

Piero Oscar Mustacchi

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A seventeen year old Italian from Cairo, Piero Oscar Mustacchi came to Florence to attend university during an untimely academic year, 1937-1938. He decided it was best to change plans, but the situation for Italians was not much better in Egypt. After a few years, the young doctor moved to San Francisco to stay with one of his professors who, in 1938, had been dismissed by the Università di Firenze and whose medical license had been revoked.

The «racial laws» had a domino effect spanning several years, implicating the children and students of those who were forced to leave; younger individuals often built their lives and careers elsewhere. Many decided to never turn back, such as Piero and his sisters; their parents joined them afterwards, and they all resettled in the United States.

From Cairo to Florence and back

Piero Oscar Mustacchi was born on 29 May 1920 in Cairo, the son of educated and well-off Italian parents. Elia Gino Mustacchi (1884-1967), the director of the National Bank of Egypt (the first and most important Egyptian bank), and Gilda Rieti (1894-1983) had three other children: Liliana, Marisa, and Mario. In the summer of 1937 Piero had graduated from the Liceo scientifico italiano in Cairo, and decided to come to Florence to study Medicine¹.

He lived on via Cherubini 6 in Benedetti and enrolled at the university on 21 December 1937. With his request to the rector, he presented his Italian citizenship certificate (which was granted by the Italian consulate in Egypt and declared him a resident of Rome), in addition to his high school diploma

¹ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Mustacchi Piero». The profession of his father, his home in Florence, and other information are found in a module titled R. Università degli studi di Firenze, compiled and signed by Piero O. Mustacchi on 5 November 1937 for his enrollment in his first year at medical school.

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and other necessary documents². In his personal student file, the transcripts of 4 verbal exams have been conserved from June of 1938, the last of which was administered by Clara Di Capua Bergamini who taught chemistry in the Faculty of Medicine. Three months later, Bergamini was dismissed from her teaching position for belonging to the «razza ebraica»³.

Even if there are no documents that ascertain Piero's Jewish origins (one indication of which being his mother's maiden name), it is clear that he did not enroll in a second year at the Università di Firenze. On 9 August 1938, the nationwide registration of persons belonging to the Jewish race was initiated. Professors, both tenured and untenured, were targeted, which then facilitated the systematic application of the racial laws.

Piero left Florence and pursued his studies elsewhere, first in Losanna, Switzerland, then at home in Egypt, where he appears to have been the first non-Muslim to graduate from the University of Cairo⁴. He came from a family of substantial means who lived in the residential Zamalek neighborhood;⁵ nevertheless, the situation for Italians in Egypt was not easy, especially after Italy's declaration to enter the war in 1940. Piero was nonetheless able to practice his profession in an unspecified British hospital; this was likely due to the contacts of his father, whose bank had an office in London ever since its foundation in 1898 and operated in commercial and international financial markets⁶. During World War II, the English had effectively re-taken control

² ASUFI, *ivi*, both his Italian citizenship certificate and his birth certificate mention 6 October 1937 as his date of birth.

³ See Francesca Cavarocchi, Alessandra Minerbi, *Politica razziale e persecuzione antiebraica nell'ateneo fiorentino*, in Enzo Collotti (ed.), *Razza e fascismo. La persecuzione contro gli ebrei in Toscana (1938-1943)*, Roma, Carocci, 1999, pp. 466-510.

⁴ According to the obituary of *Piero Mustacchi 1920-2017*, «San Francisco Chronicle», 10 September 2017.

⁵ The address of the family house in Cairo indicated on the boarding documents of Piero Oscar Mustacchi, destination New York, 1947, are incorrect. The neighborhood of Zamalek is recognizable on the documents, however, see Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed upon registration 25 February 2020).

⁶ This information is from a biographical profile prepared by Wendy Jalon for «UCSF News» (University of California at San Francisco), 27 April 1982, in anticipation of a prize for Mustacchi. I thank Jasmin Dew of the UCSF Archive for having provided me a copy of this along

over Egypt, which constituted one of their principal bases of military operations. The English hospitals in Egypt, most of them located in Alexandria, were predominantly military hospitals. But for Italian doctors who worked in Italian hospitals, it was rather difficult to maintain their occupations; in 1948, a new law prohibited foreign doctors from practicing medicine, thus permitting only Egyptians to engage in medical professions⁷.

Looking for work in San Francisco

By that time, Piero had already made other plans. He left Egypt, but not to return to Italy; at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) School of Medicine there was an Italian professor who had left Italy with his family following the legislation of anti-Jewish laws. Piero had most likely met him 10 years prior, during the 1937-38 school year, when he attended the Faculty of Medicine at the Università di Firenze. At that time, Giacomo Ancona was teaching at the university and specialized in allergology. Evidently, Piero contacted him and decided to leave for the US. On 14 June 1947 Piero set sail for New York from Alexandria. He then went immediately to San Francisco, to UCSF Medical School. He declared that he would stay there for several months, as is indicated on his boarding documentation for the *SS Marine Carp*. He provided the address of Professor Giacomo Ancona as his contact reference⁸. It was undoubtedly Ancona who introduced him to the university clinic environment.

Months after his arrival, Piero Mustacchi became a doctor at Franklin Hospital of San Francisco, the former German Hospital established for German immigrants almost a century prior. Due to the widespread anti-German sentiment during World War I, the name of the hospital had been

with other material.

⁷ Cfr. Aldo Prinivalli, *Ospedali e medici italiani in Egitto tra Ottocento e Novecento*, «Oriente moderno», 88, 2008, pp. 169-184.

⁸ Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed upon registration 25 February 2020). Two other trips from Europe with his wife are registered, in 1951 and in 1957.

changed (in 1968 it was changed again to the Ralph K. Davies Medical Center)⁹. Piero was comfortable in California. The family of professor Ancona, who had two children of Piero's age, Mario and Dora, warmly welcomed him; especially the latter.

Life in America: wife, children, and parents

On 26 September 1948, Piero and Dora were married. Dora was 25 years old, three years younger than Piero, and had a Master's degree in social sciences from Berkeley; she became actively involved in Piero's affairs, assuming organizational and representative responsibilities that undoubtedly contributed to his professional career. After their marriage, they moved for a short period to New York, where Piero had a Damon Runyon Research Fellowship from the organization of the same name, founded in 1946 in memory of the distinguished sports journalist. The fellowship subsidized cancer research at the Memorial Hospital for the Treatment of Cancer and Allied Diseases in Manhattan (now the New York Cancer Hospital, known back then as the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center). This is where the use of mercaptopurine was undergoing experimental trials for the treatment of leukemia, a field in which Piero became a specialist.

In 1949, Piero's mother took a flight from Cairo to New York, probably to get to know her daughter-in-law better; the couple of newlyweds, who at that time were living in San Francisco, took a trip to Cairo two years later¹⁰. Gilda Rieti Mustacchi flew to the US several more times after her initial visit. Even Gino Mustacchi had made several stops in the US, once in 1948 in New York before departing for London (most likely for reasons of work), and once more

⁹ See in alphabetical order «Mustacchi Piero», in *U.S. City Directories*, San Francisco, R.L. Polk, 1948-49, access upon registration at <<https://www.myheritage.com>>. Historical information of Franklin Hospital and photos are available at <<https://cpmcpsonline.org>> (accessed 6 October 2020).

¹⁰ A return flight TWA from Cairo to New York appears on 6 February 1951, by searching «Pieroi [sic] Mustacchi» e «Dora Mustacchi», in Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed upon registration 17 October 2020).

during the year after¹¹. Piero's sisters lived in the US as well, on the east coast. In the summer of 1954, Gino Mustacchi set sail from Genoa on the ship *Cristoforo Colombo*, which was inaugurated just a month prior and was intended to «show America the creativity and elegance of Italy». From New York, he went directly to California to see his son¹². On 30 June 1958 Elia Gino Mustacchi once more embarked on the *Colombo*, the fastest Italian ship, along with his wife. The final destination was San Francisco, where Piero lived; first at 12578 Montgomery Street, then at 3342 Laguna Street in the home of the Ancona family. The Mustacchi parents, the father being 74 years old and the mother being 10 years his junior, moved to the United States in order to be closer to their children and grandchildren. This was especially true for Gilda who was widowed in 1967¹³.

Piero became a father on 5 October 1954. They gave their firstborn son an Italian name, Roberto (1954-2018); Michael (1959-2018) was born on January 8, 1959, the same year in which Piero obtained his US citizenship. The two boys attended respectively Lowell High School, an old and prestigious public school, and the Galileo High School in San Francisco (now Galileo Academy of

¹¹ On the *Vulcania*, Gino Mustacchi departed from Alexandria for New York on 14 March 1948, disembarking at Southampton, while his trip on 27 May 1948 was direct to London from New York, both trips and documents available at <<https://www.ancestry.com>> (accessed upon registration 17 October 2020).

¹² See Gino Mustacchi, who gave the address 2000 Van Nessel San Francisco, where his son had his medical office with Giacomo Ancona, in Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed upon registration 17 October 2020). Audiovideo *Viaggio inaugurale: cinescopia della traversata atlantica della turbonave «Cristoforo Colombo»* by Raimondo Musu, photography by Arturo Climati, musical adaptations by Raffaele Gervasio, production management Elio Tarquini, 4 September 1954, but produced on July 23, «La settimana Incom» <<https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com>> (accessed 17 October 2020).

¹³ For Gilda e Gino Mustacchi's arrival in New York on 30 August 1958, see the passenger list accessible in the Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed upon registration 15 October 2020). The previous trips of Gilda Mustacchi are available in the same location through a search of her name, keeping in mind the errors in registration, (for example Guda instead of Gilda in April of 1953, while Gino Mustacchi is spelled with an 'E', under the name Elia, and Gina); in the database of Ellis Island Foundation none of the documents of their travels indicated in <<https://www.ancestry.com>> appear. It is not possible to reconstruct exactly when they moved to the US, or if they did so together. Gino Mustacchi shows up as a resident of Erie County (NY) when he died in 1967 at 83 years old (New York State Department of Health, Albany, NY, *New York State Death Index, 1967*, accessible at <<https://www.ancestry.com>>), while Gilda was in San Francisco when she died at 74 years of age in 1997.

Science and Technology), another public school whose motto is: «Eppur si muove» («*And yet it moves*»)¹⁴.

Academic career and profession

In 1953, at 33 years old, Piero became a faculty member at the UCSF Department of Medicine, and later became Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine and Epidemiology and International Health. Soon thereafter, he began to publish his oncological and epidemiological research in journals such as «New England Journal of Medicine». Mustacchi was one of the organizers of the conference of comparative oncology promoted by the University of California Medical Center and the American Cancer Society of San Francisco. They proposed the then pioneeristic idea of introducing the humanities in medicine, and Mustacchi even supervised one of the symposiums on «Man and Civilization»; the fourth one, dedicated to the family. The symposiums were launched in 1959 by Mustacchi's colleague, the oncologist Seymour Farber, at the University of California, San Francisco, Department of Continuing Education in Medicine¹⁵.

The UCSF Faculty of Medicine does not have any personal files under Mustacchi's name, but many of his activities have been recorded in the «Alumni Faculty Association Bulletin»: in 1980, he was awarded by La Sociedad Mexicana para el Estudio de la Hipertension and the year after he was invited to the Mexican Congress on Hypertension in Acapulco to talk about stress, work, and hypertension. Simultaneously, his wife Dora carried out volunteer activities in the program on hypertension at UCSF,¹⁶ and she

¹⁴ A photo of Roberto and one of Michael published in the yearbooks of their respective schools can be found in «Year Book 1972» of Lowell High School and in «Year Book 1976» of Galileo High School, both found at <<https://www.myheritage.com>> (accessed upon registration 17 October 2020).

¹⁵ Seymour M. Farber, Piero Mustacchi, Roger H. L. Wilson (eds.), *Man and Civilization: the Family's Search for Survival*. Record of the Fourth Symposium in the Series Man and Civilization, Held at the University of California, San Francisco Medical Center, 25 and 26 January 1964, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1965.

¹⁶ See the cited notices in «University Bulletin. University of California», 29, 7, October 1980, p. 31 and respectively in the directory *Keeping in touch*, «Alumni Faculty Association Bulletin».

was a coordinator at Cancer Prevention Study II, an important epidemiological research project that lasted 15 years. She was the president of the San Francisco Unit of the American Cancer Society, the University of California San Francisco Auxiliary, and Heritage, a rehabilitation center for the elderly¹⁷.

In 1982, as professor of Medicine and Preventative Medicine in the Department of Epidemiology and International Medicine, Mustacchi was granted the highest award of the French National Order of the Legion of Honor. The distinction was conferred to Mustacchi by François Mitterrand for his 25 years of outstanding activities and for having developed formal relationships between the University of California and various French universities in both France and francophone Africa. Pierre Penn, president of the Department of Tropical Medicine in Marseille, granted the award to Mustacchi on 29 April 1982 during a ceremony at UCSF.

Italian-Americans

Although Doctor Mustacchi was a distinguished epidemiologist in San Francisco, noted for his studies on leukemia and thyroid tumors in civilian populations,¹⁸ recognition for his scientific and professional achievements in Europe came mostly from France as opposed to Italy. It appears that Mustacchi did not maintain many connections with his country of origin, not unlike his father-in-law. Despite this, both of them often expressed pride in their Italian origins, choosing to keep their names as opposed to americanizing them, and frequenting the same circles of educated Italian-Americans in the Bay Area.

Piero Mustacchi was chief physician of the Italian consulate in San Francisco.

School of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco», 25, 2, 1981, p.18; An overview of Dora's volunteer work in *Drs Mustacchi, Ancona Honoured by Italian Government*, ivi, 4, 4, 1971, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Obituary. Dora Mustacchi*, «San Francisco Gate», 30 October 1997.

¹⁸ Wendy Jalon, article for *UCSF News*, University of California, San Francisco, 27 April 1982.

He was also president of the Leonardo da Vinci Society, an organization dedicated to spreading Italian culture and recognizing the contributions of Italians to American life. The organization was founded in 1949 (two years after his arrival), through the initiatives of Mrs. Dobbins D'Anneo, Countess Lilian Dandini, and Mrs. Louis Piccirillo (according to traditional American naming standards of adopting the husband's first and last name). Maria Teresa Tommasini, also known as Teresita, was married to the Italian-American lawyer Louis Piccirillo and she taught Italian language and literature at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1928, the chair of Italian Culture at Berkeley was established, and many of the major anti-fascist exiles were invited during the Fascist period in Italy, from Lionello Venturi to Carlo Sforza and Gaetano Salvemini¹⁹. Among other invitees was the historian Mario Attilio Levi, who published his works under the pseudonym Manlio Canavesi during the years in which the Jews were persecuted. His story is worth remembering because he was invited at Berkeley in 1967, the same year in which Piero Mustacchi, who actively participated in that Italian-American environment, was acknowledged for his services rendered to Italian culture and to medicine. As such, he was named cavalier of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic.

In 1971, Mustacchi became honorary vice-consul of San Francisco. His father-in-law, professor of medicine and expert in musicology Giacomo Ancona (also the son of baritone singer Mario Ancona who performed in the best American and European theaters), was awarded the title of Commandeur²⁰. Piero, who was born in Cairo, and the father of his wife Dora, who was born in Livorno, had become true Italian-Americans.

¹⁹ M. De Filippis, *The Chair of Italian Culture at the University of California*, «Italice», 35, 3, 1958, pp. 145-155. The list of professors sponsored by the chair of Italian culture is found at <<https://italian.berkeley.edu>> (accessed 18 October 2020). For Mrs Louis Piccirillo, of Abruzzese origins, *La storia della Prof. Tommasini, «missionaria» della lingua italiana in California*, «Abruzzonews», 29 September 2018 <<https://www.abruzzoews.eu>> (accessed 18 October 2020).

²⁰ See *Bullettin Briefs*, «Campus Bullettin», University of California, San Francisco Medical Center, 1, 2, 1967, e *Drs Mustacchi, Ancona Honoured by Italian government*, ivi, 4, 4, 1971, p. 3.

In 1997, after 49 years of marriage, the 77 year old Piero became a widower. He went on to spend his days with a woman from Castro Valley²¹. He continued his private practice in the studio he shared with his father-in-law in the Medical Arts Building on 2000 Van Ness Avenue. It seems he continued to receive patients until he was 95 years old.

Major publications

- *Extensibility and Minimum Number of Polypeptide Chains in the Collagen Micelle*, «Science», 113, 2937, 1951, pp. 405-407.
- With Ismail el Sebai, *Advanced Schistosomal Proctitis Clinically Resembling Cancer of the Rectum: Report of Two Cases*, «Gastroenterology», 19, 1, 1951, pp. 137-141.
- With Sidney J. Cutler, *Some Observations on the Incidence of Thyroid Cancer in the United States*, «The New England Journal of Medicine», 255, 19, 1956, pp. 889-893.
- *Cancer of the Thyroid Gland; Its Occurrence Among Residents of San Francisco and Alameda Counties*, «California Medicine», 86, 1, 1957, pp. 20-21.
- With Salvatore Pablo Lucia, Liliana Jassy [Mustacchi], *Bronchial Asthma. Patterns of Morbidity and Mortality in the United States, 1951-1959*, «California Medicine», 96, 3, 1962, pp. 196-200.
- With Liliana Jassy [Mustacchi], *Alexander Robert Ferguson, M.D. on «the Irritation-Cancer of Egypt»*, «Cancer», 15, 1, 1962, pp. 215-216.
- With Robert S. Sherins, Margaret J. Miller, *Congenital Malformations of the Heart and the Great Vessels: Prevalence, Incidence, and Life Expectancy in San Francisco*, «JAMA. The Journal of the American Medical Association», 183, 4, 1963, pp. 241-244.

²¹ Cf. the obituary of *Piero Mustacchi 1920-2017*, cit., where there are the names and places of his parent's residence, information that had been impossible to find prior; I have some doubts regarding the spelling of his sister Marisa's last name.

- Seymour M. Farber, Piero Mustacchi, Roger H. L. Wilson (eds.) *Man and Civilization: the Family's Search for Survival*, Record of the Fourth Symposium in the Series Man and Civilization, Held at the University of California, San Francisco Medical Center, January 25 and 26, 1964, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1965.
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- *Depression, Fatigue, and Memory Loss*, «The Western Journal of Medicine», 161, 2, 1994, p. 194.
- *Lung Cancer Latency and Asbestos Liability*, «The Journal of Legal Medicine», 17, 2, 1996, pp. 277-300.

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