

Israel Meyer

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He arrived in Italy at the end of 1932, soon followed by his young wife. They settled down in Pisa, where they both pursued an Italian degree in medicine. A few years later, their careers were interrupted by the racial laws and by internment in camps for foreign Jews. Someone, however, helped Israel, who even as an internee had made himself well-liked as a pediatrician.

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[Paula Langnas](#)

An uncertain homeland

Israel was born in Stanisławów (modern-day Ivano-Frankivs'k), in the Russian empire (modern-day Ukraine), on 6 November 1901 to Leib (Leone), a boilermaker, and Elka Schifter¹. The city was the seat of an important Jewish community, which in 1931 came to account for half of the inhabitants of the urban center². Israel attended the local high school while the world around him was changing rapidly. During the First World War, Stanisławów had been transferred from Russian control to that of the Austro-Germans, and therefore, with the defeat of the Central Powers, the region had established itself as the Western Ukrainian National Republic, which, however, was quickly torn apart by violent conflicts between its Polish and Ukrainian populations. The government of the newly formed Polish republic had soon invaded the region and annexed it in 1919 as the Voivodeship of Stanisławów. To which nationality Israel felt he truly belonged is difficult to say. On 14 February 1927 in Leopoldis (modern-day Lviv in Ukraine), he concluded his studies after taking the exams required to finish secondary school in both Polish and Russian³. He then enrolled in the School of

¹ These data can be found in ASUFI, AC, SS, f. "Meier Israel", in particular: a copy of the birth certificate translated from Polish, 8 March 1938.

² Riccardo Riccardi, *Stanisławów*, in *Enciclopedia Treccani*, available online <<https://www.treccani.it>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

³ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. "Meier Israel", diploma certificate, translation from Polish, 30 June 1934.

Medicine at the University of Prague and took a few exams⁴. In the meanwhile, he married Paula (Paulina) Langnas, twelve years his junior, who had herself moved to Leopoldis with the intention to study medicine⁵.

In Italy: student and prisoner

Israel emigrated to Italy in October 1932, settling down in Pisa,⁶ where he enrolled in the School of Medicine and Surgery, which admitted him to the sixth year of coursework,⁷ and where he joined the Gruppi universitari fascisti (GUF) [University Fascist Groups]⁸. He graduated two years later on 9 November 1934, receiving a grade of 87/110⁹. He later enrolled in a specialization course in pediatrics, given that he had already attended the Pediatric Clinic of Pisa as an “internal student” beginning in 1933,¹⁰ obtaining his degree on 29 April 1939¹¹. In the meanwhile, he enrolled in the school of specialization in dentistry in Florence in 1936, obtaining his diploma on 30 November 1939 with a grade of 56/70¹². He was not alone in Italy. Paula had joined him in 1933, followed afterward by her sister, Friederjka (Federica) Langnas (Leopoldis 24 November 1910 - ?), a student of piano who immigrated in June of 1937¹³. The proclamation of the racial laws and Italy’s entrance into

⁴ ASUPi, f. “Meier Israele”, letter from Israel Meyer to the rector of the University of Pisa, 29 November 1932.

⁵ She would graduate in 1939. See Paulina Langnas, *Memoria scritta della Dott. Paulina Langnas*, in Silvia Quintilia Angelini, Oscar Guidi, and Paola Lemmi, *L’orizzonte chiuso. L’internamento ebraico a Castelnuovo di Garfagnana 1941-1943*, Lucca, Pacini Fazzi, 2002, p. 154.

⁶ Anna Pizzuti, *Ebrei stranieri internati in Italia durante il periodo bellico* <<http://www.annapizzuti.it>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

⁷ ASUPi, f. “Meier Israele”, certificate of admission, 16 December 1932.

⁸ Ibid., “Gruppo Universitario Fascista Pisa”, 24 October 1938.

⁹ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. “Meier Israel”, certificate of graduation, Pisa, 12 December 1936.

¹⁰ ASUPi, f. “Meier Israele”, letter from Israel Meyer to the rector of the University of Pisa, 28 December 1934.

¹¹ Ibid., certification of specialization, 29 April 1939.

¹² ASUFI, AC, SS, f. “Meier Israel”, diploma of specialization in dentistry, 30 November 1939.

¹³ Alexis Herr, *Genocidal and Anti-genocidal Ethics in Fascist Italy during the Holocaust*, in Thomas Kühne and Mary Jane Rein (eds.), *Agency and the Holocaust. Essays in Honor of Debórah Dwork*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, ebook, pp. 146-147. See also the files regarding Paulina in the archives of the Universities of Pisa and Florence: ASUPi, f. “Langnas Paulina”; ASUFI, AC, SS, f. “Langnas Paulina”.

the war alongside Nazi Germany interrupted the spouses' careers at their inceptions. In 1940, Israel was deported to Isola del Gran Sasso (Teramo),¹⁴ a camp that was founded to lock up foreigners (primarily Chinese people and German Jews) and antifascist opponents. Within the camp, the cold was unbearable during the winter months, and the interned, moreover, had to procure their own food by paying some local families to cook for them, since there was no communal cafeteria¹⁵. Israel was transferred thereafter to Ferramonti (Cosenza), where he was able to rejoin his wife and sister-in-law, from whom he had been separated more than a year prior; the two women had instead been imprisoned at Pollenza (Macerata)¹⁶ and later at Bagni di Lucca on 17 September 1941¹⁷. Shortly afterward, the Meyer-Langnas family was relocated to the Castelnuovo di Garfagnana camp (Lucca)¹⁸. Israel quickly became a point of reference for the small interned community, even becoming a correspondent of the Delegation for the assistance of Jewish emigrants (DELAEM),¹⁹ so much so that, at the beginning of December 1941, he asked to open a place of worship. A space was rented at the address Via Nicola Fabrizi 3 and was designated as a synagogue and referred to as "la barchetta" [the little boat], furnished thanks to the contributions of Pisa's Jewish community. "La barchetta" also operated as a school for 13 children of different ages,²⁰ taught by adults according to each person's skills. The sanitary and dietary conditions still remained difficult, given the scarcity of

¹⁴ A. Pizzuti, *Ebrei stranieri internati*, cit.

¹⁵ Costantino Di Sante, *I campi di concentramento in Abruzzo (1940-1944)*, available online <<http://www.associazioni.milano.it>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

¹⁶ CDEC digital library, description from *Fondo Giorgio Nissim*, b. 1 f. 1, <<http://digital-library.cdec.it>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

¹⁷ See file with a map drafted by Silvia Q. Angelini, *Il campo di concentramento per ebrei a Bagni Caldi di Lucca*, 2018 <<https://www.isreclucca.it>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

¹⁸ A. Pizzuti, *Ebrei stranieri internati*, cit.

¹⁹ Silvia Q. Angelini, Oscar Guidi, and Paola Lemmi, *Il campo di concentramento provinciale per ebrei di Bagni di Lucca - (dicembre 1943 - gennaio 1944)*, "La rassegna mensile di Israel", 69, II, 2003, p. 435.

²⁰ In her memoir, Paulina instead remembers "una trentina" [about thirty children]. P. Langnas, *Memoria scritta*, cit., p. 155.

aid granted, notwithstanding the help from DELASEM²¹ and the good relationships that the internees seemed to have held with the mayor and the citizens of the village²². Israel did all that he could to also help the inhabitants of the area, making house calls especially to treat children²³. Meanwhile, in his native Stanisławów, the Nazis proceeded to annihilate the entire Jewish community.

On the run

The situation for Israel and his companions further worsened after the armistice of 8 September 1943 between Italy and the Allies, when German forces occupied the area, and Castelnuovo fell under the control of the newly formed Italian Social Republic. Very soon, Nazis and Fascists proceeded to clear out the internment camp at the beginning of December 1943, sending away its occupants first to Bagni di Lucca, then to Florence, later to Milan, and, finally, to Auschwitz on 6 February 1944. Of the 55 or 57 people deported from Castelnuovo, only two would return: Leo Verderber (a young man who used to officiate at the camp's synagogue) and Lotte Wallach²⁴. Nevertheless, Israel, Paula, and Friederjka did not suffer the same fate. In fact, along with another family, the Keinwalds, they were able to get to safety by not showing up for the order to be moved to Bagni di Lucca. Already by November, Israel had received a donation of 10,000 liras from DESALEM, through the bishop's vicar of Castelnuovo, in order "to get to safety"²⁵. Most likely, the fugitives were aided by locals. In 2000, the town of Castelnuovo dedicated an award to the memory of the *maresciallo dei carabinieri* Giovanni

²¹ Istituto storico della Resistenza e dell'età contemporanea in provincia di Lucca, *Gli ebrei internati a Castelnuovo* <<http://www.isreclucca.it>> (accessed 31 August 2022). For the role of the Tuscan division of DELASEM, see: Francesca Cavarocchi, *L'organizzazione degli aiuti. Le reti ecclesiastiche e la DELASEM*, in Enzo Collotti (ed.), *Ebrei in Toscana tra occupazione tedesca e RSI*, Rome, Carocci, 2007, in particular pp. 334-335.

²² A. Herr, *Genocidal and Anti-genocidal Ethics*, cit., p. 148.

²³ *In memoria di Sigmund Karpeles*, "Il Giornale della Garfagnana", IV, 25, January 2010.

²⁴ A. Herr, *Genocidal and Anti-genocidal Ethics*, cit., p. 149.

²⁵ Valeria Galimi, *Caccia all'ebreo*, in E. Collotti (ed.), *Ebrei in Toscana*, cit., p. 209.

Battista Aghedu, who apparently saved 22 Jews by giving the interned advance notice of the expected deportation, thus allowing a few of them to escape. However, it is not clear whether the proclamation with which he summoned the interned to the Castelnuovo police station on 4 December 1943 was a means of warning them of the imminent deportation or simply a fulfillment of the orders given to him, since it was actually he who arrested those that showed up the following day²⁶. What seems certain is that the Meyer-Langnas family was warned by another *carabiniere*, Oscar Ferri,²⁷ whose son had been treated by Israel. The three of them, therefore, disappeared from Castelnuovo in the days preceding the order of convocation²⁸. Israel tried to warn other families, but they believed that it was a normal roll call and therefore ended up being captured²⁹. Israel, Paulina, and Friederjka initially found refuge with the family of Ulisse Turri in Colle Valluto (Lucca). Carlo, one of Ulisse's children, served as their guide to Vianova, a hamlet of Careggine (Lucca), where they were taken in by the Gigli family, who accompanied them to the nearby village of Porreta (town of Careggine)³⁰. They remained hidden here for about a year. At a certain point, they had to leave the Gigli family's house following a tip that someone had given to the police, but their hosts set them up in an isolated sheep pen, thereby continuing to protect them³¹. Finally, all three of them decided to attempt a crossing of the front, which had by then crystallized on the Gothic

²⁶ A. Herr, *Genocidal and Anti-genocidal Ethics*, cit., p. 150. It should also be noted how, on 22 January 2003, during the celebration of the Day of Remembrance, the Regional Council of Tuscany pointed out that it was actually Lieutenant Oscar Ferri who warned particularly Israel, who had cared for his son. See: *Giornata della memoria, Luzzatto al Consiglio regionale solenne: "Esclusione, oggi sono pessimista. Viviamo su un vulcano"* <<http://www.consiglio.regione.toscana.it>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

²⁷ Israel Meier, *La relazione sulle condizioni degli internati ebrei di Castelnuovo di Garfagnana*, "Il Tempo e l'idea", 18, III, 1995, p. 122.

²⁸ V. Galimi, *Caccia all'ebreo*, in E. Collotti (ed.), *Ebrei in Toscana*, cit., p. 209. See also P. Langnas, *Memoria scritta*, cit., p. 155.

²⁹ I. Meier, *La relazione*, cit., p. 122.

³⁰ V. Galimi, *Caccia all'ebreo*, in E. Collotti (ed.), *Ebrei in Toscana*, cit., p. 218. See also *Un gesto da non dimenticare, Comune di Careggine*, <<https://www.careggine.org>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

³¹ P. Langnas, *Memoria scritta*, cit., p. 155.

Line. Paying 500 liras for a guide, Israel, Paula, and Friederjka managed to join a group of fugitives comprised of Polish Jews, an Italian priest (Father Fausto Cecchini), a British army major (Anthony John Oldham, commander of the Lunense partisan division), a partisan leader, a draft dodger, and some displaced evacuees. The three climbed the Apuan Alps through the Passo della Scala, guided by Adriano Tardelli ("Baionetta"), "among gunshots from either side" as Paula later remembered, and finally arrived in liberated Italy³² on 5 December 1944³³.

At the end of the war, Israel and Paulina were able to return to Pisa and resumed their practice of medical professions, he as a pediatrician and she as a dentist. Throughout the years, they returned to Porreta often to visit the Gigli family, and they also hosted one of their children, Francesco³⁴. Israel passed away in Pisa in 1963.

Main publications

- *La relazione sulle condizioni degli internati ebrei di Castelnuovo di Garfagnana*, "Il Tempo e l'idea", 18, III, 1995, p. 122.

Archival sources

- ASUFi, AC, SS, f. "Meier Israel".
- ASUPi, f. "Meier Israele".

³² V. Galimi, *Caccia all'ebreo*, in E. Collotti (ed.), *Ebrei in Toscana*, cit., p. 219; F. Cavarocchi, *L'organizzazione degli aiuti*, ibid., p. 370. See also *In memoria di Sigmund Karpeles*, "Il Giornale della Garfagnana", IV, 25, January 2010; Regione Toscana, *Eventi per il 60° anniversario della Resistenza e della Liberazione* <<http://www.consiglio.regione.toscana.it>> (accessed 31 August 2022).

³³ The precise date of the crossing is provided in the report drafted by Major Oldham for the higher command of the British armed services: The National Archives (London), HS6/832, *Italy Political & Military Liaison Mission*, "Turdus", 30 January 1945.

³⁴ P. Langnas, *Memoria scritta*, cit., p. 156.

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- Paulina Langnas, *Memoria scritta della Dott. Paulina Langnas*, in Silvia Quintilia Angelini, Oscar Guidi, and Paola Lemmi, *L'orizzonte chiuso. L'internamento ebraico a Castelnuovo di Garfagnana 1941-1943*, Lucca, Pacini Fazzi, 2002, pp. 154-155.

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