

Matilde Passigli Bonaventura

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From Madrid she moved to Italy, to the city of the man she had married, and so gave up teaching, acting and singing to become a wife and mother in Florence. In 1939 they fled to Jerusalem, where her husband, Professor Enzo Bonaventura, expelled from the University of Florence, had obtained a post at the Hebrew University. She too sought work for herself at once, but Matilde did not begin teaching at the University until after the proclamation of the state of Israel, or rather after she had been tragically widowed with three sons.

A young woman from Madrid

Born in Palma de Mallorca on 28 February 1895, the daughter of Alfredo J. Passigli and Ema Medina, sister of Saeed and Mercedes (later in married life García Gonzales). Matilde studied in Madrid at the Lycée de Jeune Filles de l'Alliance française, an organization founded for the spread of the French language abroad, and there she had pursued university level studies in classical subjects, Latin, art and singing. As an actress and singer, she took part in several productions at the Teatro de la Comedia in Madrid¹.

She knew that her family was related in some way to the Bonaventura family, who lived in Florence, the city from which her father came. And at a certain point her second cousin Enzo — son of Arnaldo, who was a musicologist² –, came to ask for her as his wife, when he had decided it was time for him to marry. The wedding was celebrated in the Jewish rite on 14 February 1921:

¹ On her personal success as a young actress, see *Noticias*, «A.B.C.», 3 July 1912, p.19 <<http://hemeroteca.abc.es>> (accessed 28 March 2019).

² On the well-known musicologist, a prolific author of literary texts and journalism, as well as a librarian, see Alberto Petrucciani, *Bonaventura Arnaldo (1862-1952)*, in *Dizionario bio-bibliografico dei bibliotecari italiani del XX secolo*, AIB, latest update 31 January 2021 <<https://www.aib.it>> (accessed 10 October 2021).

Link alle connesse
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Matilde was nearly 26 and her husband was almost thirty³.

With her marriage she interrupted her activities and her whole life changed. She moved from her home, at 18 Calle de Relatores in Madrid, to Florence, where Enzo was living with his family in via Ricasoli 24, near the Istituto di studi superiori pratici e di perfezionamento, in whose Faculty of Arts he was a senior lecturer and supervisor of the experimental psychology laboratory. The couple went to live below the hills at Fiesole, in viale Volta 173, and subsequently in via Fra' Giovanni Angelico 67⁴.

A journey, and then life in *Eretz Israel*

In August 1924, with her husband and the Florentine lawyer Alfonso Pacifici, who were both followers of Rabbi Samuel Hirsch Margulies, Matilde took part in a trip to Palestine organized by the Italian Zionist Federation. In her group, she attracted attention, «the only representative of the fair sex [...] as casual as if the discomforts of the long journey marked good habits in her life»⁵. She was pregnant, while they were looking for «the vision of life», which occurred in Palestine, because on 1 January 1925 David, their first son, was born. Manolo (Emanuel) arrived in April 1928 and Daniele in May 1936. They would gladly have educated all three of them in *Eretz Israel*, her husband wrote to Chaim Weizmann, the president of the World Zionist Organization, on 8 November 1938, after receiving official notice that he had to leave the Psychology Laboratory he had headed at the University of Florence, «dismissed from service» as of «Jewish race».

It was to Palestine that many of their acquaintances who mixed with the Jewish community and had decided to leave Italy were turning. Trying to get a

³ See [here](#) in the photo gallery the wedding invitation sent by the couple to Professor Francesco De Sarlo, Bonaventura's teacher, in the private archive of F. De Sarlo, Florence, to whom my thanks.

⁴ Bonaventura's address appears from R. Università degli studi di Firenze, *Annuario per l'anno accademico 1929-30*, Florence, Chiari, 1930, and then in Professor Bonaventura's personal file, see BLO, MS, SPSL, b. 471/3.

⁵ *Il primo viaggio di ebrei italiani in Palestina, «Israel»*, 3 July 1924 and 28 August 1924.

job there, Enzo left for Jerusalem in March 1939⁶ while she stayed with the three children in Florence, where her in-laws were near her brother Said with his wife Liana, who, to avoid leaving her parents, did not wish to leave Italy, unlike her brothers: Roberto Coen Pirani left for the United States, Mario for Brazil, together with their respective spouses. Six months later, Matilde also set off with her children and, with a *Palestine immigrant certificate* issued by the Immigration Department in Jerusalem on 20 September 1939,⁷ she joined Enzo.

She adapted to living a different life as a woman, wife and mother. She soon took up work outside the home, out of necessity — because her husband's salary at the Hebrew University was small and his position uncertain — but also because she wished to work, as she had done before her marriage. From 1940-41 she began teaching Spanish at the Berlitz Schools in Jerusalem, at 288 Herzl Road⁸. After a few years things began to come right; her children were growing up, Enzo had managed to set up a small psychology department at Mount Scopus, and he had even started publishing again. They followed events with trepidation, exchanging news especially on what was happening in Italy, and on how life would perhaps return to normal after the war.

In 1947 Enzo decided to return to Florence, to stay there for a while: he wanted to see his father, now a widower; to return to the institution where he had worked so much; to talk to colleagues; to see if there was the possibility of reinstatement at the university which had expelled him. Matilde

⁶ Patrizia Guarnieri, *The Zionist Network and Enzo Bonaventura: from Florence to Jerusalem*, in Id., *Italian Psychology and Jewish Emigration under Fascism*, New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016, pp. 113-153.

⁷ The date on the Palestine immigrant certificate, Department of immigration, Jerusalem, 20 September 1939, in the Asheri-Bonaventura private archive and reproduced here in the gallery, is therefore the correct date of arrival, which appears instead as October 1939 in the index of Arturo Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere. Gli ebrei italiani e l'emigrazione in Palestina*, Genova-Milano, Marietti, 2003, pp. 364-365.

⁸ As can be seen from a reference in English written by the director of the Berlitz Schools of Jerusalem, 31 July 1949, copy in the Bonaventura family private archive.

waited for him to come back and make his decisions.

Surviving bereavements

She was 44 when she arrived in Palestine. She was left a widow at 53.

On 13 April 1948, her husband, who «despite being 56 years old was on guard duty at the university three days a week», was killed in the notorious ambush on the road to Mount Scopus, a Jewish enclave in the Arab zone, where both the university and the hospital to which the attacked convoys had been heading. British soldiers intervened only seven hours into the attack and 79 people died, including 23 women. Matilde knew several of them. Among them was Anna Di Gioacchino, from Florence, the widow of Nathan Cassuto, a survivor of Auschwitz, who had come to Jerusalem to be reunited with her children.

It was a terrible blow to the community and to the families of the victims. «Signora Bonaventura is very low but makes an effort for her children», Paola Cividalli wrote to her father Gualtiero on 15 April 1948⁹.

Pain, disorientation, loneliness: and her mother Ema too passed away that year. They had decided that she would leave Florence and would come to stay with them. In August 1947 Enzo had received the official communication from the Immigration office in Jerusalem that they had granted his mother-in-law an immigration permit for Palestine, valid until 31 August 1948. But in fact, it arrived in mid-December, and on 24 December 1948, just nine days after her *aliyà*, she died¹⁰. For Matilde these were two severe bereavements in a few months. Her brother, Said had also lost his wife, Liana, who was just 38 years old when they arrested her in Florence, and they had waited for her

⁹ The letter quoted is in Gualtiero Cividalli, *Dal sogno alla realtà. Lettere ai figli combattenti. Israele 1947-1948*, Firenze, Giuntina, 2005, p. 128.

¹⁰ This information is taken from the document of the Government of Palestine, Department of migration, 4 August 1947, and from a handwritten note, both found among their private papers by the family, whom I thank, and published [here](#) in the gallery.

for over a year, until they learned that she had not survived Auschwitz¹¹. For her and her children, on the contrary, everything had happened all of a sudden. Daniel, her youngest, was twelve years old and still very much in need of her. So, Matilde had to do something, especially since the two older boys, 23 and 20, were both occupied elsewhere. The eldest, David, a former Palmach fighter, was determined to live in northern Galilee, in the kibbutz Jir'on which he helped found with Ada, Enzo Sereni's niece, and other friends in May 1949¹².

Finding resources

In that same summer of 1949, in late July, she submitted a short CV for herself to the Hebrew University. She wrote it in Spanish, introducing herself thus: «*viuda del Professor Enzo Bonaventura que cayo en Sheik Jarrach en defensa de la Universidad*» («widow of Professor Enzo Bonaventura, who fell at Sheik Jarrach defending the University»)¹³. She pointed to her studies in Spain, at the French school in Madrid, and to her professional experience, not the artistic ones but her teaching at the Escuela de L'Alliance Française for eight years and her private lessons in Spanish, French and Italian, over six years, to the children of the Marquis of La Felguera. Even when living in Florence she had given private lessons, moreover, she had made several translations from Italian into Spanish. She mentioned books translated for three different authors in 1926, 1932 and 1935: these were Dante Lattes, her husband, and lastly, in chronological order, the director of the mental

¹¹ The wife of her brother Said Passigli (Barcelona 4 December 1901 - Rome 22 February 1980) was Liana Coen Pirani (Pisa 14 June 1906 - Auschwitz 8 February 1945), arrested on 29 February 1944, deported to Fossoli in May and then to Auschwitz; see CDEC, *Digital Library*, under name <<http://digital-library.cdec.it>> (accessed 8 April 2019).

¹² This is Ada Feinberg-Sereni, born in Rome in 1930, who emigrated to Mandatory Palestine in 1934, a future Israeli politician and from 1969 to 1974 a member of the Knesset for Alignment, a left-wing alliance.

¹³ The Central Archive of the Hebrew University (AHU), «Personnel File. Passigli Bonaventura Matilde», typed CV signed by M. Bonaventura, Jerusalem, 27 July 1949.

hospital in Florence, the psychiatrist Paolo Amaldi, with whom Enzo Bonaventura had at the time been working as a psychologist at the high school for training teachers of the mentally handicapped. The first two authors were certainly well known at the Hebrew University, to whose inauguration Lattes had in fact come in 1925, the year in which he had founded the «Rassegna mensile di Israel».

Matilda did not fail to point out in her CV that, after arriving in Israel, she had made many translations on Zionist subjects, especially for the Jewish Agency and Keren Hayesod, in her three languages. Italian was her father's language of, and she had studied and perfected it in Florence, where she had lived «*en ambiente intelectual, musical y artístico*» («in an intellectual, musical and artistic environment»). She had studied and practiced French as a young woman, as well as staying in France, and Castilian was her mother tongue. She knew English and Hebrew quite well¹⁴.

It was for these diverse skills that the professor in Romance languages proposed the nomination of Mrs. Bonaventura as a language teacher in the Italian and Spanish programme, which in the previous fifteen years he himself had taught without charge¹⁵. He could no longer do so because of his existing research commitments, and besides, although he knew those languages well, it was obviously better that the teacher was a talented Spanish native who had lived in Italy for twenty years and spoke with a beautiful Tuscan accent. The professor was Hiram Peri, a Berliner who had migrated to Palestine in 1925 and taught at the Hebrew University from 1928, and who up to 1949 was called Heinz Pflaum (1900-1962); he was an expert on the Italian Renaissance and on Judá Abravanel, better known as the Jewish

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ AHU, «Personnel File. Passigli Bonaventura Matilde», handwritten letter and a typed copy on headed paper from H. Peri to the authorities of the Hebrew University, both 7 June 1949. Except for the CV, the documentation cited from this file is in Hebrew; I thank Rachel Bonaventura Snir for the English translation.

Lion (expelled from Spain and a naturalized Italian)¹⁶. Peri argued that those two languages were essential, not only for literature but for some practical professions, so that there was a growing demand for them from students, about twenty. He was confident that both the Italian and the Spanish governments would gladly bear the costs, wholly or in part, of the courses in their respective languages if the rector asked them to. In any case, they were essential lessons in the department, for eight or preferably ten hours a week¹⁷.

Job satisfaction

The inquiry continued. The references for the candidate were particularly warm: «an excellent Spanish teacher», confirmed the director of the Berlitz Schools in Jerusalem, who had her on her staff for almost nine years. «She has a deep knowledge of the language she teaches. Mrs Bonaventura is a very conscientious and accurate teacher and has always obtained excellent results. She is very popular with students, who seem to try harder when she gives lessons. We wish her the success she richly deserves»¹⁸.

In August Peri had the papers sent to the University's examining committee, which comprised himself, the Judaist Umberto Moshe David Cassuto and the philosopher Martin Buber¹⁹. In addition to the CV written in Spanish by Matilde Bonaventura, he sent the documentation in Hebrew which summarized that curriculum and enriched it. Recognition was also accorded

¹⁶ Hiram (Heinz) Peri (Pflaum) (1900-1962) had been teaching at the Hebrew University since 1928, and at this time he was preparing the Hebrew edition of Burkhardt's *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*. See Moshe Lazar (ed.), *Romanica et Occidentalia: Etudes dédiées à la mémoire de Hiram Peri (Pflaum)*, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1963, with a bibliography of his writings, pp. 17-22.

¹⁷ AHU, «Personnel File. Passigli Bonaventura Matilde», H. Peri on headed paper, report 7 June 1949, and note s June 1949.

¹⁸ Bonaventura private family archive, letter in English from the director of the Berlitz Schools to Prof. Peri, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 31 July 1949.

¹⁹ AHU, «Personnel File. Passigli Bonaventura Matilde», H. Peri on headed paper, 13 August 1949.

to other translations made in 1944 and 1945 and to further teaching experience, including a course organized by Keren Hayesod, the Zionist financial office based in Jerusalem, for delegates sent to South America²⁰.

All the committee members knew Italian, had been personally acquainted with the candidate for years, and had known her husband. Buber had been a colleague of Enzo J. Bonaventura in the same department of the Hebrew University and before that had been a member of the committee that had appointed him to the post in psychology. The acquaintance with Cassuto dated back almost thirty years: when they were all in Florence, he had been a professor and rabbi there from 1922 to 1925; he too had endured the sufferings of expulsion, emigration and academic integration in a new environment, and then the tragedy of his son Nathan and now of Nathan's wife Anna, who had been killed like Matilde's husband²¹.

Matilde Bonaventura's application to teach Spanish and Italian was put on the agenda of the Academic Council of the Hebrew University for the month of September. Shortly afterwards she entered regular service, which she performed with commitment and some satisfaction.

Matilde also dealt at that time, with the posthumous edition of a book by her husband that he had been very fond of: published for the first time in 1938 - shortly before it was banned - *La psicoanalisi* was issued in 1950 by Mondadori with the new preface that Enzo had prepared²².

²⁰ Ibid., H. Peri to the Council, 9 settembre 1949. 9 September 1949. As Giovanna Cestone has verified, whom I thank, neither Passigli nor Bonaventura appear as the name of the translator in the OPACs of the main national libraries, and do not appear in the bibliographic description of the translated works, not even in that of the Lattes volume, although it is printed on the title page.

²¹ For the links and events mentioned above, reference is made more precisely to the articles in this portal by Patrizia Guarnieri, Alberto Legnaioli, *Umberto (Moshe David) Cassuto*, and id., *Anna di Gioacchino Cassuto*, as well as that on *Enzo Bonaventura* and the various lives connected.

²² On this, some letters from Matilde Passigli Bonaventura to the Mondadori publishing house, including that of 21 February 1950, in CAHJP, P191, *Archivio Enzo Bonaventura e famiglia*, f. 10, «Varia», 1945-50. See E. Bonaventura, *La psicoanalisi*, Milan, Mondadori, 1938, reprinted several times; new edition with preface by the

In 1952 she obtained for herself a scholarship offered by the Spanish government; she was able to take part in a specialist course in Spanish philology from 1 February to 31 May at the University of Salamanca, on the recommendation of Peri, the director of her department, who offered to replace her in class for the period of leave from Jerusalem²³.

She served on the academic staff at Hebrew University until 1963, when she turned 68. Typically, sad to say, this long professional activity of hers has not received adequate visibility and recognition,²⁴ so much so that in the career records dedicated to the professors at the Hebrew University, in which no women appear, Matilde is named only as the wife of Professor Enzo Joseph Bonaventura²⁵. Her sons are mentioned, however, two of whom, to her satisfaction and due in part to her merits, became highly regarded professors: David Asheri, professor of Greek and Roman history at the Hebrew University, and Daniel Asheri, professor of physics at the University of Tel Aviv from 1969. Unlike her, they changed their surname.

She also maintained her ties with Italy, which she visited several times, and with Italian culture. She actively attended the Dante Alighieri Society of

author, edited by Alberto Marzi, Milan, Mondadori, 1950.

²³ Letter in Hebrew from the director of the Department H. Peri to Moshe Schwabe, rector of the Hebrew University, 7 January 1952. Copy provided and translated into English by Rachel Bonaventura Snir. Sull'allora rettore, filologo tedesco e convinto sionista *Professor M. Schwabe 1889-1956. In memoriam*, «Israel Exploration Journal», 6, 1956, pp. 273-275.

²⁴ To the granddaughters of Matilde Passigli Bonaventura, who were looking for her personal file at the Hebrew University, the director of personnel Yitshach Hafouta issued, at their request, only a statement dated 14 March 2019, of which I have a copy, that she was actually part of the H. The dossier with the documentation that made it possible to update this article was found later, at my request, thanks to Chaim Green, archivist at the AHU.

²⁵ The absence of women in Eva Telkes-Klein, *L'université hébraïque de Jérusalem à travers ses acteurs. La première génération de professeurs (1925-1948)*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2004 should be examined. In her mention of Matilde Passigli as wife, there are several significant inaccuracies to correct: she was a translator not only of her husband's work; she did not go to high school in Italy; and she did not follow but rather gave language courses at Berlitz (ibid, p. 152); complete silence on her work at the Hebrew University until retirement age.

Jerusalem, apparently until the late 1970s, and was awarded the Society's diploma of merit for «the spread of Italian language and culture», with a silver medal in 1963 and a bronze medal in 1980²⁶.

She passed away on 29 February 1984, in Jerusalem.

Principal translations:

- Dante Lattes, *Apología del hebraísmo*, versión castellana por Matilde Bonaventura, Paris-Madrid, Ediciones españolas, 1926 (original edition, *Apologia dell'ebraísmo*, Roma, Formiggini, 1923) later reprinted by Maxtor, 2013.
- Enzo Bonaventura, *Psicología de la edad evolutiva de la infancia a la adolescencia*, Barcelona, Araluce, 1932 (original edition, *La psicología dell'età evolutiva*, Lanciano, G. Carabba, 1930).
- Paolo Amaldi, *Elementos de antropología del crecimiento y de patología nerviosa mental de la infancia y de la adolescencia*, Barcelona, Araluce, 1935 (original edition, *Elementi di antropologia dell'accrescimento e di patologia nervosa e mentale dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza*, Lanciano, G. Carabba, 1933).

Archival sources

- Archivio privato Bonaventura, Tel Aviv-Gerusalemme.
- The Central Archive of the Hebrew University (AHU), «Personnel File. Passigli Bonaventura Matilde».
- CAHJP, P191, *Archivio Enzo Bonaventura e famiglia*, f. 10, «Varia», 1945-50.

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²⁶ Evidence provided and written by her granddaughter Rachel Bonaventura Snir to the author, 25 October 2018.

Translated by Tom Dawkes

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