

Mario Levi

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Economist at Olivetti, member of the anti-fascist *Giustizia e Libertà* movement, a «shy man, capable of every audacity»,¹ Mario Levi left Italy at the age of 29, evading arrest by the fascist police to the cry of «Viva l'Italia libera!»². He escaped to Switzerland and from there went to France, where he continued his work as part of the resistance and where he would spend the rest of his life.

An anti-conformist, cultured family

Mario Levi was born on 16 February 1905 into a Jewish family, the son of noted histologist Giuseppe Levi and Lidia Tanzi. He was the third of five siblings, born after Gina and Paola and followed by Alberto and Natalia³. The family moved to Sassari in 1909, where his father Giuseppe had been engaged as a professor of human anatomy at the university there. In 1914 they moved to Palermo and again, in 1919, to Turin, where Mario would attend the Vittorio Alfieri classical lyceum. Despite the fact that he had previously expressed an interest in studying law,⁴ when he finished high school, his father encouraged him to take a place at the Istituto Superiore di

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¹ Patrizia Gabrielli, *Col freddo nel cuore. Uomini e donne nell'emigrazione antifascista*, Rome, Donzelli, 2004, p. 151. As defined by Vera Modigliani, who worked with Mario Levi in Paris, in the French radio produced by Angelo Tasca.

² Rita Levi-Montalcini, *Elogio dell'imperfezione*, Milan, Baldini & Castoldi, 2018, p. 111. See also P. Gabrielli, *Col freddo nel cuore*, cit., p. 161 e Chiara Colombini, *Quegli arresti di ebrei torinesi antifascisti. Il ricordo dei protagonisti nelle parole dei loro figli e nipoti*, proceedings of the meeting at the Centre for the Jewish Community in Turin, 9 May 2014, p. 4 <<http://www.istoreto.it>>.

³ Gino Levi Martinoli (1901-1996), technical director of Olivetti from 1932; from 1957 CEO and director general of Agip Nucleare; from 1964 president of Censis. Paola Levi (1902-1984), first wife of the industrialist Adriano Olivetti, and then companion of Carlo Levi and Mario Tobino. Alberto Levi (1909-1969), physician, joined *Giustizia e Libertà* with friends Vittorio Foa e Leone Ginzburg; arrested in 1935 and sent to the border in Lucania. During the war he joined the Partito d'Azione and in the seventies he was the secretary of the CGIL. Natalia Ginzburg (1916-1991), wife of Leone Ginzburg, writer, elected to the PCI communist party in 1983.

⁴ Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico familiare*, Turin, Einaudi, 2014, p. 53.

Scienze Economiche e Commerciali (the economics school) of Turin University. He received his degree on 16 November 1927 with the submission of his thesis «Observations on the monetary policy of Sweden during the war»; his thesis advisor was Vincenzo Porri⁵.

From an early age he had manifested «an aversion to despotism», a marked critical spirit and «a healthy, non-conformist disposition with regard to politics, lifestyle choices and relationships with family and friends»⁶. He was young, intelligent and cultured - a lover of literature and art. After graduating and a spell doing work experience in Genoa, he found a job in the commercial sector of the Olivetti of Ivrea company, where his older brother Gino was already employed.

His choice and commitment to antifascism.

In the summer of 1933, he went to Paris to meet up with Carlo Rosselli; he had asked to be put in contact with Rosselli in Turin, with the Giustizia e Libertà group, thus becoming «a sort of fiduciary of the movement [...] in Piedmont»⁷.

The Levis had met and become close to the Rosselli family in Florence;⁸ Carol and Nello were friends of Gino at the Michelangelo school.⁹ The two families had spent the summer of 1914¹⁰ together in Macugnaga in the foothills of Monte Rosa and in 1922, Carlo was a guest at the Levis home when he was in Turin for study purposes¹¹.

Core members of the Turin chapter of the GL (Giustizia e Libertà) were: Carlo

⁵ ASUTo, Regio Istituto superiore di scienze economiche e commerciali (Economics and business school of Turin University), Degree results report 16-18 November 1927. Mario was awarded 110/110.

⁶ See N. Ginzburg, *Lessico familiare*, cit., p. 52; Carlo D'Amicis, Mirella Fulvi (eds.), *Conversando con Gino Martinoli*, Fondazione Adriano Olivetti, 1991, p. 20; Gabrielli, P. *Col freddo nel cuore*, cit., p. 151.

⁷ C. D'Amicis, M. Fulvi (eds.), *Conversando con Gino Martinoli*, cit., p.20.

⁸ N. Ginzburg, *Lessico familiare*, cit., p. 98

⁹ C. D'Amicis, M. Fulvi (eds.), *Conversando con Gino Martinoli*, cit., p.34.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ P. Gabrielli, *Col freddo nel cuore*, cit., p. 157-158.

and Riccardo Levi; Renzo and Michele Giua; Vittorio Foa (friend of Alberto, Mario's younger brother); Sion Segre (a student of Mario's father, Professor Levi, in Medicina); and Leone Ginzburg (future brother-in-law of Mario).

Mario's work in the GL at that time was twofold: he made numerous trips between Italy and Switzerland, to distribute clandestine antifascist material, such as the «Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà» the politico-cultural debate magazine that the movement had begun printing in January 1932. He was at the same time, the instigator of debate and political reflection, his contribution made «essentially from the point of view of economic analysis of the corporate trajectory initiated by the regime». That debate was brought to life above all by the GL Turin members, in the pages of the second series of the «Quaderni»: who claimed that the corporations, as intended in the context of fascism, were nothing more than:

a ruse, further mystification on the part of the regime. They were not established to reshape the legal foundations of capitalism, the pillars of which - profit and private ownership - were certainly not in question. Rather they were established to reinforce the measures adopted in fascism to control Italian society and in particular to oppress the working classes¹².

Arrest, escape and exile

In March 1934, Mario Levi and Sion Sengre drove to Switzerland to collect antifascist propaganda leaflets for distribution at the time of the March 25 election. The leaflets invited Italians to vote «No» in a plebiscite imposed by the regime; of course, the only choices were to accept with a «Yes» or reject with a «No». On March 11, during the return journey, the two were stopped at a checkpoint at the Swiss border; the officers found the leaflets and took the young men to the border police station. However, «as they approached the entrance gate, LEVI Mario, quick as a flash, jumped onto the banks of the river Tresa [on Lake Lugano] and threw himself into the water, making for the

¹² Cesare Panizza, *Mario Levi nell'esilio antifascista*, presented at «Giellismo e Azionismo. Cantieri aperti», XIII edition, Turin, Istoretto, 5 May 2017, pp. 3-4.

other side»,¹³ and shouting «Long live free Italy!» He was rescued by the Swiss federal police. Was the check just a coincidence or had the authorities been warned by an OVRA (Italian secret police) informant?¹⁴ Indeed in that period, the GL was infiltrated by members of the regime's secret police, by engineer René Odin (known as Agent Toga) and by the writer Dino Segre (aka Pitigrilli) cousin of Sion Segre¹⁵.

In the days that followed, the Levi home was raided and both the father and older brother of Mario were arrested, along with Leone Ginzburg and Sion Segre's brother. Based on testimony of the Stefani Agency, the newspapers reported that during his escape attempt, Levi was heard shouting «dogs of Italian cowards» and making much of the fact that many of those arrested were Jews and publishing antisemitic articles¹⁶. Mario denied the newspapers' claims in a letter published in the Times on April 9 of the same year¹⁷.

After a month spent in Switzerland he went to Paris, where Renzo Giua had also ended up, having escaped the round up and subsequent arrests made in March. Alongside Giua, Nicola Chiaromonte and Andrea Caffi, who were in Paris too, Mario created a close-knit group and continued his GL activities under the pseudonym Selva e Senape (Wood and Mustard). However, this

13 ACS, Special tribunal for the defence of the State, b. 468, «Denunzia a carico di Levi Mario», charge brought against Levi taken to the attorney general of the special tribunal, 9 May 1934, cit. in *Quegli arresti di ebrei torinesi antifascisti. Il ricordo dei protagonisti nelle parole dei loro figli e nipoti*, recorded in proceedings of meeting at the Centre for the Jewish Community in Turin, 9 May 2014, p. 3 <<http://www.istoreto.it>>.

14 «Sion [Segre] was inclined to think it a coincidence, even though his report attested that, as early as February 1933, Agent *Togo* had informed the police of the underground activities of the GL, as well as Mario Levi's border crossing at Domodossola with 2000 propaganda flyers. The informer suggested not arresting the courier since only he, Togo and Carlo Rosselli knew about the operation», in Sandi Volk, *Pitigrilli e L'OVRA, «Progetto Babele»* <<http://www.progettobabele.it>> (accessed 9 February 2019). For the alternative hypothesis see Caroline Moorehead, *Una famiglia pericolosa. La storia vera della famiglia Rosselli e della sua opposizione al fascismo di Mussolini* (original title: *A Bold and Dangerous Family: The Rossellis and the Fight Against Mussolini*), Rome, Newton Compton, 2017.

15 From «Gazzetta ufficiale della Repubblica italiana», part 1, n. 145, 2 July 1946 (Supplemento Ordinario) <<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it>> (accessed 1 April 2019).

16 In particular, articles published by «Il Tevere» and «Il Popolo d'Italia». Also, *Arresto di ebrei antifascisti operanti di intesa con i fuorusciti*, front page article, «La Stampa», 31 March 1934; *Gli organizzatori del sovversivismo*, «La Stampa della sera», 31 March 1934.

17 ACS, MI, DGPS, CPC, b. 2779, f. «Levi Mario», note of the Turin prefecture, 24 September 1938, cit. in P. Gabrielli, *Col freddo nel cuore*, cit., p. 161.

group of young men, defined by Aldo Garosci «the innovators», ultimately made the decision to leave the GL movement at the beginning of 1936, following clashes with Rosselli, Garosci and Venturi:

The conflict essentially revealed a differing interpretation of political militancy. An all-encompassing concept of militancy, [...], Rosselli's concept, [...] in opposition to an equally radical idea of cultural [...] and political militancy, intended, above all, as an act of communication – which is inevitably in conflict with the Rossellian model and its preoccupation with immediate results¹⁸.

In May 1935, Mario found work in Courpière in Alvernia, teaching Latin and foreign languages in a boarding school run by the Rozier family. He worked there until the end of 1937. He was also a contributor to the journals «Nuovo Avanti» and «La Lumière»¹⁹ and between the end of '37 and the beginning of '38 he was reunited with Caffi and Chiaromonte in Paris. Renzo Giua, on the other hand, had enrolled as a volunteer in the Spanish civil war and there he died at the beginning of '38. In that period, the three young men worked as writers for the «spoken newspaper», a radio programme in Italian broadcast on French radio. It was produced by Angelo Tasca in collaboration with Emanuele and Vera Modigliani and Giuseppe Faravelli. However, the arrival of the Germans in Paris and the subsequent occupation of the city forced the group to move on, first to Tolosa and then their separate ways. Chiaromonte moved to the States but Mario chose to remain in Tolosa with Caffi, despite being in possession of an American visa²⁰.

Having been assigned obligatory residency «necessary to secure his legal status in France»²¹ he married Jeanne Modigliani, daughter of the renowned painter, though they would go on to divorce at the end of the war. In 1942, following his internment in the Vernet d'Ariege camp, he joined the French

18 C. Panizza, *Mario Levi nell'esilio antifascista*, cit., p.3. See also *Lettere di un dissidio in Giustizia e libertà* in <<http://www.unacitta.it>> (accessed 7 February 2019).

19 C. Colombini, *Profilo biografico: Mario Levi*, «Archivi della Resistenza e del 900» <<http://www.metarchivi.it>> (accessed 9 February 2019).

20 C. Panizza, *Mario Levi nell'esilio antifascista*, cit., p. 5.

21 Ibid. See also N. Ginzburg, *Lessico familiare*, cit., p. 133.

resistance (the so-called *maquis*), becoming a member of the Libération-sud, founded by Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie. At the end of the war he was part of the Purge Commission in Marseilles.

«We in France»²²: the new homeland

After the liberation in 1945, Mario Levi returned to Italy briefly; he went there in search of work but according to Caffi, with whom he exchanged letters, the pretext was fanciful; «Mario was not really intending to settle back in Italy»²³. Thus he went back to Paris and worked as a financial consultant to an industrialist as well as writing a number of pieces for «Politics», the Dwight Macdonald journal. After a few years he gained French citizenship and remarried. He and his wife, translator Angelique Spitzer, had two children, Agathe and Jean²⁴.

He worked again in national radio and for *Documentation française*, where he was in charge of Italian news. He was involved in drafting the UN report on the European refugee situation and, from the fifties on, he worked for UNESCO at the Centre d'Etudes de Politique étrangère in Paris.

Mario Levi died in Calvi, Corsica on 1 September 1973, suddenly taking ill after a swim in the sea²⁵.

He viewed the fight against fascism as a fight for civilisation; he was always in search of an alternative existence, free from the limitations imposed by existing models. In 1935, already an exile in France, living a precarious existence, far away from loved ones, he wrote to his parents:

It is said that man is born to work but this is nonsense. Man is born to live and work is naturally part of that life, along with ambition, hope of earning, [...] etc. However, if man is reduced to asking for nothing more than a measure of «certainty» [...] then he may as well throw himself

22 Ibid., p. 131.

23 Ibid., p. 134 and C. Panizza, *Mario Levi nell'esilio antifascista*, cit., p.2.

24 Jean Levi (3 March 1948), director of research CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique), has taught at the universities of Paris, Bordeaux, Geneva and Montreal. Specialist in ancient China, essayist, novelist and translator of numerous classical Chinese texts.

25 Domenico Ribatti, *Il maestro dei Nobel*, Rome, Carocci, 2018, p. 35.

from the 5th floor²⁶.

Major publications

Found in:

- «Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà» and the weekly publication «Giustizia e Libertà»;
- «Nuovo Avanti» and the journal «La Lumière»;
- «Politics»;
- «Politique étrangère».

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- ASUTo, Mario Levi's degree thesis.

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- Patrizia Gabrielli, *Col freddo nel cuore. Uomini e donne nell'emigrazione*

²⁶ ACS, MI, DGPS, CPC, b. 2779, f. «Levi Mario», letter from Mario to his parents (Courpière, 5 October 1935) in P. Gabrielli, *Col freddo nel cuore*, cit., p. 181.

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- Jacques Vernant, *Mario Levi*, «Politique étrangère», 4, 1973, pp. 513-516.

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