

Anna Di Gioacchino Cassuto

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Married to Nathan Cassuto, ophthalmologist and chief rabbi of Florence from 1943, she is usually only mentioned as a wife whose «love never failed»¹. Betrayed by an informant, both were deported to Auschwitz, but she was the only survivor. Back in Italy at age 34, in November 1945 she immediately emigrated to find her children in Palestine: the eldest 9 years with the youngest 4. She was killed two and a half years later. Anna Di Gioacchino Cassuto, qualified as an English teacher, did not ever have the time to live out her life.

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Family background and schooling

She was born on the 21st of January, 1911 in Ancona. Her father Dario Di Gioacchino was a rich merchant, who was able to ensure a comfortable life for his wife Emma Della Pergola, a Florentine, and for their children. After Anna, Milena was born in 1914; during the First World War, in 1916 Piero and in 1917 Elio, and last Sara Vittoria Italiana on the 29th of June 1918², in Florence, where the family had moved to. Anna attended the Classical Lyceum, where at 18 she met the twenty years old Nathan Cassuto³. Their first meeting was arranged by his father Umberto and her mother Emma, having been already schoolmates from elementary school⁴. In order to get married, Nathan had to finish his studies in Medicine; Anna helped him and concurrently studied as a correspondent in foreign languages, specializing in English at the British

¹ Gaio Scilioni, *Nathan Cassuto*, in Daniel Capri, Augusto Segre, Renzo Toaff, *Scritti in memoria di Nathan Cassuto*, Jerusalem, Kedem - Yad Leyakkirenu, 1986, pp. 5-75: p. 8.

² For confirmation on essential biographical information related to the relatives, see <<https://www.myheritage.it>>, *ad nomen* (access on record 9 February 2019).

³ Hulda Campagnano, *E ne parlerai ai tuoi figli... Storia di una madre ebrea a Firenze negli anni 1943-44*, in D. Capri, A. Segre, R. Toaff, *Scritti in memoria di Nathan Cassuto*, cit., pp. 101-175: p. 155.

⁴ CDEC, Interview of Sara Di Gioacchino, interviewer Liliana Picciotto, 2 June 1988 <<http://digital-library.cdec.it>> (access 8 February 2019).

Institute, the first cultural institute out of the British territories. It was founded in 1917 by a group of Anglo-Italian scholars, also frequented by Gaetano Salvemini, Guido Ferrando, Angelo Orvieto and Marion Cave. However, in 1923 the new director Harold Goat transformed it into a pro-fascist centre⁵. Having obtained an official recognition by the government with a Royal Charter, the Institute promoting the English language and culture in Italy, issued school certifications; Anna passed all the exams in 1933 and obtained her diploma with a score of 342/450⁶.

She married the year after. In 1936 her first daughter Susanna was born, in 1937 David Moshe.

Two families: some left and some remained

Due to the royal decrees of law no. 1390, 1728, 1779 issued in 1938, her husband Nathan was forced to leave the Faculty of Medicine in Florence, the worst hit by the racial laws in the faculty, where he was a volunteer assistant ophthalmologist. In June 1939 Anna's in-laws went to Jerusalem, where the professor Umberto Cassuto, who had naturally taken on the university position in Rome, was looking for accommodation. Two of their daughters left with him, Milka and Lea, both teachers in Secondary school, who were given documents they were entitled to German Jews who were then prevented from leaving⁷. Anna's sisters and a brother also left the country, but for different destinations: Elio for France, Sara with her husband Renzo Corcos for Morocco in 1939, Milena for Palestine in 1940. Piero and his wife Liliana Benedetti and parents took refuge in the countryside and he cooperated with the partisan resistance.

⁵ Mention of the history of the institute, which closed in May 1940 during the war period, are on its website <<https://www.britishinstitute.it>> (access 10 February 2019); see also Harold Goat, *History of the British Institute of Florence*, Firenze, 1939.

⁶ British Institute of Florence Archives, 1917-1940, I.E., III 3, Registers of the 1st Grade diplomas, 1928-1936.

⁷ Testimony of Lea Cassuto Rocca, Jerusalem, 18 January 1995, in Massimo Longo Adorno, *Gli ebrei fiorentini dall'emancipazione alla Shoà*, Florence, Giuntina, 2003, p. 87.

On Cassuto's side, Nathan was left with his sister Hulda of 24, who married in 1939 with Saul Campagnano of 28 years. The two young couples decided to stay close and help each other. Nathan and Anna with their children moved to Milan where he had become deputy rabbi; Hulda and Saul followed them. They shared a flat in via Cassiodoro 6, in the Fiera area⁸. In July 1942 Anna had Daniel; Hulda gave birth to Sara in 1940, followed by Ruben in 1942.

In 1942 they all returned to Florence because Nathan had been nominated chief Rabbi. This role meant he dealt with taking care of the refugee Jews in town: he headed the Committee of Christian Jewish aid, which also operated with the decisive help of Don Leto Casini and other priests appointed by Elia Dalla Costa⁹. The children, Hulda and Anna, who was at the end of her pregnancy and gave birth to Eva on the 13th of October 1943, were all hosted in the Convent of the Calza¹⁰.

Arrest and deportation

Just over a month later, on the 26th of November 1943, Nathan was arrested with other members of the committee, in which Felice Ischio, had infiltrated as a spy under the name of Marco. After three days, Anna was also arrested in piazza Signoria with her brother in law Saul and with Raffaele Cantoni, who had met in order to plan Nathan's escape¹¹. She was moved to the Santa

⁸ Information taken from the testimony of Marcello Cantoni, paediatrician in Milan for the couple's children, in *ivi*, pp. 91-92.

⁹ Hebrew University, Oral History Division, Interview N. (96), 1, «Casini, Leto» <<https://www.youtube.com>> (access 20 March 2019).

¹⁰ See the files in Francesca Cavarocchi, Elena Mazzini (eds.), *La Chiesa fiorentina e il soccorso agli ebrei. Luoghi, istituzioni, percorsi (1943-1944)*, Roma, Viella, 2018, pp. 239-242, 267-268, 301-303; Susanna Cassuto, *Una bambina di sette anni nella tempesta della Shoah*, «Libertà», 7 February 2010

¹¹ Marta Baiardi, *Persecuzioni antiebraiche a Firenze: razzie, arresti, delazioni*, in Enzo Collotti (ed.), *Ebrei in Toscana tra occupazione tedesca e RSI. Persecuzione, depredazione, deportazione (1943-1945)*, vol. I, *Saggi*, Rome-Florence, Carocci-Regione Toscana, 2007, pp. 58-60, 67-68; Mimmo Franzinelli, *Delatori. Spie e confidenti anonimi: l'arma segreta del regime fascista*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2012, pp. 196-197. Cfr. H. Campagnano, *E ne parlerai ai tuoi figli...*, cit., p. 122. A chronicle by Anna Di Gioacchino, Jerusalem, 20 August 1947 (Di Gioacchino private papers, Jerusalem).

Verdiana jail and was able to communicate with her parents¹². Both Anna and her husband were taken on the same convoy to the Fossoli concentration camp and on to the prison in Milan. The train stopped in Prato; there was a thick fog and Anna wanted to run away and throw off her fur coat hoping to stop her pursuers. But Nathan told her that she should not abandon the dozen Jews that were on the wagon with them¹³. They were deported to Auschwitz on the no.6 convoy, which left Milan on the 30th January, 1944 and reached the camp on the 6th of February.

An adventurous return

On the 9th May 1945 the Theresienstadt camp prisoners were freed from the Russians¹⁴. It took almost three months for Anna to reach Trieste. She told of her adventures in her letters to her relatives: «we went to Prague: we were 73 Jewish women (mainly from Rhodes) and were hosted by the Italian Consulate». They ate plenty and «after 4 days they put us on a train going to Linz, promising we'd be in Italy within a few days. But actually the train went to Vienna, because there was the Typhus fever in Linz, and they told us that we'd have to go to the Wiener Neustadt camp and wait there to repatriate». They waited five weeks, then they were transported to a camp in Hungary where Anna and another three, decided to head to the station to reach Graz. Following the advice of an Italian met by chance, they went up to Gr-Kanizsa and from there on to the Hungarian-Yugoslavian border and by train to Ljubljana. They had a brief stop in a village where a partisan invited everyone to dinner to celebrate the bridge that had been repaired. In Ljubljana they ran away as they tried to send them to another camp; with no documents they jumped onto a train for Postumia. «Another night spent in a station, taking the

¹² CDEC Historical Archive, 5HB, f. «Nathan Cassuto», two letters from Anna Cassuto, s.d.

¹³ G. Scilioni, *Nathan Cassuto*, cit., p. 9. See also Giovanna Bencistà, Silvano Priori, Giovanni Verni (eds.), *Ebrei a Firenze nel 1943. Persecuzione e deportazione*, Florence, Puntostampa, 1980.

¹⁴ *Il ritorno della Mamma, commemorazione tenuta dalla Signora Susanna Evron*, s.d., around 1990 (typed with Susanna Cassuto Evron's permission).

train in the morning for Trieste: I cannot tell you the excitement in crossing the border: an American got on to check documents but only the men's, so we entered with no difficulty. It was like a dream! It was the 1st of August!»¹⁵

In Trieste she asked for help from the community and heard that her children were in Jerusalem (except for the youngest, who died on the 26th of February 1944). It was upsetting, as she admitted. But she was ever so grateful for what her parents and sister in law Hulda had done.

They had been able to retrieve the children back from the convent and the families who had taken them in at their own risk. On the 22nd of March 1945 they had taken a boat to Taranto: the three adults of 71, 62 and 30 years with five children, Susanna of 9 years, Davide 8, Sara 5, Daniel 4, and Ruben 3¹⁶.

The Di Gioacchino family was tragically hit: including Anna's two maternal uncles, Giuseppe Della Pergola (8th September 1868 – 30th June 1944) and Esther married into Cava (20th November 1866 – 30th June 1944) never returned from Auschwitz. Nathan nor Saul (6th June 1910 – 6th March 1944) ever returned, even though Anna kept on hoping as no news ever came.

In Palestine going to the children so as «to never ever leave you»...

A soldier called Gordon from the Jewish brigade, who was supposed to go up North, offered to collect her from Trieste and return her to Florence¹⁷. Anna went to Viareggio, to her brother's Piero in order to regain her health. «My darling children, are you glad that your mother has returned and will soon come to see you..?»¹⁸

¹⁵ Letter from Anna Di Gioacchino, Viareggio, 12 August 1945, copy with permission from Susanna Cassuto Evron.

¹⁶ The date mentioned by Susanna Cassuto Evron, the 17th of August 2015 <<http://moked.it>> (access 20 march 2019).

¹⁷ CDEC, Interview with Sara Di Gioacchino, interviewer Liliana Picciotto, 2nd June 1988 <<http://digital-library.cdec.it>>. See Bruno Archi, *Storia generale della Brigata Ebraica. 1939-1945 Verso la proclamazione dello Stato d'Israele*, Rome, Aracne, 2014.

¹⁸ Letter from A. Di Gioacchino to her children, Viareggio, 30th August 1945, with Susanna Cassuto Evron's permission.

In November 1945 Anna finally managed to take the boat Demetrius illegally (or the Berl Katznelsen as it was called in the Haganah code). The ship was stopped by the British, who arrested 20 of the 220 passengers. She arrived on the 23rd of November. It was not easy for any of them: the children did not recognize her. Their mother appeared different, especially her gaze. Only her voice hadn't changed¹⁹.

Anna had to find a job. But she could not speak Hebrew well enough. She could have taught English; there was great demand for teachers. She admitted she could not face a whole class of exuberant young people just yet. A friend of the family, the Professor Emilio Franco, director of the Institute of pathological anatomy of the University of Pisa, asked her to work for him in the Pathology ward of the Hadassah hospital. She could be an assistant, initially as a volunteer, with the prospect of having a paid job later. She accepted. She started working in the analysis lab in the Autumn of 1947.

The site of the Hadassah in Jerusalem was practically under siege of the Arab forces. The medical staff reached the hospital only escorted by convoys. On the 13th of April 1948, in an attack by the Arabs of a convoy directed to Mount Scopus, 79 people were killed, among which Enzo Bonaventura, a professor who had been expelled from Florence and was in service at the Hebrew University, an acquaintance of the Cassuto. She also died, having survived the concentration camp. «They say that Anna Cassuto died on the spot with her usual beautiful serene expression»²⁰.

During the 1961 trial against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, the only Italian witness Hulda Cassuto Campagnano spoke of her brother Nathan's arrest, of her husband Saul Campagnano and her sister in law Anna²¹.

¹⁹ *Il ritorno della Mamma*, cit.

²⁰ Letter from Paola Cividalli to her parents, Jerusalem 15th April 1945, in Gualtiero Cividalli, *Dal sogno alla realtà. Lettere ai figli combattenti, Israele, 1947-1948*, Florence, Giuntina, 2005, p. 129.

²¹ Giorgio Romano, *Una testimonianza sul «capitolo» italiano al processo Eichmann*, «La Rassegna mensile di Israel», III s., 28, 1962, pp. 238-247.

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