



Remembrance Day Comes to Park Avenue

Eleonora Mazzucchi (January 30, 2009)

Remembrance Day outside the Italian General Consulate and Italian Cultural Institute was open to the city, with day-long readings of the names of Italian Jews who perished in the Holocaust

January 27th was a bitterly cold day to spend outdoors. But Remembrance Day, as it is conceived by the Italian General Consulate and the Centro Primo Levi of New York, is a commemoration to be spent in the open, in contact with the world that sixty four years ago silently or unwittingly allowed for the barbarity that was the Holocaust. Nothing in modern history quite compares to it, and because of its very difficulty to fathom, the suffering and millions of lives lost risk being cast into the realm of unreality. It is with this in mind that the names of thousands of Italian Jews who faced deportation and perished in concentration camps were read aloud outside. Long a monument to elegant exclusivity, Park Avenue, where volunteers stood on a small stretch of sidewalk reciting from sheets of names, for a day became an invitation to stop and be absorbed into an event, to listen, to converge and remember.

As Stella Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz put it, “this is a way to teach people on the outside, even passersby, about this history, for them to discover it in an immediate way.” The Italian Consulate and Centro Primo Levi began honoring Remembrance Day with public readings last year. Those present who were not reading the lists from microphones—to hear the names of the dead, like an endless stream, is to be re-awakened to the thought of single lives, each contained in the name and prematurely extinguished—huddled around, some in solemnity and all in solidarity. The event drew dignitaries from across community lines, including the Permanent Representatives of Italy and Israel to the United Nations, U.S. officials like Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, executives of Italian corporations in New York, Jewish and Christian religious leaders, heads of Italian cultural institutions and various European diplomats (among which, Czech Consul General Eliska Zigova, who said she felt personally connected to the occasion after reading Primo Levi for the first time). Consul General Francesco Maria Talò noted, “Italian institutions fully understand the importance of participating in this unique form of commemoration. In so doing, they have also had the opportunity to meet with Jewish associations in New York. This really marks a further step forward: the Italian and Jewish communities have always been close, but here they are veritably merging with the city and its international representatives.”

Perhaps the most heartwarming and hopeful of moments was the program’s inclusion of students from the neighborhood’s Guglielmo Marconi Scuola d’Italia, Ramaz and Park East Synagogue schools. The children stood together and read one after the other, with remarkable maturity and poise. “We wanted to bring these two scholastic groups together to give them the possibility to reflect on the meaning of this event, the remembrance of a tragedy”, said Alfio Russo, Director of the Education Office “and to emphasize that regardless of our cultural origins, we must acknowledge that this was a loss to humanity as a whole.” Berardo Paradiso, President of the Italian American Committee on



Education (IACE) added, "It is through memory that we look for a better way into the future. That is why involving these students is crucial: ideals are transmitted."

And how did Italian Americans perceive this European holiday at the juncture between the Italian and Jewish communities? Joseph Sciame, who is a former President of the Order Sons of Italy, Vice President for Community Relations at St. John's University and Chairman of the Holocaust Center at Queensborough Community College, said that while we can "never deny that this period existed in our history", Italian Americans are reminded of "the important role we enacted in Italy". That role being the one played by the many Italians—most of whom are unknown to us today—who risked their lives to save Jews in their country. Lawrence Auriana, Chairman of the Columbus Citizens Foundation, said that, despite this, Italian Americans felt shame for what happened in Italy and he underlined the relevance of this form of commemoration: "Reading the individual names personalizes the tragedy, reminds you the Holocaust involved real people, real families."

Indeed, if one looked down at the list of names and their brief biographies, what would jump off the page were dates of birth; children, scores of them, were among those who passed. Often a list would contain the same last name 5 or 10 times, because an entire family had been exterminated. The experience of both reading and listening to the names produced the intended effect: a sometimes painful, yet necessary, triggering of memory.

Speaking with some of the guests at the commemoration, we asked them for their thoughts, feelings and reactions. We leave you with their words.

"I'm moved, being here for the second time. Last year was extraordinary and this year it is almost as though this were a consolidated event, a part of New York's history. I think it is marvelous that an idea like this one take root in the U.S., with journalists, photographers, schools and the rabbi who came to say a prayer this morning. I'm also pleased that this Remembrance Day has become a week of memory, with coordinated events underlining different aspects of memory: historical memory, personal memory, the memory of people who were really there."

Renato Miracco, Director of the Italian Cultural Institute

"The emotion I felt was very strong. What made the biggest impression on me was reading the names and especially the same last names several times. It is really a symbol for the extermination of entire families and we must remember them, especially in a place like New York, where everything has more emphasis. I hope the media gives this event the coverage it deserves."

Francesco Fadda, Vice President of the Fitzgerald Foundation of Florence

"This is something that must be done. It's an event that is beautiful in its absolute simplicity, with no frills."

Gianna Pontecorboli, Italian Jewish journalist



"I came last year and my reaction is always the same: I get a knot in my throat, my voice breaks and my eyes water. Reading the names you understand that entire families were wiped out in the name of an atrocious ideal, and an atrocious decision, the likes of which hasn't been seen since ancient history and that should have no place in our history. This can never occur again, in any part of the world."

Silvana Mangione, Vice Secretary of the CGIE (Consiglio Generale degli Italiani all'Estero)

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