

OUT OF THE PAST

CLAUDIO GERBI

CPL EDITIONS

Unpublished biographies
and correspondence

**OUT OF THE PAST:
A STORY OF THE GERBI
FAMILY**

CLAUDIO GERBI

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FOREWORD

By Susan Gerbi

This book, a delightful blend of history and personal anecdotes, traces the Gerbi family over almost five hundred years, from the late middle ages to the present era. With the Spanish inquisition and the decree of Ferdinand and Isabella (1492), many Jews fled from Spain. Among those were the ancestors of Claudio Gerbi, who settled on the island of Djerba, off the coast of Tunisia, where a Jewish community had existed since the destruction of the first temple in Israel (586 BC). The family name of Gerbi is derived from Djerba. With the pogrom of Algiers (June 28, 1805), wealthy Jews who could afford the boat passage emigrated to Leghorn (Livorno) in Italy that had become the center of Sephardic culture. Ferdinand, the First of the Medici, had promulgated a law ("La Livornina" July 10, 1593) that made Leghorn a free port open to religious and political refugees, including Jews from Spain and Portugal. The first documented member of this branch of the Gerbi family was Johanan (Hannan) Gerbi, who lived in Tripoli during the 1700s. His son, Moshè Haim Gerbi (1786-1866) was sent to Leghorn as a child. Yet somehow, he had found himself in Algiers at the time of the pogrom. Having returned to Italy, he subsequently married Luna Malcha Tagiuri and had several children, including Claudio Gerbi's grandfather, Graziadio Gerbi (1829-1907). Graziadio became a banker and a member of Leghorn's stock exchange. His son, Edmo

(Claudio's father), also became a banker and married Iginia Levi of Venice.

Subsequent chapters relay anecdotes about family members from the 19th and 20th centuries, giving a sense of life of the middle class and successful Italian Jews. Family members included bankers, lawyers, politicians, and university professors, among whom were:

Giacomo Levi, Claudio's maternal grandfather, was a lawyer and became Director of the Assicurazioni Generali in Venezia. He married Irene Levi-Civita of Padua, who became a Grand-Dame of Venetian society.

Irene had three brothers, including Giacomo Levi-Civita, who became the mayor of Padua (1904-1906) and subsequently a senator in Rome. His son, Tullio Levi-Civita, became a world-famous mathematician and was a friend of Enrico Fermi and Albert Einstein.

Among the descendants of Giacomo Levi were the three siblings, Iginia, Olga, and Alessandro Levi.

As stated, Iginia married Edmo Gerbi. Her brother, Alessandro Levi (Fig. 1), was an anti-Fascist, a Councilman in Venice, a Professor of Philosophy Law (at the Universities of Ferrara, Cagliari, Catania, Parma, and Florence.) He married Sarina Nathan (the niece of the Mayor of Rome, Ernesto Nathan.)

Iginia's sister Olga married Claudio Treves (a Socialist member of Parliament and an anti-Fascist who wounded Mussolini in a duel with him) who had two sons (Fig. 2): Paolo and Piero Treves. Paolo obtained degrees in Law and Political Science from the University of Turin, and later worked for the socialist paper *Giustizia*. Forced to flee Italy, he worked as a liaison officer with Italian exiles in Paris and then, following his father's death in 1933, lived in the UK from 1938 to 1944. There he was a faculty member at the University of London, published *What Mussolini Did To Us*, (1940), and worked together with his brother Piero for the BBC. He returned to Italy after the war, joined the Partito Socialista di Unità Proletaria, and was elected to Italy's constituent assembly in 1946.

Piero Treves (a Professor of Ancient History and Greek at the University of Florence and later the University of Venice where he was the Provost).

Edmo and Iginia Gerbi had three sons (Fig. 3): Antonello (the eldest, Giuliano, and Claudio, the youngest). The second half of the book is about Claudio and his two brothers, Antonello and Giuliano (Fig. 4). Antonello Gerbi was the senior economist at Banca Commerciale. Because of the racial laws, he was relocated to Lima, Peru, at a local bank controlled by Banca Commerciale. During his years in Peru, he became fascinated by the New World's impact on Europe and wrote several books on this subject. Giuliano Gerbi was a journalist and radio commentator; he

lived in New York City during WWII. Both he and Antonello returned to Italy after WWII. Claudio Gerbi moved to the USA in 1938 (Fig. 5) and remained in New York City, where he practiced medicine, conducted research on renal hypertension, and was an artist.

This book traces the roots of Claudio Gerbi from a successful family deeply embedded in the fabric of Italian society, giving insights into their lives with delightful anecdotes. All this was left behind when Claudio had to leave Italy in 1938 to start life afresh in the USA where the Gerbi family name was unknown. The book comes full circle, recalling the migrations of the Gerbi ancestors from Spain (1492) to Libya (1500-1700) and Italy (1805).

Page 8, Fig. 1. Alessandro Levi, Professor of
Law at the University of Florence

Page 9, Fig 2. Maternal grandparents
Giacomo Levi and Irene Levi-Civita Levi
at Leghorn's Bagni Pancaldi with their
grandchildren from left to right: Claudio
Gerbi, Paolo Treves, Piero Treves, Antonello
Gerbi, Giuliano Gerbi





Page 10, Fig 3. Mother (Iginia Levi Gerbi) with
her two sons, Antonello and baby Giuliano

Page 11, above, Fig 4. The three Gerbi
brothers (from left to right): Giuliano, Claudio,
Antonello

Below, Fig 5. Claudio Gerbi (in hat at right)
departing Genoa, Italy (Sept 14, 1938)



G. Giacomelli
SUCCESSORE A. G. CONTARINI
VENEZIA



THE ORIGIN OF THE GERBI FAMILY

It is a fair assumption to believe that the name of our family did originate in the Island of Jerba, the Homeric island of the lotus eaters. This island, located off the coast of Tunisia in the Gulf of Sirte¹ was an important Phoenician trading center since immemorial times .

The island of Jerba belonged to the Ottoman Empire and since the XVIth century it was an outpost for the Berber corsairs who were harassing the ships of the Christian countries all through the Mediterranean sea. Even though there is no recollection of any of our Gerbis living on the island at that time, it was with a feeling of inner delight that in my youth I read the story of the famous battle of Jerba, in which the entire Christian Armada sent there to destroy the Berber corsairs, was utterly annihilated by Dragut Pasha and by the followers of Suleiman the Great (1560). After the victory, the Moslems erected a pyramid of twelve thousand skulls of their enemies, a pyramid which was later transferred to an ossary².

Curiously enough the earliest Jewish migration to Jerba occurred from the East; an equally important migration occurred in the XVIIIth century from the West. This migration brought to the island many renowned rabbis and scholars and made Jerba an important intellectual center³. Most probably, some of our ancestors arrived on this

island either after the Seville massacres (1391), or one century later when the Jews were expelled from the Iberian peninsula at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. We know in fact that at that time (1492) one group of Jews moved north from the Iberian peninsula settling in Provence and the Netherlands, and another moved all through the northern coast: of Africa.

Men of great learning were among these people, imbued with the Arabic sciences and culture, as well as Talmudic criticism. I often mused about that pallid crowd of my ancestors, who walked on this planet centuries ago. Who were they? Merchants, pirates, scholars, poets, rabbis, healers? Who knows?

At times, I felt their invisible presence breathing over my neck, as once, when I was visiting the ancient synagogue of Cordoba, I thought that I was listening to their distant whispering: "Good, you are here now where we prayed centuries ago!" But these are pure inventions of my fantasy, which no document can corroborate.

It is a fair assumption to believe that these Iberian refugees settled in Jerba in the district called "Hara Kebira" ("Haran in Tunisian dialect means a Jewish quarter, or a ghetto) as the other district, the "Hara Saghira" (small quarter) was the place of a more ancient settlement, the refuge of the descendants of the Cohens, exiled from Israel at the time of the destruction of the first Temple. According to legend,

these first Jews brought with them a fragment of the gate of the Temple, which explains why the "Ghriba" became the place of religious pilgrimages⁴.

In 1832, another group of Jews migrated to Jerba from Libya following turbulent times in Tripoli, but it is doubtful that any of our ancestors were among them as, at that time, the first Gerbi we know was already settled in Leghorn⁵.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE NAME GERBI

The population of Jerba, which until recent times was largely Jewish was classified as "JERBI" (Jewish people of Jerban origin) and "ARBI" (arab people). The name "Gerbi" is still quite common in North Africa and especially in Libya, but surely most of these Gerbis are not related to us. In the telephone directory of Tel-Aviv I counted 14 Gerbis all probably of African origin; in the one of Paris there were 5 more Gerbis. Some of the Gerbis adopted the French Tunisian spelling of Djerbi and others the venetian spelling of "Zerbi" (just as Giorgione was called "Zorzon").

Beside a Suleiman Gerbi, prime minister of the Libyan king Idriz, I would like to mention here some other non-related Gerbis.

Gabriele Gerbi, a teacher of medicine from 1475 to 1489 at the universities of Bologna and Padua, published, among other works, a treatise, "Gerontocomia" (1489), which makes him the father of modern gerontology. Summoned to Constantinople to treat a sick friend of the Sultan, he was given gifts for the medical help provided. Unfortunately, during his sailing back to Venice, his patient died and the family of the deceased sent armed men and slaves to capture the doctor who together with one of his sons who accompanied him, was put between two wooden tables and sawed off⁶.

A Florentine Abbot, Agostino Piero Gerbi (died 1715 or 1725?) wrote "Documenti per la Storia della Famiglia Gerbil". Unfortunately I was not able to read his rare original manuscript⁷. From information obtained by persons who were able to peruse this manuscript, it is apparent that there is no relationship with any ancestor of our family. His Gerbis adopted often hyphenated names, such as Gerbi-Ripa, or Gerbi-Balbiani, or Gerbi-Boschetti and lived in Piedmont (Chieri, Turin) or Tuscany (Prato, S. Marcello Pistoiese, Casentino e Monte Venturina) in the late XVIth century.

Another medical doctor, Ranieri Gerbi, a professor at the University of Pisa, published a manuscript in 1794 describing a miraculous cure for toothaches . A worm, called "Curculio antidoltangicus" was crushed between the thumb and forefinger of the right hand. The finger then touched the affected part. An investigatory commission found that 431 of 629 toothaches were stopped immediately (sic!)⁸.

During my lifetime in Italy a Miss Gerbi was a popular elementary school teacher in Turin, a captain Gerbi was chief of Genoa's harbor, but the most popular of all was Giovanni Gerbi, from Asti, a bicycle rider and the winner of the bicycle tour of Italy. His detractors said that this "maglia rosa" used to keep nails hidden in the handles of his bicycle and let them drop during a race in order that his opponents would get flat tires.

THE POGROM OF ALGIERS AND MOSHÈ HAIM GERBI

Because of the Napoleonic wars, the economic situation of the entire Mediterranean region was rapidly deteriorating. The British naval blockade had made commercial exchanges more difficult, taxes were imposed on the territories under the French flag, and the citizens (Jews included) who had acquired French nationality had to serve in the French Army.

In the past, Algiers was a very rich city. Its international commerce was mostly in the hands of Jewish firms, such as the one of Joseph Bucri and Naphtali Busnach, the chief of the Jewish community, who had many financial dealings with Mustapha Pasha, the local ruler⁹. The firm of "Salomon Coen-Bucri and Brothers" originated in Leghorn and opened offices in Algiers in 1793. Later, Naphtali Busnach, a relative by his marriage to a Bucri girl entered their firm, whose capital was valued to be more than five million francs.

At 7 o'clock on June 28th, 1805, a Janizary soldier met Naphtali Busnach in the street and shot him. This was the signal for a pogrom in which a group of soldiers, plus an enthusiastic and vociferous mob of Arabs, killed more than 100 Jews¹⁰ and robbed them of all their properties.

I will report some details of this pogrom from the account

of an anonymous refugee, who arrived in Leghorn, an account which has been confirmed in an official report to Paris by Mr. Dubois-Thainville, the French consul in Algiers.

"It was a Saturday morning and we were leaving the Synagogue after the sermon, when we heard shrieks, clamor and noise of shots coming from the city. Soldiers, armed with pikes, demolished the doors of the Jews, pillaging and killing everyone who was indoors. Jewish women and children jumped from the roofs for the "Kiddush Hashem" (self immolation to affirm their faith and not to be killed by the hand of infidels). The soldiers killed some who were found in houses which were also synagogues and plundered everywhere taking even ritual objects and "talledothes" (prayer shawls) . Killing and plundering continued all day until 11 o'clock in the evening. Some, by free will, gave the soldiers all their properties. In the evening, the ruler sent a crier through the city and the soldiers' quarter ordering them to give peace to the Jews." Several of the murdered people were dragged, with a rope around their neck, to the outskirts of the city and burned; others, because it was Sunday, remained unburied and were eaten by dogs. The number of the wounded was not exactly known.

Several Jews found refuge in the French Consulate, but shortly thereafter they were ordered out of the country, unless they had mechanical skills. The "San Antonio" a small boat (a "trabaccolo" or a "lugger", a boat with only

one sail), under the command of the Austrian Captain, Franco Dunkovich, was requisitioned and a first group of 178 refugees sailed, destination Leghorn. At their departure the Algerian ruler gave them biscuits and water and while the boat was still in the harbor, it was under fire by Berber soldiers. In great haste sails were hoisted and the boat was finally in the open sea and out of danger.

Usually, the passage from Algiers to Leghorn would take between six and fifteen days; despite the heavy human load, the "San Antonio" made the trip in almost record time of seven days.

The leaders ("parnassim") of the Jewish community in Leghorn paid for the passage and, when the boat landed in Leghorn, they sent aboard 153 pounds of bread, vegetables, cold cuts and fruits; also, they paid for the fee on entrance to the Quarantine Station in Leghorn and for the porters and bedding and kitchen wares for these refugees.

In the list of the passengers we find Moshè Haim Gerbi, single, aged 19. He arrived in Leghorn on July 7th, 1805. The passengers were left on board until July 9th when they were transferred to the Quarantine Station (Lazzaretto di San Leopoldo).

More Algerian Jews arrived as refugees on three more boats. The second boat was the "Madonna del Rosario"

under Captain Giovanni Sanchich; she arrived on July 20th with 269 persons aboard including 77 children (268 Jews and one christian woman of Austrian birth, a slave of one of the refugees who let her free). On this boat 146 were males and 122 females. Most of the passengers were rather well off, being from the richest families in Algiers; many had friends or relatives in Leghorn, who made affidavits and had them released from the Quarantine Station a few days after their arrival. The name of Moshè Haim Gerbi was not among the persons who left the Quarantine Station because of an affidavit.

Life in the Quarantine Station was not very comfortable, but the refugees felt that they had avoided a great danger and were now among friends and co-religionists who were ready to help them in any possible way.

Even in those difficult and calamitous times, the Jewish community of Leghorn rose to the occasion and did everything possible to help the newcomers. As the expenses at the Quarantine Station were higher than living in town, every expedient to have the refugees out of the Station was tried. A good number of refugees were sent, by their own volition and by financial help of the community to Smyrna, others to North African countries or France, where they had relatives or friends, but a large number remained in Leghorn.

More refugees arrived with two more boats. Five women

who arrived on August 31st were not allowed to enter Leghorn because they probably were prostitutes and were sent out to Tripoli.

Life in the Quarantine Station was made easier for their unwilling residents by the fact that the Station Chief, Captain Tauci, was a personal friend of a prominent Leghornese Jew, Alessandro Ambron. Tauci acted toward the refugees with humanity and understanding, caring for the sick ones (among them there was a tubercular woman, one pregnant woman who aborted and an epileptic man). On only one occasion he had to put in jail a drunkard who "for no reason at all" kicked another refugee in the stomach. Sale of alcoholic beverages was temporarily discontinued!

In order to help this sudden invasion of co-religionists, the Jewish community almost went broke and had to borrow 1000 piastres from the "pidiom shevuim" (a special fund for the liberation of Jewish slaves). It was decided to have a "nevadà" (a voluntary contribution) in which because of the expenses "feite e de fazer?" it was requested from "todos es SS. Jehudim de mostrar sua generosidade on tal occasi3n." On July 13th, 1805, mostrar sua generosidade on tal occasioa in the Synagogue, Moshè Haim Gerbi contributed the sum of five piastres, not a small sum for a refugee. This shows either a man of great generosity, or that after all this 19 year old fellow had some money in his pockets.

MOSHÈ HAIM GERBI (Mosè Vita Gerbi), 1786-1866.

What Moshè Haim Gerbi was doing in Algiers during the fatal days of the pogrom remains obscure to me. The recollection of my Aunt Ebe Gerbi Tagiuri was that he arrived in Leghorn at the age of 13 to study in one of the famous Yeshivas for the rabbinate; his presence in Leghorn in 1799 could not be substantiated by the proof of the student's enrollment in a religious school, as all such documents were destroyed during World War II. However, we know that the religious instruction usually lasted six years which makes my hypothesis plausible that he really was in Leghorn at the age of 13. It is not surprising to me that his father, Johanan (Hanan) Gerbi of Tripoli, might have chosen to send Moshè Haim to Leghorn, which was a center of Sephardic culture. At that time, Leghorn was very well known as a center of Hebrew teaching; a Leghornese Rabbi, Abraham Miguel Cardozo, had arrived in Libya in 1662 disseminating to the Maghreb region the Sephardic teaching via religious books printed in Leghorn. As in the island of Jerba, where a large proportion of its male population migrated elsewhere for a decent livelihood, it is very possible that in Tripoli too, during the calamitous period caused by famine and plague (1764-1765), the idea of sending one son abroad might have occurred to the mind of Johanan (Hanan) Gerbi. The presence of so many illustrious scholars in Leghorn could have been a further inducement to send his son there, especially if

Moshè Haim had indicated a vocational preference for the rabbinate. It is probable also that at that time some kind of connection already existed between the Libyan Gerbis and the Leghornese Tagiuris who could look after the well-being of his son.

After completing his studies at age 19 Moshè Haim might have gone to North Africa where he and the Tagiuris had some relatives. During his return trip to Leghorn in June 1805 he was in Algiers where the Bucri Leghornese family commanded a monopoly on the maritime traffic between that city and Leghorn. Possibly he might have been visiting some Algerian Tagiuris, as he later married a Luna Malchà Tagiuri, who was born in Algiers. We know that Moshè Haim did not follow a religious career after all, but in the following years he devoted himself to commerce. We should not forget that the culmination of religious instruction was the study of the treatise "Baba Mazià", which dealt with the commercial laws.

The legend that he was actually born in Tripoli (Libya) seems corroborated by the fact that both my Father and Aunt Ebe remember that on occasions our Leghornese family received gift packages from relatives living in Tripoli. (According to a note written by my brother Antonello, other relatives were living in Tunisia and Egypt). The packages contained water of orange blossoms, dried eggs of sturgeon, dates, ostrich feathers, corals, and possibly also some money.

Probably in his early life Moshè Haim had some health problems which could have had lethal consequences. I was told that the name of "Haim" is usually given to children who survive a serious illness.

On his arrival in Leghorn in 1805, Moshè Haim did have to go to the Quarantine Station (Lazzaretto S. Leopoldo) like many other passengers of the fateful "San Antonio". This fact raises the question whether at that time there were some other Gerbis or distant relatives in Leghorn, who could make an affidavit for him. The possibility of other Gerbis residing in Leghorn at that time seems rather remote, as in the census of the Jewish community ("the Nazione Ebraica") of 1809, made a few years after his arrival, he was listed as single with no dependents and no other Gerbis are mentioned. It is possible, however, that he knew some Tagiuris, with whom he later became related by marriage.

Difficult as it is to follow the steps of an obscure citizen of the XIXth century, I was able by good fortune to collect some information.

At the age of 23 (1809) Moshè Haim was listed as "addetto al commercio"; but already in 1813 he had applied for a "patent" for an individual firm. Apparently, he was dealing in ivory, ostrich feathers and corals. This last product became, as years passed by, his main trade. He was assessed by the French Government (as Leghorn

was still under Napoleonic rule) a tax of Fr. 360.25, a sum which he did not have to pay, probably because in the meantime Tuscany was returned to the rule of the House of Lorraine. In 1816, he was inscribed in the fiscal registry as a "dazajolo" (customs broker 7) (Filippini).

He lived in Leghorn the rest of his long life, dying there at the age of 80 (1866). From 1818 to 1826 his address was in Quattro Cantonate, 946 (first floor) and from 1827 on (after the birth of more children) in Via Serristori, 987; both these addresses were in a mostly Jewish district.

He married Luna Malchà (Luna Regina) Tagiuri, the daughter of Ester Grazia (nee?) and Clemente (Rahamin) Tagiuri. Luna Malchà was born in Algiers in 1786, and she died in Leghorn in 1855. Her maiden name suggests that her family originated from Tagiura, a village east of Tripoli, which is not too distant from the Island of Jerba and where many Jews migrated after 1510. Her father was listed as a merchant in the 1809 census and he had three children: one daughter (Luna Malchà) and two sons (Abraham Raphael and Moshè).

Abraham Raphael married Luna Daninos; they lived in Paris, trading in precious stones. My father often mentioned their name, especially if one of my brothers visited Paris. Moshè married his niece, Simhà (Allegretta) Tagiuri, the daughter of his brother Abraham Raphael. Luna Malchà lived in Leghorn before the pogrom in

Algiers of 1805. In fact, the name of her family was not on any of the lists of the passengers in any of the four boats reaching Leghorn immediately after the pogrom. Clemente (Rahamin) Tagiuri gave on July 13th, 1805, ten piastres for the nedavà.

The marriage of Moshè Haim Gerbi and Luna Malchà Tagiuri was blessed by the birth of numerous children: David, (born in Leghorn in 1816, died in Leghorn in 1886) He was a merchant and married a Mariella Levi. From their marriage they had a daughter, Ida, who married a Mr. Cammeo, an administrator. From this marriage they had two children: Federigo and Bice. Federigo, an authority in his field, became a respected and well-known professor of Administrative Law. Their address was Via Ricasoli 4. Clemente (Rahamin) (born in Leghorn in 1822, died in Leghorn in 1899). About him I know only that he never married, lived as a "bon vivant" and was a rather cultivated person.

Allegretta (Simhà): She was born in Leghorn in 1826 and married a Mr. Castelli; they had a son, Egisto, a telegraph operator, and a grandson, Giorgio, an engineer who lived in Genoa.

Geaziadio (Hanan, or Hanalel, or Johanan).(Born in Leghorn in 1829, died in Leghorn in 1907).

He was my paternal grandfather and I will talk about him

later on. He married the daughter of one of his sisters, Alessandra (called also Alessandrina or Sarina), the daughter of Abraham Raphael Pegna, a reputed usurer, and Enrichetta Gerbi. Their address was Corso Umberto 95.

Giacomo (Jaacov) (Born in Leghorn in 1831, died in Leghorn in 1905).

I do not know whether he was married or not. He was a merchant in ostrich feathers (Egyptian connections?). Elia Leone (Eliahu Jehuda) (Born in Leghorn?, died in Leghorn in 1877).

He married a Sarah Levi. From their marriage they had four children: Clementina (Born 1853, died 1913), Cesare (born 1855, died 1923), Felice (Born 1857, died 1923), and Adele (Born 1860, died 1949). Elia Leone was famous as a miser and conducted a banking business in Leghorn; his children, Cesare and Felice, inherited his firm, the Banco Gerbi ("Ces. Gerbi and Co.").

Enrichetta (Rebecca). Little is known about her. She married Abraham Raphael (Abramo) Pegna, and they had four children: Alessandra, Giacomo, Clementina and Raphael Haim. Alessandra was my paternal grandmother, and Clementina married a Raffaello Passigli who was a money changer and a coral businessman. Giacomo (Yakov) died young and probably unmarried. Raphael Haim

married Esther Rignano and their son, Abraham Raphael, had twins, Yakov and Johanan, who died young. They also had a daughter, Sarah, who remained unmarried.

After this genealogical digression, let us return to Moshè Haim Gerbi, who, once settled in Leghorn, became engaged in the manufacture of coral artifacts. Just as Amsterdam was made the capital of the diamond industry by the Jews, Leghorn became known in the beginning of the XVIIIth century as the capital of the coral business. After the decline of Marseilles, Leghorn became the center of coral industry and commerce. In the first half of the XVIIIth century coral, unprocessed and processed, was sent to England and the East India Company shipped it from London to Indian merchants (mostly in Goa) in exchange for diamonds. This lucrative exchange of commodities was almost completely in the hands of Jewish Sephardic firms. During the lifetime of Moshè Haim there were in Leghorn four important (and twelve less important) factories for the processing of corals: all owned by Jewish families. Half of the imported coral was sold to foreign countries unprocessed, whereas the other half was polished and worked upon in local factories as its price was two-thirds more when sold after treatment¹¹. In 1740 the Leghornese De Castro family was the major exporter of coral to India, rivalling the Salvador family and the firm of Abraham and Jacob Franco. Dutch and German Ashkenazi Jews joined in this exchange as most of the diamonds were cut and polished in Amsterdam and Antwerp. The magnitude

of this operation is revealed by a Leghornese merchant, Abraham De Castro, who wrote: "It is common for the coral fisheries to bring from the islands adjacent to Leghorn from six to eight thousand pounds weight of coral each boat.... about three hundred of such boats are employed in collecting in each of the coral fishing season for the market of Leghorn."¹². This commerce was facilitated by the abundance of coral along the North African shore and by markets for this commodity in Central Europe and Asia (India and China).

I was told that when Jack and Giacomo Benzimrà (see genealogical tree) were children in Leghorn, they played ping-pong on two large wooden tables, which had a hole at each corner. Their grandmother, Adele (Gerbi), told them that they were playing on the "coral tables." At each corner some pegs were affixed, holding a stretched canvas on which the raw corals were poured in order to choose those to be processed. Apparently, the same two tables were used as dinner tables at Sukkot.

The coral-diamond trade with India collapsed between 1765 and 1793; this was possibly a reason for the redirecting of trade from Leghorn toward Central Europe (Warsaw). In fact, one of Moshè Haim's customers was a Mr. Chayes from Warsaw (Poland); in order to avoid the intermediary fee, this Chayes eventually settled in Leghorn. He must have been a very shrewd merchant because in his lifetime he accrued a fortune. He built for

himself a luxurious villa at a corner known as the "Attias", had elegant carriages with horses, bought real estate and the "Acqua della Salute", a spa of mineral water. Even today, in Leghorn, there is a Hotel Corallo and the most popular water of the spa is sold under the name of "Acqua Corallo". So you can see how the corals of my great-grandfather bore fruit!

Mr. Chayes was later made consul of Portugal and when the Queen of Portugal visited Leghorn, she was his guest. She made him a count.

In the crowd of so many relatives; sons, cousins and grandchildren of Moshè Haim Gerbi, there is probably a "Florentine" (?) Hanalel Gerbi, whose exact identity is still obscure to me. Apparently, he bought from a Benjamin Bonaventura of Pisa a rare book of Maimonides for the sum of 613.19 liras (a large amount of money at that time); this book belonged previously to Moshè Haim.

I cannot stop telling about these old Gerbis, without mentioning the legend about another Gerbi, also living in Leghorn at the same time. He was an eccentric and picturesque figure, a bohemian avant-lettre, who was always dressed in the least elegant way with socks falling on his unlaced shoes. Children followed him in the street making fun of him. What he was doing for a living is obscure to me; when somebody asked him about his profession, he used to answer that he was selling yarns.

If an interlocutor was interested and pressed him to show his merchandise, he looked utterly annoyed stating that he was selling yarns for novels. To him is attributed the following sentence, which remained proverbial in our family. In answer to a question of why he would not wash himself more frequently, he said: "there is nothing wrong in taking a bath once in a while, but the important thing is not to fall into the habit of it!". This reminds me of those ancient Thebaid hermits who, not only deemed it holy not to wash themselves, but would pick up the dirt of their own bodies and reapply it onto their skins. Another legendary dictum attributed to him was the reference to some people who were so dirty that "they had between their fingers the dirt we usually have between our toes."

GRAZIADIO GERBI (1829-1907)

Your great-grandfather Graziadio grew up in an epoch of turmoil, which pervaded all Europe. It was the time in which many European countries fought for constitutional rights and the abolition of despotic rulers, imposed upon them by the Treaty of Vienna.

Young Graziadio evidently had liberal views and as a member of the Stock Exchange in Leghorn, he staked his entire fortune on backing the freedom of Italy. When Italy had established its capital in Florence (1865), he had already accumulated what at that time was considered a small fortune.

In 1849, after the first revolutionary movements for Italian independence, the Grand Duke Leopold II invoked the help of Austrian troops to restore order in Tuscany. A few years ago, I saw a proclamation of one of General Radetski's commanders, issued in Pietrasanta, in which "every act of insurrection would be dealt with the utmost rigor". I wonder how this announcement would have affected the old Gerbi who, reputedly, sided with the insurrection forces. According to a study, in Leghorn alone 44 Jews belonged to the "Carboneria", the secret patriotic society, and I would not be surprised if there was among them a Gerbi. The personal friendship of Graziadio with the young brilliant Rabbi Ben-Amozegh is well known to

us and it is probable that Graziadio shared Ben-Amozegh's views about a free Italy.

Around 1864 (date uncertain) Graziadio married a young and beautiful niece of his, Alessandra (Sarah Alishagun) Pegna (1844-1913). Intermarriages were not uncommon in the restricted Jewish community, especially among Jews of the same ethnic origin. We were told that my grandmother Alessandra was a most handsome lady; she was commonly known in Leghorn as the "beautiful Jewess". A well-known Leghornese painter, Vittorio Corcos (1859-1933), also called "the Italian Laszlo" made a large full-size portrait of her, which for years hung in our living room. Several children were born from their marriage; many of them, as was common at that time, died as infants. However, two of them survived: Ebe and a younger boy Edmo.

Alessandra must have looked much younger than her uncle-husband Graziadio. In a sonnet by Bedarida, a Jewish-Leghornese poet who wrote sonnets in a humoristic vein, describing in Italo-Jewish-Sephardic dialect the life of the Leghornese community, on the occasion of a party, mentions: "la Gerbi col su' zio" ("the Gerbi lady with her uncle")¹³.

The family legend tells us that a young and attractive Jewish girl, a relative named Nina Cammeo, was engaged to take care of the children and that grandfather Graziadio became infatuated with this young person. Faithful Nina

one day confessed everything to grandmother Alessandra begging to be sent away. This was done and it seems that for a while peace and harmony reigned again. It was either remorse at this base action of chasing away such an innocent girl that might have affected the good business judgment of Graziadio, or it was a bad turn in the general economic situation. In any case, his business turned bad and a great portion of his fortune was lost. To make matters worse, many of his children died and, in despair, Graziadio turned to religion for consolation and to his friend, Rabbi Ben-Amozegh, for guidance.

Graziadio became a most pious member of the congregation and we were told that during a visit to Rome he refused to walk under the Arch of Titus, where the Jews of Palestine had marched in chains after the destruction of the Second Temple. He would not remove his "yarmulke" when walking inside St. Peter's cathedral.

Following his imploring demands and promises of good behavior, Nina came back to the house to take care of Ebe and Edmo, and gradually the dissipated fortune was accumulated again and to an even greater extent. The silver Menorah we have at home was ordered at this time and it is one of the several expressions of his devotion to his religion. Later on, Nina was considered as a dear member of our family and even after she had a family of her own, and whenever possible for her, she always attended our family Seder until about 1934 when she died

of cancer of the breast.

By profession grandfather Graziadio was a banker, a member of Leghorn's Stock Exchange. With his brother Elia Leone he founded the "Banco Gerbi", an investment bank, also active in the flourishing and lucrative money exchange trade. For a while my father and Mario Passigli (see genealogical tree) worked in the bank, which later was administered by Elia Leone Gerbi and his two sons Cesare and Felice and their brother-in-law Giacomo Benzimrà under the name of "Ces. Gerbi & Co." After the death of Cesare and Felice (1923) and of Giacomo Benzimrà (1928), the bank eventually stopped its activities in 1935 (see Appendix I for "Letter to the Customers"). You should not be unduly impressed by the word "bank". Don't think of marble buildings with modern architecture or of many city branches. The modest "Banco Gerbi" was situated in the popular and animated Via Grande, the street connecting the main square of Leghorn (where there is the Cathedral dedicated to Saint Julia, the Patron of Leghorn) to the harbor. The bank consisted of one room on the street level, which actually was only a half room as the original room had been divided into two by a wall; one half was the "SALE E TABACCHI" shop of Mr. Rimediotti, the other half, the size of a large corridor, was the Banco Gerbi. There were no windows; the light came from the street and from gas lamps. Actually, at the opposite side, I was told there was a tiny window, which opened onto a dark small courtyard, where a public toilet was located. This place was

so filthy and flea-infested that it was seldom used; in order to reach it, a person had to jump through the small window into the courtyard. The portion of the Banco near the street had a counter where the money change was effected. In the obscure rear portion there was a safe, an iron trunk, a copy-press and a table with chairs, around which the customers could read the financial papers and give orders for investments.

In his old age Graziadio became blind and he had to have a man accompany him in the street or to the Synagogue. He died on February 22nd, 1907, before I was born.

His wife Alessandra died on June 4th, 1913 and I remember seeing her a few days before her death. The former celebrated beauty had disappeared from her senile face, which reminds me of the sagesse of many feminine beauties in history who forbade their former admirers to visit them on their death bed, as the ugliness of Death might have obliterated the memory of their pristine beauty.

Until her death grandmother Alessandra lived in Leghorn in Aunt Ebe's house, located on the ground floor of a building in Piazza Cavour no. 4. Apparently grandmother Alessandra was very thrifty; when my father moved after his marriage to Florence, two beautiful pink and gold Sevres china vases had to be shipped there from Leghorn. These vases were dismantled from their pedestals and Alessandra, with parts of them carefully packed, would go

to the railroad station. If she spotted some passenger for Florence, she would beg him to take the package (who would refuse doing a favor for such a beautiful woman?). Eventually, the vases were re-assembled and adorned the "credenza" of our dining room.

On another occasion, several years before the above incident, during Passover, as my Father did not want to leave Paris where he was spending several months, she went to that city together with Graziadio and Ebe. Like many ladies in Paris, she loved to go shopping in the great stores. After examining the merchandise and learning about its cost, she would say: "Mais a Livourne ça coûte moins cher", or Livourne on obtient ça plus bon marché". A sales girl retorted politely: "Mais, Madame, qu'est-ce que c'est Livourne?"

EBE GERBI TAGIURI (1872-1952)

Even though we were seeing her almost daily when we lived in Leghorn (1914-1916), I do not have many anecdotes to report about Aunt Ebe. At that time, she was a recent widow of her much older husband, Prof. Alberto Tagiuri, a mathematics teacher in high school whom I hardly knew. I have a vague recollection of him as a pudgy serious man (he never smiled) with a heavy mustache and eyeglasses, a proper figure for a high school teacher. I am still doubtful if her husband was a blood relation of Aunt Ebe, as her grandmother was also a Tagiuri. Anyhow I feel almost certain that she did not receive much happiness from their union. Also, I do not know from which sickness Prof. Tagiuri died, even though mental illness was rampant in his family, illness which may account for the eccentric behavior of his son (and cousin of mine) Pier Luigi, about whom I will discuss later. Actually, I feel that a serious genetic study of the Tagiuri family could offer some clues about the frequent mental aberrations which were noted in their progeny.

A wealthy Tagiuri relative one day assembled all his nontransferable stocks and paper money in the water closet, set fire to them and flushed the toilet. In a few minutes, his entire family was plunged into utter misery. Not even Saint Francis could have accomplished his vow of poverty in a quicker way! Eventually, one of his daughters,

Rita, married Eugenio Soria. She was known for her almost pathological generosity. Another daughter, ADA, was a bizarre woman who had the craze of dancing (I remember seeing her dance a tango alone in the railroad station of Alassio while waiting for her train). Another daughter, Bice, who settled in Bologna after marrying a Mr. Lasky, loved her food to such an immoderate measure that she became extremely obese. But a more serious case was that of the only son, Corrado, a licensed pharmacist who had opened a pharmacy in Milano not too far from where we lived (via Castelmorrone no. 15). One night, my Father was urgently summoned out of bed because Corrado had made a shambles of the whole pharmacy; everything there was destroyed. Corrado ended his life in an insane asylum.

I understand that in her youth (and even thereafter) Aunt Ebe was rather flirtatious. The writer Elio Nissim, who now lives in England, kindly wrote to me that on an old fan his father had written the following lines:

A questa tavola seggon molti frutti acerbi,
Evviva la Signorina Gerbi.

A questa tavola seggon molti frutti maturi,
Evviva la Signora Tagiuri.

(At this table many green fruits are seated,
Long live Miss Gerbi,
At this table many ripe fruits are seated,
Long live Mrs. Tagiuri.)

Even though not a beautiful woman by normal standards,

Aunt Ebe was in her youth a woman who attracted the opposite sex; the charm of her spirit must have helped her!

In the Humbertine society where illicit liaisons had reached literary respectability, Ebe found herself, especially as a widow, an actual participant of women's liberation. Her dark complexion and her vivid looks betrayed our possible Berber origin. As a matter of fact, Antonello believed that our ancestors were probably Gerbi-Berbers, converted to Judaism after an Egyptian persecution¹⁴.

After her husband's death, Aunt Ebe continued to live on the ground floor of a "palazzo" in Piazza Cavour no. 4. I remember her apartment as a series of large dark rooms, getting their light from the windows on the piazza. From the seats at the side of each window, she could follow the city life in the greatest detail and the coming and going of all her friends from the "Farmacia Jacchia" of Doctor Castelli, who used to offer little glasses of Elixir of China to his customers as an aperitif. These were the years of the great period of Leghorn's artistic life, created by painters (after Fattori's death) such as Ulvi Liegi, Natali, Bartolena, Llewyn Lloyd, Plinio Nomellini, Adolfo Tommasi, writers like Targioni-Tozzetti and Menasci, playwrights like Sabatino Lopez and Niccodemi, poster painters like Cappiello, actors like Falconi, musicians like Mascagni and poets like Marradi¹⁵.

As in contemporary Paris, in Leghorn, too, emancipated

ladies kept their "salotti" open to literary and artistic men. Vivacious Aunt Ebe participated actively in the artistic life of the town. Her library was quite rich in contemporary literature, and especially in poets like Pascoli, Carducci and D'Annunzio (a few rare first editions of his poems which belonged to her are now in my library). Because of her liberal views, not shared by many conservative families of her time, her "salotto" was shunned by some people. For instance, Giacomo Benzimrà forbade his young bride Adele, a cousin of Aunt Ebe, to visit her home, because Ebe was entertaining unmarried couples, emancipated ladies or her current boyfriend, a Mr. Pupeschi. Aunt Ebe bragged that Mr. Pupeschi had a delicate white skin, like that of a baby powdered with Boro-Talcum.

We children found it rather strange that she was keeping on her desk in the studio a well-preserved human skull; but that was probably the fashion of the time, like a Beethoven mask on the wall or a bust of Dante on top of the library. You should not forget that at the same time there was the rage of the spiritistic seances, with little tables which moved with rattling noises, interpreted by entranced mediums. At any rate we loved that skull and probably gave him an affectionate name; when it was cold outside, we played with it, making his teeth rattle.

As a socialist, and therefore a non-interventionist, at the outbreak of World War One, Aunt Ebe's main preoccupation was to keep her son Pier Luigi out of

combat. She enrolled as volunteer nurse in the Red Cross and did service on hospital trains, often exposing herself to danger in getting wounded soldiers from the front lines. This work, however, put her in close contact with colonels of the Red Cross, which facilitate the retirement of cousin Pier Luigi to different psychiatric institutions for the duration.

At the end of the war, she resumed living in Leghorn, rather active in the socialist movement. Among her close friends were Mr. Mondolfi, the socialist mayor, and Emanuele "Menè" Modigliani, brother of the painter Amedeo, and a socialist member of the Parliament.

Like many mature widows in our days, Aunt Ebe loved to travel, taking several cruises. We always humorously maintained that, more than an intimate desire to meet some interesting male companions, the chief reason for her traveling was to rob the shipping lines of all the letterheads she could get hold of, as for months and months after a trip we would receive letters, always written in her distinctive purple ink, and with the emblems of the Lloyd Triestino or of the Cunard Line.

I wondered sometimes why she never considered remarrying, but the preoccupation toward her son might have been a paramount consideration. Yet I was told that at a certain time she was infatuated with a writer, Averardo Borsi, a personal friend of the poet Giosuè Carducci. Later

on, she fell in love with his son, Giosuè Borsi, but I do not know whether it was a platonic infatuation or a bed companionship.

Even after Giosuè's death she remained devoted to his memory (certainly more than to that of her deceased husband) to the point that she ordered to have in her coffin the letters Borsi had addressed to her; certainly an act of faith in life after death!¹⁶ During the last years of his life Borsi had become a fervent Catholic, and this fact might have influenced Aunt Ebe's religious feelings, as for a while she even considered converting to Catholicism.

In her later years, after the death of her son Pier Luigi (see later), Aunt Ebe lived in a rather shabby building, which she owned, with her widowed daughter-in-law Iris. Iris was of humble extraction and worked as a seamstress; her father made a living as a pilot in the harbor. Iris proved to be a most devoted person; she was able to hide Aunt Ebe during the Nazi persecutions and faithfully attended her until her death.

Jeannette met Aunt Ebe in September 1949 on the occasion of our first trip to Italy after World War Two. At that time Aunt Ebe was 77 years old and was as always of swarthy complexion and with her still fiery Berber look. "We went directly to Aunt Ebe's house" - Jeannette wrote in her diary - "She owns the building in which she has an apartment with her daughter-in-law Iris. She was greatly

moved to see Claudio again, as was Iris. Aunt Ebe is quite remarkable- 77 years old- yet in complete possession of her faculties. She is very bright and alert and seems to have excellent memory. In her room, filled with books "a la Gerbi", are numerous pictures and photographs; a few very sweet ones of Claudio and Giuliano in their teens, and a few etchings Claudio made. She was wearing many rings and insisted that I choose the one I would prefer her to will to me. I selected an emerald (?), surrounded by small diamonds, which had belonged to her mother."

The question mark in parenthesis justifies our disbelief about the authenticity of the stone. Most probably "un culo di bottiglia" (a bottle bottom), but we were wrong in our judgment as it was later appraised for one thousand dollars, and this sum was given to us by the Insurance Company when the ring was stolen in 1972.

Aunt Ebe died in Leghorn on June 19th, 1952 and was buried in the Cimitero dei Lupi.

PIER LUIGI TAGIURI

A character like cousin Pier Luigi Tagiuri cannot be easily forgotten. Already as a child his behavior was the subject of family discussions. He could not tolerate receiving orders from anyone.

Once, while having a rumpus with his governess in the street, a passing policeman told him: "Hey, young man, if you do not behave, I will have to take you to jail!" "Not before your face gets swollen by my slapping and scratching you!" retorted rebellious child Pier Luigi.

On other occasions, in order to have the streetcar stop for him, he lay flat on the rails. Yet, he was considered a sort of child prodigy, when on the occasion of the wedding of Claudio Treves and Aunt Olga, he produced a versified translation of a few lines of Vergil's "Aeneid".

As an adolescent he was collecting, to our amusement and admiring astonishment, chicken bones and he had reconstructed a pair of skeletons. His stamp collection was also the object of our astonishment because instead of using hinges, he would glue the stamps onto the album pages with the secretions of his nose.

When his father died, he was watching the races at the hippodrome; someone reached him there to give him the

sad news. "Couldn't he have waited until the end of the races to die?" said Pier Luigi rather annoyed.

No wonder that with this lack of respect for authority and with this rebellious nature, he tried to avoid military service during World War I. I am sure that if he were sent to the front lines he would not have hesitated to shoot his commanding officer. At the time of his physical examination prior to his induction, he would rub tobacco leaves in his armpits on the assumption that the temperature of the thermometer would increase; before a chest x-ray, he would have some spots painted with tincture of iodine to puzzle the radiologist. Thanks to his mother, he was able to spend his time in different psychiatric institutions for the duration of the war.

At the end of the war he was able to obtain a degree of Doctor of Law, a profession which he pursued on only one occasion. Asked to defend a poor chap who had stolen a bicycle, he was able, after his speech in court, to have the defendant put in jail for six months instead of the three months asked by the prosecution!

Pier Luigi did not take this legal fiasco too badly. He was young and quite good looking. He took a sophisticated care of his person; his rather dark complexion and his sideburns enhanced the fiery look of his eyes.

He kept a collection of several dozen shoes and over 350

different ties, all meticulously catalogued ("light pistachio tie with a single black line", "cerulean blue papillon", "rose-pink tie with orange dots, small", etc.) He had also a collection of bowler hats of every hue, spats, vests and canes.

To satisfy his collector's desires, Pier Luigi often asked his mother for money, and, if she refused to give it to him, he would become very agitated and would shout from the window to the passers-by that his mother was a miser. I understand that on several occasions Aunt Ebe went to the chief rabbi, Mr. Toaff, for advice.

No wonder that in a small town like Leghorn the legendary "Avvocato Tagiuri" was noted in the street by his dove-colored bowler and similarly colored gloves; white spats, mahogany cane with a silver handle, puffing his pipe filled with aromatic British tobacco.

Occasionally we saw him in Milan, usually when some important football match (soccer) was taking place in this city. He would not sleep at our house, and my mother was rather embarrassed to hear him say: "No thanks, I'd rather sleep in a whorehouse which costs less than a hotel, but where I can have more fun." Sometimes, however, he went to sleep with a distant cousin, a young lady who appreciated his virile attentions.

His passion for football was such that he never missed a

match of his Leghorn squad, to the point that he became the mascot of the team and the athletes would refuse to play if "Avvocato Tagiuri" was not present on the field. Eventually he became sports editor of the "Telegrafo", the local daily newspaper, signing his articles "Pilutag" (Pier Luigi Tagiuri). In January 1945 the old "Il Telegrafo" resumed publication under the new name "Il Tirreno", and Pier Luigi Tagiuri was among the few columnists to run the new paper.

Gastone Orefice, then a journalist at his first job, recalls: "Pier Luigi Tagiuri, the former sports columnist of "Il Telegrafo", was the only one (together with the editor Athos Gastone Banti) who had some experience on how to run a daily newspaper. Pier Luigi's high-pitched voice, his elegant suits, his unusual ties, his cane and his large monocle made him an exceptional figure. As nobody knew Leghorn as well as he did, he ran the city page almost alone. Many of our writings were often edited or written anew by Pier Luigi Tagiuri. A conscientious journalist, he would be the last to leave the office at dawn, stopping sometimes on his way home to play billiards or cards.

He married Iris, a simple but wise girl, who perhaps dreamed that after marrying a lawyer, her life might have been easier. Poor Iris! She died years ago and I wonder if in this respect she must have been much disappointed.

They did not have any children (fortunately), and a few

years after their marriage, a malignant tumor of the pleura (mesothelioma) brought him to his grave.

THE APPROACHING STORM

The beginning of what was going to happen could be felt already in 1937 as in that year everybody could sense a feeling of increasing distance from the Western democracies and the tragic “rapprochement” between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. At first people thought that this was one more bluff of Mussolini, but later the ties between the two dictators became more and more firm, leading to the “Steel Pact” of the Rome-Berlin Axis. At the end of 1937 the Duce met the Fuehrer at the Brenner Pass. After this meeting in 1938 the racial campaign began in Italy. At first the majority of the Italian Jews took this campaign very lightly. Not I, because of my experience with the German refugees. My friend Alice Adler had to leave Frankfurt some years before because of Nazi persecution and had to come to Milan to obtain her diploma as an architect. Among the students at the university I knew of many other similar cases. Paolo Levi Sandi and I organized a service of medical assistance for those refugees, to whom we would give free medicine (obtained from the samples doctors usually received) and free medical assistance. Occasionally we were able to find jobs for German physicians.

Curiously enough, both Uncle Sandro and Antonello were skeptical about my preoccupations. “All right”, they would say, “probably we will have some restrictions for the

foreign Jews now residing in Italy; but certainly not for the Italian Jews who have been integrated into the life of the nation. No one will dare to impinge on our constitutional rights."

In 1938 I was working hard on my scientific papers as before the end of the year I was supposed to submit my application and all my publications (about 30) in order to take the exam for a professorship in Medicine. The next year I was supposed to direct a new clinic for hypertensive and renal disease patients at the Department of Medicine of the University.

Similar clinics were already active in the United States and I had been corresponding with Dr. Leopold Lichtwitz of the Montefiore Hospital in New York and with the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center also in New York, in order to arrange a visit which would have helped me create our unit in Milan. So, I planned to visit New York toward the middle of September 1938. In the meantime, during those fateful months, the antisemitic campaign rose to full fury. Every day the newspapers, under orders from the Fascist government, would publish lurid lies and accusations about the Jewish people who had no way to defend themselves or to deny the slander. Slowly these infamous accusations were beginning to take hold on the moderate strata of the Italian bourgeoisie, even among the most open and intelligent people. Sadly, many friends became cooler and distant; even my old friend Edgardo Gianni

found some justification for the racist campaign. This fact hurt me greatly.

As a matter of fact, in 1938 Europe was terrorized and intimidated by the Nazi philosophy; France and England had already capitulated at Munich. It was hopeless to obtain any assistance from the western democracies. Asylum in many of these countries was impossible. Stories were circulating about German Jews who were refused admittance and sent back to Germany into the arms of the S.S.

Everybody had heard about sealed trains and concentration camps from which no one ever returned. And yet not a voice was raised by the western nations or by the church in defense of the oppressed. It is probably true that many German Jews were caught and annihilated because of their feeling of belonging to the Fatherland.

In Italy the situation was different because since the beginning of the racial campaign the Italian Jews were no longer considered to be citizens with the same rights as their compatriots. We were then seeing the church denying the moral teaching of the Gospel, and the monarchy of Savoy not defending the constitution.

Painful as it was, this idea of finding refuge abroad was then natural; it meant a great sacrifice, distancing one's self from the graves of dear ones, living in a country

where one could not expect much assistance, speaking a language not one's own, and finally erasing one's past life, achievements, and that self-respect that the name of one's family had created for generations.

When the first restrictions for foreign Jews became known, the idea to leave the country became stronger in my mind. In the meantime, I remember the departure of Alice Adler and her daughter Mulli from Milan to Switzerland. In order not to raise suspicions, her husband had remained in town; I spent interminable hours in their living room, where previously I had spent so many pleasant moments. Both Mr. Adler and I kept smoking our pipes nervously until, the telephone rang with a coded message announcing that the ladies had happily reached Lugano. Their lives were safe again! Mr. Adler and I each hugged each other and we drank to this occasion. For the first time I recognized the solid moral fiber of Mr. Adler, feeling somewhat ashamed of my sexual liberties with his wife.

Everyday we would learn about foreign Jews leaving the country; the luggage merchants often remained without any merchandise. After Alice's departure, the discussions in our family became more serious. Antonello was still optimistic; he was of the opinion that the current policy would soon end and the situation of the Italian Jews would improve. I was of the opposite opinion and I favored a general exodus. Father and Giuliano were still uncertain and averse to the idea of breaking up the unity of the

family which an exodus from Milan would have caused. Naturally we never discussed this problem at home. So that no one would listen to our plans, we would drive to the periphery of the town in our car for our discussions. It was eventually decided that I would be the first to leave Italy, followed by Antonello, Giuliano and lastly by my father.

I had some difficulty in obtaining a visa on my passport, because the U.S. Government needed a declaration by the director of the Ospedale Maggiore, a Dr. Massimo Della Porta, that I was leaving Italy for scientific reason and that on my return I would still have my position on the hospital staff. This pusillanimous man, fearing reprisals from the party officials, tried every bureaucratic reason to withhold his consent. At last, when I confronted him in his office, refusing to leave without his signed paper, he eventually relented. He must have been relieved, the bastard, when not long thereafter he sent me a letter discharging me from my duties at the City Hospital!

At the Passport Division of the Police, things moved more smoothly, because for months I had been the personal physician of the second in command of the police department (who was a diabetic). I remember commissar Fisicaro signing and stamping my passport raising his eyes to me and commenting: "So, doctor, you are going to America. Lucky you!". I showed no emotion. Antonello obtained his visa on the passport without

difficulties. Giuliano, as a journalist, did not need any. Father instead, had to contact several foreign consulates to obtain his visa. Foreign countries, at that time, were extremely reluctant to give visas to refugees or would-be refugees. Eventually Father obtained his visa after contacting the French Consulate and presenting himself as the father of a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor.

You have to take in consideration the exceptional times in which we were living; thousands of refugees were fleeing from Germany and those countries, like Italy, which had accepted them. The invasion of foreign people into countries where unemployment was rampant scared even the most liberal government. Ironically, years before I had refused a position as medical director of the railroad workers in Bangkok, and I was not averse to a position in the Belgian Congo. Now my letters to friendly doctors in France and Belgium inquiring about possibilities for a position received no answer or the usual "We are very sorry that at the present time, especially after the arrival of so many German physicians, no position can be offered. We are keeping your application on file and will contact you in the future should an opening...etc. etc."

The day of my departure from Genoa (September 14th, 1938) finally arrived. Marcella Conte came to Milan from Rome to say good-bye and brought me a biography of Madame Curie to read during my journey. I had a new hat and a new overcoat; besides a crate of medical books, I

had also my skis. My wallet contained \$175, the maximum sum allowed by law to be taken out of Italy.

The "Conte di Savoia" was moored at the Molo dei Mille in Genoa. Father and Antonello took me to the pier giving me advice up to the last minute. Antonello did not miss the occasion to take pictures with his Leica. Finally, I boarded the ship on the last gangplank.

Going to America! The distant continent still had a fascination of its own, before the era of jet planes. The long journey through the vast ocean with its insidious waves and the arrival at that haven of persecuted European people would create a mystic image of that country about which I had heard and read so much during my younger years. I was moved but I tried to conceal my inner feelings. After three sirens, the big transatlantic liner began to move. In the evening, looking at the distant lights along the coastline, I wondered whether these lights were from the Italian or the French Riviera.

What was my feeling about this big adventure which was going to change my entire life? Bitterness? No doubt I felt bitter about the way I was unjustly discriminated against by my fellow citizens. Even if it was not openly said, I was told that I did not belong to the Italian people, with whom my family had been associated for centuries, fighting their wars (which we sincerely believed to be our wars as we deeply felt Italian), and giving the fruit of our

intellect to enrich the Italian culture and treasures. It was a feeling of bitterness and of being unjustly punished and excluded, even though this exclusion was sort of a blessing in disguise, so that I was not asked to be an accomplice to the crimes perpetrated by the Nazi-Fascist regimes. I also had a feeling of complete loss of loyalty toward my sovereign, Victor Emmanuel III, who had cowardly betrayed the constitution which his ancestors had given the Italians a century before.

All my past life was going to be seen in a different perspective. My professional career, long lasting friendships, and family bonds had to be considered severed, at least for the moment. God only knew if and when I would be able to be reunited with my father, brothers and relatives left behind. And yet in a way, this forced exodus made me proud of my ancestors, those eternal nomads who had survived, escaping from the Spanish Inquisition or from Moslem rulers rather than be compelled to give up their religious belief. (I must admit that for me this religious belief was not at that time strong enough to push me toward martyrdom!). Deep inside me there was a dim hope that in a new environment and with new opportunities, I would be able to give full expression of myself and to give meaning to this life of mine.

After a short stop of the ship in Cannes, the next day we docked in Italy again, as the boat reached Naples. I could not resist putting my foot again on Italian soil. I went to

the Banca Commerciale Italiana and phoned Antonello in Milan to have his authorization to obtain 6000 lire (about 30 dollars) stating that I had lost that money during the night playing cards. Then the big boat left the dock and I saw Ischia and Capri become more and more distant and disappear from the horizon.

At dark I could see, far away, the lights of the southern coast of Sardinia. When will I return to my native country?

Later we were on the vast ocean. Before our arrival in New York we were in the midst of a furious hurricane; we learned later that the storm had already taken hundreds of lives along the coast. Steel windows were put on the promenade deck of the boat to protect the glass from the fury of the waves; the linoleum of the corridors was redolent with the stench of vomiting and in the dining room I ate almost alone. We arrived in New York (September 24th, 1938) at early morning on a beautiful crystal-clear day. I was impressed to see the interminable line of cars crawling along the highway. [...]

ENDNOTES

1 According to history a Jewish community in Jerba was present centuries before Jesus Christ. Actually, according to legend, it was present since the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem (586 B.C.). This tiny island, now connected to the continent of North Africa by a Roman causeway, still has a dozen synagogues. One of these, the "Ghriba" (= the marvelous) is the oldest one and is considered a site of pious pilgrimages as holy as the Temple of Jerusalem. These pilgrimages were attended both by Jews and Moslems from all North Africa. As demonstrated by recent photographs, the floor is covered by carpets and it is still customary today for all visitors to remove their shoes, as the Moslems do when they are entering a mosque. Another of Jerba's synagogues (the "Bezalel") was damaged by an accidental fire which destroyed the Ark, Torah scrolls and prayer books.

This island is well known for its silversmiths, the cultivation of dates, and fishing for sponges. In more modern times, the tourist industry erected many modern hotels along the sandy shores. An enthusiastic description of the island, with annotations about its legends, customs and history was written by a French tourist, E. Grevin, ("Djerba, l'île heureuse". Stock publ., Paris 1937). This book underlines the existing harmony between the different ethnic groups, such as the Berbers of the Carilite Moslem sect, the Jews,

the Maltese and the Greek Christian fishermen.

A more recent book about the Jewish population of Jerba was written by A.L. Udovich and L. Valensi, "The last Arab Jews, the Community of Jerba, Tunisia". Harwood publ., 1984.

2 Alfonso Viloa, "La historia dell'impresa di Tripoli di Barberia", Francesco Ramperetta, Venezia, 1566 (reprinted with the original characters of the 1566 edition by Alfieri & Lacroix, Milano, 1912).

3 A.L. Udovich, L. Valensi, "The last Arab Jew. The Community of Jerba, Tunisia", Harwood publ., 1984.

4 A.L. Udovich, L. Valensi, "Etre Juif a Djerba", in *Communautes juives des marges sahariennes du Maghreb*", In Institut Ben-Zvi, Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 199-205.

5 M. Cohen, M.M. Moreno. "Gli ebrei in Libia. Usi e costumi". Sindacato Italiano Arti Grafiche, Roma (no date).

6 C. Cerbetto. "Di alcuni illustri anatomici italiani del decimoquinto secolo". Verona, 1842, pp. 10-45.

7 Manuscript listed in catalogue "Storie locali", Libreria L. Gonnelli & Figli, Via Ricasoli 14r, Firenze, Primavera 1982.

8 A.K. Shapiro, "A contribution to the history of placebo effect", *Behavioural Sciences*, 5, 109, 1960.

9 This Mustapha Pasha was an ambiguous figure, probably corrupt, ambitious, clever in business, friend of both French and Jews, from whom he got loans of large amounts of money. He was eventually killed by his own soldiers on August 31st, 1805.

10 According to other accounts, in three hours of rioting there were between three and five hundred dead Jews.

11 Gino Guarnieri, "Livorno e la marina mercantile sotto i Lorenesi (1737-1860)", Giardini publ., Pisa, 1889.

12 Guido Bedarida, "Gli Ebrei di Livorno", Le Monnier publ., Firenze, 1956, p. 28.

13 Ghedalia Yogev, "Diamonds and Coral. Anglo-Dutch Jews and Eighteen-Century Trade", Leicester University Press, 1978.

14 According to Nahoum Schlonseht, before the advent of Islam, the Berbers of the region surrounding the Island of Jerba became Judaized. Even though there is not any actual proof for this conversion, this possibility adds credibility to Antonello's hypothesis. see Udovitch A.L., Valensi L. "The last Arab Jews; the Community of Jerba", Harwood publ. 1984.

15 Gino Galletti, "Livorno nell'Ottocento", Lectures at

the Circolo Filologico, Belforte, publ. Livorno, 1900.

16 Giosué Borsi, born in Leghorn June 10th, 1888, died in World War One during the assault on Monte Zucco on November 15th, 1915. He was an actor, a writer and a translator.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Claudio Gerbi, was born in Florence, Italy, in 1907 and died in New York City in 1990. He studied medicine and practiced in Milan before moving to the USA in 1938, escaping the Racial Laws. He conducted research in hypertension at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, served as a district physician in Boston, and moved to New York in 1942. Dr. Gerbi was a faculty member of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University, where he taught internal medicine. He retired in 1979. Much loved by his patients (including a sizable number of the Italian Jews who had fled to New York), Dr. Gerbi had a general practice in Manhattan for 37 years.

As a Renaissance man of many talents, Dr. Gerbi studied art at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts prior to medical school in Milan. Similarly, the great Dutch painter from the 17th century, Jacob von Ruisdal was a physician in Amsterdam. In the 1950s, Dr. Gerbi resumed painting and studied at the Art Students League in New York City. He had several one-man shows in the USA and Italy. His paintings have won awards in competitions and are in permanent collections of museums.

His landscape artwork embodies his sensitivity to the environment's elements, capturing and distilling this to

share the warmth of the sunshine and general ambiance with the viewer. He brought this same sensitivity to the practice of medicine, listening to the patient. His skill in differential diagnosis was legendary. These facets of keen observation are combined with wit in his writing as he portrays the history of the Gerbi family over the centuries and his own upbringing and life.

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