

Avigail Vigodsky De Philippis

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In September 1938 Avigail Vigodsky, a native of Palestine, was an untenured supervisor in botany at the Faculty of Agriculture in the University of Florence. The young academic, who had chosen to come to study in Italy and had demonstrated her qualities, was afterwards obliged to interrupt her scientific work, in December 1938.

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Family history

Avigail Vigodsky was born on 1 June 1912 at Rishon Le Zion, in Palestine, at that period part of the Ottoman Empire. Her father, Elhiau Vigodsky, a secular Jew with socialist views, had been born in St Petersburg and had emigrated to Palestine in 1906 after the failed uprisings in Russia in 1905, in which he had actively taken part and for which he was wanted by the Russian police. Like many immigrant Jews in Palestine during those years, Elhiau had become a farmer, devoting himself to producing citrous fruits and grapes for wine. Her mother, Pessia Davidson, had reached Palestine aged three with the first immigration at the end of the nineteenth century, fleeing from Russian Poland, then in turmoil from the frequent anti-Semitic pogroms. Elhiau and Pessia had met and married at Rishon Le Zion, where their three children were born: Avigail (1912), Yehudit (1914) and Hillela (1933).

Education and qualifications

Until she was 19 Avigail lived at Rishon Le Zion, where she attended the primary schools. She then studied at the Hebrew Teachers Training College for Women in Tel Aviv, where she received her degree on 24 July 1931. In October 1931 her parents accompanied her to Florence to enrol her, on 3 November, in the Faculty of Natural Sciences at the University of Florence.

She took lodgings at the pensione Consigli in via Cavour, whose owner was Jewish, and where other students from Palestine were staying.

Avigail quickly learned Italian, and this allowed her to pass the examinations at the end of the summer term of the first year of the course. In Florence she met Alessandro de Philippis, a native of Bellosguardo, a small town in the Cilento area, who had moved to Florence to finish his studies in agriculture, which he had started at the Federico II University at Portici. Avigail and Alessandro married in January 1935.

On 23 July of that year, Avigail graduated in natural sciences with a mark of 110/110, defending a thesis in botany on the embryology and karyology of *Ruscus aculeatus*. In 1935 she was appointed volunteer assistant to Professor Giovanni Negri at the Botanical Institute and began to publish her first studies, displaying remarkable scientific productivity. In 1937 she became untenured assistant to the chair in botany of the University of Florence Faculty of Agriculture, whose incumbent was Professor Raffaele Ciferri, and continued her researches in botany, while dealing with examinations for the students in the Faculty of Agriculture¹. On 16 October 1938, in consequence of the royal decree *Provvedimenti per la difesa della razza nella scuola fascista*, she was expelled with other Jewish lecturers from the University of Florence. In the letter of 9 December 1938 which Arrigo Serpieri, the rector of the University of Florence, wrote to the Minister for National Education, it is stated that he personally, as professor in the Faculty of Agriculture, had «of even date communicated by registered letter to the undernamed their dismissal from post with effect from 14 December prox. ». In the index there appears among the untenured assistants «Vigodsky De Philippis Avigail»².

1 Albina Messeri, *Avigail Vigodsky de Philippis*, «Nuovo Giornale Botanico Italiano», 65, 1958, pp. 1-3.

2 ASUFI, AC, 1938, f. 8B.

On the move

During 1939 Avigail accompanied her husband on a study tour in the Balkans, from where it was their plan to go on by moving together to Palestine, leaving Italy. While they were in Belgrade, however, the Second World War broke out and they then took the decision to return to Florence. In 1942, her husband, Alessandro de Philippis, was appointed professor of sylviculture in the Faculty of Agriculture, though with opposition from one member of the appointments committee, who meant to make it count against him that he had a Jewish wife. In the winter of 1943, when the risk of being arrested and deported had become too great, Avigail and Alessandro fled from Florence and took refuge in Paciano, a village in Umbria on the slopes of mount Petrarvella, overlooking Lake Trasimene, in the house of a cousin of Alessandro. They spent the winter in hiding there, until the Allied troops liberated the area after the battle of Trasimene, in June 1944. At this point, Avigail and Alessandro moved to Bellosguardo, Alessandro's town, waiting for Florence to be liberated by the Allied troops.

At the end of the war, Avigail and Alessandro returned to Florence, and, while Alessandro resumed his work, Avigail had no further official post with the University of Florence, as is clear from official documents relating to her record of service,³ and in contrast to what is reported in secondary sources⁴.

In 1949 she gave birth to their first son, Donato, and in 1952 their second, Roberto. She did not resume her research and teaching activity at the University. In 1956 the first symptoms of cancer appeared, which brought about her death on 10 June 1958.

³ Ibid., AC, *Stati di servizio*, f. «Vigodsky de Philippis Dr Avigail».

⁴ A. Messeri, Avigail Vigodsky de Philippis, cit., p. 3.

Principal publications

- *Ricerche embriologiche su Ruscus aculeatus L.*, «Nuovo giornale botanico italiano», 43, 1936, pp. 707-734.
- *Su di una stazione preistorica in superficie scoperta nei pressi di Motza (Gerusalemme)*, «Archivio per l'antropologia e la etnologia», 55, 1936, pp. 125-136.
- *Studio monografico del Solenostemma olei folium (Nect.) Bull. et Bruce (S. Argel Delile Hayne)*, in *Atti del terzo Congresso di studi coloniali. Firenze-Roma, 12-17 aprile 1937*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1937, vol. 5, pp. 8-13.
- *L'epoca della differenziazione delle gemme fiorali nell'olivo*, «Nuovo giornale botanico italiano», 44, 1937, pp. 484-487.
- *Ulteriori osservazioni sull'epoca della differenziazione delle gemme fiorali nell'olivo*, «Nuovo giornale botanico italiano», 45, 1938, pp. 45-66.
- *Solenostemma Argel (Delile, 1982) Hayne. (Solenostemma olei folium Nect. Bull. et Bruce) Morfologia ed anatomia*, «Nuovo giornale botanico italiano», 45, 1938, pp. 572-585.
- *Studio morfologico ed anatomico di Leiphaimos brachyloba (Griseb.) Urb. var. cumbrensis*, «Nuovo giornale botanico italiano», 45, 1938, pp. 190-195.

Archival sources

- ASUFI, AC, 1938, f. 8B.
- ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Vigodsky Avigail».
- ASUFI, AC, *Stati di servizio*, f. «Vigodsky de Philippis Dr Avigail».

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- Albina Messeri, *Avigail Vigodsky de Philippis*, «Nuovo Giornale Botanico Italiano», 65, 1958, pp. 1-3.

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