



Thousands of Names and Emotions on Park Avenue

Marina Melchionda (January 29, 2010)



On January 27, we gathered outside the Consulate General of Italy on Park Avenue to read the names of the thousands of Italian Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Here are some of the most precious moments we experienced on that day. OUR VIDEO IS COMING NEXT WEEK. STAY TUNED!

On January 27 Italy woke up to the news that somebody had written on the walls of Via Tasso in Rome "Io non ho memoria" (I have no memory). This was particularly meaningful since it was Remembrance Day. We heard about this here on the "other side of the pond", in NYC, while getting ready to go to the Italian Consulate on Park Avenue.

This is the fourth year that the Italian and Italian American community gathered there to commemorate the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. We attended and participated in a very



special, moving, and heartfelt ceremony: the reading of the thousands and thousands of names of the Jews deported from Italy during the Fascist era.

Italy was once again the only country that organized an open air event for the occasion. It was freezing cold, but we stood in front of the Consulate for hours and hours with the knowledge that it was well worth it. We could tell how necessary it was by looking into the wondering eyes of those walking by, by their "What are you doing out here?" questioning looks and in our "We are commemorating the innocent Italian victims of the Holocaust" answers.

People of all ages, walks of life, and cultural backgrounds offered to read a page or two. Some people stood behind the lectern for much more than that, others for a very little time... reading those names was not easy. Sometimes you could find the same surname repeated dozens and dozens of times in a row, and you understood that entire families had been completely destroyed by this insanity.

Under each name you could find a brief bio of the person, and of course most of them ended with "killed", "died in an unknown place and date"... It was so rare to read "liberated", "survived", that you felt incredibly relieved all of the sudden, just as it had to do with a member of your own family.

During the seven hours of reading, people came and people went, but we were there the entire day to meet all of them. The Consul General of Italy Francesco Maria Talò and the Director of the [Primo Levi Center](#) [2] Natalia Indrimi welcomed us and all of those who came after. Italian, American, and foreign media arrived one after the other. Getting such huge coverage was also important: the word could spread widely, our message could reach a significant number of people.

Many non Italians joined us. The Consul General of Germany Horst Freitag and the Consul General of Poland Krzysztof W. Kasprzyk came early in the morning. They were at the same time testimonies of a common past of war and ambassadors of a shared future of peace and human and social justice. With them, the Consul General of Israel Mr. Asaf Shariv.

The Jewish community in New York was also widely represented by the Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Gabriela Shalev, Rabbi Potasnik, Rabbi Weiss, the Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz and, we must say, it was extremely moving to see him sharing the four podiums with Apostolic Nuncio to United Nations Celestino Migliore, the Archbishop of Brooklyn Nicholas Anthony di Marzio, and finally Cardinal Egar: a further demonstration of the significant efforts towards reciprocal respect and recognition that the two religious communities are making.

As regarding the Italian-American community, the presence of Cav. Joseph Sciamè, President/Chair of the [Italian Heritage and Culture Committee, NY, Inc.](#) [3], and a National Past President of the [Order Sons of Italy in America](#) [4]; Cav. Tony di Piazza, Chairman of the [Federation of Italian American Organizations of Brooklyn & Queens](#) [5] and Matilda Cuomo, former First Lady of the State of New York and mother of Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, stood out.

And of course, many, many Italians... they were there not only to present their personal tribute to the victims, but also as representatives of organizations, foundations, and various groups. Andrea Fiano, son of Nedo Fiano, a survivor of the camps and journalist for [Milano Finanza](#) [6], was among the first to open the ceremony. Silvana Mangione, Secretary of [CGIE - General Council for Italians Abroad](#) [7], joined him together with Gianluca Galletto of [Mantica Ventures](#) [8]; Ilaria Costa, director of [IACE - Italian American Committee on Education](#) [9]; Massimo Magliaro, director of [Rai Corporation](#) [10]; and, of course, the Italian Ambassador to the United Nations Cesare Ragaglini.

The Italian government was well represented by the Consulate and the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [11]'s officials. Deputy Consuls Maurizio Antonini and Marco Alberti supported Consul General Talò in the welcoming of all the guests arriving and in managing the event.



It was a rich day, that was made even more precious by the afternoon arrival of the students of the [Scuola d'Italia Guglielmo Marconi](#) [12], the bi-lingual Italian-American school of Manhattan, accompanied by their Dean Anna Fiore and some of their professors. It was important that they participated, both for us and for them. It helped us understand that you're never too young or too old to remember; and it taught them one of those lessons you can't learn in class: history is all around you, and even if it might not have affected your personal past, it is certainly shaping your present. And you will be the one who, starting with it, can decide what is going to happen in the future.

The day reached its apex when the students of the [Park East Synagogue Day School](#) [13] joined their Scuola d'Italia's colleagues. It was amazing to see them together sharing this common memory, chatting, and finally laughing. They were alike; there were no boundaries between them. We knew it. They knew it.

As the hours went by, we of i-Italy asked some of the people mentioned above to share their impressions and feelings about this anniversary with us. We are reporting them here to give you a number of different points of view on this universal issue.

Matilda Cuomo Former First Lady of New York: "I came here not only to represent my family, but also as a former teacher. I have two sons-in-law who are both Jewish, and I must say that I am very proud of them. They actively work for the community, helping those in need, the ill, and spreading the message of cooperation, reciprocal help and support among those they come in contact with. I look at them and love them as if they were my own sons, because they teach people the same values I once taught to my kids"

Nicholas Anthony di Marzio, Bishop of the Diocese of Brooklyn: "Last Sunday at mass, I told my parishioners that I would come here today. I am here not only as a man of God, but to represent a diocese that embodies the idea of coexistence among people of different races and cultural backgrounds. Both the Jewish and Italian communities are significantly big in my borough, and it is amazing to see how they live side by side, loving and respecting each other. Their kids are friends... Sometimes I look at them and I just can't believe that not too long ago Italy allowed something like the Holocaust to happen. It seems so far from reality. But it's not... That's why you have to keep remembering what happened in the past... so that in the future Jewish and Christian kids can still play together...."

Edward Michael Egan, **Archbishop of New York from 2001 to 2009.** "Having lived for over 24 years in Italy, I feel so close to that country that I almost define myself as an Italian. So I am here to share an important moment with a group of people that I see as my own co-citizens. Moreover, I thought that my presence could be important also in view of the recent visit of the Pope to the Synagogue of Rome. Symbolic moments like that one should happen not only in Rome, but in every part of the Christian world. Being here, I commit myself to the effort of further dialogue with the Jewish community of New York".

Silvana Mangione, Secretary of the General Council of Italians Abroad: "I just finished reading pages of names, sorry if I still can't restrain my emotions. These are feelings that you can't hide: to stay here and hear the same surname being pronounced 10, 20, 30 times in a row kind of hits you right in the stomach. I express all my sympathy to the Jewish community of New York, and as an Italian I also apologize on behalf of my co-citizens for the shameful words found this morning on the walls of Via Tasso in Rome. It encourages me even more to attend this kind of event and express all my sorrow for the past tragedy. We have the duty to prevent it from happening again, it's a commitment that we should take seriously!"



Alfio Russo, Educational Director at the Consulate General of Italy. "I am extremely pleased that so many students got involved in this initiative. The Italian school system is strongly engaged in the mission to keep the memory of the tragedy of the Holocaust alive. Every year the Scuola d'Italia, as an example, organizes workshops, laboratories, and monographic lessons focused on this moment of history allowing its students to become very knowledgeable on the subject. As an example, just a week ago, Dean Anna Fiore took her older students to attend the screening of "50 Italians" at the CUNY Graduate Center in Manhattan. The documentary tells the story of 50 Italian Fascist soldiers that saved 50.000 Jews from persecution, offering the audience new elements about that historic period. The students' presence today is thus particularly appreciated, representing another step towards our goal to preserve memory among new generations".

Gianluca Galletto, Partner, Mantica Ventures: "I am not Jewish but for family reasons I feel very close to this people for what it has endured in the past. It's not the first time that I am participating in this initiative and I must say that every year it involves me more. This time the event is particularly meaningful to me. I woke up with the news of the writing on the wall in Via Tasso and I felt disgusted. While the "American Italia" is here commemorating a tragedy in a universally shared spirit of mourning, in our country people are feeling more and more legitimized to think and write those kind of offenses. It offends me, and the personal experience I am having today. Before I was standing there waiting for my turn to read and on the page I had before me I could not find even one person that survived. I started reading all the bios with personal anguish until, finally, I found a "liberated" and...I felt liberated too".

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Links

- [1] <http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/img7441.jpg>
- [2] <http://www.primolevicenter.org>
- [3] <http://www.italyculturemonth.org>
- [4] <http://www.osia.org>
- [5] <http://www.fiaobrooklyn.org>
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