'No One Ever Objected': Europe's Largest University Explores Its Fascist-era Antisemitism

Fed up with traditional memorials, historians at Sapienza University of Rome are digging through archives to reconstruct the stories of Jewish scholars expelled under Mussolini's 1938 Racial Laws

Credit: Photos: Historical Archive Sapienza University of Rome/Wikimedia Commons. Artwork: Anastasia Shub

Ariel David
Rome
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ROME – Historians rarely achieve the celebrity status that leads to them being recognized in public. But that happened to Serena

Di Nepi, a professor at Sapienza University of Rome, when she went to her gym one day in early 2023.

historian after spotting her name on the membership card. "Can you help us find information about our uncle?"

Sieg Heils and 'Jewish race' rants: Antisemitism scandal shakes Italian PM Meloni's party

'A race of merchants': Antisemitic song is latest headache for Italy's far-right rulers

Why Italy's far-right government is now ramping up WWII revisionism and fascist nostalgia

The gym worker had read in the local Jewish press about a project that Di Nepi co-directs, which involves historians investigating the role of their university in the antisemitic persecutions sparked by the so-called Racial Laws approved by Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime in 1938.

The goal of the "1938 Sapienza" project is to reconstruct, through archive documents and testimonies, the experiences of dozens of scholars who were expelled from the university under the racist legislation – which banned Jews not just from academia but from most aspects of Italy's public life.

The project was launched in 2018 to mark the 80th anniversary of the approval of the laws, says Umberto Gentiloni, a professor of contemporary history who came up with the scheme and was later joined by Di Nepi as a co-director.

Sapienza University of Rome in December 1937, before the so-called Racial Laws were passed that led to antisemitic persecution. Credit: Willem van de Poll/Nationaal Archief

"I was a bit fed up with traditional memorials: ceremonies, speeches, plaques," Gentiloni explains. "Those are important too, but I thought it would be more interesting to get into the university's archives and try to concretely reconstruct this history."

Doing such work is especially important for Sapienza, given its complicity in supporting Fascism and the Racial Laws in particular, he says.

Founded in 1303, Sapienza (which means "wisdom" or "knowledge" in Italian) is one of the oldest universities in the world and is today the largest in Europe. Back in the 1930s, it had just been given a new sprawling campus outside central Rome and most of its academic leadership was deeply supportive of the regime. Antisemitism was not an initial cornerstone of Mussolini's policies, but as Il Duce increased ties with Hitler, he also sought to introduce racist legislation that parroted Germany's Nuremberg Laws.

The ideological cover for this came in July 1938 with the publication of a "Racial Manifesto" that argued for the need to maintain the "purity" of the "Italian race" and keep it separate from the "Jewish race." The pseudo-scientific manifesto was signed by 10 leading Italian researchers from multiple fields, and seven of them were professors at Sapienza.

ROMA - ANNO II - N. 15
ESCE IL 5 E IL 20 DI OGNI MESE
UN NUM. CENT. 80 - ARR. L. 1.20

VITA UNIVERSITARIA

DIREZIONE E AMMINISTRAZIONE
CITTA' UNIVERSITARIA

5 MAGGIO 1938-XVI - II DELL'IMPERO

ABB. ANNUO L. 10 - ESTERO L. 20
SPEDIZIONE IN ABB. POSTALE

SALUTO A HITLER

"Vita Universitaria", consapevole dell'alto significato del nuovo incontro tra i Capi di due grandi popoli, la cui unione è garanzia di pace e di ricostruzione europea, partecipa con entusiasmo alla solennità delle accoglienze che l'Italia di Mussolini prepara al Führer della nuova Germania. E, facendosi interprete dello spirito che anima le schiere degli scienziati italiani stretti attorno al loro Duce, invia da queste colonne ad Adolfo Hitler, ospite di questa "Roma æterna, arx omnium gentium", il suo caldo e vibrante saluto.

Pietro de Francisci

Vita universitaria del Terzo Reich

Sapienza newspaper Vita Universitaria (University Life) salutes Hitler's Rome visit in May 1938. Credit: Historical Archive Sapienza University of Rome

Between October and November 1938, the regime responded with a series of laws that banned Jews from public school, politics, the army and many other professions, restricting their property rights and personal freedoms.

"It's a matter of coming to terms with our history, and at the same time reconstructing the identity of the victims, making sure they are not just a number," Gentiloni tells Haaretz.

The student's tale

Last month, Gentiloni's team held an event – marking the anniversary of the October 16, 1943 deportation of more than 1,000 Roman Jews by the Nazis – in which they unveiled the results of their research so far. In Sapienza's personnel archives, the researchers have recovered 67 files of faculty members – six of them women – who were expelled in 1938 for belonging to the "Jewish race."

Il Duce Benito Mussolini in the early 1920s. Credit: Bain Collection/Library of Congress

It is painstaking work because there is no centralized list of expelled scholars, says Di Nepi, who is more of an expert on Early Modern history but joined the project because of her archive experience. Researchers have to go file by file, faculty by faculty, possibly guessing a person's Jewish identity from their last name, to recover the relevant documents for each victim, she says.

The four researchers on the team, largely supported by the Holocaust Museum Foundation in Rome, have digitized almost 4,000 documents, available on the project's website. This also tells the story of the 1938 expulsion to a broader public, through articles and podcasts.

Some of the biographies were partially already published and have been enriched with further documentation, while other stories have been newly uncovered or were known mostly to the families of the victims.

One example is the story of Elio Pavoncello, the long-deceased uncle of the receptionist who approached Di Nepi at the gym. He was a humanities student at Sapienza, starting in 1937. Under the Racial Laws, Jewish students were expelled from schools, but those who had signed up for university were allowed to graduate – which Pavoncello did in 1941.

ROMA - ANNO III - N.
ESCE IL 5 E IL 20 DI OGNI MESE
UN NUM. CENT. 80 - ARR. L. 1.20

VITA UNIVERSITARIA

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DIREZIONE E AMMINISTRAZIONE
CITTA' UNIVERSITARIA

5 OTTOBRE 1938-XVI - III DELL'IMPERO

ABB. ANNUO L. 10 - ESTERO L. 20
SPEDIZIONE IN ABB. POSTALE

I professori ebrei

eliminati dalle Università

Siamo in grado di dare ai nostri lettori un elenco preciso e autorizzato dei professori universitari che domani lasciano l'insegnamento ed entro il 16 ottobre, a termine del R. D. L. 5/9/38-XVI, n. 1390.

Il nostro elenco è il solo che possa far fede su quest'argomento: esso darà intanto essere integrato da alcuni nominativi per i quali sono in corso ulteriori accertamenti.

BARI

Foà Bruno: *O. di Economia politica corporativa.*

BOLOGNA

Ascarelli Tullio: *O. di Diritto commerciale.*
Camis Mario: *O. di Fisiologia umana.*
Del Vecchio Gustavo: *O. di Economia politica corporativa.*
Foà Emanuele: *O. di Fisica tecnica.*
Horn d'Arturo Guido: *O. di Astronomia.*
Levi Beppo: *O. di Analisi matematica (algebrica ed infinitesimale).*
Mondolfo Rodolfo: *O. di Storia della filosofia.*
Pincherle Maurizio: *O. di Clinica pediatrica.*
Segre Beniamino: *O. di Geometria analitica con elementi di proiettiva e geometria descrittiva con disegno.*
Supino Giulio: *O. di Costruzioni idrauliche.*
Valtorta Edoardo: *O. di Istituzioni del diritto romano.*

CAGLIARI

Levi Teodoro: *S. di Archeologia e Storia dell'arte antica.*
Pincherle Alberto: *S. di Storia.*
Ysorbo Camillo: *S. di Diritto commerciale.*

FERRARA

Serena Angelo Piero: *S. di Diritto internazionale.*

FIRENZE

Camerio Federico: *O. di Diritto amministrativo.*
Finzi Enrico: *O. di Istituzioni di diritto privato.*
De Semo Purificato Giorgio: *O. di Diritto commerciale.*
Limentani Ludovico: *O. di Filosofia morale.*
Momigliano Attilio: *O. di Letteratura italiana.*
R.E. Istituto C. Alfieri
Ravà Renzo: *S. di Legislazione del lavoro.*

GENOVA

Barbi Roberto: *O. di Statistica.*
Levi Nino: *O. di Diritto e procedura penale.*
Lombroso Ugo: *O. di Fisiologia umana.*
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Rabbeno Angelo: *O. di farmacologia.*
Volta detto Dalla Volta Amedeo: *O. di Medicina legale e delle assicurazioni.*

MILANO

Asculi Alberto: *O. di Patologia generale e anatomia patologica veterinaria.*
Asculi Guido: *O. di Analisi matematica.*
D'Ancona Paolo: *O. di Storia dell'arte.*
Donati Mario: *O. di Clinica chirurgica.*
Fedro Mario: *O. di Diritto ecclesiastico.*
Foà Carlo: *O. di Fisiologia umana.*
Levi Mario Attilio: *S. di Storia romana.*
Mortara Giorgio: *O. di Statistica.*
Terracini Aron: *O. di Glottologia.*
R. Politecnico di Milano
Levi Mario Giacomo: *O. di Chimica industriale.*

MODENA

Donati Benvenuto: *O. di Filosofia del diritto.*
Finzi Marcello: *O. di Diritto e proc. penale.*
Padoa Leone Maurizio: *O. di Chimica gen. ed inorganica.*
Ravenna Ettore: *O. di Anatomia ed ist. patologiche.*

NAPOLI

Foà Anna: *O. di Bachicoltura e agricoltura.*
Forti Ugo: *O. di Diritto amministrativo.*
Levi Ezio: *O. di Filologia romanza.*
Istituto Sup. Navale
Graziani Alessandro: *O. di Diritto marittimo pubblico e privato e di diritto aereo.*

PADOVA

Donati Donato: *O. di Diritto costituzionale.*
Fano Mario: *O. di Economia politica corporativa.*
Ravà Adolfo: *O. di Filosofia del diritto.*
Rossi Bruno: *O. di fisica sperimentale.*
Terni Tullio: *O. di Anatomia umana normale.*

PALERMO

Artom Camillo: *O. di fisiologia umana.*
Asculi Maurizio: *O. di Clinica medica generale e Terapia medica.*
Dina Alberto: *O. di Elettrotecnica.*
Fubini Mario: *S. di Letteratura italiana.*
Segre Emilio: *S. di Fisica sperimentale.*

PARMA

Bigiavi Walter: *O. di Diritto commerciale.*
Levi Alessandro: *O. di Filosofia del diritto.*
Liebman Enrico Tullio: *O. di Diritto processuale civile.*
Melli Guido: *O. di Clinica medica generale.*

PAVIA

Lattes Leone: *O. di Medicina legale e delle assicurazioni.*
Levi Adolfo: *O. di Storia della Filosofia.*
Levi Giorgio Renato: *O. di Chimica generale ed inorganica.*
Marconi Arturo: *O. di Geometria analitica con elementi di proiettiva e geometria descrittiva con disegno.*
Zamorani Vittorio: *O. di Clinica pediatrica.*

PERUGIA

De Rossi Gino: *O. di Microbiologia agraria.*
Finzi Cesare: *O. di Chimica farmaceutica.*
Tedesco Giorgio: *S. di Fisica.*

PISA

Franco Enrico Emilio: *O. di Anatomia e Istologia patologica.*
Gentili Attilio: *O. di Clinica ostetrica e ginecologica.*
Racah Giulio: *S. di Fisica teorica.*
Ravenna Cino: *O. di Chimica agraria.*
Saverbotti Cesare: *O. di Patologia generale.*

ROMA

Almagià Roberto: *O. di Geografia.*
Arias Gino: *O. di Economia politica corporativa.*
Barbi Riccardo: *O. di Politica economica e finanziaria.*
Cassuto Umberto: *O. di Ebraico e lingue semitiche comparate.*
Della Seta Alessandro: *O. di Archeologia italica.*
Del Vecchio Giorgio: *O. di Filosofia del diritto.*
Enriques Federigo: *O. di Geometria superiore.*
Levi Civita Tullio: *O. di meccanica razionale.*

SASSARI

Ottolenghi Michelangelo: *S. di Anatomia degli animali domestici.*

SIENA

Tedeschi Guido: *S. di Diritto civile.*

TORINO

Debenedetti Zaccaria Santorre: *O. di Filologia romanza.*
Fabro Giorgio: *O. di Storia medioevale.*
Fano Gino: *O. di Geometria analitica con elementi di proiettiva e geometria descrittiva con disegno.*
Herlitzka Amedeo: *O. di Fisiologia umana.*
Levi Giuseppe: *O. di Anatomia umana normale.*
Momigliano Arnaldo: *S. di Storia romana con esercitazioni di epigrafia romana.*
Ottolenghi Giuseppe: *O. di Diritto internazionale.*
Terracini Alessandro: *O. di Geometria analitica con elementi di proiettiva e geometria descrittiva con disegno.*
Vitta Cino: *O. di Diritto amministrativo.*

Regio Politecnico di Torino
Fubini-Ghiron Guido: *O. di Analisi matematica.*

TRIESTE

Del Vecchio Ettore: *S. di Matematica generale e finanziaria.*
Fubini Renzo: *O. di economia politica corporativa.*
Pugliese Mario: *S. di Scienza delle finanze e diritto finanziario.*
Segrè Angelo: *O. di Storia economica.*

VENEZIA

(Ist. Sup. di Scienze ec. e commerc.)
Luzzatto Gino: *O. di Storia economica.*

SOMMARIO

RINNOVAMENTO

In questo ultimo periodo la storia ha registrato eventi del più alto interesse; ma nel che, ai fatti di ogni italiano, abbiamo voluto given di giudizio commossi, qui dobbiamo limitare a notare soltanto i fatti che riguardano gli studi superiori.

Il numero chiuso per due università, la politicizzazione di gran parte del corpo docente generale, la modifiche e le successive integrazioni, quelle di carattere razziale, la chiusura delle facoltà di lettere e altri minori provvedimenti, che saranno da noi commentati in seguito.

L'esame di un problema, però, non può essere rimandato per la sua serietà: angosciosa, quello della razza, balzato oggi, per volere del Capo e per necessità storiche, in primissimo piano fra i problemi nazionali.

E' toccato a un gruppo di professori e di assistenti universitari l'onore e la responsabilità di determinare i criteri fondamentali del problema razziale e quelli in modi particolare agli istituti di cultura superiore il compito di approfondirlo, sia dal punto di vista scientifico che giuridico. Per questo il nostro giornale, che da tre anni assolve il compito di agitare ogni problema universitario, non potrà ignorare, certo, questo palpitante argomento.

Le discussioni di carattere puramente scientifico lasciamo ai più esperti; non sarà più opportuno di quando forse non siamo e, in ogni caso, non più tardi e imbeccate e deformate, continuano e, vogliamo sperarlo, continueranno sempre più vivide e severe in altre sedi: nelle aule scolastiche, nei laboratori, nelle riviste di scienza pura e specialmente nei La difesa della razza e, la giovane e già rigogliosa consorella.

Ma oggi, il tema — che nel nostro giornale dovrebbe essere seguito soprattutto nei suoi sviluppi didattici e amministrativi — data la sua eccezionale importanza, viene esaminato anche da un punto di vista puramente scientifico.

Per rincuorare il più lontano possibile da superficiali improvvisazioni, ci siamo rivolti a quei professionisti universitari che, in questo periodo, hanno seguito con maggiore severità scientifica il problema razziale, circa di loro una gradita ai nostri lettori.

Da parte nostra ci limiteremo a qualche breve considerazione e a dare alcune notizie da noi accuratamente controllate.

* * *

I primi e più severi — o meno brutali — provvedimenti presi finora contro gli ebrei, riguardano l'insegnamento e la frequenza nelle scuole.

Non poteva essere diversamente, giacchè la Scuola assenda l'organo più em

Sapienza newspaper Vita Universitaria (University Life) announcing the expulsion of Jewish professors in October 1938 Credit: Historical Archive Sapienza University of Rome

Digging in state archives, the Sapienza historians uncovered new documents relating to his post-university days, including that along with other Roman Jews, he participated in anti-Fascist meetings and distributing flyers, for which he was briefly imprisoned in 1942. This was a relatively early act of defiance, as resistance to Mussolini's regime was largely muted for most of the Fascist era. It only became more widespread in late 1943, after Nazi Germany occupied central and northern Italy to prop

up Il Duce's puppet regime and fight the Allies, who had landed in the south.

"Uncovering these early acts of defiance helps combat the narrative that Jews passively went to the slaughter, while here we see there was active participation in the resistance," says Massimo Finzi, another of Pavoncello's nephews and the only one alive today who met him.

Pavoncello was caught in the Nazi roundup of October 1943 and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, but never returned, says the 83-year-old Finzi. "For a long time, even after the war, we didn't know if he was dead or alive," the nephew recalls. "My mom [Pavoncello's sister] created a special prayer for me that I recited every evening for years, and I still remember it today: 'God, let me grow strong and good, grant health to mom and dad, and bring back uncle Elio.'"

'Complete betrayal'

The project's investigation of Pavoncello is a rare case of information emerging on a student from the period, Gentiloni says. The university's archives only preserve lists of names of students, so, unless family members come forward, it is hard to gather any data from just names, he notes.

Much more can be gleaned from the thick personnel files of professors and researchers like Nella Mortara, one of Italy's first female experimental physicists. She was a graduate of Sapienza's prestigious physics institute, perhaps best known for the work of Enrico Fermi. He was a Nobel Prize laureate who left Italy for the United States after the Racial Laws were approved (to protect his Jewish wife), and went on to design the first artificial nuclear reactor and play a key role in the Manhattan Project. Fermi, who named his daughter Nella, once praised Mortara as an outstanding researcher who could think out of the box, saying that "she is not classic electron; she is a quantum electron."

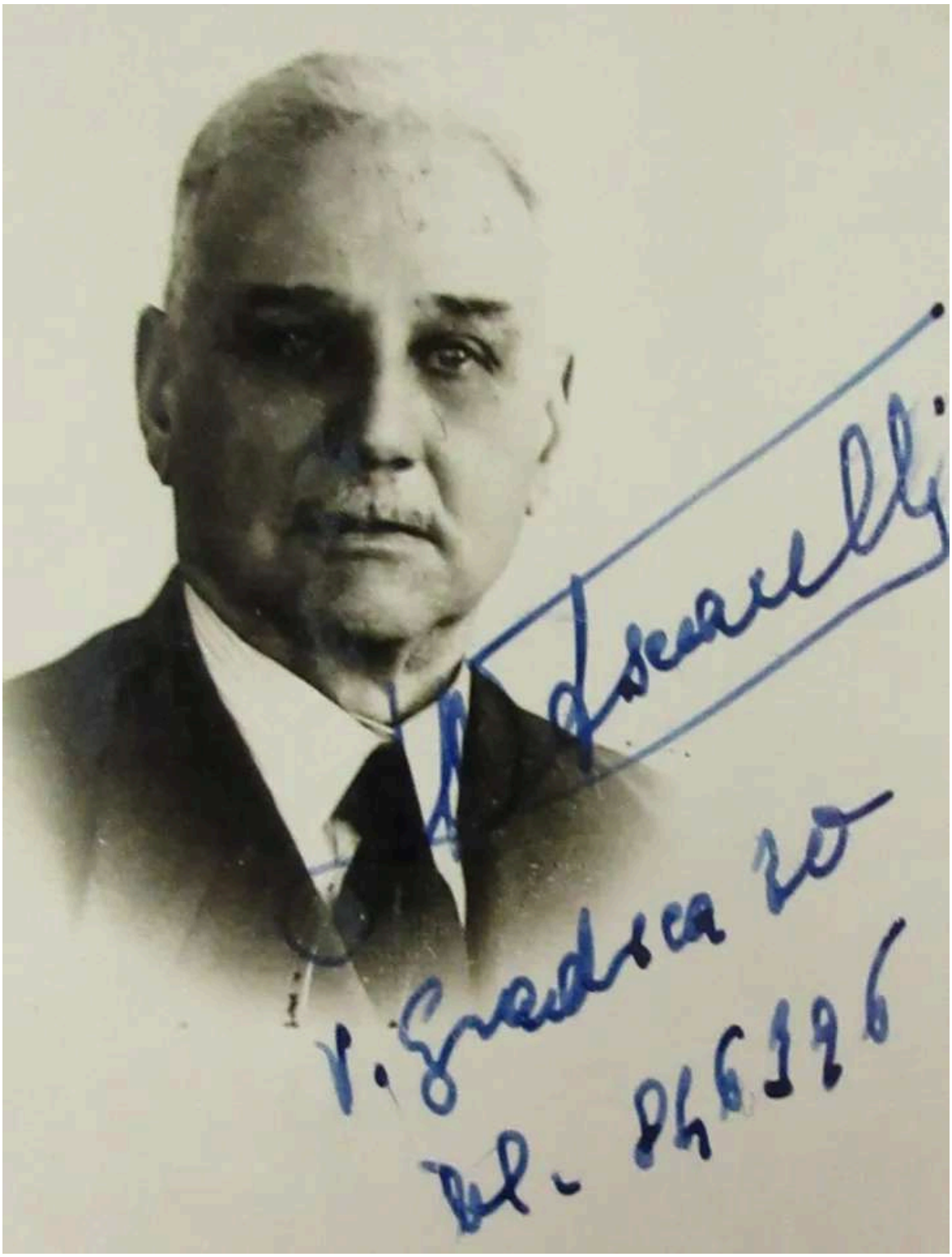
Nella Mortara, one of Italy's first female experimental physicists. Credit: Historical Archive Sapienza University of Rome

But Mortara, an expert on X-rays, was summarily dismissed like all the other Jews under the new legislation, as shown by the documents found in Sapienza's archive.

She briefly emigrated to Brazil but returned to Rome in 1941 to be with her family, riding out the Nazi occupation by hiding in a convent. She was reinstated as an assistant at Sapienza after the war, resuming her teaching and research despite suffering from bouts of depression. She died in 1988 at age 95.

While Mortara, like many women scientists, labored in relative obscurity before and after the war, the Racial Laws also didn't spare more high-profile academics such as Attilio Ascarelli, a leading forensic expert at Sapienza. He had served as a colonel in the medical corps during World War I, but was still expelled from the university in 1938.

In the following years, he was protected by a former high school friend who had meanwhile become none other than the controversial wartime pope, Pius XII. Pius found him a job at a Vatican university, and Ascarelli later fought with the resistance during the Nazi occupation. After the Allies liberated Rome in June 1944, he was charged with the grisly task of leading the exhumation and identification of the victims of the Ardeatine Caves Massacre – the Nazi killing of 335 Jews, political prisoners and civilians at an abandoned quarry outside the city. Among the victims, Ascarelli identified two of his nephews.



Attilio Ascarelli, a leading forensic doctor at Sapienza. Credit: Historical Archive Sapienza University of Rome

Almost all the academics who were found so far to have been expelled from Sapienza in 1938 survived the Holocaust, partly because they mostly came from a better social and economic background and had more means to ensure their safety, Di Nepi says.

But the Racial Laws remain a black stain on Italy's relations with Jews, particularly as they were seen as a betrayal of a very loyal minority, she says. Jews had fought and participated enthusiastically in the unification of Italy in the 19th century, as this ensured their emancipation. This was especially true for Roman Jews, who were locked in the Ghetto until Italy captured the city from Pope Pius IX in 1870.

ROMA - ANNO IV - N.12

VITA UNIVERSITARIA

DIREZIONE E AMMINISTRAZIONE CITTÀ UNIVERSITARIA

QUINDICINALE DELLE UNIVERSITÀ ITALIANE

30 MARZO 1940 - XVIII IV DELL'IMPERO

25 MARZO XVIII

IL DUCE ALL'UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

L'ORDINAMENTO DEGLI STUDI MEDICI

SOMMARIO

Sapienza newspaper Vita Universitaria (University Life) reporting on Il Duce's visit to the university in March 1940. Credit: Historical Archive Sapienza University of Rome

"In many cases, this was the first generation of Jews who had studied at university," Di Nepi adds. "It was a complete betrayal

of the emancipation project."

Total indifference

The people targeted by the Racial Laws had only been free for a couple of generations. Many, like Ascarelli, had fought for Italy in World War I and had fully assimilated into secular Italian life. Some were even ardent Fascists, Di Nepi notes.

That was the case with Alessandro Della Seta, an archaeologist and art expert at Sapienza, and the head of the Italian School of Archaeology in Athens who was removed from his posts despite being a longtime supporter of the regime. He spent the war in hiding and died of an illness in 1944, just a few months after Rome was liberated and he was officially reinstated.

Alessandro Della Seta, one of Italy's top prewar archaeologists. Credit: Historical Archive Sapienza University of Rome

"All these people were expelled or removed from one day to the next," Gentiloni says. "And what strikes me the most when reading the minutes of the faculty meetings that approved the expulsions is that for each case, the decision was unanimous. No one ever objected."

In the highly competitive academic rat race, many non-Jewish junior researchers quietly and comfortably slipped into their teachers' and mentors' chairs, Di Nepi says, adding: "It was seen as an opportunity to create new jobs."

That may partly explain why some of the survivors did not return to Sapienza after the war, despite being reinstated. Some simply had stellar careers abroad, but others did not find it right to return to an institution that had so easily dismissed them, Gentiloni says.

Highlighting the apathy and silence that accompanied the expulsion of Jewish faculty at Sapienza gives the project a broader impact, which goes well beyond reconstructing a dark page in a university's history, he adds.

Further stories of Jewish academics persecuted under the Racial Laws may emerge from the university archives as the research continues, Gentiloni and Di Nepi say.

More efforts need to be done to reconstruct how the legislation affected Jewish students. For instance, while those who had signed up before 1938 were allowed to complete their studies, it is unclear how many actually stayed.

"Some may have had to drop out to help their families deal with the sudden economic difficulties caused by the Racial Laws. Others may have left the country with their families. And others may have just wondered what was the point in getting a degree in law or medicine in a country where they couldn't be lawyers or doctors," Gentiloni says.

"Telling the story of a victim of Nazism and Fascism means returning to them an identity that they wanted to erase, reducing it to a number tattooed on the arm or a bunch of ashes," says Finzi, Pavoncello's nephew. "It means taking a path that is exactly the opposite of the Nazi and Fascist plan."

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