had given "her wedding ring to the Nation like all Italian mothers," while his sons all belonged to party professional or youth associations. One of his mother's brothers, moreover, as a "fervent patriot and veteran of his own battles for Italian independence," had "set up the first local Fascist party group in Correggio Emilia (Reggio province) in 1920" as documented in Giorgio Alberto Chiurco's *Storia della rivoluzione Fascista*.<sup>34</sup>

Aside from this latter comment – emphatically underlined in red ink – this self-portrayal focuses on the Nation, and Fascism is represented as having brought the nationalist aspirations of this elderly patriot to fruition. However, in contrast to Marsiglio's letter, no mention is made of "Jewish origin" here and this is certainly a telling silence. In autumn 1938, a good Fascist profile needed to expressly deny or skirt this delicate issue.

Another Trieste irredentist, Giorgio Schey, born in 1889 and former deputy manager of the *Banca Commerciale Italiana* in Milan, centred his self-defense letter on his having deserted the Austrian army and enlisted as a volunteer in the Italian army in the Great War "and having always responded, together with his wife, to his country's appeals and shared its destiny with the heart of one who has consecrated his life to his Nation."<sup>35</sup> As proof of this he stressed that his daughter, who had joined both the Fascist party and the Dante Alighieri society, had been accorded the honour of having a composition of hers "on eternal Rome and its imperial destiny" selected in a competition promoted by the Regime, "[which] is of itself sufficient proof of her sentiments and those of

<sup>33</sup> Moise Elia Levi to His Excellency, the Minister for Internal Affairs, Milan, December 19, 1938, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 231, f. 15995BEN.

<sup>34</sup> Alberto Chiurco, *Storia della rivoluzione Fascista*, (Florence: Vallecchi 1929).

<sup>35</sup> Giorgio Schey to Exc. Ministry of Internal Affairs, Milan, December 31, 1938, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 192, f. 12161DIS.

the family she grew up in.” Moreover, he added, an additional fact “worthy of the greatest consideration” was his “mixed marriage” to Gentile Giuseppina Ascoli “of Catholic faith”: right from the start “ignorant of and alien to the Hebrew faith,” he moved progressively closer to Catholicism not simply on the strength of the example of his wife, but also in “thoughts and feelings which he resisted only in so far as consecrating them in baptism could have been interpreted as opportunism and not belief and thus incompatible with a life of faith, loyalty and pride.”<sup>36</sup> “Thoughts and feelings,” then, were the basis of his new identity.

A PNF member since 1932, Schey had joined his Fascist trade union in 1927 but he mentions this in just a few lines at the end of his letter. Like Marsiglio, it was Nation – presented in the context of the imperial myth which led from Rome to the African Empire –, Catholic faith and mixed marriage from the religious and/or “racial” point of view which were the foundations of Schey’s self-image and the idea of loyalty to Fascism which he put forward.

Accountant Gino Norsa’s application for “discrimination” was equally centred on love of country with an anything but rare explicit reference to the Risorgimento. As a stockbroker born in 1876 and a party member since 1933, Norsa applied for “discrimination” “on the basis of his patriotic past and [his family’s and his own] evident desire to assimilate.”<sup>37</sup> As proof of this, he mentioned his father Pacifico’s merits as a Garibaldi volunteer, member of the Milan Guardia Nazionale and combatant in the “1866 war campaign against the Austrians” together with the military backgrounds of many close family members. To this he added his “43 year long banking and stock exchange career” terminated “in homage to the Regime’s directives” with his resignation as stockbroker.

Like Norsa, industrialist Guido Modena, born in 1882 and a party member since 1932, based his application on the “feelings of Italianness” which had been the inspiration for his and his family’s actions and cited as proof the fact that his father Flaminio had fought in the 1859 “campaign to liberate Lombardy” as a volunteer in the Piedmontese army.<sup>38</sup> The similar patriotic merits of other members of the family, he underlined, were proof of the fact that “he himself and all his family members had been brought up in an environment suffused with the loftiest patriotic sentiments and absolutely no thought of belonging to any other race than the Italian race.” The “assimilation” referred to by Norsa makes an appearance in Modena’s application, too, in his references to the many mixed marriages in his family history and the inevitable mention of his profession, functionary in N.U.S.I (*Nuova Unione Siderurgica Italiana*), and the “autarchic objectives” of his work.

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<sup>36</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup> Gino Norsa to Ministry of Internal Affairs, Department for Discrimination of the individuals qualified as belonging to the Jewish Race, Milan, February 4, 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 220, f. 15303DIS.

<sup>38</sup> Guido Modena to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, and to the Hon. Commission for the Discrimination of the Citizens of Jewish Race, Milan, December 12, 1938, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 231, f. 15889DIS.

All these cases show that alongside patriotism and issues of identity another highly important element in these “discrimination” letters is the professed “political” value of applicants’ professional dedication. This aspect relates both to the Regime’s autarchy propaganda and the applicants’ sociological profiles as the lion’s share of these came from the liberal professions, especially as engineers and technicians, or were exponents of the dynamic Milanese entrepreneurial scene. In contrast to the overall preponderance of traders to be found in the Italian and probably Milanese Jewish population at that time,<sup>39</sup> my sample makes clear that Milan’s PNF members included significant numbers of professionals from the industrial entrepreneurial milieu whose interaction with the Regime and its trade union activities in particular had brought essential networking and thus financial benefits. Their more or less strongly felt support for Fascism was thus influenced, to a not insignificant extent, by shared interests and social connections with the party hierarchy and the Fascist state. The disappearance of the Milan party archives unfortunately limits our ability to fully analyse how this relates to the specific characteristics of Milanese Fascism. Certainly the few available studies, most of which are based for the most part on prefects’ reports and the Fascist police’s secret informants, have identified the Milanese middle class and the professional bourgeoisie as the social basis of consent to the Regime, a consent which was motivated by opportunism to a considerable extent and thus always influenced by careful consideration of the Regime’s economic policies.<sup>40</sup>

The letters cited thus far highlight a single type of letter writer on the basis of overall parameters such as date of birth and PNF membership. This typology is, moreover, best represented in the sample considered here. As far as party membership is concerned, as I said, half of the self-descriptions analyzed here (53%) relate to individuals who joined the PNF in 1932 and 1933, namely during the intensification phase designed to widen the party’s mass base that was implemented by party secretary Achille Starace. It was, in fact, in this phase that party membership in Milan increased from 13,217 in 1930 to 39,044 in 1933, despite the many obstacles encountered.<sup>41</sup>

Only a very small minority of my sample (around 8%) had joined the party at the outset, from 1921 to 1924. This figure is even more significant if interrelated to generational data: it is clearly mostly among the less young that late membership can be interpreted as a sign of conscious choice. From this perspective it should be kept in mind, as I wrote before, that in general more than half of my sample (63%) is accounted for by individuals born in the last 25 years of the 19th century and especially the 1880s and 90s. The bulk of them joined the party no earlier than 1932-33 and their letters can be read also in connection with this: this is the generation which benefited fully from the legal

<sup>39</sup> For Italian data (with reference also to Lombardy) see Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy*, 34-35. There are no in-depth studies on the social composition of the Milanese Jewish population in 1938. An initial reference can be obtained from the analysis carried out on the basis of a different, but equally random, sample of Milanese “discrimination” applications, see Asquer, “Autobiografie di supplica,” 114.

<sup>40</sup> Granata, “PNF: organizzazione del consenso e società milanese negli anni Trenta”; Id., “Il fascismo e le sue basi sociali,” in *Storia d’Italia. Le Regioni dall’Unità ad oggi. La Lombardia*, eds. Duccio Bigazzi, Marco Meriggi, (Turin: Einaudi 2001), 947-984.

<sup>41</sup> Granata, “PNF: organizzazione del consenso,” 637.

emancipation implemented by the unified state and which fought in World War One en masse, a pivotal experience likely to act as a key reference point in patriotic self-representations, together with a diverse assortment of solidarity activities of a charitable kind prompted by the war.

By contrast, only a small minority (approximately 9%) of the applicants born in the 19th century joined the PNF at the outset. These latter include aristocratic businessman Mario Sacerdoti di Corrobbio, founder of the local Fascist party group of Paris and political secretary to the Massa Finalese and Lisbon groups, industrialist Michele Vitale, member of the Milanese Fascist group directorate and leader of the local Oberdan group, wealthy Lamberto Segre, in his day member of the Ponzone d'Acqui local group directorate and Mario Zabban, born in Palermo and member of his local group since 1923. Apart from a few colorful outpourings such as Vitale's impassioned appeal at the end of his letter "that your Excellence could return everything to him or at least his March on Rome papers which I am very much attached to," the style of these letters is strikingly concise, even terse. The letter writers leave the strength of their arguments to the documents attached to their dossiers for the most part. Documents attached by Michele Vitale, for instance, included many proofs of his political merits and full integration in the Milanese Fascist network of social and charitable activities. Abstention from long digressions may be evidence of confidence in the writers' ability to obtain "discrimination" or a sense of deep disappointment. In any event a desire to keep faith with a proud and soldierly style comes across powerfully, despite everything.

### **The power of Fascist education: young people**

A significant proportion of my sample, specifically 37% of the letter writers in it, is made up of individuals born in the twentieth century. In contrast to the former group, these latter were too young to have fought in World War One but were more likely to have taken part in the Fascist wars and specifically the campaign for the Empire. More than half of these joined the Fascist party in the fateful years of 1932-3, and many of them had passed through the party's youth and university student organizations. The Italianness of their families, demonstrated mostly using the example of their fathers, and a personal commitment to Fascist pedagogy, as shown in the Regime's youth propaganda activities, are the main themes running through these letters. And in this group there is nothing random about the fact that self-representations exalting an enthusiastic and emotional sense of belonging to the Regime and involvement in party roles and activities come across more frequently, though these latter are often of scant importance and inconsequential from the authorities' point of view. In stylistic terms, these letters often have a structure in common which hinges on personal progression – in a sort of bildungsroman – which started with a specific moment of initiation in teenage years and then developed and came to fruition in adulthood in an emotional connection to the Regime's values.

This is the case, for example, for engineer Piero Forti, born in 1910 "to a family with a highly patriotic tradition" which at his birth did not practice Jewish ritual prescriptions in order "not to burden a new citizen with a stigma

incompatible with profound and thoroughgoing Italianness.”<sup>42</sup> In his letter, Forti declared that he “had played an active part in Fascist life,” “in the Regime’s institutions” and “in the revolutionary movement” since he was sixteen. Retracing his progressive sense of identification with and participation in Fascist life in third person in a biographical style, Forti was prompted by a sudden moment of enlightenment: “As soon as he was able to find his place in student life of the school he attended, he joined the *Avanguardie Giovanili Fasciste* at the young age of 16 in 1926.” After acting as squad leader in the Ugo Botti group, “as he matured, his commitment to the Fascist ideal which had attracted him since adolescence grew stronger” and he joined the PNF in 1928, GUF in 1929 and lastly, “wishing to express his Fascist faith in a militant way,” he joined the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*. Called to arms as a sub-lieutenant and then promoted to lieutenant in 1936, “felt the heroic cause of the Ethiopian war strongly” and received a letter of commendation from Federal Secretary Franco Parenti. His dossier is incomplete and we thus have no way of knowing how his application was received.

Engineer Cesare Grassetti, born in Verona in 1901, employed at the Ercole Marelli firm and holder of the title *Commendatore d'Italia*, granted him “by the Fascist government in recognition of his special achievements in industry and commerce,”<sup>43</sup> also started right from the beginning of his personal formation. “When the war broke out,” he recounted, “the undersigned, though just fourteen, made his contribution to the need of the hour at school and outside giving up his holidays and evenings to it (assistance to soldiers, charitable work, etc.)” In 1919 he enrolled at Padua University’s Engineering Faculty and there his ardent commitment to Fascism took practical shape: “He brought his Fascist faith and enthusiasm for the Duce to Padua from Verona” and took part in many “retaliation missions against the Reds including burning down the Chamber of Labour and the consequent setting up of the first *Fascio di Combattimento Patavino*. He graduated in engineering and returned to Verona where he joined the PNF in 1926 and unsuccessfully applied for his prior actions during the Red biennium to be recognized. He then worked “tirelessly” in the Verona province council of *Opera Nazionale Balilla* and was appointed major. For all this, which simply demonstrated his “love for his country to which the undersigned and his family have always given everything they could,” he “trustingly” requested the benefit of “discrimination.” In his case, too, we do not know the outcome of his application which probably remained provisional. Significantly, however, the Prefect of Milan rejected his application on the basis of the absence of the “legal requisites.”

“Total confidence that he had done nothing to betray his Nation’s trust” was at least apparently the state of mind of Ruggero Norsa, lawyer, born in 1909 and a PNF member since 1927, at the same time as he joined the Milan Fascist University Students Group (GUF) at the age of 17.<sup>44</sup> In actual fact this was the second letter that Norsa had written to the General Directorate after his

<sup>42</sup> Piero Forti to His Excellence, the Minister for Internal Affairs, Milan, December 1938, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 237, f. 16276BEN.

<sup>43</sup> Cesare Grassetti to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, Commission for the Discrimination of the Citizens of Jewish Race, Milan, March 31, 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 280, f. 20198BEN.

<sup>44</sup> Ruggero Norsa to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, General Directorate for Demography and Race, Milan, January 27, 1941, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 238, f. 16400DIS.

application for “discrimination” had been rejected unanimously the first time around, by the Prefecture and the Central Commission set up to consider such cases, on the grounds of “lack of requisites.” But Norsa had highlighted his early membership of the party in no uncertain terms right from the start “at just 17 years of age, as soon as he was in a position to express his wishes.”<sup>45</sup> Active then in the Crespi local group, he had recently been gratified by the recognition of his role as *capo-fabbricato*, responsible for surveillance and anti-aircraft measures at the building he lived in Via Canova. Whilst an extremely low rung in the Fascist hierarchy, this role was of some importance in the context of the aims for pervasive social control which the Regime aimed for. Those appointed to such posts were, in fact, generally early days Fascists with no prior appointments or, as would appear to be the case here, the most ardent young people in search of some formal or symbolic return on their dedication.<sup>46</sup>

As far as other forms of participation were concerned, Norsa continued in his first letter, his physical fragility had meant that he had not been able to enlist in the *Milizia Volontaria* or take part in the Ethiopian wars “but,” he clarified, “as far as his own wishes and opportunities allowed he had always demonstrated himself to be a fervent and energetic Fascist.” As *Gruppo Rionale Crespi’s* leader, Milanese provincial head of the party, Andrea Ippolito – formerly head of the Milan GUF– and Fabbri, lawyer and member of the Directorate of the National Lawyers and Prefects Trade Union, of which Norsa was a member, would confirm, his personal story was that of a “Fascist since the beginning” and for this reason, he explained vehemently, “there would be no justification for his not being classified amongst those possessing the qualities attributed to those exempted from the effects of the Racial Laws.” Given the merit of the Norsa family, he concluded, moreover, “the undersigned trusts that he should not be excluded from the Fascist family which he had always belonged to with loyalty and devotion and that his qualities deserving of preferential treatment be recognized.” Significantly, these appeals fell on deaf ears and in his second, and unanswered, letter, Norsa emphasized not only his own personal life history but the patriotic virtues of a distant relative, thus obtaining the Prefect’s *nulla osta*. In any event, in both letters he made almost no mention of the Jewish religion, but only gently underlined the presence of mixed marriages in his family history.

### Fascist Women

Fascist pedagogy was the focus of the self-representation of another, easily identifiable though smaller group of letter writers, namely women asking for, and frequently being denied, “discrimination” on the basis of their roles as daughters, mothers and wives as well as teachers and assistants in the Regime’s

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<sup>45</sup> Ruggero Norsa to Exc. Ministry for Internal Affairs, General Directorate for Demography and Race, Hon. Commission for the Discrimination, Milan, dateless but prior to 23rd January 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 238, f. 16400DIS.

<sup>46</sup> Emilio Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo. Il partito e lo stato nel regime fascista* (Rome: Carocci, 2008<sup>2</sup>), 195-197.



many voluntary activities, which were crucial to the dissemination of Fascist values.<sup>47</sup>

“Education,” “culture” and “sentiments” were, for example, what made of Renata Coen, born in Salonica in 1902 and a party member since 1936, a perfect “Italian and Fascist.”<sup>48</sup> Wife of lawyer Luigi Franco Cottini, squad leader from the earliest days, World War One volunteer and former federal secretary of the Milan PNF in 1929 and 1930,<sup>49</sup> Coen had trained as a Red Cross nurse and patronised the *Assistenza Spirituale alle Forze Armate* (spiritual assistance for the armed forces) and *Istituti Riuniti Marchiondi e Spagliardi* association, which worked with disadvantaged children.<sup>50</sup> In a heartfelt letter written in the first person she asked, significantly, to be granted “discrimination” on “moral” grounds alone:

“I am the wife of an early Fascist member who has always played a front rank role in defense of the cause and I have remained both heart and soul by my husband’s side at moments of triumph and time of war. Now I cannot bear to be cast aside from Fascism and from him which, for me, are two expressions of the same idea. [...] I repeat once again that I have nothing to gain in material terms from the measure I am applying for but at such a painful time anything which would bring me closer to normality, however slight, would narrow the void which currently separates me from the many things which are dear to me.”<sup>51</sup>

Fascist for love, then – by conviction and education but also in “sentiment” in the most literal sense of the word – Renata Coen requests “discrimination” to avoid being separated even symbolically from “many things dear to me,” including those close to her and her family “normality.” Application for discrimination as capable, however “slightly,” of alleviating the suffering caused by racial persecution was, in this case moreover, subordinate to the writer’s primary desire to be considered “Arian” as she herself “had no connection with the Jewish race and religion because she had never practised it” and this even before her baptism as a Catholic in 1938. Having lived, as she put it, “in an exquisitely Fascist environment, I have always supported all Fascism’s progress and expansion in the world with great passion and I cannot now believe that I am to be considered alien to the Nation’s patriotic life.” At a time in which “the

<sup>47</sup> Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 61-95.

<sup>48</sup> Renata Coen to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, General Directorate for Demography and Race, Milan, March 15, 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 217, f. 15087BEN.

<sup>49</sup> At the time Renata Coen was writing, Franco Cottini was “Commissario” at the Istituti Riuniti Spallardi e Marchiondi Onorary Consul of the Kingdom of Albania in Milan, President of the Fascist Institute Africa Italiana (Milanese Section), member of the Ernesto Breda Society’s management board.

<sup>50</sup> On the Red Cross nurses and their links with Fascism see Stefania Bartoloni, *Donne nella Croce Rossa italiana: tra guerre e impegno sociale*, (Venice: Marsilio, 2005); on the relationship between social assistance in the medical sphere and Fascist ideology see Olivia Fiorilli, *La signorina dell’igiene. Genere e biopolitica nella costruzione della infermiera moderna* (Pisa: Pisa University Press 2015).

<sup>51</sup> Renata Coen to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, General Directorate for Demography and Race, Milan, March 15, 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 217, f. 15087BEN.

fortunes of Fascist Italy are always foremost in my thoughts,” she concluded, in a notable attack on the concept of “Aryanism,” “I can’t see why I shouldn’t be considered Aryan if Aryan means Italian and Fascist with an Italian and Fascist education.”

Once again for “moral reasons alone” Elsa Della Pergola - born in Ancona in 1906, party member since 1933 and “full professor in literature at the Royal Technical Institutes” in Bolzano, until she was removed from her teaching post on racial grounds - also applied for “discrimination.”<sup>52</sup> As an active participant in *Opera Nazionale Balilla* as *Capo-Gruppo delle Giovani Italiane*, as she said in her letter, she had held “patriotic conferences” and “courses in Fascist culture” for young people “and carried out Italianness work in this border province.” “These after-school activities,” she explained, “were additional to her teaching work which, in the school context too, always focused on inspiring a profound love of Nation and absolute devotion to the Fascist Cause in the young people entrusted to her.”

The need to bring their conduct into line with the Regime’s models of femininity was so pre-eminent in these women’s applications that generation and party membership produced limited variations in self-representation. Emblematic of this is the case of Lucia Sacerdoti, born in Padua in 1898, and for one and a half years at the helm of the *Giovani Fasciste* of the *Gruppo Rionale A. Diaz* in Milan and later “as a reward,” secretary of the women’s section of the same group:<sup>53</sup> a “high ranking post,” this latter, which she claimed to have stood down from “of her own accord” and

“with huge suffering when she realised that my distant origins, however reduced to a mere accident of birth given my feelings, my Catholic faith and my family and friendship bonds all absolutely alien to the Jewish environment, would have prevented me from playing the role I had previously in the party hierarchy as a result of the laws.”<sup>54</sup>

In addition, then, to emphasising her distance from the Jewish faith, which she declared she had never practised never having “ever followed any of the rites to be admitted to the Jewish church,” as the daughter of a Catholic mother, and reiterating the Italianness of her family, she recounted the role her ancestors had played in the Risorgimento and explained her reasons for joining the party in 1935 as follows:

“Despite the fact that I have lived a private and exclusively family life, my patriotic feelings have always taken precedence over all else and I have followed the new dynamism which Fascism has brought to Italy with huge faith. When the possibility of a colonial war presented itself I felt that every truly Italian woman had a solemn duty to do and having

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<sup>52</sup> Elsa Della Pergola to His Excellence, the Ministry for Internal Affairs, Milan, December 29, 1938, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 239, f. 16455BEN.

<sup>53</sup> Lucia Sacerdoti to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, Milan, March 10, 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 251, f. 17325BEN.

<sup>54</sup> Lucia Sacerdoti to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, Milan, March 10, 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 251, f. 17325BEN.

overcome the old prejudices of various family members that women were to occupy themselves with the home and future children alone, I joined the P.N.F. (March 1935/XIII). As the Duce was then emphasising women's role in building the Nation, my membership of the Party was both a proof of devotion to Him and also a chance to make myself useful in anyway might be felt necessary."<sup>55</sup>

Emblematic of the style of these women's letters which showed greater pride and were often written in the first person, Sacerdoti moves ably between the conflicting pressures of a Regime which on one hand made the domestic femininity mystique one of its cornerstones while on the other prompted a previously unknown mass involvement by women in the Nation's public sphere. This latter participation had, as in this case, nurtured hopes among some women of recognition by the Duce, and more generally by the Regime, of the political importance of the many activities they had carried out in his name. But, as is well known, such hopes could not have been more convincingly dashed. Whilst for Sacerdoti "discrimination" was ruled out from the start by a bureaucratic obstacle detected by the prefect, for others such as lawyer Pia Ravenna,<sup>56</sup> patroness of the Ferrara branch of the National Mother and Child Agency (Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia - ONMI) right from the start or Carola Rotschild,<sup>57</sup> assistant and then President of one of the mother and child centres managed by the Milan ONMI branch, the grounds for refusal by the authorities was precisely that there was nothing exceptional about the applicants' merits.

## Conclusions

By analysing a sample of around one hundred "discrimination" applications sent to the Regime between the autumn of 1938 and the spring of 1939 by citizens of "Jewish race" living in Milan who had been members of the Fascist Party prior to the anti-Jewish laws, I have shown that it was patriotism, understood as heroic tribute due on certain crucial nation-building occasions, but also as doing one's professional duty or performing one's educational role, which was undoubtedly the essential ingredient at the basis of every claim, however loosely defined, of affinity with the Regime.

Explicit reference to the importance of Fascism's leader alone is less frequent. Mussolinism does crop up in a few letters, but it is not the dominant note showing how different these documents are from other epistolary sources analyzed by historians thus far. We can think, for example, of the letters written directly to the Regime's leader which have been systematically analyzed by Christopher Duggan.<sup>58</sup> There, adherence to Fascism was often inspired by a sense

<sup>55</sup> Lucia Sacerdoti to Hon. Ministry for Internal Affairs, Milan, March 10, 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 251, f. 17325BEN.

<sup>56</sup> ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 235, f. 16213BEN.

<sup>57</sup> ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, b. 235, f. 16198BEN.

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Duggan, "The Internalisation of the Cult of the Duce," in *The Cult of the Duce. Mussolini and the Italians* eds. Stephen Gundle, Christopher Duggan, Giuliana Pieri (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2013), 129-143; Duggan, *Fascist Voices*.

of emotional closeness to the Duce himself and frequently separated off from the Fascist party. The cases analyzed here were not simply written for a specific and different purpose – in which the need to pretend should never be underestimated – but they are an expression of a much more circumscribed social environment from a sociological point of view which encompassed, as we have seen, an upper middle class milieu which had demonstrated a willingness to support the Regime without ever entirely renouncing implicit criticism. This certainly made itself felt in the very varied narrative and reasoning styles of these letters as well as in generating an image of adherence to Fascism which focused much less on the concept of an exclusive and personal relationship with the Duce and, by contrast, took the form, to a much greater extent, of claims to having fully taken part, both individually and as a family, in the nation's history from within.

A role in this dynamic, however, was certainly played by the specific situation which citizens of Jewish culture, religion or tradition were thrown into in the autumn of 1938, when they were called on to demonstrate their loyalty to this history for pressing reasons and to emphasise an idea of citizenship founded on meritorious actions rather than blood, “origin” or “race” (intended as a biological feature). In some narratives, such as Lucia Sacerdoti's and Salvatore Marsiglio's letters show, “distant Jewish origins” were explicitly referred to as a “mere accident of birth” and juxtaposed to “feelings,” “personal beliefs,” a (Catholic and Fascist) “faith,” and “family and friendship bonds (...) alien to the Jewish environment.” In other cases, though less frequent in the letters of applicants who appeared to be closer to the Regime, this issue was completely, and strategically, ignored.

Even if not without contradictions, such idea of citizenship could be proposed by applicants as sympathetic with some crucial issues of the Fascist “political religion,”<sup>39</sup> and in particular with the sacralized idea of a glorious historical journey begun with the Risorgimento and perfectly fulfilled by the advent of the Regime. What does this tell us about Fascist Jews? The “discrimination” mechanism was effectively designed to highlight the Regime's coherence in presenting itself as the main author of this national consolidation, so it is not surprising that this rhetoric takes a pre-eminent part in the self-representations analyzed here. However, I think that this might suggest something more about the relationship between Fascism and Jews in the 1930s.

Due to the nature of the sources, it would be inappropriate to use the controversial category of consensus. There is no doubt that the degree of adherence to the Regime of those writing the letters analyzed here, as the different tones in them show, varied widely and cannot be reduced to a single form. The largest group identified, on generational grounds (those born in the second half of the nineteenth century), encompassed individuals who declared a formal adhesion to Fascism for the most part, often without having played any part whatsoever in the party hierarchy. Within this group, in fact, early Fascists and those who had filled posts of importance in the party hierarchy at the end of the 1930s were very few and far between and the distinguishing feature of

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<sup>39</sup> For a definition see Emilio Gentile, “Political religion: a concept and its critics – a critical survey,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 1 (2005): 19-32.

these letters is above all the terse and concise style in which they were written. Attachments, references and statements of merit make the difference here. Beyond this small minority, however, the key feature of this first group's narratives is patriotism.

Letters written by those born in the twentieth century, which I have identified as the second group of writers, with their third person language and their peculiar structure, give a greater sense of these applicants' deep disillusionment in the face of incongruity between their fully Fascist profiles and the limited weight this had in obtaining them the distinction they hoped for between themselves and the mass of those persecuted. It is within this group that we can find the more explicit (and proved) statements of adherence to the Regime. But, more significantly, it is among these applicants that the Nation is accompanied by the "Fascist family" as a community of reference.

Letters from Fascist women, written in the first person and significantly forthcoming on the subject of the "suffering" caused them by their situation, are another important category in that they give us an effective insight into what may have felt like a twofold disillusionment, a twofold betrayal – as Fascists and as women at the heart of the Regime's ideology. Together with patriotism and Fascism, it is the Fascist femininity mystique, and its paradoxical effects in terms of women's mass involvement in the public arena, that seems to be at work here. But also family ties and a sentimental attachment to "normality" played a role, as Renata Coen's letter shows.

Therefore, to come back again to the main group of my sample, if we go beyond the unsolvable question about whether these narratives were true or false or showed 'real' consensus or not and if we bear in mind the "narrative transaction" framework, the fact that most applicants (i.e. the first group) chose to emphasize general Italian patriotism more than specifically Fascist inclinations turns out to be a significant element: for it reminds us that the patriotic narrative built up by the Regime was a powerful shared conceptual tool in 1938's Italy and, in some respect, it matched very well the role played by patriotism, both as a practice and a value, in Jews' emancipation and problematic integration into Italian society. In this respect, it might be said, "discrimination" found a favorable humus and its symbolic implications, together with the material ones, probably explain us why thousands of Jews tried to benefit from it.

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