

Bianca Maria Finzi Contini Calabresi

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When Bianca Maria Finzi Contini embarked on the transatlantic liner the Rex, headed for the United States with her husband Massimo and their two sons, Paul and Guido, she was a well-educated, wealthy young woman who had had to interrupt her university education to look after her family. She later recommenced her studies at Yale University, under the aegis of a fellow émigré, a Parisian professor. She eventually also completed her Italian degree in post-war Italy, graduating there too. She went on to continue her teaching and research in Connecticut.

Family and education

Bianca Maria was born in Milan on 27 May 1902, to Luisa Del Vecchio (1879-1953) and Armando Finzi Contini (1871-1941). He was a doctor and the heir to one of the leading Italian Jewish families. Bianca had three siblings: brothers, Bruno (1904-1982) and Renato (1911-1946), and a younger sister, Marcella (1909-?).

Bianca studied at the Facoltà di Lettere (the Arts & Humanities Faculty) of the Università di Bologna, that being the city where she lived with her family. In the summer of 1929 she married Massimo Calabresi, who was already well on his way to a highly successful career in medicine. Moving to Milan for her husband's job (Massimo had started working at the university hospital headed up by director Domenico Cesa Bianchi), together with the birth of her sons (Paolo in 1930 and Guido in 1932), meant that Bianca Maria had had to give up her university studies, despite already having passed all her exams and only having her thesis left to do. Her brother, Bruno, and sister, Marcella, had instead both managed to graduate in Mathematical, Physical and Natural

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Sciences from the same university in Bologna, in 1931 and 1932 respectively¹.

A new home in the United States

The dictatorial drift of fascism, which the family and their network of friends had always actively opposed, together with the proclamation of the racial laws in 1938 and Massimo's consequent expulsion from the Università di Milano, all contributed to Bianca and Massimo deciding to leave Italy for the U.S., taking with them their two sons. Bianca's sister, Marcella, had already taken the step of emigrating to Brazil, together with her husband, Guido Tedeschi, who had been expelled from the Politecnico di Milano, where he had been working as an adjunct professor of Physical Chemistry. They had sailed for Sao Paulo on 28 February 1939, with their 4-year-old and 3-year-old children². Up until that moment the two families had been very close, living in the same city. Now, many in their extended family and circle of friends were choosing to leave Italy; even Massimo's sisters were trying to find a way out of the country.

On 8 September 1939, Bianca, Massimo, Paolo (9) and Guido (7) set sail from Genoa on the transatlantic liner the Rex³. They all appear registered on the ship's manifest as Jews, except for Bianca, who had converted to Catholicism in 1932 and who is recorded as Italian. They docked in New York on 16

1 ASUBo, *Sezione studenti*, f. 2433, «Bianca Finzi-Contini». Bianca Maria's father, Armando, graduated from the Università di Bologna in 1895 (f. 1704), as did her brother Bruno and sister Marcella, who both took degrees in Mathematical, Physical and Natural Sciences, in 1931 and 1932 respectively (ff. 7327 e 5921, 7494). Their younger brother, Renato, also attended the same faculty and university as his aforementioned siblings during the academic year 1930-31 (f. 7125).

2 Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, *Cartões de Imigração, 1900-1965, ad nomen*, available online at <<https://www.myheritage.it>> (accessed 13 December 2018). Guido Tedeschi was born in S. Lazzaro di Savena (BO), and graduated in 1932 from the Università di Bologna, in Industrial Chemistry (ASUBo, *Sezione studenti*, f. 417). In 1935 he was an unpaid academic assistant, as his brother-in-law Bruno Finzi Contini, at the Regio Istituto Superiore di Chimica Industriale di Bologna (via dei Celestini 4); see *Annuario del Ministero dell'Educazione Nazionale*, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935, p. 359. Regarding Guido's expulsion from the Politecnico, see <<https://www.ternasinistrorsa.it>>.

3 Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (recorded access 14 December 2018).

September of that year and found accommodation at the Raleigh Hotel, 115 West 72nd, Manhattan, where they waited for Massimo to be officially awarded a fellowship in the department of Medicine at Yale University, Connecticut, which had been prospectively offered to him before they set sail for the U.S. They spent three months in the hotel, thanks to a loan provided by an American banker friend of Massimo's family. They were in contact with Italian friends and acquaintances who had already emigrated to New York; cousin Renata arrived that November, also in search of work. Eventually, Massimo received the call to his post, around Christmas 1939, and they made the move to New Haven. Massimo's Yale research grant was, however, due to run out in July 1940, but the hope was that his position would be made permanent⁴.

Studies and work

Bianca still had a long way to go: with no work experience in Italy and lacking an officially completed university qualification, her opportunities were significantly limited. Moreover, most American universities, including Yale, still refused to admit women. The family settled down in New Haven, moving into one of the typical local houses made of timber (quite a change from the villas and domestic staff they were used to). Once the children had started attending school, Bianca enrolled at the Yale Graduate School on a French Literature course, a language she spoke fluently. She was greatly encouraged by the lessons she took taught by Henri Peyre (1901-1988),⁵ a Parisian who had returned to Yale University in 1938 as Sterling professor, after five years lecturing at the Egyptian University in Cairo. Bianca took a Master's degree in French Literature and subsequently began teaching the subject at New

⁴ Letter from Francis G. Blake to Massimo Calabresi, 19 December 1939, copy given to the author by Guido Calabresi. See here [Massimo Calabresi](#).

⁵ Susan Heller Anderson, *Henri Peyre of Yale Is Dead at 87, Was Sterling Professor of French*, «New York Times», 10 December 1988. Cfr. <<https://www.nytimes.com>> (accessed 5 January 2019).

Haven State Teacher's College (now Southern Connecticut State University). She enjoyed the teaching and it helped the family's finances too.

The United States officially joined the war against Italy and Nazi Germany on 11 December 1941. Following this event, various measures were introduced against *enemy aliens*, namely those Italian, German and Japanese immigrants who had not yet been granted U.S. citizenship (a minimum of five years' residence was necessary to qualify). The measures implemented included confiscation of property and arrest. Bianca Maria was forced to leave her job, despite the protests of several colleagues and many of her students⁶, since the law in Connecticut prevented enemy aliens from teaching in state colleges.

The return to Italy – Difficulties and satisfactions

In 1946, following the end of the war and the hard years under the fascist regime, as well as the death of her brother Renato, aged just 35, Bianca decided to return to Italy to finish her degree. She crossed the Atlantic without her family and, on 9 November 1947, she graduated from the Università di Bologna, the university she had had to leave twenty years previously, completing her thesis on «John Ruskin's Social Philosophy»⁷. Did she do this simply for personal satisfaction, or because she wanted a qualification that would be valid in Italy should they decide to return permanently? The previous year, her husband had applied to be readmitted to his post at the Università di Milano, but they soon realised that it might be a very lengthy process. They had obviously seriously considered the possibility of returning to Italy permanently, especially since even Massimo was not enjoying the degree of success in his academic career in the U.S. that his talent had seemed to make him destined for in Italy. However, their sons were well integrated in the U.S. and seemed set for great things.

⁶ Written account given to the present author by Guido Calabresi on 28 November 2018.

⁷ ASUBo, *Sezione studenti*, f. 2433, «Bianca Finzi-Contini».

Furthermore, all the family had by now been granted U.S. citizenship. Bianca returned to the United States, travelling on her U.S. passport (issued on 25 June 1947); she left Naples on 7 December 1947, sailing on the *Vulcania*, and arrived in New York on 18 December⁸.

The anticipated good news from Italy was not forthcoming. Rather than them returning permanently to Italy in the post-war years, it was Bianca's mother-in-law and sister-in-law, Cecilia, who made the move to join them in the U.S. Bianca's mother, Luisa, was also to visit them. So it was that Bianca decided to apply to take a PhD in French at Yale, believing that this would help her find a post in a private university. She was admitted and completed her PhD with a thesis on «*Jeunesse Laique d'Ernest Renan*». There appeared to be no further obstacles to her obtaining a teaching post, since she already had U.S. citizenship at this point. Henri Peyre, who notoriously judged Yale to be too masculine, tried in vain to get her onto the university's teaching staff, which at the time comprised men only, a situation which was to remain the same until 1969. Bianca instead found a post teaching Italian and French at Connecticut College for Women, in New London, fifty miles away from the family home at 614 Orange Street, New Haven⁹. Although the College had an excellent reputation as a female college, and Bianca did enjoy her time as a teacher there, it was not a research centre. Her work there was devoted to teaching and she longed for more time to study and write. She left Connecticut College for Women and moved to Albertus Magnus, a smaller, Catholic college in New Haven itself, where she taught and held the post of head of the Italian department for many years. Even more rewarding were the achievements of her two sons, Paul, an oncologist, and Guido, a jurist, both of whom rose to rapid success, with none of the tribulations of their

⁸ Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (recorded access 10 December 2018).

⁹ Founded in 1911 as Connecticut College for Women in response to the exclusion of women from Wesleyan University in 1909; it changed its name to Connecticut College in 1969, when admission was granted to male students.

parents' generation.

In the mid-seventies Bianca retired and was finally able to dedicate herself to her book *Ernest Renan et Émile Egger: Une amitié de quarante ans* (Paris 1979), accepted for publication by a prestigious publishing company.

A globe-trotting life

She was a frequent traveller, often solo. As well as frequent trips to Italy, where she still had family and friends, Bianca periodically went to Brazil to stay with her sister Marcella (Marcella's two eldest sons, Ugo and Adriano, were almost the same ages as Bianca's own sons). Marcella's family had arrived in Brazil on a temporary visa and had ended up staying there¹⁰. Records show that Bianca travelled to Rio De Janeiro in 1951, and subsequently left for New York on 27 June, although her final destination was actually Italy¹¹. The following June, her 72-year-old mother, Luisa, is documented as sailing from Naples on the Conte Biancamano, staying first with them in Connecticut and then with Marcella in Sao Paulo. At other times it was Marcella and Guido who travelled to visit Bianca¹².

In 1954, Bianca and Massimo sailed from Southampton on the Queen Mary, docking in New York on 8 February, bringing with them 11 items of luggage, brought over from her mother's house, since her mother had died the

10 Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, *Cartões de Imigração, 1900-1965*, «Marcella Finzi Contini Tadeschi [sic]», available online <<https://www.myheritage.it>> (recorded access 13 December 2018).

11 Documenting this journey, there is also a Brazilian immigration card with Bianca's photograph, granting temporary residence: Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, *Cartões de Imigração, 1900-1965, ad nomen*, available online <<https://www.myheritage.it>> (recorded access 14 December 2018).

12 Luisa Finzi Contini, née Del Vecchio, born in Lugo di Romagna on 3 November 1879, is recorded as arriving in New York aboard the Conte Biancamano, travelling first class, with 7 items of luggage, on 2 June 1952. She gave her address as Branford, Connecticut, where she owned a house; cfr. Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (recorded access 14 December 2018). She died in Sao Paulo on 12 August 1953 <<https://www.geni.com>> (accessed 14 December 2018). Marcella and Guido Tedeschi flew to New York from Rio de Janeiro on 13 May 1952, giving Branford, Connecticut as their contact address; cfr. Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (recorded access 4 January 2019).

previous August while she was in Brazil. Brazilian immigration papers record one further trip Bianca made to Brazil, alone, in July 1960¹³.

On 10 October 1962, the honorary title of *Commendatore dell'Ordine della stella d'Italia* (formerly *Stella della solidarietà italiana*) was bestowed on Bianca by the President of the Italian Republic, who at the time was Giovanni Gronchi¹⁴.

In January 1982 Bianca was back in Italy once more, together with her husband; they had been invited over by Alessandro Seppilli and his wife Anita Schwarzkopf, who had moved back to Italy from Brazil in 1946. Alessandro had been readmitted to his post at the Università di Modena and had later moved to the Università di Perugia. They had been friends since their days as university students, when Alessandro and Massimo had graduated together from the Facoltà di Medicina in Florence. It was during this stay with their friends in Umbria that Bianca died suddenly, aged nearly 80, on 19 January 1982¹⁵. She was buried in New Haven, in Grove Street Cemetery. In 1986, Bianca's sons, Paul and Guido, set up a Yale University prize in her name, for the best Senior essay in Comparative Literature¹⁶; this was followed by the Finzi-Contini Lectureship, established in 1990. Participants in this programme have included Umberto Eco, Antonia S. Byatt, Orhan Pamuk, William S. Merwin, Azar Nafisi, Alberto Manguel and Maxine Hong Kingston.

Major publications

- *Ernest Renan et Émile Egger: Une amitié de quarante ans*, Paris, Nizet, 1979.

¹³ Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, *Cartões de Imigração, 1900-1965, ad nomen*.

¹⁴ This honorary title specifically recognises Italians abroad or foreign citizens who made outstanding contributions to the rebuilding of Italy; *Presidenza della Repubblica, Onorificenze, ad nomen* <<https://www.quirinale.it>> (accessed 18 December 2018).

¹⁵ Bianca's place of death is not written on her tombstone, although it does appear in the written account given to the present author by Guido Calabresi, on 28 and 29 November 2018.

¹⁶ Yale University, Office of the Secretary and Vice President for Student Life, *Prizes by Department or Subject* <<https://secretary.yale.edu>> (accessed 15 December 2018).

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