

Vivaldo (Mario Ernesto) Levi D'Ancona

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Having completed his secondary education in 1938 and unable to register at university, Vivaldo undertook a complicated migratory journey, which led him to relatives, first in Paris and then in Lisbon. In 1940 he was reunited with his parents, who had moved to the States, and began to study engineering there. However, his exile would continue, in Japan, again in America and then in Brazil, where he would eventually settle.

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The beginning of «an eternal exile» at 18 years old

Mario Vivaldo Ernesto (known as Vivaldo) was born in Florence in 1921, the third child of Ezio Levi and Flora Aghib D'Ancona¹. He had been a student at the Naples high school where his father taught Neo-Latin literature and briefly continued his secondary education in Florence; his parents had moved there after his father lost his job when the Italian racial laws came into force. His parents decided that they two should go to the United States to look for a place in which to settle, while their children would remain in Florence with their maternal grandfather; all the children that is, with the exception of Vivaldo, who should have begun his university studies, but was prohibited from doing so. The only solution was for him to attend university abroad.

On 16 April 1939 he was accompanied to the Santa Maria Novella train station in Florence: «so began my eternal exile», he would write many years later in his memoir². When he left Italy, at 18 years of age, he went first to Paris to live with the Lazard family, cousins on his mother's side. Some months later they put him on the Highland Princess, a ship bound for Portugal. He docked in Lisbon on 4 July 1939 and was the guest of his

¹ A student of Alessandro D'Ancona, Ezio Levi married D'Ancona's niece in 1916 and in 1926 he added their shared surname to his own.

² Marcela Lima (Ed.), *Agora vou aqui, agora vou là. Vivaldo Levi D'Ancona e suas memorias de exilio*, Brasilia, Utopia, 2013, p. 74.

Oulman-Bensaude cousins; while there, he continued his studies and learned Portuguese. In the same year he moved to the Azores where the Bensaudes had a large tobacco factory and shipping company³. In Ponta Delgada on São Miguel island, Vivaldo met Alfredo Bensaude; by then an elderly man, he was an engineer and founder and teacher at the Instituto Técnico of Lisbon. His brother, Joaquim (1859-1952) also an engineering graduate, had become a noted historian of Portuguese geographical discoveries. Engineering and the history of discoveries, as well as the role of the Jewish people in Portuguese discoveries would become and remain of great interest to Vivaldo for the rest of his life.

As soon as his parents settled near Boston in October 1944, after much upheaval and moving around, his father (who had finally found a teaching position, albeit temporary, at Wellesley College) was able to provide an affidavit for Vivaldo so that at least one son could join the parents in the States. At nineteen, Vivaldo set sail from Ponta Delgada on 12 December 1940 with an «in quota» visa, issued on 7 December, declaring him Italian (although it was corrected to «Hebrew») and a student. He travelled second class on the Portuguese boat Gonçalo Velho and arrived in New York on Christmas day. He initially stayed with Laura and Enrico Fermi (she was a second cousin of his mother Flora) and after a brief time with them, he joined his parents in Boston⁴.

Student in the USA and volunteer in the Second World War

In his memoir Vivaldo recounted being registered at the Gamaliel Bradford Senior High School in order to learn English. He also wrote about accompanying his father to Harvard on Sundays to meet up with Gaetano

³ An important Jewish family of Moroccan origins that settled in the Portuguese islands and whose children were sent to Germany to be educated: see Jane Bensaude, *Memorie*, ed. by Luisa Levi D'Ancona, Florence, Florence University Press, 2016.

⁴ M. Lima (Ed.), *Agora vou aqui*, cit. p. 96. See Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search*, «Levi d'A? C. [sic], Mario Vivaldo» <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed on registration 12 May 2019).

Salvemini, who had left Italy fifteen years previous and who taught at Harvard.

Vivaldo's father was not well, however; following a brief stay in hospital, on 28 March 1941, Ezio Levi D'Ancona died at the age of 57, leaving his wife and Vivaldo behind and having never seen his other four children again. Flora was very concerned that Vivaldo should not interrupt his engineering degree and she managed to find teaching work in a small college. According to letters exchanged between Flora and the secretary of the Emergency Committee of New York, the woman, who knew about Ezio's case and had been struck by the widow's bad fortune, wanted to offer some comfort. Flora asked her for a reference for Vivaldo, who intended to apply for a scholarship at the New Hampshire Summer Camp of the International Student Service; she assured the other woman that he was able to offer tutoring in Italian, Portuguese, French, maths, physics and chemistry. He was offered a scholarship at the Grafton Work Camp for boy scouts, thanks to the interest that American acquaintances and contacts had taken in the family⁵.

In April of the same year he passed the entrance exam for Yale University, where he gained a Bachelor's degree in engineering in 1944⁶. In August 1944 he volunteered for the American army and enrolled in the infantry. He was sent to Camp Blanding in central Florida, one of the biggest military training bases in the country, which, during the war, also operated as a detention centre for German, Japanese and Italian prisoners. He was then posted to the Pacific and remained part of the occupying force in Japan until 1947. In Japan he attended engineering courses at Kyoto University⁷, where he studied the fuel injection engine, technology that would be developed and marketed

⁵ NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B., Non Grantees, b. 37, f. 21, «Aghib Levi D'Ancona Flora», 1941, letter from F. Aghib Levi D'Ancona to Miss B. Drury, n.d., arrived 24 May 1941; reply from B. Drury, 26 May 1941 and 16 June 1941, part of the contents of her husband's file, *ibid.*, b. 87, f. 27, «Levi D'Ancona, Ezio», 1939-41.

⁶ Cf. entry for Vivaldo Levi D'Ancona in *Yale University 1945 Classbook and Sexennial Record*, New Haven, Yale University, 1951, p. 73.

⁷ See image gallery, photo 2.

about 75 years later. He was demobilised from the army in 1947 and immediately took up post-graduate studies in Diesel Engineering at North Carolina State University. In 1948 he returned to Italy to see his siblings.

Wedding and emigration to Brazil

In 1949 he met Mirella Calef (1928-2914) in New York. She was the daughter of Carlo Calef, first a lecturer at the clinic for urinary diseases at the Università di Napoli and then assistant professor, who was dismissed from his job in Italy in 1938. Mirella was 12 when she emigrated to Brazil with her mother and father, who had gone on to open a clinical laboratory in São Paulo⁸. She and Vivaldo got married in 1949 and he too moved to Brazil⁹. It was there that he founded Onça, a metallurgy company, which would occupy him for the rest of his life. He had two children: Ezio, who became an engineer and took over as owner and director of Onça; and Carlos Arturo Levi D'Ancona, a urologist of international renown and a professor at the Università di Campinas.

Archival sources

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⁸ The visas granted in Trieste to the three Calefs were permanent, destination Santos; see Anna Rosa Bigazzi, *Os dialetos judeu-italianos. Um estudo sobre o bagito*, Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade de São Paulo, 2002 <<https://www.teses.usp.br>> (accessed 15 May 2019). Carlo Calef, born Perugia, 1897, only swore allegiance to the PNF (National Fascist Party) in 1936, according to the report filed on 12 March 1936 in Naples, published in <<https://www.renatojungano-urologo.it>> (accessed 15 May 2019).

⁹ Cf. entry in Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, *Cartões de Imigração, 1900-1965, ad nomen* (available online at <<https://www.ancestry.com>>). Vivaldo had become a naturalised US citizen.

- Marcela Lima (Ed.), *Agora vou aqui, agora vou lá. Vivaldo Levi D'Ancona e suas memórias de exílio*, Brasília, Utopia, 2013.

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