

Maria Luisa Moldauer Eisenstein

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She went to study medicine in Italy, to escape anti-Semitism, and ended up Italianizing her name, moving to several cities on the peninsula until moving to Sicily, and discovering her literary talent – encouraged by prominent Italian writers – after undergoing arrest and imprisonment. Her book, published in 1944, was for a long time the only record on women’s internment camps, which had been first established in 1940. After the war, she decided to move to California.

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A polyglot girl who emigrated to Florence

Maria Luisa was born in Vienna on 22 September 1914 – her name was Maria Ludwika – to Nuchin (Norbert), a lawyer, and Bianka Seinfeld (Vienna 22 February 1895 - Los Angeles 27 June 1965)¹. Her father was from Stryj, a city in Austro-Hungarian Galicia, which became part of the Lwów Voivodeship in Poland; the area would be incorporated into Soviet Ukraine in 1939 and invaded in 1941 by the Wehrmacht².

She graduated from the women’s gymnasium of the Wiener Frauenerwerbsverein in 1932 and enrolled at the University of Vienna in 1934-35. By the age of 21, she had distanced herself from the Jewish religion and had decided to emigrate to Florence, where, in 1935-36, she was admitted to the second year of the Faculty of Letters and started a brilliant course of study³. Her choice of Italy was most likely due to anti-Semitic

¹ National Archives at Riverside, California, *Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009, Naturalization Records*, «Moldauer Bianca»; *US, Find a Grave Index, ad nomen*, at <<https://www.ancestry.com>> (accessed upon registration 10 June 2022).

² ASUFi, AC, SS, f. «Moldauer Maria Luisa», enrollment form, a.y. 1935-36.

³ *Ibid.*, request to the Rector for admission to the second year of courses, 15 November 1935; authenticated translation of the high school diploma dated 5 July 1932. For the year of her detachment from the Jewish religion see *Maria Eisenstein (Moldauer)*, at <<https://www.geni.com>> (accessed 10 June 2022).

sentiment in both Austria and Poland, where, based on her university enrollment file, her parents apparently still resided⁴.

With the enactment of racial legislation, Maria Luisa was classified as a Polish citizen of the «Jewish race»; she communicated to the university admissions office that she was of «Catholic religion», even though it is not clear if or when she was baptized⁵. This meant that as a foreign citizen, who only came to Italy after 1919, she would have to leave the country within six months of the publication of the RDL of 7 September 1938, no. 1381,⁶ all the more so because in the autumn of 1938 she was enrolled in the first year *fuori corso* [off-course, beyond the prescribed time for the degree completion]. She was able to benefit from the extraordinary graduation session for the 1938-39 academic year, the last opportunity that off-course students identified as Jewish could use to conclude their studies, even if they were foreigners, «as an exception to the provisions that prevent[ed] foreign Jews from permanently residing in the Kingdom», as stated in the RDL of 15 November 1938, no. 1779⁷. And in fact, a year later, on 17 November 1939 Maria Luisa graduated with the thesis «On the style of Goethe's Faust», earning a grade of 107/110⁸.

Her faculty adviser was the philologist and Germanist Guido Manacorda, a clerical fascist and advocate for religiously motivated anti-Semitism; the professor must have welcomed the request of a student like her, who already had extensive knowledge of German literature and was probably turning to Catholicism. Around the mid-Thirties Manacorda had met Hitler various times on Mussolini's behalf, as part of diplomatic exchanges related to the Austrian

⁴ ASUFi, AC, SS, f. «Moldauer Maria Luisa», enrollment form, a.y. 1935-36.

⁵ Ibidem, request to the Rector for admission to the course examinations, 18 September 1939.

⁶ **RDL 7 September 1938, no. 1381**, *Provvedimenti nei confronti degli ebrei stranieri* (GU no. 208, 12 September 1938).

⁷ **RDL 15 November 1938, no. 1779**, *Integrazione e coordinamento in unico testo delle norme già emanate per la difesa della razza nella Scuola italiana* (GU no. 272, 29 November 1938, changed to law 5 January 1939, no. 98).

⁸ ASUFi, AC, SS, f. «Moldauer Maria Luisa», University of Florence, Faculty of Letters, minutes of the graduation examination, 17 November 1939.

question and the definition of the German position toward the sanctions; the talks had also concerned the persecution of Catholics, with the objective of reaching a mediation between the Reich and the Holy See⁹.

Interned as a foreign Jew

In February of 1940 Maria Luisa moved to Catania, where a young man, to whom she was engaged, and some friends resided; among them was the writer Vitaliano Brancati¹⁰.

A few months later, on 17 June, she was arrested and on 4 July, she was interned at Lanciano, in Abruzzo, in one of the seven camps set up for «enemy» or foreign Jewish women; she asked to be transferred because of her poor health and from 13 December she stayed in the nearby free internment location of Guardiagrele¹¹. There she met Samuel Aron Eisenstein (Aizinstein; Răcăciuni 1913 - Los Angeles 1996), of Romanian nationality, whom she married on 4 February 1942; the marriage was officiated by Elio Toaff, then rabbi in Ancona¹². Samuel, a student of medicine in Pavia in 1940, had been interned in Agnone, in the province of Campobasso, on 14 July

⁹ On Manacorda see Benedetta Garzarelli, *Manacorda, Guido*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 68, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2007 <<https://www.treccani.it>> (accessed 10 June 2022); P. Ostermann, *Zwischen Hitler und Mussolini. Guido Manacorda und die faschistischen Katholiken*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2017. After the Liberation, Manacorda was subjected to the purging process; he did not appeal due to his advanced age and definitely retired in 1946.

¹⁰ Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *Il libro esemplare di un'autrice fantasma*, in Maria Eisenstein, *L'internata numero 6*, edited by C.S. Capogreco, Milan-Udine, Mimesis, 2014, p. XXV.

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. XXVIII-XXIX. Maria Luisa's internment experience is reconstructed in Alberto Gagliardo, *Ebrei in Abruzzo tra internamento e deportazione: la provincia di Chieti (1940-1943)*, Guardiagrele, Di Prinziò, 1998. I wish to thank the author for pointing me to this text. For an overview see C.S. Capogreco, *I campi del duce. L'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista (1940-1943)*, Turin, Einaudi, 2004 (3rd ed. 2019); Gianni Orecchioni, *I sassi e le ombre. Storie di internamento e di confino nell'Italia fascista. Lanciano 1940-1943*, Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2006; Annalisa Cegna, *Alcune riflessioni sull'internamento femminile fascista*, «Diacronie. Studi di storia contemporanea», 3, 2018 <<http://www.studistorici.com>> (accessed 10 June 2022).

¹² C.S. Capogreco, *Il libro esemplare di un'autrice fantasma*, cit., pp. XXVIII-XXIX.

1940 and had arrived in Guardiagrele in April of 1941¹³.

In July of 1942 the couple returned to Lanciano as free internees; Maria Luisa managed to earn something by giving English lessons to the daughter of a lawyer, while her husband was covertly working as a doctor, also because he had not been able to graduate or enroll in the professional registry, as was required to practice the profession, since he was a Jew. At the end of September, the couple was still in Lanciano, as were several other internees, trusting perhaps in a rapid advance of the Allies. At this stage, Samuel spent a brief period in prison for having violated the curfew by visiting a patient, but he was not recognized as a Jew¹⁴.

To the South

The anti-German revolt that broke out in Lanciano between the 5th and 6th of October provoked a repressive intervention by the Wehrmacht. The threatening German presence caused many of the former internees to quickly flee; like others, Maria Luisa and her husband were also helped by the new mayor, lawyer Antonio Di Jenno, who apparently provided them with forged documents¹⁵.

Some of the fugitives found shelter in the large wooded area of Defensa near Pescasseroli, waiting for the most favorable time to wade the Sangro and pass the front. In this climate of precariousness and wait, Maria Luisa became friends with the writer Alba De Céspedes, who had left Rome in September together with her future husband Franco Bounous, a Foreign Ministry official. After separating to take on an adventurous journey to the South, the two couples met again in Bari in December of 1943¹⁶.

Here, Maria Luisa and Samuel worked mainly as translators for the

¹³ See Anna Pizzuti (edited by), *Ebrei stranieri internati in Italia durante il periodo bellico*, «Aizinstein Samuel Aron» <<http://www.annapizzuti.it>> (accessed 10 June 2022).

¹⁴ C.S. Capogreco, *Il libro esemplare di un'autrice fantasma*, cit., p. XXXIII.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. XXXIV-XXXV.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. XXXIV-XLII.

Psychological Warfare Branch (PWB), the agency in charge of managing the mass media in the liberated territories, while De Céspedes directed *Italia combatte* (Italy fights), a radio program of Radio Bari aimed at partisan forces. In January, the Eisenstein couple moved to Naples, still working for the PWB; meanwhile Maria Luisa, encouraged by Alba – who also arrived in Naples, in February – and by the bookseller and intellectual Gaspare Casella, devoted herself to writing her memoirs on the experience of internment¹⁷.

Writer in liberated Rome

In the second half of June the spouses managed to reach the capital, now in the hands of the Allies. Maria Luisa continued to work for the PWB and began to collaborate with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), a relief organization that played a vital role in assisting Italian and foreign Jews in the immediate postwar period¹⁸. She reconnected with her Florentine Jewish friend Gabriella Bemporad, who, upon her suggestion, would move to Rome to find a temporary occupation and live for a period of time with the Eisensteins; daughter of the publisher Enrico, Gabriella had been her classmate at university and would become an established translator and mediator of German literary texts¹⁹. Maria Luisa and Samuel frequented the homes of Alba de Céspedes and the brothers Franco and Mauro Lucentini, cosmopolitan *salons* that contributed to the renewal of the cultural scene in postwar Rome. Alba and Casella put her in touch with Donatello De Luigi, an interesting intellectual and owner of a small but innovative publishing house²⁰. In October of 1944, she published, for the series «Libri del giorno», *L'internata numero 6* [Internee no. 6], which was «neither a diary nor a novel,

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. XLIV-XLVI.

¹⁸ On this phase see *ibid.*, pp. XLVI-XLVIII.

¹⁹ On Gabriella, translator of Hofmannsthal and friend of Cristina Campo, see Giovanni Sorge's tribute at <<http://www.cristinacampo.it>> (accessed 10 June 2022).

²⁰ On him, Gianni Giovannelli, *L'uomo in frac: Donatello De Luigi genio (dimenticato) della Roma liberata*, «Charta», 141, 2015, pp. 40-45. On this phase see C.S. Capogreco, *Il libro esemplare di un'autrice fantasma*, cit., pp. XLIX-LIII.

but [displayed] the raw truth of the former and the imagination of the latter», as the publisher wrote in the preface²¹. The volume, which was in fact a fictionalized but realistic transfiguration of her experience of imprisonment and which is still the only written testimony on the women's internment camps established in 1940, would share the destiny of various other texts of concentration camp literature: their publication in a changing and lively postwar context would be followed by a phase of oblivion and by a laborious rediscovery in the Nineties²².

The author demonstrated fine narrative skills, presenting a series of characters with remarkable effectiveness: the director of the prison, who had reprimanded her because in a letter, she had dared – according to him – to speak ironically of Manzoni;²³ the unctuous and dishonest commissioner Eduino Pistone; the woman director of the Marfisi camp, «wagging her tail» before her superiors;²⁴ but above all, a complex gallery of Jewish women internees or of «enemy nationality», poor and wealthy, young and old, with their tragic and romantic stories, friendly relationships, but also hostility and distrust heightened by the plurality of their backgrounds and conditions.

The text, modulated on the ironic and antiheroic register of a *comédie humaine*, retraced the moods and environments in which the vicissitudes of «a jumble of 75 women» had unraveled:²⁵ the poor diet («some strands of pasta and some beans swam sadly in a gloomy greyish water»),²⁶ whose

²¹ Preface to Maria Eisenstein, *L'internata numero 6. Donne tra i reticolati del campo di concentramento*, Rome, De Luigi, 1944, p. 9.

²² For a careful analysis of the text, highlighting its character of realistic fiction and its different literary origins, from echoes of Pirandello's narrative to Yiddish humor, see Gianni Orecchioni, *Dietro il sipario. Maria Eisenstein e l'invenzione del diario*, preface by Dacia Maraini, Lanciano, Carabba, 2022. See also A. Cegna, *Alcune riflessioni sull'internamento femminile fascista*, cit., pp. 2-3; Marta Baiardi, *Deportazione razziale e memorialistica femminile italiana degli anni Quaranta. Temi e problemi interpretativi*, in Dianella Gagliani (edited by), *Guerra resistenza politica. Storie di donne*, Reggio Emilia, Aliberti, 2006, p. 89-97.

²³ M. Eisenstein, *L'internata numero 6*, cit., pp. 96-97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

expenses were also endured by the internees,²⁷ the toilet facilities («there were four, but three never worked»)²⁸ and the miserable housing, vexatious bans («do not smoke after 8 pm»)²⁹ and the obligation of speaking Italian even if half of the women did not know it,³⁰ the punishments and the abstruse bureaucracy, the rumors about the corruption of Roman officials. Walking to the village (outings of an hour and a half were allowed to purchase necessities or attend medical appointments) was one of the most common pastimes, along with card games (which were forbidden), but the days of the imprisoned women revolved around the correspondence with loved ones, which kept Maria Luisa very busy since several of her companions relied on her writing skills. The text focused on significant events, such as the extradition of two women, perhaps politicians, to the *Reich*,³¹ the clandestine reading of a Swiss newspaper, the «Basler Nachrichten»,³² a protest for the improvement of nutrition,³³ the organization of a night party, which ended with the «soft» singing of «youth, youth... This Camp sucks...» [TN: The internees' song parodied the fascist anthem «Giovinezza» (Youth)]³⁴.

The narrative also conveyed the subjective and bodily experiences of Maria Luisa and her companions, their amenorrhea and «nervous fever»,³⁵ their despair and anguish («What if Hitler wins?»),³⁶ the difficulty to understand why they were considered «suspicious»,³⁷ the «erotic problem» that weighed

²⁷ Ibid., p. 111. A subsidy was provided only for the destitute in 1942-43, though insufficient to cover the necessary expenses (see C.S. Capogreco, *Il libro esemplare di un'autrice fantasma*, cit., p. XXI).

²⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 64.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

³¹ Ibid., p. 104.

³² Ibid., p. 132.

³³ Ibid., pp. 107-111.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 123. The director would leave the camp every night and locked the building.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 42-44.

on the camp as a «dark cloud»³⁸.

It is difficult to reconstruct the reception of the text, which most likely found its first readers among the Roman Jews, engaged in the painful labor of rebuilding community life. Maria Luisa participated in this reconstruction: on 7 December 1944, she held a conference at the Jewish Circle in Rome entitled «Incomprehension», which was followed by a debate on the history of anti-Semitism³⁹. She also collaborated with «Mercurio», the innovative literary magazine that De Céspedes had developed in the months of occupation, in which, in 1947, she published a brief account of her adolescence at boarding school⁴⁰.

Emigration to the USA

Maria Luisa confided to her friend Gabriella that she would have liked to stay in Rome and find a job in publishing⁴¹. However, she decided to emigrate to the United States, perhaps because she could not find a position that would ensure her some stability or because Samuel intended to rejoin his family, which had managed to cross the ocean in 1937; the need to help her mother, who had escaped extermination by taking refuge in Siberia, and her grandmother Anna Seinfeld, who survived deportation to Theresienstadt unlike her grandfather Isidor, must have also played a role in this decision⁴². Her father, who had volunteered for the Polish army at the outbreak of the war, had died in June of 1940⁴³.

Thanks to a grant from the JDC, Maria Luisa left from Naples with her

³⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

³⁹ C.S. Capogreco, *Il libro esemplare di un'autrice fantasma*, cit., p. XVIII.

⁴⁰ *Ciuffo della Bugia*, «Mercurio», IV, 30, 1947, p. 35. On De Céspedes and «Mercurio» see Laura Di Nicola, *Mercurio. Storia di una rivista 1944-1948*, Milan, Il saggiatore, 2012.

⁴¹ C.S. Capogreco, *Il libro esemplare di un'autrice fantasma*, cit., p. LI.

⁴² Differently from what is reported *ibid.*, p. XVIII, it would not be the Lviv ghetto but the Theresienstadt camp; Maria Luisa's grandfather should be the engineer Isidor Seinfeld from Vienna: see *The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names*, ad nomen <<https://yvng.yadvashem.org>>.

⁴³ See M. Eisenstein, *L'internata numero 6*, cit., p. 66.

grandmother on 7 December 1947 on a transatlantic liner named *Vulcania*, and arrived in New York ten days later, bound for Los Angeles, where her mother-in-law Amalie Aizinstein lived; the young woman claimed to be stateless and to speak English, French, German, and Italian⁴⁴. On 17 February 1949, she applied for naturalization in the United States, and in November she joined her mother Bianka;⁴⁵ in 1950 she was a resident in Westlake, Los Angeles, with her mother and grandmother, and was a «lecturer» seeking employment⁴⁶. Samuel returned to Pavia to graduate and emigrated to Los Angeles in 1950; in 1951 he applied to become a medical examiner, but later devoted himself to psychiatry and psychoanalysis, becoming associate clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Southern California School of Medicine and, from 1969 to 1977, director of the Training School of the Southern California Psychoanalytic Institute⁴⁷.

The couple divorced shortly after their reunion in the United States. Maria Luisa's whereabouts since then are lost: we only know that she assumed the surname Steele and died in Alameda, Los Angeles, on 16 October 1994⁴⁸. In 2013 in Lanciano, the street to Villa Sorge, the site of the internment camp, was named after her⁴⁹.

⁴⁴ See The Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search*, «Maria Eisenstein» and «Anna Soka Seinfeld» <<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org>> (accessed upon registration 10 June 2022).

⁴⁵ National Archives at Riverside, California, *Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009, Naturalization Records*, «Eisenstein Maria Louise» and «Moldauer Bianca», at <<https://www.ancestry.com>> (accessed upon registration 10 June 2022).

⁴⁶ United States of America, Bureau of the Census, Washington (DC), *Seventeenth Census of the United States, 1950*, Los Angeles (CA), Roll 6185, Sheet no. 24, at <<https://www.ancestry.com>> (accessed upon registration 10 June 2022).

⁴⁷ California State Archives, Sacramento, *Board of Medical Examiners Record of Applications, 1939-1953*, 4 October 1951, *ad nomen*, at <<https://www.ancestry.com>> (accessed upon registration 10 June 2022). On Samuel see the obituary by Wolfgang Saxon, *Samuel Eisenstein, 83, Psychoanalyst-Psychiatrist*, «The New York Times», 25 October 1996 <<https://www.nytimes.com>> (accessed 10 June 2022). He was also editor, with Franz Alexander and Martin Grotjahn, of *Psychoanalytic Pioneers*, New York, Basic Books, 1966.

⁴⁸ *California, US, Death Index, 1940-1997*, database accessible at <<https://www.ancestry.com>> (accessed upon registration 10 June 2022).

⁴⁹ Clara Labrozzi, *Intitolata la via che porta a Villa Sorge alla scrittrice Maria Eisenstein*,

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