

Carla Coen Pekelis

[Go to personal file](#)

She left us her memories and diaries. In 1996, a book based on this material came out posthumously in Italy, which publisher Elvira Sellerio chose to title *La mia versione dei fatti* and was later translated into English. The author's last name in the book was that of her as a married woman and the widow of a beloved husband, who was a distinguished jurist who had come to Italy from Odessa as a student. She left Italy with him after the enactment of the racial laws. Carla's memories are extraordinary for understanding their primary need to leave: to escape from fascism, discrimination, and the impossibility to work and study and live freely. Extraordinary also is the diary in which she chronicled her journey to Italy after the war – a journey that so many expatriates undertook – amidst hopes and disappointments.

Carla was among those who did not return to live in Italy, and made a new life for herself in New York. Her life was harder than others'. She tried, however, in many ways, to «build a bridge»: that was her purpose, as she wrote to Piero Calamandrei.

Young and talented

She came from the capital of Italy, where she was born on 5 April 1907, the eldest child of Ada Ascoli and Dante Coen,¹ and was unhappy to leave her home at Lungotevere Mellini 51, the Prati district in Rome, the view of Castel Sant'Angelo, her many cousins, uncles and aunts. She, her brother Guido and her sister Luciana had many relatives, especially on their mother's side, as

¹ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Coen Carla», birth certificate, City of Rome, Department of Statistics and Vital Records, issued on 2 October 1924, with signature authentication dated 4 October 1924. Private papers of Carla Coen Pekelis held by the family (CCP), New York, City of Rome, Office of Vital Records, extract from the Registry of birth records for the year 1907, 8 September 1949, which reports the address. *La mia versione dei fatti* was translated into English by George Hochfield with the title *My Version of the Facts* (Evanston, IL, The Marlboro Press-Northwestern University Press, 2005). All references hereafter are to this edition unless otherwise noted.

[Link to other connected Lives on the move:](#)

[Enzo Bonaventura](#)
[Corrado Cagli](#)
[Renata Calabresi](#)
[Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco](#)
[Marion Cave Rosselli](#)
[Guido Coen](#)
[Paolo Milano](#)
[Alessandro \(Alexander\) Pekelis](#)
[Emanuele \(Emanuel\) Pekelis](#)
[Amelia Pincherle Moravia Rosselli](#)
[Renzo Ravà](#)
[Maria Todesco Rosselli](#)

one can see from the Ascoli family tree that is reproduced in a framed [painting](#) from 1932². In the spring of 1924 her parents decided to move to Florence, because Dante Coen had acquired, with a partner, a jewelry store on the Ponte Vecchio, the renowned Settepassi³.

They were convinced that this business would offer Dante a great opportunity. He had been working from a very young age, and had not been able to study as much as he would have liked. However, after just three years, he fell ill and died. Perhaps because of this circumstance, at least in part, Carla had rather gloomy memories of her life in Florence: they lived at Piazza D'Azeglio 29, across a large public garden and close to the boulevards that had been built around Florence when it was Italy's capital; yet, she remembers «narrow streets, small shops, small talk, fog», even⁴.

When they arrived in Florence, she had just passed her graduation examination at the glorious Visconti *liceo classico* in Rome, not far from the Palazzo Venezia, as had her brother Guido who, being ahead in his studies, was in the same class as her⁵. In Florence, they both enrolled in the university, which had been officially inaugurated in January 1925. Guido enrolled in the School of Law in October 1924 and graduated on 4 July 1928,⁶ whereas Carla matriculated in the School of Letters in December 1924. This school developed from the Philosophy and Philology unit of the more autonomous Istituto di studi superiori.

However, Carla never graduated, and did not go beyond matriculation in the

² The painting is dated 1932 and also travelled long distance. It is presently in Los Angeles, in the home of Haim Pekelis, whom I wish to thank for the photo published here in the [gallery](#). See Carla Pekelis, *La mia versione dei fatti*, edited by Arianna Ascoli, Palermo, Sellerio, 1996, pp. 30-31, 45-49, and *My Version of the Facts*, cit., pp. 21, 36-40.

³ Ead., *My Version of the Facts*, cit., p. 36. The jewelry shop on the Ponte Vecchio was opened by Leopoldo Settepassi in 1856.

⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

⁵ Ibid., declaration by the principal of the Liceo ginnasio «Ennio Quirino Visconti», Rome, stamped 3 July 1926 (thus subsequent to Carla's first university matriculation).

⁶ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Coen Guido», minutes of the graduation examination, School of Law, 4 July 1928. The papers on file include the family address on piazza D'Azeglio.

first year of university⁷. She pursued her studies at home, as she had been doing since her childhood, for that was often the way daughters were educated in middle-class families. She had always been taking piano lessons. Her new piano teacher asked her total dedication to develop her talent, take the music exams at the Luigi Cherubini Conservatory of music, and earn her diploma⁸. Did she pursue her music education? A file under her name, which has just been found in the Archives of the Florentine conservatory, provides an answer⁹.

A pianist with a diploma

On 30 June 1926, before the committee chaired by the director of Florence's Conservatory of Music, Carla performed pieces by Bach and Jean-Baptiste Clément, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt and Czerny. She passed the exam as *privatista* [home-schooled student], receiving a high grade (nine), and was awarded her diploma in piano. She continued her studies and two years later, on 12 and 13 June 1928, she took the exam for the «higher diploma» in piano, achieving her best scores in the oral examination and in the performance of music by Chopin and Giovanni Sgambati¹⁰. The first examining committee included musicologist Arnaldo Bonaventura as an alternate member, whose son Enzo was teaching psychology in the School of Letters where Carla had enrolled. Maestro Alberto Franchetti (1860-1942), who had risen to international success often collaborating with Arturo Toscanini, who directed the Conservatory of Florence from 1926 until 1928 when he retired to private life, served on both examining committees¹¹. From

⁷ Her matriculation card for the academic year 1924-25 is missing from ASUFI. However, her matriculation is stated, also for administrative reasons, in her student file, *ibid.*, AC, SS, f. «Coen Carla».

⁸ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, *cit.*, p. 37.

⁹ G. Cherubini Conservatory, Florence, *Archivio storico alunni*, student ID no. 695, «Coen Carla». I wish to thank Paola Gibbin, a librarian with expertise in music history, who recovered this documentation in the archive that is awaiting reorganization.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, «Processo verbale degli esami», 30 June 1926, and «Esame di licenza superiore di pianoforte», 12-13 June 1928.

¹¹ Among Franchetti's operas of greater renown are *Germania*, conducted by Arturo Toscanini

the file held in the Archives of the conservatory, we also learn the name of the piano teacher with whom Carla studied and of whom she declared herself to be a student:¹² her teacher was the celebrated Ernesto Consolo (1864-1931), who educated excellent pupils including the soon-to-be-famous Luigi Dallapiccola (1904-1975), who had graduated from the Cherubini conservatory in 1924. In his career, Consolo alternated between teaching – in Chicago, New York, Geneva, Paris and Florence, at the Conservatory – and performing everywhere in Europe. He also performed at the Maggio musicale fiorentino, playing the music of his teacher Giovanni Sgambati (which he also assigned to Carla for her diploma examination), and the music of the young Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco¹³. Castelnuovo-Tedesco lived in Florence and, until 1928, in the same Piazza D’Azeglio where Carla lived with her parents. They could not have known it then, but the composer and the pianist would be neighbors once again years later and across the ocean.

With a double diploma from the Conservatory, Carla was qualified to teach piano and to perform. In the memoir she would write, she would make no mention of a future professional activity in music, nor would she mention her distinguished teacher, who died in 1931. And what became of her university studies? The historical archives of the University of Florence hold an incomplete student file under her name. This file shows that she was matriculated as of 1 December 1937,¹⁴ when she was 30 years old, had two small daughters and a husband, whom she had met through her brother in

at La Scala and the Metropolitan, *Cristoforo Colombo* and *La figlia di Iorio*, on the libretto by Gabriele D’Annunzio. See Renato Badali, *Franchetti, Alberto*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 50, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1998 <<https://www.treccani.it>> (accessed 30 September 2022). Both Franchetti and Bonaventura were Jewish, the former from his mother’s side since he was the son of Luisa Sara Rothschild. The composer mentioned later was also Jewish.

¹² G. Cherubini Conservatory, Florence, *Archivio storico alunni*, student ID no. 695, «Coen Carla», undersigned application for admission to the exam, 29 May 1926.

¹³ Some information is found in Mauro Macedonio, *Consolo Ernesto*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 28, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1983 <<https://www.treccani.it>> (accessed 30 September 2022).

¹⁴ ASUFi, AC, SS, matriculation form in the School of Law, student ID no. 13963, and *ibid.*, f. «Coen Carla».

the spring of 1930.

A love marriage

Alexander had dark, bright eyes, an adventurous past filled with incredible travels, and great intellectual charm. Carla immediately fell for him. Beaming with joy, she announced it to Carlo, known as Carletto, her favorite cousin: falling in love mattered much more than finding a fiancé. A few weeks later, however, there was also an engagement, because the young Russian, who, born in Odessa, had been living in Italy with his family for a decade, had passed her mother's fearsome test. *Signora* Ada had realistically assessed the virtues of her daughter's suitor, namely a wholesale fur business owned by his recently deceased father on the elegant Via Tornabuoni, and the brilliant start of a career as a lawyer and university lecturer.

The **wedding invitations** were ordered from the renowned Francesco Pineider firm, which, in Florence, had stores on Piazza della Signoria, since 1774, and Via Tornabuoni. Alexander Pekelis and Carla Coen announced their wedding in Florence on 25 January 1931. They honeymooned in Genoa, where Carla set foot in a synagogue for the first time. She was «filled with dismay». She realized that a different approach to Judaism was the main difference, by education, experience and mentality, between her and her spouse and between their families. Her mother-in-law, after all, had a «very low» opinion of Italian Jews, and Carla unwittingly corroborated it. As she would later recall, «the only ceremonies that brought me close to a religious experience were those that Alex celebrated at home»¹⁵.

It was him who always insisted that his wife resume her university studies, though in the Law, which was his field; this way, she could work in a law office of their own. And only later, according to Alex, they would think about having children. Carla remembered tacitly reversing the order of their priorities. On 1 July 1933, Daniela was born; she was given the names of her grandmothers,

¹⁵ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, cit., pp. 53-55 and *passim*.

the first being that of her maternal grandmother, who stayed with them for a while. On 23 February 1936, their second child Simona was born; she was given the names of her maternal aunt and paternal uncles. They moved to a larger apartment at via Cavour 64, in the city center. Finally, on 25 September 1937, Carla submitted her application to the rector of the University of Florence, on stamped paper, to enroll in the School of Law. She was starting over, but did not even have the time to take an exam because by the date of her matriculation, on 1 December 1937,¹⁶ she was pregnant for the third time. Rossella was born on 10 July 1938. With a newborn and two girls aged five and three, it was not easy to study. But Carla was determined; she wanted to be both a mother and a student, and attended the lectures of six courses, as attested by the signatures of her professors on her university transcript. Among them, the names of Renzo Ravà for Constitutional law and Enrico Finzi for Institutions of private law (both of them would be expelled the following year), and the name of the young Giorgio La Pira, the future mayor of Florence, stand out¹⁷.

The real problem suddenly arose two months after Rossella's birth, with the enactment of the racial laws. On 2 November 1938, Carla signed, in her own hand, on her university application, that she had picked up her high school diploma, which she had already presented at the time of her first enrollment in the university, in 1924¹⁸.

That diploma was still her only degree. However, she was well versed in German and French, which she had learned and studied from an early age with a very strict German governess and a French *promeneuse*, respectively; she had studied English with a private teacher in Florence and at a school for

¹⁶ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Coen Carla», Carla Coen Pekelis' application to the rector of the University of Florence, 25 September 1937; matriculation form, 1 December 1937, reporting also her address, and the autograph and undersigned addition dated 2 November 1938.

¹⁷ CCP, *libretto di iscrizione* [transcript] of Coen Carla, University of Florence, School of Law.

¹⁸ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Coen Carla», matriculation form, 1 December 1937, and the autograph and undersigned addition dated 2 November 1938.

girls in England;¹⁹ and she was an avid reader of literature and a pianist. She was educated and highly intelligent, but also a bit of a snob, as she defined herself. She never thought of working, since she had no need to; she also had an active, busy, tireless husband by her side, who never backed down. She also never thought of having to travel much. Travelling did not seem to appeal to her; «by temperament I am usually inclined to stay at home», she said of herself²⁰.

But «in the meantime, the world around [...] was breaking up»²¹. Being able to get out of Italy, and as soon as possible, became almost an obsession for her.

«Who knows where we will end up»

Her sister Luciana and her husband, a fervent Zionist, moved to Mandatory Palestine as early as October of 1938. In December, his brother Guido left his wife and two children for the United States. Uncle Giorgio Ascoli decided to move with his wife to Argentina, where they had a brother-in-law; a cousin would go to Brazil where an uncle lived, other cousins would go to Australia²². But the one who really had to leave was her husband, as a foreign Jew who had arrived in Italy after 1919: a decree-law of 7 September 1938 ordered it. On 16 September she turned to her cousin Carlo Tagliacozzo; as president of the Associazione movimento forestieri [Association for the movement of foreign nationals], in Ancona, he could certainly make sure that the documents that Alex needed be notarized: the degree diploma with the signature of Rector Arrigo Serpieri by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the decree of his *libera docenza* with the signature of Minister Bottai by the Swiss

¹⁹ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, cit., p. 47.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

²¹ Ibid., p. 58.

²² Historian Shira Klein has advanced the debatable thesis that Italian Jews did not leave even when they had a visa, precisely by offering Carla Pekelis as an example: her «friends supported her decision to emigrate only because she had married a foreigner» (*Italy's Jews from Emancipation to Fascism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 96). In fact, the list not only of her friends but also of her Italian relatives who left – for the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Mandatory Palestine, and Australia – is long, much longer than I could document here also thanks to her relatives.

Legation. It was an urgent matter. A week later she asked her cousin, «what about the papers that you have in your hands?»²³. As decided, Alex moved to Paris in late fall, while she and the girls would spend the winter in Nice, to avoid the cold, and would then join him.

The plan did not work out: Carla could not bear to be alone. Alex went back to get her: in January of 1939, they were again together in an apartment at 9 rue de Bassano in Paris. It was cold, small (two rooms, it seems), poorly furnished and crowded: besides the two of them with three little girls, it accommodated two grandmothers – who had joined them in the meantime – and the hustle and bustle of Alex’s clients – he had immediately started to work – and of refugees like them, who were seeking help and advice. In the spring they moved to Avenue Victor Hugo, to a large building at no. 186 or perhaps no. 174²⁴.

By memory and with her notes, Carla traced in great detail all the movements that continued at least until January 1942, and recorded the places, the people they met or heard from, the houses and the furniture: it is an extraordinary account. Many were their relocations; her participation in world affairs, which got in the way of their personal lives but never quite coincided with the events of the history books, was more active than she later recounted. They went to Vichy, then to Pau, and to the mountains, in the Pyrenees – for the health of the girls or of Mamulia, her mother-in-law. Relatives and acquaintances were also on the move as a result of the anti-Semitic laws. Carla tried to keep track of all of them by writing letters and postcards, by exchanging photos and addresses. She wrote to her cousin on 18 December 1939:

²³ CCP, the letters from Carla Coen to Carlo Tagliacozzo, Florence, 16 September [1938] and 23 September 1938, with the relative envelopes, are among the private papers that her daughter, Simona Pekelis McCray has generously made available for this research, New York, May 2022.

²⁴ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, cit., pp. 68-69, 70. One eighty-six is the number that Carla indicates in her autobiography, but her husband’s letterhead paper, which Carla used for her correspondence, includes the number 174. It is possible that he also had an office, or that she remembers incorrectly.

Though I keep thinking that distances don't count, etc. etc. [...] in a generation, the young Levi's of Sydney will no longer know who the Ascoli's of Ancona are. I never look back and that is why I rarely soften. But sometimes one can't help but remember Villa Rosa and think that by leaving it behind us, we have left with it the best, or at least the sweetest part of our lives [...] who knows where we will end up²⁵.

Tortuous paths and missed departures

They were also thinking about going to Palestine, like her sister and brother-in-law had done, and as their friend Enzo Sereni, her former high-school classmate in Rome, who had made aliyah in 1927 and whom they had met in Paris, encouraged them to do²⁶. Carla and Alex had prepared the documents and booked the ship to Haifa. However, they ran into a few obstacles. In her memoirs, Carla does not elaborate, but they were crystal clear to her husband, as we learn from his correspondence with his brother-in-law Mario Ottolenghi on some business affairs and an authorization denied him by Elio and Aldo Servadio, who had moved to Ramat Gan. This meant that they gave up leaving, a circumstance that Alex serenely accepted²⁷.

Thus, the Pekelis' remained in Paris also for that spring in 1940. On 30 May, however, they left the city (as usual, Carla would not have left): they were four women – one was the French nanny, Anne – and three little girls in a used Buick, which Alex drove without mastery but with his usual bravery²⁸. He did not know French; he took them to Tours and returned to Paris. A few days later, Italy entered the war and they were dislodged from the hotel, which was requisitioned, and later, from a private home. When Alex came back, they continued their journey amidst a thousand vicissitudes as German troops entered Paris and he volunteered to enlist. They agreed that she,

²⁵ CCP, letter of Carla Coen to Carletto [Carlo Tagliacozzo], Paris 18 December 1939, on letterhead paper. The villa she mentions was Villa Rosa alle Grazie, Ancona, where her cousin lived.

²⁶ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, cit., p. 82. See Alberto Cavaglioni, *Sereni, Enzo*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 92, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2018 <<https://www.treccani.it>>.

²⁷ CCP, letter of Alexander Pekelis, Paris 26 May 1940.

²⁸ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, cit., pp. 86-88.

proud of her husband, would stay with the girls and grandmothers. Together they made up an excuse for them, that Alex had to leave on business.

A week later, at night, he returned: the officer to whom he had gone to enlist had rejected him, perhaps because he had an Italian passport, though he was no longer an Italian citizen. Alex was disappointed, almost humiliated. He came to his senses only when Carla informed him that the French government was handing over German refugees to Hitler. Would Italians be next? They had to get out of France, and thus obtain visas for another country. To this end, on 4 July 1940, Alex set off again, taking his mother with him, while Carla remained and waited for him in a farm in Anglards, tirelessly trying to procure food and news, which was scarce, and make sure that the girls had as normal a day as possible, wherever they were. She was only happy that Alex had been rejected and was not in England.

Their strategy was to buy entry visas for any destination – better than nothing – in order to obtain the permits to leave France and pass through Spain and Portugal, and from there leave. It seemed less difficult to get them in a town than in a city like Marseille; through back roads, they would stop in small towns and small hotels, where they would run into other refugees in transit, all tired, more or less distressed, some undecided whether to go back where at least they had their homes. Mende, Marseille, Perpignan were their stops until they reached the Spanish border, at Perthus on 9 August. They intended to cross Franco's Spain as quickly as possible, without attracting attention: after Gerona and Barcelona, they continued by train to Madrid, where Carla enjoyed the luxury of going alone to the Prado Museum, and then, on to Badajoz through the poorest and most desolate areas where they waited for the arrival of their car to reach the border with Portugal. Their whole family and luggage were meticulously searched.

The next stop was Lisbon, where they dealt again with consulates, police stations, bureaucracy, and travel agencies as they waited for their visas to cross the ocean. They were increasingly anxious, not least because they had

taken lodging in the luxurious Avenida Palace Hotel, hoping to leave soon; instead, time was passing and their resources were dwindling. More than ever Carla wrote letters to their relatives, friends, and acquaintances scattered throughout the Americas, asking for help; but those who had migrated only a few months before, such as her brother Guido and her uncle Giorgio, could not provide an affidavit.

At the end of October, uncle Carlo Ascoli got them visas for Brazil, where he had happily moved years before. They were first of all surprised, because he was, among Ada's siblings, the uncle who loved the good life and women, but not the most reliable in the family. However, he endeavored for them and managed to work a miracle. Brazil was not quite the destination that Carla and her husband desired, but cousin Carlo from Ancona was also on his way to São Paulo. Carla and Alex went to the Brazilian consulate in Lisbon to sign the documents.

It was only then that they learned that to receive their permits they had to take an oath that they were not Jews. It was barely a formality, the consul reassured them upon seeing their dismay, but at least they would be safe. They did not agree. They went back to the hotel, exhausted, and tried to explain it to the girls²⁹. For months Carla and her mother apologized to the uncle, sending him long letters in São Paulo, to which he apparently did not reply as he was very offended at having wasted time, money and effort on those ungrateful relatives. Still, in March 1941 Carla begged her uncle to write to her, and to accept a *chèque* for «the expenses [you had] incurred for our Brazilian visas». She wrote on the same piece of paper, «Dear uncle, endless thanks, again, for your affectionate and effective support in dark times. A hug also from Sandro»³⁰.

After Mandatory Palestine, Brazil was also a missed destination for them.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 144-146, 325.

³⁰ CCP, Carla to «Dearest uncle» (Carlo Ascoli, Automovel Club, São Paulo, Brazil), Larchmont 27 March 1941.

The American consul and Calamandrei

They sailed from Lisbon to New York on 28 December 1940, on the SS Serpa Pinto. They had been trying to leave since the beginning of October, according to Carla's notes. On the 15th of that month they had all been summoned to sign their visas, which were ready at the US Consulate in Lisbon. But then, the consul noted that they lacked the approval of the Italian authorities, since they were Italian. He did not care if they had fled Italy because they were Jewish – that was the procedure regardless. Alex concluded that it was a sign of fate: by not letting them go to America, God was protecting them, perhaps, from some misfortune. Carla, instead, did not want to give up.

It was Carla's mother who asked a career diplomat, the brother of one of her childhood friends, for a recommendation. They never found out if it was because of her and her acquaintance, but the validity of their passports was immediately extended to the United States. It happened so quickly that the US consul, to whom they went again, became suspicious about their political identity: there was a war, and he demanded that in order to be welcomed in the United States, these Italians would demonstrate that they were opponents of fascism. Of course, they were. But how to document it?

They did not know which way to turn anymore. Even Alex was angry this time: it was not just happening to them; he had seen and heard of so many of these absurd waits and dramatic denials, of papers, authorizations, and permits. Some people were dying because of them: «one day someone will tell the story of these "waiting rooms"»³¹. For the affidavit her husband had contacted an Italian acquaintance in New York, Max Ascoli, who was already naturalized and worked as a professor; but Ascoli had not responded because he was, apparently, on his honeymoon. They informed Guido, Carla's brother who had been living in New York for a couple of years. Then it occurred to them that just before leaving Italy, «Il Telegrafo» had published

³¹ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, cit., p. 148.

an article that insisted on Professor Pekelis' lack of ardor for Fascism and deplored the fact that he – «Russian by birth, Jewish by race, Zionist by choice» – had been appointed editor-in-chief of a new journal. This task, however, did not last long. It was a perfect article for the purpose. They just needed to find it or find someone who would send it to them.

Piero Calamandrei did that. Carla would always maintain a sense of gratitude toward Alessandro's professor at the University of Florence, who without delay responded to their telegram and sent them the valuable newspaper article³². The US Consulate in Lisbon issued their American visas on 20 November 1941, as shown by the data recorded on the boarding documents, which, incidentally, present several errors. As their last residence they indicated Paris, from which they had left a year and a half earlier in search of a country where they could settle in. As a reference in New York they gave the name and address of Guido Coen, at 235 East 73rd Street³³.

They still had to wait over a month to find 8 available seats on the ship. The travel across the ocean lasted 12 days and ended on 9 January 1941. Carla's memoir ends when at night, both fascinated and frightened, she is looking at the bay where they would soon disembark.

«We are fine»

They went to live in Larchmont, at 16 Summit Avenue. She recounts how they had settled in after a few months as follows:

We live in the country and, although relatives and friends view it as crazy, we are very happy with it. Life here is very expensive and raising a large family like ours is much easier outside NY, both from a financial and a hygienic standpoint: the girls go to school and begin to speak English [...]. The schools are very beautiful and when I took the girls there the first time, I could not believe that, to enroll them, they did not ask for money or ... documents. We had been living in the land of paperwork for so many months now! Sandro goes to NY every day [...] he spends several hours at the office and a few in the library, where he works with great

³² Ibid., p. 150.

³³ The Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org>> (accessed upon registration 10 August 2022).

passion. Of course, it is a matter of starting over, if only because of the language, and it is not easy. But we hope that out of all these efforts, something good will turn up³⁴.

Meanwhile, they had conceived their fourth child: on 16 September 1941, Carla gave birth to Haim, who was circumcised at New Rochelle Hospital on the 24th: Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Pekelis – following the American style, by which the wife's first and last name disappear – announced the event to their friends³⁵.

They went to live in a larger house, at 181 Larchmont Avenue. They continued to frequent several people, on account of Alex's work and of a family tradition that they always cultivated. Carla reconnected with some acquaintances from Florence and elsewhere, especially Maria Todesco, Nello Rosselli's wife, who had lived in Larchmont since August 1940, with Mrs. Amelia and Marion, her English sister-in-law, who was Carlo Rosselli's widow, and all their children. They had known each other for years, because Nello was a friend of Alex's, and Carla remembered seeing him cry when in June of 1937 Nello and Carlo were murdered in France³⁶. The children were now playing together, their mothers were spending time together; thus Carla became «Maria's friend», as we read on the verso of a photo among the Rosselli family papers³⁷. Their acquaintance, however, did not develop only because of their children. From letters of her mother Ada to distant relatives, we learn that Carla was active in the women's section of the Mazzini Society, as the Rossellis also were, and used to speak at Italian women's clubs. Did she lecture? Even her mother did not seem to know for sure; it was an activity

³⁴ CCP, Carla to «Dearest uncle» (Carlo Ascoli, Automovel Club, São Paulo, Brazil), Larchmont 27 March 1941.

³⁵ Ibid., invitation to the circumcision of Haim Pekelis, dated 24 September 1941.

³⁶ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, cit., p. 61.

³⁷ ASFi, *Archivio Rosselli, Corrispondenza*, holds 10 pieces of correspondence from Carla Coen (1937-1956) to Maria and Amelia, which are listed here: <<https://www.sai-toscana.beniculturali.it>> (accessed 30 August 2022). In the first one to Maria Todesco, Florence 7 May 1937 (ASFI-R-15220), Carla sent her affectionate wishes to Maria, with whom she still used the formal *Lei*, and a gift for the birth of her second son. I wish to thank Giulia Barbugli for bringing these letters and others to my attention.

that Rachel, the wife of Paolo Milano – another couple of friends from Italy that they had reconnected with in New York – had given her to do³⁸.

«Running things at home»

The university positions that Sandro had managed to obtain, at the New School and Columbia University, were not enough to support their large family. As Carla confided to her cousin in a letter, «having exhausted our savings, the problem is now pressing». She was looking for a job. At first, she had an «easy and well-paid» assignment at the radio station where her brother Guido was already working. Guido ended up neglecting the law practice, the responsibility of which rested on the shoulders of Renzo Ravà, a former professor of Carla's in Florence, who had been expelled because he was a Jew. What was Carla's task? As her mother Ada explained to Carlo, who was her nephew, her task consisted in «speaking once a week on the radio, reading... against fascism. They found that she has a very good voice and diction, and she is very much sought after. I must admit that the first day I listened to her I was terribly excited». She was proud, but she could also see that Carla was tired and did not feel well, even though she did not complain. Carla took «everything too seriously and passionately», and she had a lot on her plate. So, she «ended up not finding the job she wanted yet». Perhaps that assignment at the radio could become a steady position. Carla thought about it, but said that she preferred another job: from late October 1942 she was an editorial secretary for a newspaper or a magazine. Which one? Carlo asked in vain. For how long? In her memoirs, characteristically, she made no mention of it. She proofread, took care of correspondence, and translated every day, until 5 p.m.; this way, she could be with her children as well, although she did not lack, as she said, domestic help, thanks to the children's

³⁸ CCP, Ada Coen Ascoli to her nephew Carlo Tagliacozzo, Larchmont 20 August [1942], and *ibid.*, on the hospitality offered to the 5-year-old son of Maria Todesco, while she was hospitalized.

grandmothers and trusty Anne³⁹.

Her children – in her letters, she writes extensively about them – and the family appeared to remain at the center of her life. She certainly did not lack other interests, but she lacked the time to cultivate them, with the exception of reading, which she considered her constant «passion».

On 22 August 1945, Alessandra, also called Cocò, was born. On the 5th of November of that year, *nonna* Miriam passed away; and a few months later *nonna* Ada, her mother, decided to return to Italy, to Ancona, where she was born and had relatives. It was up to Carla to «run things at home», alone. Alex always had a lot of work to do, even at night, and often travelled.

He never came back from Basel, where he had gone to attend the Zionist congress as a delegate of the US section of the Jewish Socialist Party Poale Zion⁴⁰.

A broken life

They told her over the telephone that there had been an accident during the landing of the Paris-New York flight at Shannon International Airport, Ireland: 9 crew members and 14 passengers. It was Saturday, 28 December 1946⁴¹. The same day, six years earlier, she and Alex had left by boat from Lisbon to start a new life in New York.

After this tragic misfortune, a kind of pilgrimage began. Her friends rushed to visit her: «the house is far too full with people», Renata Calabresi told their mutual friend Maria and Mrs. Amelia, who had returned to Florence by then.

Carla is heartbroken, crushed inside, and amazing for courage and fortitude. She has the good fortune to be able to cry and talk – observed Renata, who was a psychologist by profession – and the endurance to see everyone who comes to tell her of their friendship and

³⁹ CCP, Carla Pekelis to Carlo, 4 November 1942.

⁴⁰ About the international movement, started in Russia, which attempted to combine Zionism and socialism, and on the American organization, see *Zionism: Po'alei Zion*, in *Jewish Virtual Digital Library* <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org>> (accessed 30 August 2022).

⁴¹ *Flight Safety Foundation*, database, TWA flight no. 6963, 28 December 1946 <<https://aviation-safety.net>> (accessed 30 August 2022). About the way Carla was informed, see C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, cit., p. 159.

remembrance [...] We all try to help as we can. Carla is pleased to have me close and I go there as often as I can⁴².

In Carla's recollections of that period, however, it even seemed that after a while, people avoided her, out of pity and embarrassment. They advised her to leave and distract herself, to return to Italy. She remained in Larchmont, at home. Two months later, it was her mother who embarked to come and help her⁴³. Carla made up her mind only when her sister from Palestine suggested, by letter, that they meet in Florence⁴⁴. They had not seen each other for nine years. Luciana would arrive with Mario, her husband. Carla traveled alone – her children stayed at home with her mother – in a second-class cabin, with an American passport and much fear.

Meetings in Italy

She kept a diary of that trip in 1946, writing about the crossing to Italy and her stays in Genoa, Florence, Viareggio, Ancona, Rome, slowly «reconnecting the ancient threads», but also looking at the present filled with expectations, disappointments, and unknowns. She entertained discussions on politics and comparisons with America: Italian children «study more and often know more [...] they have more self-discipline and a graver concept of life»⁴⁵. What were the communists like in person? Were they the bogeyman that everyone was talking about? She asked to meet Mimmo, that is, Emilio Sereni, a deputy

⁴² ASFi, *Archivio Rosselli, Corrispondenza*, ASFi-R-06219, Renata Calabresi to Amelia and Maria Rosselli, 3 January 1947. Carla was the friend she used to see more frequently, and for this reason she would go to Larchmont: «we enjoy each other's company, and I feel almost as if the Pekelis', young and old, have adopted me», Renata would write to her usual correspondents, *ibid.*, ASFi-R-06179, 13 October 1946.

⁴³ Ada Coen Ascoli left Naples on 28 February 1947 and arrived in New York on 10 March; see The Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org>> (accessed upon registration 10 August 2022). It is from the documents related to that trip aboard the *Saturnia* that we learn the year of her last departure from the United States, in 1946. Her subsequent trips, in 1949, 1950 and 1953, on the *Andrea Doria*, are recorded under the name Ada Coen.

⁴⁴ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, *cit.*, p. 166. Unfortunately, this letter of Luciana to Carla was not among the papers that I could review.

⁴⁵ *Ead.*, *La mia versione dei fatti*, *cit.*, p. 263. [TN: The English translation does not include this part of Carla's memoir.]

to the constituent assembly, because he was the brother of Enzo, who had been Alex's and her friend in Paris. Enzo died in Dachau⁴⁶. She also happened to run into Giorgio Amendola, her former high school classmate, whose father Giovanni, she knew, had died as a result of the Fascists' beating. It was difficult for her to navigate the Italian political environment, not only because she had been away for so long, but also because she «used to getting the news well digested and interpreted by Sandro», she admitted with Mimmo who cheerfully teased her that this was «convenient, but rather dangerous». And when she brought up that in America she had learned to think, he laughed and said: «poor us [...] not only have they regimented you [...] but they've left you with the illusion that you're thinking»⁴⁷. She admired his firmness in contradicting her – it is not true that totalitarian regimes numb the brain – and his restraint in answering her that even when they tortured him, he did not lose his freedom to think, because no one can take that away from you.

In addition to countless relatives, Carla met those who had been away for years and had recently returned: the pianist Gualtiero Volterra from Australia, the theater critic and friend Paolo Milano and the painter Corrado Cagli, both from New York, and of course, her cousin Carlo, who had returned from Brazil and was again depressingly looking for work: «everyone tells you that you're damned right, that the law must be applied, and you should get your teaching job back [...]. But once you've lost something, it's useless to fool yourself; it's lost forever»⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ Emilio Sereni (Rome 1907 - Rome 1977), an agricultural historian, a Jew, an antifascist and a partisan, registered with the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1926, went to Paris in 1930 and, upon returning to Italy, was arrested and sentenced by the Special Tribunal to 20 years in prison. He was pardoned and expatriated clandestinely with his wife (a writer) and their daughter to Paris; he was convicted of subversive activity in 1943, but managed to escape one year later. He was a partisan and a member of the Central committee of the PCI from 1946 to 1975; when Carla met him in Rome, he was minister of Postwar assistance and of Public works, and was an extremely prolific scholar. His daughter Clara Sereni writes about the family environment in *Il gioco dei regni*, Florence, Giunti, 1993.

⁴⁷ C. Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, cit., pp. 300-301.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 284, and for the other meetings previously mentioned, see pp. 266-267, 280-282, 306-310. For the other meetings with Mimmo Sereni and Amendola, see *ibid.*, pp. 295-303.

On 23 September 1947, Carla left again on the SS Saturnia from Genoa. The book based on her memories definitively ends with her arrival in New York on the 4th of October.

A job, possibly

My Version of the Facts, published posthumously, does not recount what Carla did in the United States, neither between 1941-46, nor after she was widowed, when she was nearly forty years old and had five children, the oldest being 13 years old, the youngest one and a half.

She told everyone that «Alex had taken out an insurance policy just the day before leaving»⁴⁹. She sued TWA on account of the human errors and defaults that were found, and obtained compensation⁵⁰. But not immediately, since as late as mid-June 1951 the court case was still open. In September 1949, she told Amelia Rosselli that she was awaiting to hear about another job, and confided that due to financial straits, she was still unsure whether that year she would be able to take her children to Italy as she wished⁵¹. She could do so only three years later. She did not stop looking for employment, but we have sporadic information about this. They were mostly precarious, contractless collaborations, of which no specific evidence remains. From the fall of 1949, she worked at the House of Italian Handcrafts, a trading company based at 15 East 26th Street in Manhattan⁵². «I never thought I would end up working in business» – she wrote to her husband's «dearest professor», Piero Calamandrei, founder of the Action Party and a member of

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 160-161.

⁵⁰ Written testimony from Carla's daughter, Simone McCray to the Author, 20 May 2022. The case was still open after 5 years from his death judging from notice no. 739, «Journal of the Supreme Court of the United States», 4 June 1951, p. 238.

⁵¹ ASFi, *Archivio Rosselli, Corrispondenza*, ASFI-R-06499, Carla Pekelis to Amelia Rosselli in Florence, Larchmont 9 September 1949.

⁵² Registered in 1955, it was dissolved by the authorities for inactivity in 1985, see *The Open Database Of The Corporate World* <<https://opencorporates.com>>. The opening, however, dates to 1947, with the greetings of minister Carlo Sforza, see *Italian Handcrafts*, «The New York Times», 12 April 1947, p. 26.

parliament at the time⁵³. She almost justified herself: «My work attempts had always been in the field of translation etc. etc. However, I do not mind doing what I do (selling above all and also the preparation for it). It is quite varied and you are in contact with a lot of people; observing all this is one of the experiences that still interests me the most». After all, both her and Alex's families had made their living from trading; but the main reason why she had been working there for a year and a half now was that, in her words, «I naively hoped that my job would involve – from time to time – a trip to Europe. Unfortunately, now I have realized that only those very high up travel; the others are left with their mouths watering». She wanted to go to Italy. «Everyone goes to Italy but me. And it makes me a little angry»⁵⁴.

In the summer of 1952, she finally took to Italy the girls who were born there and, for the first time, Haim and little Cocò⁵⁵. It was a «very busy stay», with many stops, relatives and meetings, as she wrote to Calamandrei, regretting that they had not been able to see each other even though he and his wife had invited her: «I am quite tired, but I think I have achieved my goal. I have built a bridge and there is not one of my children who does not intend to go across it again»⁵⁶.

Daniela especially did so when three years later, she went to work for Adriano Olivetti in Ivrea. She was the oldest daughter, and it seems that it was Daniela who convinced her mother: at her college there were many female students, especially in art and music, who were interested in learning Italian. She could teach them. Why was she not trying? Carla was very familiar

⁵³ For a biographical profile, see Stefano Rodotà, *Calamandrei, Piero*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 16, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1973 <<https://www.treccani.it>>. The quotation is taken from the letter at AISRT, *Fondo Piero Calamandrei*, b. 26, f. 4, sf. 33, Carla Pekelis, New York 30 April 1951.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Unfortunately, in the database of The Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search* <<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org>> this trip of Carla's and her children's is not recorded, neither under Pekelis nor under Coen; nor are her subsequent trips, of which we have documentary evidence, for example, in CCP, through a letter from Cosimo Pekelis to Carla's daughters and son, dated 7 October 1985.

⁵⁶ AISRT, *Fondo Piero Calamandrei*, b. 26, f. 4, sf. 33, handwritten letter by Carla Pekelis, n.p., 11 August 1952.

with the environment at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, a liberal arts college, where she also enrolled Rossella and Simona; and all the teachers knew the three Pekelis girls, including the president, who also taught philosophy at the New School, like Alex. She spoke to him directly.

Harold Taylor was Canadian, had also studied in England, and was the youngest college president in America (he took office at just 30 years old, in 1945); he was well known for this, for «remembering the name of every student on campus», for having innovative ideas in education, and because he was a staunch defender of academic freedom⁵⁷. The interview evidently went well. Carla Pekelis had no qualifications other than a 1924 Italian high school diploma, in addition to two piano diplomas, but at a private American college, it was possible to give her a position. It was decided that Mrs. Pekelis would begin teaching as a member of the Language and Literature Faculty, which comprised several professors, including, since 1942, Marguerite Yourcenar, who lectured in French literature⁵⁸. Carla had finally obtained a signed contract to teach a course three times a week, with a salary. It was the year 1953⁵⁹.

That year was decidedly busy for Sarah Lawrence College.

Battles, travels and bridges

Since the end of 1951, at the height of the Cold War, Sarah Lawrence College had been among the educational institutions accused of hiring subversive professors, an accusation that had been made by the American Legion and was picked up by the press. In the climate of McCarthyist hysteria against

⁵⁷ Craig Kridel (ed.), *Harold Taylor and Sarah Lawrence College: A Life of Social and Educational Activism*, New York, SUNY Press-Excelsior Editions, 2002, forthcoming. The *Harold Taylor Papers* (1914-1993) are held in the Sarah Lawrence College Archives; the catalogue and a Biographical note are available online at <<https://www.sarahlawrence.edu>> (accessed 30 August 2022).

⁵⁸ See Sarah Lawrence College Archives, Bronxville (NY), *Carla Pekelis Faculty File*, copy for the announcement of the new faculty positions, 10 September 1953. I wish to thank SLC's archivist Christina Kasman for providing me with a copy of the documents.

⁵⁹ See the letter exchange with Harold Taylor: *ibid.*, Pekelis Carla, 21 May and 26 May 1953. That year Yourcenar was on leave in Europe, as announced by the College, 10 September 1953.

communists, teachers in the US were threatened with expulsion and even fired if they refused to take loyalty oaths. In the spring of 1953, eleven Sarah Lawrence College professors were subpoenaed before the Senate Committee on Internal Security; the Board of Trustees of the College paid their legal fees to defend them. President Taylor did not abandon them and spoke at a crowded conference arguing that true anti-Americanism was «telling students what to think and making sure that they think it». Students and parents mobilized. In November 1954, 75 percent of the faculty and administrative staff also signed a petition against Senator McCarthy⁶⁰. It is not difficult to imagine Carla Pekelis' position, first and foremost as the parent of students at Sarah Lawrence. She joined the college as an instructor with a signed contract right in May 1953. In September, the College announced the beginning of her course in the 1953-54 academic year; the course imparted a basic knowledge of the language «in the context of Italian cultural and political history»⁶¹. It certainly contributed to the development of the College's Foreign Student Program; in 1957, at the first Summer Session in Florence, Mrs. Pekelis taught Italian language and how to get by in the city. The «Italian experiment» and her course were a success, judging from an article that two enthusiastic students of hers wrote in «The Campus. The Weekly Student Publication»⁶².

In 1965 Carla published *A Dictionary of Colorful Italian Idioms* and in the meantime, she also taught Dante and Pirandello. In 1967 she was coordinator of all Foreign studies, and served as director from 1968 to 1970.

⁶⁰ Valery Park, *Un-American Activity: Harold Taylor, the American Legion, and Academic Freedom*, «Sarah Lawrence Magazine», Autumn 2003, pp. 40-41. Regarding the professors accused of communism, and the mobilization of students and parents, in addition to archival documents, I have consulted articles and documents available at the SLC site, in particular *Sarah Lawrence Under Fire: The Attacks on Academic Freedom During the McCarthy Era* <<https://www.sarahlawrence.edu>> (accessed 30 August 2022).

⁶¹ Sarah Lawrence College Archives, *Carla Pekelis Faculty File*, copy for the announcement, 10 September 1953.

⁶² Margie Abrahams and Harrie Green, *Italian Experiment*, «The Campus. The Weekly Student Publication, of Sarah Lawrence College», Bronxville (NY), 28, 3, 2 October 1957, pp. 2, 4 <<http://edu.arcasearch.com>> (accessed 30 August 2022). See also Carla Pekelis, *Taking a Trip Back to Rome*, Sarah Lawrence College, «Alumnae/i Magazine», 24, 3, 1959, p. 8.

That year, she taught her last course on Italian short stories; she herself used to write some⁶³. In 1971, at the age of 64, she retired and devoted herself to writing her memoirs of the period 1907-1941, which later became the first part of the book that her cousin Arianna Ascoli would edit over twenty years later⁶⁴.

Carla was in her sixties when she married Peter Seitz, who was two years her senior and had two children. He was a labor lawyer, and the director for labor relations at the Department of Defense; he was well known as an expert particularly in Major League Baseball arbitrations⁶⁵.

Carla died at age 78, on 5 October 1985, at her home in Manhattan. She bid farewell to her children and grandchildren with a touching note. She wrote it in English and, in part, in Italian⁶⁶.

Main publications

- *Dictionary of Colorful Italian Idioms. A Treasury of Expressions Most Commonly Found in Italian Speech and Writing Today, With Their American Equivalents*, illustrated by Paolo Mazzetti, New York, George Braziller,

⁶³ Ead., *Excerpt from Speech Given at Dante Celebration*, *ibid.*, 31, 3, 1966, pp. 8-9, 25. About her courses on Intellectual and Cultural Traditions of Western Civilization, see *The Divisions*, «The Emanon», 29 May 1970, p. 16. The «Sarah Lawrence Magazine Index» lists 14 items under her name, including the commemorations in her honor <<https://www.sarahlawrence.edu>> (accessed 30 August 2022).

⁶⁴ About the genesis of the book, which was published posthumously with a title chosen by the publisher Sellerio, see the letters of the editor, and cousin, Arianna Ascoli to writer Carla Sereni, daughter of Enzo Sereni, friend of Alex and Carla Pekelis, in Gabinetto Vieusseux, Archivio Contemporaneo Alessandro Bonsanti, *Fondo Clara Sereni, Corrispondenza*, b. 37, letters 20 August-6 September 1996. The book's first part, from 1907 to 1941, was written in the 1970s, whereas the second part, concerning 1947, dates to that very year and was written in English and Italian. The unpublished text was deposited into Fondazione archivio diaristico nazionale, Pieve Santo Stefano; the deposit receipt dated 15 July 1993 is found in CCP.

⁶⁵ Based on their children's recollections, whom I wish to thank, the year of their wedding was 1968 or 1969. See Damon Stetson, *Peter Seitz, 78, The Arbitrator in Baseball Free-Agent Case*, «The New York Times», 19 October 1983, Section D, p. 25 <<https://www.nytimes.com>> (accessed 30 August 2022).

⁶⁶ CCP, handwritten notecard, n.d., but early October 1985. See also *Carla Pekelis Seitz, Obituary*, «The New York Times», 8 October 1985. Among the most heartfelt commemorations is that of the renowned psychologist and film expert Rudolf Arnheim (1904-2007), a former colleague at SLC and friend of Carla's: CCP, Carla Pekelis, n.d. but 1985 or 1986, typewritten text of a speech accompanied by an autograph note. *Ibid.*, letter on letterhead paper from the President of Sarah Lawrence College, Alice Ilchman to faculty and staff, 9 October 1985.

1965.

- *La mia versione dei fatti*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1996; Engl. trans. by George Hochfield, *My Version of the Facts*, Evanston (IL), The Marlboro Press-Northwestern University Press, 2005.

Archival sources

- ASFi, *Archivio Rosselli, Corrispondenza*, correspondence with Carla Coen Pekelis, 1939-1956.
- ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Coen Carla».
- Private papers of Carla Coen Pekelis held by her family (CCP), NewYork.
- Conservatory of Music «G. Cherubini», Florence, *Archivio storico alunni*, student ID no. 695, «Coen Carla».
- Fondazione archivio diaristico nazionale, Pieve Santo Stefano, MP/93, Carla Coen, «Memorie 1907-1941», typewritten [1976].
- Sarah Lawrence College Archives, Bronxville (NY), *Carla Pekelis Faculty File*.
- The Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org>>.

Bibliography

- Stanislao Pugliese, *Introduction*, in Carla Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, Evanston (IL), The Marlboro Press-Northwestern University Press, 2005, pp. VII-XII.

Patrizia Guarnieri

Translated by Francesca Parmeggiani

Cite as:

Patrizia Guarnieri, *Carla Coen Pekelis* (2022), in Ead., *Intellectuals Displaced from Fascist Italy. Migrants, Exiles and Refugees Fleeing for Political and Racial Reasons*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2019-
<<http://intellettualinfuga.fupress.com/en>>
e-ISBN: 978-88-6453-872-3
© 2019- Author(s)
Article published under license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Publication date: 15 November 2022.