

Gualtiero Cividalli

[Go to personal file](#)

«We need to think seriously about the children's future and set off for *Eretz Yisrael*», wrote Gualtiero Cividalli to his wife Maria, on 19th July 1938, after reading the «Manifesto della razza»¹ in the «Giornale d'Italia». When the racial laws were passed, Cividalli immediately understood the gravity of the situation, so much so that, aged 39 and with deeply held antifascist and Zionist ideals, he made up his mind to emigrate, together with his wife and 5 children.

Family history

Born in Florence on the 8th of November 1899 to a wealthy family, he was the son of Carlo Cividalli (1869-1952), an administrative officer for the railways, and Gilda Contini (1869-1959) from Ferrara². He went to high school at the Liceo Ginnasio Michelangelo in his hometown, where he became friends with Nello Rosselli, who helped him co-found a literary, patriotic and interventionist school newspaper, «Noi Giovani», which saw six issues published³.

After completing his high-school diploma in classics, he took part in the Great War as a telephone operator in the army corps of the engineers and saw front-line action on the Piave as a lieutenant, receiving a military medal for his actions. In 1923 he took an Engineering degree in Rome⁴. On 10th July 1924 he married Maria D'Ancona (1900-1983), the eldest daughter of Giuseppe

Link to other connected Lives on the move:

[Enzo Bonaventura](#)
[Cecilia Calabresi](#)
[Renata Calabresi](#)
[Umberto Cassuto](#)
[Paola Cividalli Lazard](#)
[Maria D'Ancona Cividalli](#)
[Alfonso Pacifici](#)
[David Prato](#)
[Nello Rosselli](#)
[Giuseppe Sinigaglia](#)

¹ Cited in the appendix to Gualtiero Cividalli, *Dal sogno alla realtà. Lettere ai figli combattenti. Israele, 1947-1948*, edited by Francesco Papafava, Florence, Giuntina, 2005, p. 318.

² She was part of the Finzi Contini family, although her grandfather Beniamino had removed Finzi from his surname.

³ Francesco Papafava, *Così nacque Noi Giovani di Nello Rosselli e Gualtiero Cividalli*, «Nuova Antologia», 221, 2002, pp. 6-20.

⁴ See Sara Berger's introduction in Gualtiero Cividalli, *Lettere e pagine di diario 1938-1946*, edited by Sara Berger, Florence, Giuntina, 2016, and the interview with Piero Cividalli <<https://www.giuntina.it>> (accessed January 9th 2019).

D'Ancona and Alice Orvieto, who were part of two important Tuscan families of Jewish intellectuals; they had met at school, since Maria was in Nello's class. She graduated in Literature at the University of Florence and their friendship circle grew to include, always in an antifascist environment, the Calabresi sisters (Cecilia and Renata), who were their peers and went to the same Faculty. Furthermore, they also made friends with the Rosselli brothers' wives⁵.

Antifascism and Zionism

In November 1924, Gualtiero took part in the Jewish youth congress in Livorno, «a meeting of souls», where his friend Rosselli gave a famous speech⁶. Many years later, he would remember it thus:

Nello's words were a direct and spontaneous expression of a profound sentiment and were understood as such by everyone [...]. A statement of his own Jewishness. Even though he made the speech in a way that could be criticised, it was nonetheless a noble and honest expression of a personal sentiment coming from someone who knew how to live and die for an ideal⁷.

From 1923, Cividalli was involved in the central commission in Italy of the *Keren Kajemet Le Israel*, the national Jewish fund established after the 5th Zionist congress with the intent of buying land for the Jewish population in Israel; from 1935 to 1938 he was the commission's president in Florence⁸. His Zionism was also influenced by his friendship with the Florentine lawyer Alfonso Pacifici,⁹ while his activity in local and national Jewish organisations is proven by the copious correspondence with Zionists such as Aldo Levi,

5 Evidence of their scholastic attendance, a drawing for the poster made for the play «I fiori», written by Alvarez Quintero and performed by Carlo and Nello Rosselli, Renata Calabresi, the D'Anconas, the Cividallis and others, in May 1921 at the Fondazione Rosselli, Rosselli family archives, M1406 <<http://www.archiviorosselli.it>> (accessed on January 10th 2019).

6 On the Livorno Congress and Rosselli's speech, Maurizio Molinari, *Ebrei in Italia: un problema di identità (1870-1938)*, Florence, Giuntina, 1991, pp. 48-42; Mario Toscano, *Ebraismo e antisemitismo dal 1948 alla Guerra dei sei giorni*, Milano, Angeli, 2003, pp. 99-107.

7 Gualtiero Cividalli to Carlo Alberto Viterbo, undated (but post 25th July 1957), in CAHJP, P140, *Archivio G. Cividalli*, f. 20.

8 Ivi, f. 7, David Prato to Gualtiero Cividalli.

9 Ivi, f. 21, correspondence between Gualtiero Cividalli and Alfonso Pacifici.

Umberto Nahon, David Prato, Enzo Sereni and Enzo Bonaventura¹⁰. Among his letters, are some which he exchanged with Umberto Cassuto in 1926, regarding the donation of an Italian Perushim manuscript and Kabbalah by the 16th-century Cordovero to the library of the recently founded Hebrew University of Jerusalem¹¹.

Having escaped the fascist squads during the «night of Saint Bartholomew» in Florence in October 1925, Cividalli was monitored by the fascist police up until 1941, even after his move to Palestine, since he was a member of the «Gruppo Sionistico Fiorentino - an international association [...] even though it does not seem that he was an active member of subversive parties, he had still adhered to amendoline social democracy and has never shown much sympathy towards the Regime»¹². His house in Via Andrea del Castagno in Florence had become an informal point of reference for German Jewish refugees arriving in the city in 1933¹³.

Having been included on the register of engineers as soon as it was established, Gualtiero worked for the highly regarded engineer Ugo Giovannozzi (1876-1957) in Viale Principe Amedeo 21, Florence¹⁴. In 1937, he planned the refurbishment of Palazzo Strozzi, which had been bought by the INA (National Insurance Institute) and in the following July he was tasked with overseeing the works for two years. After the racial laws of September 1938, his name was struck off the register and he was advised to resign from his

10 Ivi, f. 20. See too Arturo Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere. Gli ebrei italiani e l'emigrazione in Palestina prima della guerra (1920-1940)*, Genoa-Milan, Marietti, 2003.

11 CAHJP, P140, *Archivio G. Cividalli*, f. 20, Umberto Cassuto to Gualtiero Cividalli. See information on the National Library of Israel website <http://cahjp.nli.org.il/webfm_send/671> (accessed 29th April 2019).

12 Letter from the prefect of Florence to the Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione generale della pubblica sicurezza, Divisione polizia politica, 4th September 1934; this and other copied documents were consulted by Luisa Levi D'Ancona in the private Cividalli, Ramat Gan Archive; for the originals see ACS, MI, DGPS, AGR, CPC, b. 1374, f. «Cividalli Gualtiero», <<http://dati.acs.beniculturali.it>> 1929-41 (accessed 29th December 2018).

13 Interview by Luisa Levi D'Ancona with Piero Cividalli, Ramat Gan, 26th December 2018.

14 Letter from the prefect of Florence to the Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione generale della pubblica sicurezza, CPC, Rome, 24th February 1930, in the private Cividalli Archive. For the study and relative Archivio Giovannozzi, see entry at <<http://siusa.archivi.beniculturali.it>> (accessed 29th December 2018).

post with a settlement. He was eventually forced to leave the firm, which is why the refurbishment is attributed to Giovannozzi¹⁵. As a result of the same laws, his children, Piero and Paola, were forced to stop attending the same high school their parents had been to. The Cividallis thus decided to leave the country they loved, which would never have happened had it not been for the racial laws¹⁶.

Emigration to Palestine

Having left his wife and children in Lausanne in December 1938, Gualtiero landed in Palestine on 2nd January 1939 with a tourist visa. He met many Italians there, especially Florentines – the largest group¹⁷ - including his sister Iolanda (1902-1987) who had left Trieste for Palestine in October 1938 together with her husband Mario Bolaffio (1895-1988) and their 3 children. As soon as Gualtiero received his documentation from the British Government, he was joined by the rest of his family. In March 1939, his wife Maria set off on the steamer «Marco Polo» from Venice, with her children, Lia (an infant, just a few months old), three-year-old Gabriel, and the older children, Paola, Piero and Bona, 14, 13 and 11 years old respectively, accompanied by their cook and housekeeper Antonietta Calamai. They moved to Tel Aviv, close to Iolanda's family, renting a house on Allenby Road. In July 1939, Maria and the children went back to Tuscany on holiday until the end of September when they returned to Palestine via Trieste, taking with them Gualtiero's parents, while the D'Anconas all stayed in Florence or elsewhere in Italy¹⁸.

Maria and Gualtiero's house immediately became a focus for Italians coming

15 Daniela Lamberini, *Un «monte di saxi» nuovi: i restauri di Palazzo Strozzi nella Firenze postunitaria e fascista*, in *Palazzo Strozzi metà millennio, 1489-1989*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1991, pp. 214-241. See also G. Cividalli, *Dal sogno alla realtà*, cit., pp. 318-325.

16 So said his son, Piero Cividalli, in the long online interview cited above and from which much biographical information has been garnered.

17 See A. Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere*, cit., pp. 125-130.

18 Family tree of the Cividallis and D'Anconas respectively, in G. Cividalli, *Dal sogno alla realtà*, cit., p. 53, and biographical information regarding various relatives, pp. 327-337.

to Palestine, including those who were taken prisoner by the English in North Africa. Cividalli appears to have been on the managing committee (together with Enzo Sereni, Giuseppe Sinigaglia and Umberto Nahon) of the *Irgun Olé Italia*, an organisation made up of Italian Jews, overseen by Dante Lattes¹⁹. Founded «to assist Italian immigrants with their economic and cultural integration in *Eretz Yisrael*», the *Irgun Olé Italia* had its headquarters in Tel Aviv and correspondents in Haifa and Jerusalem²⁰. When Italy joined the war, even Gualtiero was arrested, as were many other Italians, by the British authorities, only to be released two weeks later²¹.

It was not easy for the children to fit in at school, neither was it easy for Gualtiero to find a job. He took a few temporary jobs as a quantity surveyor until 1941 when he was employed by the War Supply Board, a British organisation: because of this he was obliged to give up his Italian citizenship, although this was restored to him after the war. His life in Palestine was regulated by the war, with the 6 pm daily curfew imposed by the British. After the War of Independence, in 1951, he was employed as a surveyor and engineer for the Rasco construction company, where he was to work for 20 years.

The bond with Italy

His daughter Paola joined the British army in 1943 and was sent to Egypt. Aged 18, Piero joined the Jewish Brigade (*Brigata Ebraica*) which fought on the Gothic Line, wanting to contribute to the liberation of Italy²². In September 1945, while on leave in Florence, he reconnected with his D'Ancona grandparents and his aunt and uncle, Clara and Elio Salmon, who had

19 Prefect of Florence to the Ministero dell'Interno, 13th April 1939, in the private Cividalli Archive. For Cividalli in the *Irgun Olé Italia*, see CAHJP, P140, *Archivio G. Cividalli*, f. 19.

20 *Irgun Olé Italia, Informazioni per chi viene in Erez Israel*, Tel Aviv, 1939, in CAHJP, P140, *Archivio G. Cividalli*, f. 19.

21 Letter from the chairman, Enzo Bonaventura, to members, 24th July 1941, in *ivi*.

22 Interview with Piero Cividalli, «La Stampa», 24th April 2018 <<https://www.lastampa.it>> (accessed 10th January 2019). Cfr. Bice Migliau (ed.), *La brigata ebraica in Italia 1943-1945*, Rome, Comunità ebraica di Roma, 2015.

avoided the deportations by hiding in the countryside, near Volognano where the old D'Ancona castle-villa was located²³.

Maria briefly returned to Italy in August 1946, stopping off in Alexandria, Egypt, as the guest of the Ambron family. Around the same time, the Ambrons also provided a safe haven for King Vittorio Emanuele III and his wife Elena following the King's abdication²⁴. After the war, in 1946, the Cividalli grandparents moved back to Florence. Gualtiero and Maria bought an apartment in via Giambologna, where they had previously lived, and their Italian citizenship was restored, however they continued to live in Israel, as did their children. The children's revoked Italian passports were not reinstated until 1995²⁵. Gualtiero died two years later; Maria had already died in 1983. Gualtiero is buried in Jerusalem.

The many letters he sent to his children, whilst they were fighting in the War of Independence for the Israeli State, were posthumously published, along with his diary, in two volumes. They are rich in information and include his thoughts and observations regarding the fascist regime, Italy during the years of civil war and the contradictions which he felt arose from choosing a distinct state.

Major publications

- *Dal sogno alla realtà: lettere ai figli combattenti, Israele, 1947-1948*, edited by Francesco Papafava, Florence, Giuntina, 2005.
- *Lettere e pagine di diario 1938-1946*, edited by Sara Berger, Florence, Giuntina, 2016.

²³ The vicissitudes of the Salmon family are documented by Elio Salmon, along with news of his father Giuseppe D'Ancona and his mother Alice (hidden in a closed order convent in Monte San Savino), in an epistolary diary made up of letters to his sister-in-law Maria Cividalli: see Elio Salmon, *Diario di un ebreo fiorentino 1943-1944*, Florence, Giuntina, 2002.

²⁴ Interview by L. Levi D'Ancona with Piero Cividalli, cit.

²⁵ Interview with Piero Cividalli <<https://www.giuntina.it>> (accessed 9th January 2019).

Archival sources

- Private Cividalli Archive, Ramat Gan, Israel.
- CAHJP, P140, *Archivio G. Cividalli* <<http://cahjp.nli.org.il>>.
- ACS, CPC, b. 1374, f. «Cividalli Gualtiero», 1929-41 <<http://dati.acs.beniculturali.it/CPC/>>.
- Rosselli family archive, letters and postcards from Gualtiero Cividalli to Nello Rosselli <<http://www.archiviorosselli.it>>. The Rosselli papers are now in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, undergoing reorganisation.

Bibliography

- Daniela Lamberini, *Un «monte di saxi» nuovi: i restauri di Palazzo Strozzi nella Firenze post-unitaria e fascista*, in *Palazzo Strozzi metà millennio, 1489-1989*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1991, pp. 214-241.
- Arturo Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere. Gli ebrei italiani e l'emigrazione in Palestina prima della guerra (1920-1940)*, Genoa-Milan, Marietti, 2003.
- Interview with Piero Cividalli <<https://www.giuntina.it>>.

Patrizia Guarnieri, Luisa Levi D'Ancona

Translated by Alexander Luca Coscarella

Cite as:

Patrizia Guarnieri, Luisa Levi D'Ancona, *Gualtiero (Beniamino) Cividalli*, in
Patrizia Guarnieri, *Intellectuals Displaced from Fascist Italy*,
Firenze University Press, 2019. <<http://intellettualinfuga.fupress.com/en>>
ISBN: 978-88-6453-872-3

©2019 Firenze University Press

Open Access article published under license CC-BY-SA 4.0

Publication date: 23 January 2020.