

Józef Lewsztein

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In Palermo, where he lived and studied, Józef graduated with a degree in Medicine and Surgery on 22 November 1939, with a score of 105/110 and upon completing a thesis in Obstetrics and gynecology under Professor Salvatore Scaglione's supervision¹.

Shortly after, as Józef himself wrote, he «continued to work until June 1940 at the Civic Hospital», where he pursued a practical internship for six months².

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Arrested in Palermo after entry into the war

On 14 June 1940, the prefecture of Palermo communicated to the Ministry of the Interior that Józef Isaac Lewsztein, a foreign Jew residing in the regional capital «by agreement with the local Center [that is, the *Servizio informazioni militare*, the SIM], was stopped as a dangerous element, suspected of carrying out activities against national interest»³. The proposal was «that the person in question be interned in a concentration camp». While awaiting the decision of the authorities, it was conveyed that Józef «was in prison [at the Ucciardone], available to the Police». Three days later, that is on the 17th, this detention turned into an arrest.

From Poland to Italy to study

Józef, who was born in Warsaw on 24 March 1915 to Boris and Fruma Bryl (or Brill) - presumably to a well-to-do family - came from Poland and wanted to be a doctor: he entered the Kingdom of Italy on 1 December 1933 with the

¹ Historical archive from the University of Palermo (ASUPa), *Registro dei processi verbali degli esami di laurea in Medicina e Chirurgia*, «Lewsztein Giuseppe».

² Information on the training program is found in a handwritten letter from 16 December 1940, transmitted to the Ministry of the Interior and preserved in ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, *Ufficio internati*, cit., and in a typewritten letter that I received from the Maggioli Mazzoni Archive.

³ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, *Ufficio internati*, A4 bis, *Internati stranieri e spionaggio 1939-1945*, b. 215, f. «Lewsztein Josef di Boris».

status of refugee and enrolled at the University of Perugia, where he took four exams⁴. «At that time - he would specify to the Police Headquarters in Pesaro on 23 July 1943 - I was encouraged to pursue this end by the Italian Consular Authorities in Warsaw»⁵. On 29 November 1934, the rector of the University of Perugia, formally released him from enrollment at the university so that he could continue his studies at the University of Florence, where he attended his second year and took another three exams⁶. Then, he asked to be transferred to Palermo, for which he received permission, and on 8 October 1935, he was admitted as a third-year student to the Facoltà di Medicina [School of Medicine]. We do not know the reason behind this change of universities: it is certain that Siegfried Szarfstein (1912-1995), a cousin of Józef's - or so Józef defined him - lived in the Sicilian capital. Siegfried had also been a student in the same School and had graduated in 1934; he would emigrate to Hong Kong with his mother in 1939, where he became a highly esteemed doctor⁷.

Internment at Ferramonti

The Ministry of the Interior ordered that he be assigned to «the camp of Ferramonti in the town of Tarsia, where he [could] be kept under surveillance». He departed from the Central Station in Palermo on 14 July with the first group of those arrested (fourteen foreign Jews), and arrived in Mongrassano the following day along with Adamo Baumann, also a doctor, and Chaim Finkelstein, a citrus trader⁸.

4 ASUPa, *Registro delle immatricolazioni*, «Lewsztein Giuseppe».

5 Cited letter, that was sent to me by the Maggioli Mazzoni Archive.

6 ASUFi, AC, SS, f. «Lewsztein Giuseppe» and ASUPa, *Registro delle immatricolazioni*, «Lewsztein Giuseppe».

7 Brief information about Siegfried Szarfstein from a page dedicated to him on the portal *Gwulo: Old Hong Kong* <<https://gwulo.com>> (accessed on 3 March 2020). The page also contains a testimony from the niece of Rosie Landau, who Siegfried met in Hong Kong and married at the end of the 1960s.

8 ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, *Ufficio internati*, cit., telegram number 23 dated 16 July 1940.

On 16 December 1940, while in Ferramonti, Józef asked the Ministry of the Interior if he could take the State exam at the University of Bologna or the University of Rome, an exam that he had not been able to take because, right after his graduation, he had become sick with nephritis (illness remained a constant factor in his life). Roughly ten of his colleagues were in the same situation across Italy. On 24 March 1941, the Ministry communicated to him that «according to the current provisions, Jewish graduates can take state exams only in the session immediately following the graduation date: therefore, you can no longer be admitted»⁹.

In Ferramonti, Lewsztein collaborated «with the infirmary of the concentration camp from July 1940 until March 1942 when [he had to] interrupt this activity as he contracted malaria, a pathology that affect[ed] many internees due to the poor hygienic conditions»¹⁰. His request to be treated in the dermatology ward of the hospital in Cosenza was rejected.

Transferred to the province of Pesaro

On 15 December 1942, Józef asked, and obtained permission, to be transferred to Piandimeleto (Pesaro), a place to which Aron Weiss, a fellow internee at Ferramonti, had also been relocated¹¹.

The young doctor tried to make himself useful: «also in this location - as remembered by Lidia Maggioli and Antonio Mazzoni - he tried to exercise the

⁹ This evidently referred to the circular MEN, Direzione generale istruzione superiore (DGIS) [General Directorate of Higher Education], number 4102, 21 October 1939, which prescribed that only the graduates of the class of 1939 could take the State examination in the exam session beginning in February 1940, and «only [in] this one» (a copy is available in ACS, Ministry of Public Education, DGIS, Div. II, *Leggi, regolamenti etc. 1925-1945*, b. 192, f. «Studenti stranieri. Studenti Ebrei divieto di iscrizione» [Foreign students. Jewish students prohibited from enrollment]). A subsequent circular specified that for interned students, the expiration of their student status was suspended, and that they would be able to «regularize their position after being released from the concentration camps» (MEN, Direzione generale ordine universitario [General Directorate of University Education], number 1553, 18 September 1941, held in *ibid.*).

¹⁰ Maggioli Mazzoni Archive, *Ebrei italiani e stranieri internati in provincia di Pesaro, 1940/1944*, edited by Lidia Maggiolo, Antonio Mazzoni, file «Lewsztein (Lowsztein) Joseph» <<http://www.archiviomaggiolimazzoni.it>> (accessed 3 March 2020).

¹¹ On him, and on the uncertain relationship between the two, cfr. *ibid.*, file «Weiss Aron».

profession, but he encountered hostility from the local authority doctor and, in a short time, he was sanctioned with a transfer»¹². That is how on 16 October 1943, he was transferred to Sant'Angelo in Vado (still in the province of Pesaro). He lived there at the home of Lucia Capanna, the mother of Maria Storti, with whom Markus Pordes, another Polish doctor whom he had met in Ferramonti, also lodged¹³. He established a strong, amicable bond with the Storti Capanna family. In Sant'Angelo, «he offered to work at the hospital of the nearby Sassocorvaro, even as a nurse, but even though the Medical Director of this last establishment was in agreement, the authorities did not give their assent»¹⁴.

Victim of the Forlì airport massacre on 5 September 1944

Between 2 and 3 December 1943, after the notorious Police order of 30 November, the hunt of «pure Jews, both Italian and foreign», began. Józef immediately fled with the help of Maria Storti and Father Augusto Giombini, a fighting partisan, to the Pieve of Santa Maria dei Graticcioli in the town of Mercatello sul Metauro. But to no avail. He was captured in the home of the parish priest «by soldiers of the local Army» and brought first to Sant'Angelo in Vado, then to jail in Urbino. On account of his always precarious health conditions, he was able to leave jail and recover in the isolation ward of the Civic hospital. But even this solution did not ensure his safety. On 12 August 1944 he was arrested by the Germans and brought to jail in Forlì, a city close to the Gothic Line, which, in those weeks, was becoming the frontline of fighting (it would be liberated on 9 November). On 5 September 1944, twenty people, ten of whom were Jewish, were brought to the airport, killed with a

12 Ibid., file «Lewsztein (Lowsztein) Joseph».

13 On him ibid., file «Pordes Marco (Markus)».

14 Ibid., file «Lewsztein (Lowsztein) Joseph».

blow to the head and pushed in the craters that had been created by the bombing.

A letter from 13 September 1944, with the subject line «Executions», was sent by the Republican Prefecture of Forlì to two offices of the Ministry of the Interior, informing them that «on the 5th, the German police shot the following people in retaliation»: this was followed by twenty names including Lewsztein Josef, born in Warshau on 24 April 1915, as the sixth person on the list¹⁵.

On 27 January 2020, the University of Palermo dedicated a commemorative plaque to him, which was placed at the rectorate's entrance¹⁶.

Archival sources

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¹⁵ The letter is reproduced in Wladimiro Flamigni, *Aeroporto di Forlì. Settembre 1944. La grande strage di ebrei e antifascisti*, Cesena, Il Ponte Vecchio, 2015, p. 138.

¹⁶ This is the [translated] text of the plaque: «Józef Izaak Lewsztein, a young doctor and a graduate of this Palermitan institution, died in the slaughter of the airport in Forlì, on 5 September 1944. In remembering his name, with this plaque we intend to give homage to all of the Jewish students, male and female, from the University of Palermo, whose life journeys were in defiance of racism and barbarically broken by the violence of nazifascism. Palermo, 27 January 2020, Fabrizio Micari, Rector».

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