

Flora Aghib Levi D'Ancona

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She had always followed her husband, moving from place to place, to wherever his work as a university professor took him. In the winter of 1939, she accompanied him to the United States, where he hoped to find work in an American university; they hoped that her excellent English would help him to obtain work. They left their children in Italy, planning to bring them to the States once they were able to establish a new life there. Things did not, however, go according to plan and Flora ended up alone and in need of work for herself.

Family and an excellent education

Flora Aghib was the only child of Arturo, a timber importer from Livorno and Marguerite D'Ancona, born in Paris into an important intellectual middleclass family. Flora had received an excellent private education, with much emphasis placed on literature, music and painting. Among her tutors was one Ezio Levi, eleven years her senior, who she would marry in 1916 in Florence. They had five children together: Antonio Giacomo in 1917, Mirella Luigia in 1919, Vivaldo Ernesto in 1921, Pier Lorenzo Arturo in 1926 and Viviano Ludovico Emanuele in 1937.

They lived in Livorno where Ezio was a literature professor at the Italian Naval Academy but returned to Florence between 1918 and 1919 when he took a position as professor of comparative literature at the Istituto Superiore di Magistero Femminile. The family then moved to Palermo in 1923 after he was called upon to take over the Neo-Latin literature chair at the university there. In 1925 the family relocated again, to Naples, where Levi had been offered the romance philology chair¹. The following year the whole family added

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¹ See Ezio Levi D'Ancona and the various archival and bibliographical sources.

D'Ancona to their name; it was the surname of Flora's mother and for Ezio, the surname of his teacher Alessandro D'Ancona.

Helping Ezio, especially with English

Following Ezio Levi D'Ancona's expulsion in 1938 due to the Italian racial laws, the family moved to Florence, to the home of Flora's parents in Via Bovio and from there, they made the decision to emigrate to the United States. Flora would play a central role in this undertaking. Initially the family decided that Mirella, their 20-year-old daughter, would accompany her father and that Flora would remain in Florence with the other children; the youngest was only 2 years old at the time. However, Mirella spoke little English and would have been unable to interpret for her father «who knew even less of the language than she did»². Thus they changed their plans and it was decided that Flora should accompany her husband both to interpret for him in the various American institutions and to write letters to relevant colleagues.

It was Arturo, Flora's father, who convinced her that this was their best option and he offered to keep the children with him, even though he had been widowed in 1937, safe in the knowledge that Mirella would look after all of them. Flora and Ezio departed with the idea of reuniting the family as soon as they had established a new life in America, as detailed in Flora's memoir, which she wrote many years later for her children, from whom she was separated for much longer than she had hoped and imagined. Had she made a mistake in following her father's advice? It was a question she continued to ask herself. Undoubtedly when they left for the States, they were unaware of the difficulties they would face; Ezio was convinced that his renown would lead automatically to a university position or at the very least to an extended series of conferences. For her part, Flora never considered that he could be

² Flora Aghib Levi D'Ancona, *La nostra vita con Ezio*, Florence, July 1981, unedited manuscript. The original, containing a signed dedication «To my Mirella in memory of her father» is held in the private archive of L. Levi D'Ancona in Jerusalem; we are grateful to the archive for granting us a copy of part of the text.

so wrong in his prediction; her memoir later recounted the disappointment and bitterness she felt³.

Leaving for two months, remaining for ten years

On 10 December 1939, the couple boarded the ship *Saturnia* in Genova. They had only managed to obtain a tourist visa for the States, on the basis of an invitation, extended to the professor and his wife, to a congress of the Modern language Association in New Orleans⁴. They arrived in New York on 21 December.

Flora was relieved to be met by friends on arrival in America⁵. There was Roberto Funaro and his wife, from Florence, as well as her cousin Lalla, otherwise known as Laura Capon Fermi. She and her husband Enrico hosted the couple in their first days in America at their home in Leonia, New Jersey on the other side of the Washington Bridge. They were kind to the Levi D'Anconas but the hope that Enrico's great fame would help Ezio in his search for work was soon dashed.

They moved from the Fermi home to a room in a Manhattan hotel, arranged for them by Ginevra Capocelli. Capocelli was the sister of the director of the Facoltà di Magistero at the Università Suor Orsola Benincasa in Naples and she herself taught Italian in a high school in New York, where she had emigrated in 1922⁶.

Flora also accompanied her husband to an appointment with the secretary of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, an organisation that Ezio had contacted months earlier from Italy. On 9 January 1940, Miss Drury met with the couple and noted that the couple was not

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed on registration, 20 November 2018).

⁵ F. Aghib Levi D'Ancona, *La nostra vita con Ezio*, cit.

⁶ Ibid. For the arrival of Ginevra Capocelli in New York in 1922 and her frequent transatlantic trips, see Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed on registration, 20 November 2018).

young and that the women could be a native English speaker, given her excellent command of the language⁷.

Flora remained by her husband's side throughout the difficult period in America; she accompanied him to Texas where he had found work as a supply teacher and to Mexico, where, with the help of the National Council of Jewish Women, they were trying to obtain a permanent visa, which would then allow them to remain in the States⁸. They eventually ended up in Massachusetts where Ezio had managed to secure a temporary position as a visiting professor of Italian for the academic year 1940-41 at Wellesley College.

Alone in America with her son

Ezio passed away on 28 March 1941, at the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. Flora and her son Vivaldo, who had joined her just a few months earlier were left «alone on the continent».

The ECADFS had remained in contact with the widow and on seeing the notice of the professor's death in the press, opened a file in Flora's name, knowing that it was she who would now need to find work. She was 46 years old: «a pathetic case [...] she is a very nice woman, fine English», noted Miss Drury, the secretary.

Flora needed to earn her living as well as to help her son complete his studies in engineering and she threw herself into the endeavour. She asked Miss Drury if the Emergency Committee could assist Vivaldo in obtaining a scholarship from the international student service body. The request was naturally of an informal nature given that Vivaldo did not meet the requirements to be considered a displaced scholar. As a start, The Friends of

⁷ NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 87, f. 27, «Levi D'Ancona, Ezio», 1939-41, Interview Memorandum, January 1940.

⁸ The University of Texas at El Paso Library, *Fanny Zlabovsky-National Council of Jewish Women case files*, MS 508, C.L., b. 1, f. 41, «D'Ancona, Ezio Levi», 1940; also contains correspondence with Flora Aghib.

Refugee Teachers agreed to add Flora to the waiting list for a teaching post. This came about thanks to the introduction made by Wellesley College and specifically Mildred Helen McAfee, the head of the college, who had helped the Levi D'Anconas obtain their visa to remain in the States. In June 1941 Flora was offered a job at Bennett Junior College for girls in Millbrook, Dutchess County in New York State⁹. She then moved on to a teaching position in Chattam Hall, originally the first Episcopalian school for girls in South Virginia and also frequented by students from the neighbouring North Carolina. Finally, she accepted a position in Sweet Briar, Virginia, at the women's liberal arts college, where she taught French, Spanish and Italian. During the war Vivaldo enlisted as a volunteer on the Pacific Front, remaining there for five years; Flora, meanwhile, struggled to maintain written correspondence with her other children, according to Viviano's memories of that period. Indeed, her other children had stayed in Italy but were forced into hiding after the events of 8 September; they hid first in Casentino and then in January 1944 they escaped to Switzerland¹⁰. In the same year, their grandfather Arturo, father of Flora, passed away.

After seven years of separation, Flora was finally reunited with Mirella and Viviano, who arrived in New York on 3 September 1946¹¹. Flora returned to Sweet Briar with 9-year-old Viviano, the son she had not seen since he was little more than two. Mirella stayed on in New York where she continued her studies and went on to work at the Institute of Fine Arts, forging a brilliant academic career at CUNY.

In September 1950 Flora Aghib decided to return to Italy with Viviano. She

⁹ See reply from Miss Drury to Flora Aghib Levi D'Ancona, 16 June 1941, and undated notes in Flora's husband's file in NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 87, f. 27, «Levi D'Ancona, Ezio», 1939-41. Also notes in Flora Aghib's file, *ibid.*, b. 37, f. 21, «Aghib Levi D'Ancona, Flora», 1941, 24 and 26 May, 13 June 1941.

¹⁰ USCFSF, *Visual History Archive*, Viviano Levi D'Ancona interviewed by Marta Baiardi, 25 June 1998, available online in *Ti racconto la storia: voci dalla shoah* <<http://www.shoah.acs.beniculturali.it>> (accessed on registration, 10 March 2019).

¹¹ See Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed on registration, 20 November 2018).

lived in her family home and dedicated herself to writing her family memoir, studying the Jewish traditions of Livorno and translating various English language books. In the hope of establishing a centre for romance philology at Florence University, Flora donated her husband's book collection to Florence University, where it is held as the *Fondo Ezio Levi* in the humanities library. Flora passed away on 24 December 1982.

Major publications

- Sadie Rose Weilerstein, *Eroi ebrei*, translated from the English by Flora Aghib Levi D'Ancona, Rome, Fondazione per la gioventù ebraica, 1958.
- *Marche di fabbrica e vecchie tradizioni*, part 1st, *La fortezza vecchia di Livorno*, part 2nd, *Origini post-risorgimentali di pregiudizi religiosi a Livorno*, Livorno, Municipality of Livorno, 1971.
- *Marche di fabbrica e vecchie tradizioni*, part 3rd and 4th, *Tre romanzi e molti critici per l'identikit di Livorno*, Livorno, Debatte, 1973.
- *La giovinezza dei fratelli D'Ancona*, Rome, De Luca, 1982.
- *The Sephardi Community of Leghorn (Livorno)*, in Richard David Barnett, Walter M. Schwab (eds.), *The Sephardi Heritage. Essays on the History and Cultural Contribution of the Jews of Spain and Portugal*, vol. 2, *The Western Sephardim*, Grendon, Gibraltar Books, 1989, pp. 180-202.

Archival sources

- Flora Aghib Levi D'Ancona, *La nostra vita con Ezio*, Florence, July 1981, unedited manuscript (the original, containing a signed dedication «To my Mirella in memory of her father» is held in the private archive of Luisa Levi D'Ancona in Jerusalem).
- Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>>.
- NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 37, f. 21, «Aghib Levi D'Ancona, Flora», 1941.

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- USCSF, *Visual History Archive*, Mirella Levi D'Ancona interviewed by Marta Baiardi, 16 March 1998, available online in *Ti racconto la storia: voci dalla shoah* <<http://www.shoah.acs.beniculturali.it>>.
- USCSF, *Visual History Archive*, Viviano Levi D'Ancona interviewed by Marta Baiardi, 25 June 1998, available online in *Ti racconto la storia: voci dalla shoah* <<http://www.shoah.acs.beniculturali.it>>.

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