

## Nedo, Andrea and Talia

Letizia Airos Soria (January 31, 2009)



An encounter with journalist Andrea Fiano, member of the Board of Directors of the Primo Levi Center (NYC). He is the son of Nedo Fiano, an Auschwitz survivor, and the father of Talia, an Italian American teenager

I met with journalist Andrea Fiano whose father, Nedo, was one of the few Italians to survive Auschwitz. I had a very specific, powerful image in mind. It comes from the transcript of an interview I read some time ago which said that as a child, Nedo was no longer allowed go to school because Italian law prohibited it. I was struck by the image of a child who in 1938 lost the right to an education, along with the right to play with his Italian peers. Instead, he had to attend classes organized by the Jewish community.

My interview with Andrea Fiano therefore followed an imaginary thread: before me was Nedo as a boy, Andrea as a boy, and Talia, Andrea's teenage daughter.

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“Being the son of an Auschwitz survivor means growing up with big questions. I have resolved them over time but they still partly remain. This is with respect to what happened, and why it happened to me and to other families. Why are there grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins whom I have never seen?” In Andrea’s memory there is an incident in particular that may have coincided with his growing awareness as a child.

“I remember once, in elementary school, we went to sing as a choir in a retirement home and I saw a kind of tombstone. I became convinced, incorrectly, that it bore my grandmother’s name. I became very emotional and started to cry, and the teacher calmed me down. I was eight years old. It was a different life for a child; that is to say, I had no relatives on one side of the family, and my father was somewhat peculiar. He was a father who was not like other fathers, and there were many situations that provoked very intense emotions.”

Andrea describes those days: “We are talking about an Italy where my father’s story was rare, even for the Jewish community. Fewer than 8,000 Jews were deported, a few hundred returned, and today there are about one hundred who are still alive. It was an unusual fact which was not discussed, and for many it was an issue that was close or farther away depending on their sensitivity, but I had this at home. I grew up asking about very little, and until I became an adolescent I don’t ever remember having friends who were children of the deported; I had never shared my story.”

He speaks of his father Nedo with affection, but with a sort of journalistic rigor: “He did not talk often about his past; he began to do so over the last twenty years. I had the good fortune to grow up with an optimistic father figure who was anything but resentful. He returned to Germany in the 1970s to work, elegantly dressed, in a country where he had been a slave only twenty, fifteen years earlier. In our home there was always a message of optimism about human nature along with a clearly anti-Fascist outlook.”

For many years Nedo Fiano has been tirelessly bringing his testimony and sharing his experiences throughout Italy: “He has appeared at more than 700 venues such as schools, clubs, and churches. I believe that he felt a duty, and at a certain point he started to write out short memories and then later started to talk about them.” His way of sharing his testimony is unique, and for this reason he is able to reach the younger generation. He not only tells his tragic story, but he speaks about freedom, democracy. He tries to make people understand that too often rights that have been won with great battles are taken for granted.

How does his “American” granddaughter Talia, Andrea’s daughter, live with her grandfather’s experiences?

“It must be said that if you have a family with these kinds of stories, there is no need for a specific date. I remember once at school, she was asked to choose a hero to talk about. She chose her grandfather, while a boy of German origin opted for his uncle who was a Lutwaffe pilot. She stood up and said, ‘That’s not a hero. Do you know what the Germans did during the war?’ It is part of her DNA. She has respect and solidarity, but also great awareness. She has not read her grandfather’s book because of the language issue, but she will.”

Andrea’s family story greatly influences his social consciousness and his awareness of being a citizen. His sensitivity to the phenomenon of racism and discrimination is very strong. “I remember a few years ago I was at a dinner in Italy with some childhood friends in a restaurant overlooking the sea. At one point a person began to make some very racist comments about Filipinos. I said: stop it right now or I will leave. They were all astonished by my reaction. Even my wife did not understand. Unfortunately, the situation today is much worse. It is not easy to know how to behave.”

What does Remembrance Day mean to Andrea?

“As Primo Levi said, every nation that forgets its past is destined to relive it! I do not know whether this is so, but it is important to think, to reason, to know our history as Italians, as Jews. The idea of pausing to reflect, on one symbolic day, seems essential to me. The reading of the victims’ names on Park Avenue in front of the Consulate General of Italy. The fact that the New York Times’ radio last year said that ‘if you see the traffic slowing down it is because they are reading the names of the deportees’ – that had great meaning for me. It is not only a tribute to the memory of these people; it is not limited to the victims’ relatives who do not need an exact date to remember. Little by little the past will be reconstructed thanks to this occasion as well as to the many people who came to the



U.S. to escape Fascism and racial persecution.”

Last year, like many, I participated in the reading of these names. They came slowly, one after the other, like small waves on the shore. The act of repeating them all, as the surrounding silence was interrupted by the noise of the passing cars and the footsteps of the hurried pedestrians, dug into the depths of our humanity. The same surname repeated more than a dozen times; entire families exterminated. I left the small podium set up in front of the Consulate with my heart in my throat.

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This is a tribute that transcends symbolic value and i-Italy had to make a contribution. So here is the special edition that you have before you. It is dedicated to the image of Nedo Fiano as a child, deprived of his own right to be a child. It is also dedicated to all children in every part of the world who, even today, are still victims of discrimination and racial violence. On the same day that a man with black skin takes the oath of office as president of the United States of America, this message - here in New York - takes on a particularly special meaning.

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