

International Holocaust Remembrance Day: Italy Never Forgets, and Neither Does America

Francesca Giuliani (January 31, 2012)



On January 27, i-Italy attended the memorial ceremony held at the Consulate of Italy and spoke to the many attending guests. These are the comments we gathered, and they all teach very important lessons on the value and the actuality of Remembrance.

Every year on January 27, the [Italian Consulate in New York](#) [2] is the place where the International Holocaust Remembrance Day is celebrated in the most emotional way. The doors of the Consulate are opened on busy Park Avenue, a line of microphones is set up and hundreds of people gather to honor the fallen Italian victims of Auschwitz. Their names are read out loud, from the first to the last, for a six-hour long roll-call.



Auschwitz survivor **Stella Levi** stresses the importance of calling each and every name on the list, many of which sound exactly like hers. “Without a name you don’t exist,” she tells i-Italy.

Stella was 19 years old when she was deported to Auschwitz, an experience that left an indelible mark on her existence, as well as on her tattooed arm. Stella tells i-Italy that by that time she had already suffered the worst insult of her life. That happened four years before being deported, when she was forced to stop attending classes in her Italian high school: “That was the most horrible thing I have ever experienced,” she states, and she sees the presence at the ceremony of the [Scuola D’Italia Guglielmo Marconi](#) [3]students, partaking in the reading, as a very important sign that her message won’t be lost in time.

Consul General of New York, **Natalia Quintavalle**, highlights the importance of the ceremony as a joint effort of all the Italian institutions in New York. The presence of the “Italian System” (or as referred to in Italian, the “sistema Italia”) as the propelling force of such an event is testified by the fact that the event itself is hosted in front of the Consulate of Italy in New York City.

Riccardo Viale, Director of the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [4], believes that New York City is the best location for such a commemoration, as “outside of Israel, New York City is the city where the Jewish culture and heritage are most felt, so it’s important to honor the role of the Jewish people in the world and to commemorate the victims of the Shoah from here.”

New York City’s institutions are aware of this, and their presence at the event is significant. “The Italian consulate is to be congratulated and commended for doing this each and every year,” says **Vincent J. Gentile**, representing [New York City Council](#) [5]at the ceremony. “Just as we say about 9/11, ‘Never Forget’, we need to say the same about the Holocaust. That’s why commemorations like this are so important, putting names to the victims is very significant,” he adds.

For the first time, the names of the victims are accompanied by a musical counterpoint. “Having musicians accompanying our reading adds something very important to it,” says **Alessandro Cassin**, Deputy Director and Director of Publishing at [Primo Levi Center](#) [6]. “Each of them participates with extreme generosity and sensibility,” he adds.

Among the musicians is **Lawrence “Butch” Morris**, who believes that “Music is the healing force of the universe,” and that performers are responsible for supporting events like this: “especially this event. It is a very positive and spiritual situation for us to be in and to make music with – not necessarily for, but with.”

Italian artist **Mauro Pagani** tells i-Italy that he has a lump in his throat since he entered the Consulate. “I can’t even think that each name we are hearing tells the story of a life so tragically interrupted, this terrifies me. I tried to play and to stick to the logic of music, at least for the time I performed, otherwise I couldn’t even manage to play.”

The [New York City Fire Department](#) [7] was represented by Chief **Nigro**, an Italian-American who witnessed another striking tragedy of our times, and a more recent one: the 9/11 terroristic attacks that took the lives of 3000 people. Speaking of World War II, Nigro thinks that “maybe here in America we didn’t realize what was going on in Italy as the people there did at the time. It’s not a period we are proud of but we’re not shying away from it – we remember and it will never happen again.” When we ask him whether he sees a connection between the Holocaust and the 9/11 events, Nigro says: “The connection I see is a connection that I don’t understand, and it’s the deep hatred that people have for people that aren’t like them, a hatred they can extend to the degree that it includes murdering innocent people.”

“The memory of the Holocaust is a universal lesson,” Quintavalle says, “it reinforces the importance of tolerance and interreligious dialogue as the most important pillar of civil coexistence.”

Quintavalle is also glad that since its first edition, back in 2008, the attendance to the event has significantly grown, especially among Americans and international guests, such as the [UN](#) [8]personnel and international consuls.



Among the many consuls attending the commemoration were Consul General of Angola **Adão Pinto**, who told i-Italy about the fratricidal wars his country has experienced, which represent a common ground to better understand the importance of such remembrance occasions; [Consul General of Ukraine](#) [9] **Serhiy Pohorel'tsev**, who remembered the Ukrainian victims of the Babi Yar massacre, when the lives of over 100,000 people were taken, 34,000 of which were Jews; and [Consul General of Jamaica](#) [10] **Geneive Brown Metzger**, who highlighted the actuality of such commemorations in a time that is still identified by wars and conflicts the resolution of which requires dialogue, tolerance and awareness of the past and its atrocities.

Andrea Barbaria, [Consul of Italy in Newark](#) [11], NJ, believes that this commemoration is also extremely important to highlight the primary role that many Italian citizens had in saving Jewish lives during World War II. **Joseph Sciame**, Vice-President for Community Relations at [St. John's University](#) [12], proudly states the same: "Italy has so much to be proud about, and each year I have attended this commemoration as an Italian-American. It is a true commemoration for me."

Natalia Indrimi, Executive Director at [Centro Primo Levi](#) [13], tells i-Italy about the importance to combine events such as this with research programs that aim to shed a light on topics so hard to approach, such as the Fascist terror and its silent acceptance in the Italian society, which led to the dramatic consequences that Stella Levi talked to us about, and that many others didn't have a chance to tell. "Remembrance day always offers opportunities for productive dialogue. This year the Italian Cultural Institute hosts the exhibition 'Il Genio Italiano', which is dedicated to 150 years of Italian creativity in science and technology. The program of Centro Primo Levi opens a window on certain aspects of scientific research and the mechanisms through which it became subjected to the regime's ideology. In 1924 only 6 Italian scientists refused to take the loyalty oath to Mussolini and it was a group of prominent scientists who produced and underwrote one of the main ideological instruments of racial persecution: The Manifesto of the Racist Scientists. This happened within a fertile scientific world, which, not unlike the rest of the country, accepted a compromise on fundamental civil liberties. The intersection between the exhibition and the program offers significant elements to reflect on our past," Indrimi states.

The two faces that Italy had during those years are something to further analyze, especially for the Italian-American community, as to understand its own complex history it has to gain an always more in-depth knowledge of the history of its original homeland.

It's what **Anthony Julian Tamburri**, Dean of the [John D. Calandra Italian-American Institute](#) [14] at [CUNY Queens College](#) [15], tells i-Italy during the ceremony: "In learning our history as Italian-Americans, we must know Italian history too, even its shameful pages. It is a fact that the Church has not been the most friendly power towards Jews during those terrible years, as it is a fact that there are many Jews among the Italian-Americans. These are things we must never forget."

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- [1] <http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/stellalevimemoria1.jpg>
- [2] <http://www.consnewyork.esteri.it>
- [3] <http://www.lascuoladitalia.org>
- [4] <http://www.iicnewyork.esteri.it>
- [5] <http://council.nyc.gov>
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[13] <http://www.primolevicenter.org/Home.html>

[14] <http://www.qc.cuny.edu/calandra>

[15] <http://www.qc.cuny.edu>