

Salonika 1943. Dusting Off a Forgotten Chapter of History

Marina Melchionda (February 22, 2010)



The theatrical performance "Salonika 1943", held at the Primo Levi Center on February 18, wrapped up this year's celebrations of Remembrance Day. We attended the event, in which the work was presented in English for the first time, and interviewed one of its authors, the former Ambassador of Italy to Israel and Greece, Gian Paolo Cavarai

The representation of "Salonika 43" at the [Primo Levi Center](#) [2] in New York on February 18 wrapped up this year's celebrations for Remembrance Day, the date the Italian government (and most of the European governments) chose to remember the victims of the Holocaust. The date marks the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. For the occasion, the theatrical play "Salonika 43", which was dedicated to the extermination of the Jewish community of Salonika by German hands in 1943, and to the heroic Consul General of Italy Guelfo Zamboni that managed to



save more than 500 victims, was represented for the first time in English with an American Cast directed by Alan Andelson.

Before the main Italian media operating in the area, Alessandro Cassin, journalist and research consultant for the Primo Levi Center, presented to a full house the outstanding interpreters Robert Zukerman and Lily Bansen, accompanied by the music and chants of Galeet Dardashti and Brandon Terzic.

In the first rows, eminent representatives of the Italian, Italian-American, Greek, and Israeli communities in New York sat together with the Consul General of Italy in New York, Francesco Maria Talò, and his wife, Ornella; Deputy Consul Maurizio Antonini; the new director of the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [3] Riccardo Viale. With them was also Stella Levi, Board Member of the Primo Levi Center and a survivor of Nazi persecution. Born in the Island of Rhodes, Mrs. Levi has experienced many of the situations narrated in the play.

The event enjoyed the sponsorship of the Alexandre Bodini Foundation and of the Italian-American [Joseph Mattone Jr](#) [4], who shared with us all his pride for supporting the initiative: " As a child living in Brooklyn, I had many friends of Jewish heritage. I could see the effect the news from Salonika had on their lives, I looked at their worried, anguished faces, and knew that I had to do something. I believe that theater, as every form of art, should be considered a means to teach history to new generations. And, also, by putting on stage a play like this one, we should also remind ourselves of what we have gone through, so that we act today to prevent and put an end to contemporary genocides."

Special guest of the evening was Gian Paolo Cavarai, former Ambassador to Greece and Israel, and Diplomatic Advisor to the former President of the Italian Republic, Life Senator [Carlo Azeglio Ciampi](#) [5].

Co-author of the play, for the occasion he also represented Ferdinando Ceriani, Theatre Director and Professor at the [Luiss University](#) [6] of Rome, and Antonio Ferrari, correspondent for the Mediterranean Area and the Middle East for the Italian daily [Corriere della Sera](#) [7], who together with him gave birth to this moving and dramatic representation.

A very simple scenography gave great prominence to the movements, words, and facial expressions of the characters.

For most of the representation, Consul Zamboni was sitting at a desk illuminated by a soft light, positioned on the left inside of the stage. Actress Lily Balsen, who represented the anguished Jewish community, continuously changed roles and personalities, although her voice and expression never left her anguished features...

Their interpretation was alternated and overlapped by the deep and vibrant voice of singer Galeet Dardashti, who hummed ancient Sephardic hymns. They resounded in our ears and souls just as much as the repertoire, while images of the 1940s Salonika and its Jewish community forced us to see the dreadful truth right before our eyes. In the pictures, mothers, elders, children, and those injured and physically challenged stood beside the rest of their friends and families, as they were all sent to the same destiny: Auschwitz, Poland.

On the stage there were two parallel, growing torments. One was Mr. Zamboni's who, with strength, perseverance, and disgust for what was happening around him, used every possible means to save the lives of the Jewish citizens of Salonika, whether Italian or not. Letters to the SS command, to the "Royal Embassy of Italy in Athens", to the [Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [8], were written with frustration and vacuous, uncertain hope. The other one was the Jewish community's that, as the play went on, became victim of ever growing abuse, both physical and psychological.

The interpreters were surrounded by silence: nobody in the audience moved a muscle, everybody was completely into the show, their faces covered by a thick shadow of pain, sorrow, and sense of guilt.



"Everybody is guilty, to a larger or lesser extent": words of anger with which Consul Zamboni left Salonika and the stage. The curtain closed on the representation as we were given the info that his successor continued in his efforts and saved another three hundred Jews by sending them to Athens. Unfortunately, that was not the final destination for most of them, as a train was waiting for them even there.

Heirs and testimonies, and many of those sitting among the audience expressed praise towards the actors, directors, and authors of the play. "It must have been the tenth time that I assisted to this representation, but it's the first that I cried", claimed a touched and moved Ambassador Cavarai.

We had had the opportunity to meet him a few days before the event at the Consulate General of Italy. The interview we had with him, that lasted almost two hours, gave us the opportunity to understand and feel how attached he is to "Salonika 43".

When did the project of "Salonika 43" come to light?

When I was Ambassador in Israel, I organized a conference to present the book of an historian of Italian origin, Daniel Carpi, who at that time was Professor of History at the [University of Tel Aviv](#). [9] In "A New Approach to Some Episodes in the History of the Jews in Salonika during the Holocaust. Memory, Myth, Documentation" he retraced the history of the Jewish community of Salonika during the Nazi Occupation through reports and documentations he found in the archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I was very interested in the book, but it wasn't before I was nominated Ambassador to Athens that I started thinking to set up a theatre production based on it. The idea came to light when I met Antonio Ferrari, correspondent of the daily *Corriere della Sera* in the Mediterranean Area and Middle East. He knew much about the story of Consul General Guelfo Zamboni and felt that he had to write something about it. In Italy, very few knew his story... sometimes it happens that the need to forget a bad chapter of history brings a people to forget also the positive aspects of it. And one of them was without a doubt Consul Zamboni.

We immediately organized a symposium on the issue. On that occasion, we met Theatre Director Ferdinando Ceriani who read some of the documents collected in Carpi's book. His dramatic, theatrical interpretation inspired us to set up the play, the three of us together, Mr. Ceriani, Mr. Ferrari, and I. First, we published a book, "Salonika's Jews 1943 - Italian humanity documented", edited by Mr. Ferrari, Prof. Alessandra Coppola, and Jannis Chrisafis. The book enjoyed the sponsorship of Intergilo, a group of companies based in Greece. Italo Coscione, its president, had already sponsored several events I organized in Athens, and decided to make the book a Christmas present for all of his contacts.

It was when I became Diplomatic Advisor to the former President of the Italian Republic, Life Senator Carlo Azelio Ciampi, that we decided to finally set up the theatre work. It took us two years to do it...

You seem to be really passionate about theatre...

Yes, I discovered my passion for theatre when I was 18. I was a high school senior when they took my class to see *Othello* by William Shakespeare at the Quirino Theatre in Rome. With [Vittorio Gassman](#) [10] and Salvo Randone as the main interpreters, I couldn't have had a better first experience with theatre. I was admitted in the [National Academy for Dramatic Arts "Silvio D'Amico"](#) [11] and attended a directing class. Although I finally abandoned that path to embrace the diplomatic one, I always tried to nourish my personal passion and promote Italian dramatic arts by organizing a considerable number of representations in the territories where I was stationed.

When was "Salonika 43" first performed?

We had our world premiere on September 23, 2008 at the University of Tel Aviv. We knew that it was not an easy show to present in that context; the issues it faces and analyzes are not the easiest to confront. We knew we had to start from there, although it is not a play dedicated or addressed only to the Jewish community. It must be looked at as a "universal story", one that regards everyone of us, especially today, when too much seems to have been forgotten.

The representation was sponsored by one of the most important financial institutions in Israel, [Bank Hapoalim](#) [12]; the Recanati family, originary of Salonika; and Bruno Lansperg, a 85-year-old



business man.

After four days, we had another very succesful performance in Salonika...

How did the citizens of Salonika react to the show?

We were lucky enough to present the show as part of a bigger festival, "[Demetria](#) [13]", organized by the Town Hall of Salonika. The city was covered with manifestos announcing the show, which in that case was financed by [Impregilo](#) [14], [Italgas](#) [15], and the Jewish community of Salonika. It was a good opportunity to hand down the story of Consul Zamboni to the heirs of those who benefited from his actions. The local Jewish community is decimated as compared to what it was before 1943, but they still keep an area of their Museum dedicated to his memory.

Was the show ever brought to Italy?

Yes, on November 22, 2008 we presented it at the [Biennal of Venice](#) [16], Theatre Section. It was a very different venue from the two where we had hosted the show before. The auditorium had only 240 seats or so, but the context in which we performed gave the show great resonance.

Thanks to some contacts I had in Turin, I also managed to bring it there. In that case we enjoyed the sponsorship of the [Compagnia San Paolo](#) [17], obtained also through the mediation of Dario Di Segni, who promoted "Salonika 43" in first person. Evelina Christillin, President of the [Fondazione Teatro Stabile di Torino](#) [18], offered us the Gobbetti Theatre, a 18th century jewel with 280 seats. We performed within the "[Festival delle colline torinesi](#) [19]" (Festival of Turin Hills), an important local event with national relevance.

Finally, also thanks to Compagnia San Paolo e Mr. Di Segni, we arrived in Genoa. There we had the support of the Primo Levi Center and the [Teatro Stabile of Genoa](#) [20]. We performed at the [Teatro della Corte](#) [21], which has more than 1000 seats. It was a great success, with the two institutions renting buses to take the people to see the show. It was a source of pride both for me and the whole cast.

Before this representation in New York, the play has always been performed in Italian. Who were the actors starring in it?

Guelfo Zamboni was interpreted by [Massimo Wertmüller](#) [22], nephew of director Lina Wertmüller, and theatre, cinema, and TV actor.

The singer is Italian and belongs to the Jewish Italian community originating from Tripoli. I fell in love with Evelina Meghnagi's voice in 2003 when I was Ambassador in Athens. On the occasion of the Festival Ellenico, we held a representation of "Le memorie di Adriano", and she was the singer for that. I absolutely wanted her for my play...

The Italian actress representing the Jewish community is Carla Ferraro.

Why is it so important to bring "Salonika 1943" to New York, on the occasion of Remembrance Day? It is important for a number of reasons. First, because in the United States, and in New York in particular, there are three important communities that are directly involved in the facts we recount in "Salonika 1943": the Jewish, the Italian, and the Greek. Second, because this city is an important "window" for all of those operating in the theatre field. It is thus the best starting point from which to plan a wider tour in the US.

Which city are you planning on bringing the show to next?

Washington, without a doubt. If here I found the enthusiasm of the Consul General of Italy Francesco Maria Talò, and the director of the Primo Levi Center, Natalia Indrimi, in Washington I can find a huge supporter in the Italian Ambassador Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata. Hopefully we will perform there in April.



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Links

- [1] <http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/copertina-vera1266879755jpg>
- [2] <http://www.primolevicenter.org>
- [3] <http://www.iicnewyork.esteri.it>
- [4] <http://www.mattone.com/josephMattoneJr.htm>
- [5] <http://www.quirinale.it/qrnw/statico/ex-presidenti/Ciampi/cia-biografia.htm>
- [6] <http://www.luiss.edu/>
- [7] <http://www.corriere.it>
- [8] <http://ww.esteri.it/eng>
- [9] <http://ww.tau.ac.il/index-eng.html>
- [10] <http://www.vittoriogassman.it/>
- [11] <http://www.silviodamico.it>
- [12] <http://www.bankhapoalim.com>
- [13] <http://www.planetware.com>
- [14] <http://www.impregilo.it>
- [15] <http://www.italgas.it>
- [16] <http://www.labiennale.org>
- [17] <http://www.compagniadisanpaolo.it>
- [18] <http://www.teatrostabiletorino.it/>
- [19] <http://www.festivaldellecolline.it>
- [20] <http://www.teatrostabilegenova.it>
- [21] <http://www.teatrodellacorte.it>
- [22] <http://www.massimowertmuller.com>