

Giuseppe (Joseph) Gentili

[Go to personal file](#)

He was not expelled from the university under the race laws but dismissed even earlier, when he went into hiding to avoid taking part in the war in East Africa. At the age of nearly 80, this very active geographer and climatologist at UWA published an article, *Thoughts and views from my life*, a life spent mostly in Australia, where he had sought refuge in 1939. He wished to give notice to his readers that his memoirs were «not dramatic, emotional or controversial». They were indeed packed with silences, to avoid taking issue with academic circles and the group to whom he was bound by family ties.

[Link to other connected Lives on the move:](#)

His education

He was born, the son of Giulio and Elisa (Lisetta) Jona, on 13 March 1912 in San Daniele del Friuli, where the first Gentili had settled in 1676, from a Sephardi family on his mother's side and Ashkenazi on his father's, immersed in banking and commercial activity¹. He was named after his paternal grandfather, a leading figure in the community; he had two younger sisters, Ginetta, born in 1914, Magda born in 1916, and a brother, Robert, born in 1923. Having fled to Bologna in 1917, they returned to San Daniele, and in 1923 moved to Udine in 1923, as much because his mother was insistent that her sons should study, unlike her husband.

Giuseppe obtained his diploma in accountancy at the Antonio Zanon Technical Institute, where in consequence of the Gentile reforms geography was no longer a core subject and the cultural environment was torn apart by the colonial question and by discrimination against Slovenes². He had wanted

¹ He devoted several pages of his autobiography to the history of his family, Joseph Gentili, *Tracks Along the Way. Thoughts and Views from my Life*, «Australia Jewish Historical Society Journal», 11, 1990, pp. 93-127, later *Orme sulla via. Pensieri e riflessioni sulla mia vita*, translated by Adonella Cedarmas and Javier Grossutti, Udine, Ribis, 2001. See also Valerio Marchi, *Negli occhi e nel cuore. I Gentili ebrei friulani testimoni della Shoah*, Bari, Kappa Vu Storia, 2017.

² On this, see Francesco Micelli, *Joseph Gentili e la scuola geografica friulana*, in *Joseph Gentili*

to study zoology, but his studies allowed him to enrol only for economics and commerce; he therefore enrolled in the Scuola superiore di commercio in Venice, for the course in diplomatic and consular studies, where Ugo La Malfa also graduated in 1926. By enrolling in the university fascist groups (GUF) in both Venice and Trieste, he managed to steer a middle course by avoiding both: «every time there was a GUF meeting in Venice I turned up in Udine, and every time the Friuli organizations had to meet, I could say in all honesty that I was in Venice»³. His professor in economic history was the influential Gino Luzzatto (1878-1964), who was arrested in 1928 as an anti-fascist member of Giovane Italia, and was dismissed ten years later as a Jew, being replaced by the young professor Amintore Fanfani. Luzzatto suggested for his graduation thesis the topic of Jewish settlements in Palestine, but he turned to the competition between road and rail transport, graduating with top marks in 1933, under the holder of the chair in geography, Leonardo Ricci (1877-1967)⁴.

His marriage and the beginnings of his career in geography

He became engaged, and married Eliana, his professor 's daughter. Ricci, for

geografo friulano in Australia. Atti della giornata di studio (San Daniele del Friuli, 25 maggio 2001), Udine, Comune di San Daniele del Friuli, Litografia Designgraf, 2001, pp. 11-25, especially pp. 14-19.

³ Ibid., p. 37. On his university experience, see Gabriele Zanetto, *La geografia accademica cafoscarina tra le due guerre*, in *Joseph Gentilli*, cit., pp. 31-53. Gino Luzzatto (Padova, 9 January 1878 – Venice, 30 March 1964) after joining in 1919 the Royal Advanced Institute for Economic and Social Sciences in Venice, later Ca' Foscari University, became in 1922 the holder of the first Italian chair in economic history and the director of the Institute, a post he lost in consequence of his support for the manifesto of anti-fascist intellectuals. In 1942 he joined the Partito d'Azione, he became vice-president of the Jewish community in Venice and took part in the Venice Committee of Delasem (Group for assisting Jewish emigrants). After 8 September 1943 he went into hiding in Rome. On 6 July 1945 the Veneto Committee of National Liberation appointed him rector of Ca' Foscari; see Paola Lanaro, *Luzzatto Gino*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, vol. 66, 2006, available online at <<http://www.treccani.it/>> (accessed 31 January 2020).

⁴ For this and earlier autobiographical details, J. Gentilli, *Tracks along the way*, cit. p. 105. Leonardo Ricci (Milano 1877 - Mantova 1967), a geographer from Trento, a friend of Cesare Battisti, devoted himself chiefly to cartography; he collaborated with his brother-in-law Olinto Marinelli, with whom he shared in the editing of the *International Atlas* of the Italian Touring Club; he taught at the university in Venice from 1928 to 1952 and then moved to the Bocconi University in Milan.

his part, was brother-in-law to Olinto Marinelli from Udine (1874-1926)⁵ and was related to Attilio Mori, who was father-in-law to Roberto Almagià (1884-1962): by his marriage Giuseppe thus really entered the 'family' of Italian geography. His father-in-law recommended him to the Institute of Geography at the University of Florence, directed by Renato Biasutti, who was not only a native of San Daniele like Gentilli, but was also a student of Olinto Marinelli, the geographer who had succeeded his own father in the chair at Florence, where Ricci had lived and taught at the technical institute of commerce before coming to Venice.

When he was 22 Giuseppe moved with his wife to Florence. As an infantry second lieutenant in the class of 1912, and therefore liable to call-up, he served as head of the city military district; at the university he was «appointed as unpaid lecturer» in the Institute of Geography from 1 November 1934, ratified by the rector the following month, at the office in via Laura 48, near the Faculty of Humanities; after competitive examination in April 1935 he became a permanent lecturer, as shown by his service record⁶. «The pay was not much, but there was a fairly good library and the work load was very moderate. The students were perhaps a little casual, with the girls rather more serious than the boys».⁷ The same institute was also the home of the «Rivista geografica italiana» and the Società di Studi geografici e coloniali, in which Gentilli appears as secretary, with its own «Bollettino». To make some more money, he started to teach Italian geography to students at Smith College, which in 1931 had begun an Italian programme, in Florence itself⁸.

⁵ See Patrizia Giorgio, *Marinelli Olinto*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, cit., vol. 70, 2008, <<http://www.treccani.it/>> (accessed 15 February 2020).

⁶ Archivio Storico dell'Università di Firenze (hereafter ASUFI), *Stati di servizio*, file «Gentilli Giuseppe»; see also Regia Università degli studi di Firenze, «Annuario per l'anno accademico 1934-35», p. 113 and p. 110.

⁷ J. Gentilli, *Tracks along the way*, cit. p. 106.

⁸ Gentilli's teaching for Smith College in Florence emerges from The University of Western Australia Archives (hereafter UWAA), Cons 116, P275, V1, file «Gentilli Joseph», application, January 1940. On the College's external courses, closed down in 1939, see Bernhard Streitwieser, Anthony C. Ogden (eds.), *International Higher Education's Scholar-Practitioners*:

Experience as an academic in Florence, however, did not last long.

Officially resigned from the university

After Mussolini had declared war against Ethiopia on 2 October 1935, Gentilli, then 23 years old, was recalled to service, but made a decision not to report and took refuge in the mountains. When the Ethiopian campaign ended, he had to appear before a court martial and was reduced to the ranks. But the problem was with the university. Sixty-five years later he recalled that he had lost his post, «although Professor Biasutti had accepted my apologies»⁹. It is clear, however, from the rector's decision that it was actually the director of the Institute of Geography, namely Biasutti, who had ordered him to resume his duties within a certain period, a very short one given the dates. Considering that he had not attended, on 11 October 1935 the rector declared Doctor Gentilli «to have officially resigned», both on the basis of regulations and the statement from Biasutti himself in a letter of 9 October, of which there is no trace in the file. On 19 October the administrative council of the university ratified the decision, with retrospective effect from 23 September, for neglect of duty «without justification» and for not attending in person. With this decision, Gentilli's case came under the articles 46 and 47 of the Royal Decree of 30 December 1923 (articles abrogated by presidential decree in 1957), which defined as officially resigned those state employees who without justified grounds had not resumed duties in the required period or had been absent for more than ten days, and who could in consequence suffer suspension of grade, promotion and salary¹⁰. It is clear from Gentilli's service record that the administrative council had specified that this decision of the rector would apply from 29 October 1935 to 28 October 1936¹¹. If this

Bridging Research and Practice, Oxford, Symposium Books Ltd, 2016, p. 75.

⁹ J. Gentilli, *Tracks along the way*, cit. p. 106.

¹⁰ RD 30 dicembre 1923, n. 2960, *Disposizioni sullo stato giuridico degli impiegati civili dell'Amministrazione dello Stato* (Gazzetta ufficiale della Repubblica italiana, n. 17, 21 January 1924), articles 46-47 <<https://www.normattiva.it/>> (accessed 16 February 2020).

¹¹ ASUFi, *Stati di Servizio*, f. «Gentilli Giuseppe», decision of the rector 10 October 1935, which

ruling, after less than five months in service, was intended to last a year, it seems that lecturer Gentilli did not set foot in the small Florence Institute of Geography, where only an unpaid lecturer remained with the director; this was Doctor Emilio Scarin (1904-1980), also from Friuli, who from this point enjoyed rapid career movement, becoming a professor in 1941 with a chair at Genoa: Biasutti encouraged him to concentrate on colonial studies, sending him on several projects including to Ethiopia¹².

Away from fascist Italy

Gentilli was at pains to recall the signs of his own anti-fascism, from when he was a student; he had witnessed a punitive expedition against an organization in Gorizia which published a newsletter in Slovene, where the police had covered the getaway «so blatantly that I condemned the regime forever». When a cousin was sentenced to three months in prison for criticizing Mussolini at the barbers, he criticized his naivety, not his words; as a soldier he considered himself unlucky to have run up against a bad captain who was a leading fascist. As for his withdrawal from work at the university, this he justified with arguments as a geographer: seeing on the map how far Italian patrols had penetrated, it was impossible to believe that they had been attacked by Ethiopians, as the official version claimed. And he was shocked that soldiers called up to go to Ethiopia found themselves with Sicily to their left: they were sending them to Spain without even warning them. «Obviously, only a move out of Fascist Italy would have solved my problem»¹³.

explicitly quotes Biasutti's letter (missing); and meeting of the administrative council 19 October 1935. At this period the rector was the professor of Medicine Bindo De Vecchi.

¹² An unpaid lecturer in 1934-35, Emilio Scarin, having graduated in law from Bologna and then in political and social sciences from Florence in 1930, succeeded Biasutti in the post of geography and ethnography of Africa, and the post of political and economic geography; then with the academic competition of 1941 came the chair at the University of Genoa, which he held from 1942 to 1975. Cf. Tommaso Mazzoli, *Scarin Emilio*, in *Dizionario biografico dei friulani*, s.d. <<http://www.dizionariobiograficodeifriulani.it/>> (accessed 16 February 2020).

¹³ J. Gentilli, *Tracks along the way*, cit. p. 107 and earlier, in order of mention in the text, p. 106.

He was thinking about it. Having lost his university post he worked a little in his father's business and continued studying: he took part in the XIII Italian Geographical Congress held in Udine in September 1937, where he was impressed that Roberto Almagià, one of the acknowledged experts in the field, a native of Florence of Jewish origin, a professor at the University of Rome and joint director, with Biasutti and Mori, of the «Rivista geografica italiana», «disporting an ample black shirt»¹⁴. This was the congress at which the minister, Bottai, intervened to point out to the geographers what their duties were in line with the requirements of fascism, which was in fact reasserted in the January 1939 issue of the «Bollettino della R. Società geografica italiana»¹⁵. Giuseppe Gentilli sent two papers to the International Geographical Congress in Amsterdam, for which he was attacked by «Regime fascista», the daily newspaper of Roberto Farinacci, who pointed to him as «a man who shall never be able of understanding the spirit of Fascist Italy»¹⁶.

On 14 July 1938 there appeared in the «Giornale d'Italia» the so-called Race Manifesto. Among the signatories was Lidio Cipriani from Florence (1892-1862), who had volunteered in 1935 for the war in East Africa and was one of the council members of the Italian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology, of which Biasutti was «Honorary Secretary», while Nello Puccioni was «Publications Secretary» and the rector, Bindo De Vecchi, was President¹⁷.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 107. When he was expelled under the race laws, Almagià found shelter near the Vatican Library and published under the pseudonym Bernardo Varenio, cf. Ilaria Caraci Luzzana, *Almagià Roberto*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, cit., vol.34, 1988, <<http://www.treccani.it/>> (accessed 16 February 2020). See *Roberto Almagià e la geografia italiana nella prima metà del secolo: una rassegna scientifica e una antologia degli scritti*, Proceedings of a conference organized by the Istituto di geografia umana, University of Milan, 11-12 December 1986, Milano, Unicopli, 1988.

¹⁵ See *Atti del XIII Congresso Geografico Italiano tenuto in Friuli dal 6 al 13 settembre 1937*, Udine, tip. Del Bianco, 1938, especially p. 29, Giuseppe Bottai, *Mete ai geografi*, «Bollettino della Reale Società geografica italiana», s. VII, 4, 1939, pp. 1-3; and Giulio Sinibaldi, *La geopolitica in Italia (1939-1942)*, Rome, Libreria universitaria 2010, chapter I.

¹⁶ He related this himself; see J. Gentilli, *Tracks along the way*, cit., p. 107, quoting «Il regime fascista», 25 June 1938.

¹⁷ See Regia Università degli studi di Firenze, «Annuario per l'anno accademico 1934-35», p.137. In 1939 Cipriani moved to take charge of the Museo di antropologia e di etnologia di Firenze, then in June 1940 he was dismissed on a charge of selling some of its artefacts, and was also struck off several scientific societies. In 1945 he was arrested in Milan as a signatory

When the first racial measures came out on 5 and 7 September, Giuseppe took issue especially with the fact that the government was asking foreign Jews to leave Italy within 6 months. He informed his father that as soon as possible he too would leave Italy, where he had been born and where his children had been born: Leone Emanuele in 1937, and Cinzia Diana the year after.

I went to the passport section of the police office and politely said that, as a Jewish swine, I wished to leave for abroad. They replied that they would not let me go until they were sure that another country was willing to accept me, because they did not want to have to pay for my return if I was not admitted. Fair enough; I must have set a speed record starting all documents through the pipeline the same day, and picking up the next day the application form for immigration into Australia from the British consulate in Trieste.¹⁸

Where to go? A long way away

It would also have been good to move to Canada, but they warned him that they felt no need of European geographers or scholars; from New Zealand they «replied rather curtly, sounding as if applicants from Italy could not even be considered». He ruled out the idea of trying the United States, where competition was enormous. As far as he himself related, it occurred to him to write to four Australian scholars who had taken part in the congress in Amsterdam in 1938 and of whom he had read something; they replied and the geographer Wynne Williams forwarded the request for help received from Gentili to an Australian MP of his acquaintance; the academic secretary of the University of Western Australia also invited him to call in if he was passing there, although geography teaching at UWA did not exist¹⁹.

On 20 August 1939 Giuseppe embarked at Naples on the British ship

of the notorious Race Manifesto, but was freed after 7 months under a nonsuit. See Francesco Surdich, *Cipriani Lidio*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, cit., vol. 25, 1981 <<http://www.treccani.it/>> (accessed 18 February 2020). On Puccioni, Biasutti and the Florentine and Italian school, see Claudio Pogliano, *L'ossessione della razza. Antropologia e genetica nel XX secolo*, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2005, pp. 369-439.

¹⁸ J. Gentili, *Tracks along the way*, cit., p. 108.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Ormonde with a ticket for Sydney. He was alone. The landing permit in Australia cost £300; the Italian government allowed only £200 to be taken out; according to his recollections, he persuaded a friar he met on the train to bring him the other £100. On 12 September 1939 he landed at Fremantle, the harbour for Perth, where volunteers from refugee organizations referred him to the assistance office next to the synagogue in Brisbane Street. They found him a room in a boarding-house and the architect Harold Boas made an appointment for him with the founder of the History Department at UWA²⁰. Professor Fred Alexander (1899-1996) suggested he try the Carnegie Corporation of New York, from which came numerous funds for philanthropic and cultural activities in Australia: perhaps they would be able to allow a grant for Gentilli as a refugee scholar. He made a good showing; his CV showed that he knew six languages: Slovene, French, Italian, Spanish, Ladin and - with room for improvement - English²¹.

At the beginning of January 1940 the vice-chancellor Frank Reginald Beasley (1897-1976), an English jurist educated at Oxford, and from 1927 a professor at UWA, wrote a long letter to Carnegie's president, Frederick Keppel (1875-1943), in which he set out both the situation of the University in Perth, where for some years the teaching of economics had been lost but could now be resumed, and that of Gentilli, who seemed to have been expelled from the university as a Jew, while saying nothing - perhaps Gentilli himself had not done so - about the circumstances in which he had lost his post in Florence a

²⁰ Several gaps and inaccuracies with regard to names, in the memoirs of J. Gentilli, *Tracks along the way*, cit. On p. 109 he speaks of the architect Harold Boas (see Max Poole, *Boas Harold 1883-1980*, in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, vol. 13, 1993 <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/>>, as «President of the Jewish Relief Organisation»; in the Australian Jewish Welfare Society, between 1936 and 1946 this position appears to have been held by the scientist Isaac Boas (1878-1955), see Newman Rosenthal, *Boas Isaac Herbert*, *ibid.*, 7, 1979 <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/>> (accessed 15 February 2020). See Brian de Garis, *The Department of History in the University of Western Australia, 1913-65*, «Studies in Western Australia History Journal», 32, 2018.

²¹ UWAA, Cons 116, P275, V1, f. «Gentilli Joseph», and in particular F5-7, a translation in English under oath of the qualification received in Venice, Roma, 24 July 1939, and a brief CV. I am indebted to Patrizia Razzoli, a student on my course, for identifying Gentilli's personal file at UWA, and to Lesley Annamalay, team leader of Special Collections and Archives, Reid Library, for documentation provided to me.

good three years before the racial laws²². At any rate, in the CV in English which he presented to the university in Perth Gentilli correctly stated the dates of his service in Florence, without mentioning either his official resignation or expulsion for reasons of race, which was not the case, and which Beasley had inferred from his being a Jew²³.

On 24 February a telegram announced the grant of a three-year funding, which covered the salary for Gentilli, who in the meantime was giving a part-time course in statistics for the very modest sum of £125 a year, which just covered the costs of food and board at 82 Thomas Street, in the vicinity of the university. Having got the grant, by which he moved to a salary almost tripled of £350 a year, he became a lecturer in the Department of Economics at UWA and in May a member of the Faculty of Arts by appointment of the University Senate²⁴.

At this point he could afford to be joined by his wife and children. From his file at UWA it appears that a letter to the Department of the Interior on 2 April 1940 requested authorization for their entry to the country, and a note the following month mentions the authorization for the family to be reunited²⁵. Eliana and the children, however, never reached Australia.

New difficulties lay in wait.

²² For the dates reference is made not to those in Gentilli's memoirs of 1990 but rather to what appears from the archive documentation of UWA. I am grateful to Maria Carvalho of the UWA Archives for the list he sent; see UWAA, Cons 116, P275, V1, f. «Gentilli Joseph», and in particular F1-2, a letter from the deputy to the Acting vice -chancellor F.R. B.[easley] to J. Gentilli, 8 January 1940; F3-4, Id., letter to Frederick P. Keppel [Carnegie Corporation], 8 January 1940. For the *Frederick P. Keppel papers, 1880-1943*, Columbia University Libraries, Archival Collections. On his managerial role, see Richard Glotzer, *A Long Shadow: Frederick P. Keppel, the Carnegie Corporation and the Dominions and Colonies Fund Area Experts 1923-1943*, «History of Education», 38, 5, 2009, pp. 621-648. On the vice-chancellor of UWA, see Fred Alexander, *Frank Reginald Beasley*, in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, cit., vol. 13, 1993 <<http://adb.anu.edu.au>> (accessed 15 February 2020).

²³ UWAA, Cons 116, P275, V1, file «Gentilli Joseph», and in particular F5-7.

²⁴ Ibid., telegram from the Carnegie Corporation, 24 February 1940, and his appointment as lecturer in the Department of Economics, 23 February 1940; approval of the University Senate of his appointment as member of the Faculty of Arts, 9 May 1940.

²⁵ Ibid., letter to the Department of the Interior, 2 April 1940, and notes of 2 May 1940 which mention a letter of authorization, though missing from the file.

From enemy alien to refugee alien

With the declaration of war by Italy on 10 June 1940 Australians began to look askance at Australian Italians. All at once they were «enemy aliens». Their radios, cameras, tractors and boats were confiscated, in some cases even real estate; they could not travel and in some areas they had to report each week to the local police station; the National Security Act of 1939-1940 provided for the imprisonment in internment camps of those suspected of lacking loyalty to Australia or of being sympathetic to fascism. Gentilli was arrested and detained in Fremantle prison. In 1990 he recounted how he had written a spirited protest as a Jewish refugee and had managed to get out after just two weeks in prison. His protest was probably less convincing than the intervention of vice-chancellor Beasley; among the papers of the UWA archive there is a copy of one of his letters to the Intelligence Section of the Australian Military Forces, endorsed by the directors of the Economics and Philosophy departments, in support of «Dr. Gentilli». As of 24 July 1940 he appears as still interned, even though he was a displaced foreign scholar who had been dismissed from his teaching appointment in the università of Florence on the introduction of the antisemitic legislation.

The University would not have sought assistance for Dr. Gentilli nor have offered him an appointment had it not been convinced that his service would be valuable and his conduct above reproach. WE who have come into closet contact with him do not believe that he is in any way a supporter of the Fascist political system which deprived him of his livelihood in his native land. We believe, on the contrary that he is strongly opposed to that system and that he is most unlikely to do anything inimical to the interest of the country which has given him refuge²⁶.

It was important to state this, and important that professors were doing so.

At Fremantle itself the president of the «Giovane Italia» club, with clear anti-fascist leanings, had to undergo three years of internment because an Australian officer believed the title referred to the «Gioventù italiana del

²⁶ UWAA, Cons 116, P275, V1, f. «Gentilli Joseph», F1-2, letter to the Intelligence Section Australian Military Forces, 24 July 1940.

littorio». These experiences were suffered mostly in silence by the more than 7,700 interned aliens, including 4,700 men from the Italian community resident in Australia, which by this time had become the largest non-Anglo-Celtic community²⁷. Once again, in his memoirs Gentilli skates over the saddest and most unfair aspects; but in the sparse and fragmentary recollections on the internment of Italians in Australia there is also a pioneering contribution: in 1983 at the Italo-Australian Welfare Centre he recalled the first people who were interned in the western area, namely the crew members of the ship *Romeo*²⁸. Things had actually gone better for him than for the many fishermen, workers and carpenters of Italian origin. It was not until November 1943, however, that he obtained the official status of «refugee alien», no longer subject to the earlier restrictions.

At last he could have a camera. He was very satisfied²⁹.

From the early 1940s he took part in initiatives organized by the Australian Italian Antifascist Movement, linked to the organization, *Italia Libera*³⁰.

What really happened? Distress and nightmares

According to the 1933 census there were at that time in Australia more than 20,000 Italian males and about 6,700 females, compared with about 8,000 in 1921, the vast majority from the north of Italy and manual workers; after the decline in migration in the years of the great depression, the flow of arrivals

²⁷ On this Gaetano Rando, *Enemy aliens: gli italoaustraliani e il secondo conflitto mondiale*, Wollongong, University of Wollongong, 2005 <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/>> (accessed 10 February 2020).

²⁸ Joseph Gentilli, *Italian Roots in Australian Soil. Italian Migration to Western Australia*, Marangaroo, W.A., Italo-Australian Welfare Centre, 1983, p. 96.

²⁹ UWAA, Cons 116, P275, V1, f. «Gentilli Joseph», F91, letter of thanks from J. Gentilli to George A. Currie (the new vice-chancellor), 9 November 1943.

³⁰ Marcello Montagnana, *I rifugiati ebrei in Australia e il movimento antifascista Italia libera*, 11 «Notiziario dell'Istituto storico della Resistenza in Cuneo e provincia», 31, 1987, p. 96. The author (Turin 1936-Greece 2004) was an immigrant to Australia in 1939 at the age of 3 with his parents, because of the race laws, and his father Massimo had fought in *Italia Libera*. He returned to Italy in 1948. On the monitoring of Italian anti-fascists Australia by the fascist police a conservative estimate is that of the entries in the central political police records: 233, of which just 3 are women (1 from Friuli); see Gianfranco Cresciani, *Refractory Migrants. Fascist Surveillance on Italian in Australia 1922-1943*, «Altre Italie», 28, 2004, pp. 6-46.

increased tenfold in the 1950s³¹. Using Australian census data, Gentilli began to address Jewish immigration, with statistical and demographic studies, often working with the monthly «The Westralian Judean», which was financed by the Jewish congregation in Perth, of which he became director, though he was soon replaced because of his overly progressive views.

As far as he recalled, the first news of deportations and extermination arrived in 1943. What could he have done at such a distance? Talk about it and kill hope, or remain silent? In distress about his family, of whom he had no information, he approached a friend in Venice. His mother replied: in September 1943 they had gone into hiding in the hills in Tuscany, then in a convent near Verona, where his brother Robert had disguised himself as a seminarian and his sisters had taken on housework; as for other members of the family, some had emigrated like him, some of his cousins had joined the partisans, one was in hiding and safe, others had been taken away by the fascists and shot³².

In June 1945 Joseph devoted an article and much energy to a survivors relief fund raised at Perth: *Don't Let Them Die*³³.

As for his university post, it was for him «a real nightmare». In March 1941 the university senate had given approval for his course in economic geography, but when the three-year grant from the Carnegie Corporation was about to end, he was informed in December 1942 that his post would lapse for lack of funding. He had to make up something for himself: the new vice-chancellor, George Currie, continued to support him with internal

³¹ Ware Helen, *A Profile of the Italian Community in Australia*, Melbourne, Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, 1981, p. 13. For an outline picture, Adriano Buoncompagni, *In Australia*, in Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, Emilio Franzina (eds.), *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana. Arrivi*, Rome, Donzelli, 2009, pp. 111-119; for World War II, Andreina De Clementi, *Il prezzo della ricostruzione. L'emigrazione italiana nel secondo dopoguerra*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2010, pp. 73-83.

³² J. Gentilli, *Tracks along the way*, cit., p. 119. Details on his own parents and on others, in Id., *Italian Jewish Refugees in Australia*, «Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal», 10, 1989, p. 5, pp. 420 ff. I am grateful to Lea Campos Boralevi for information on some of Gentilli's cousins, referenced in the file.

³³ Id., *Don't Let Them Die*, «Westralian Judean», June 1945, pp. 1-2; Id., *Jewish Board*, ibid., July 1943, pp. 5-6.

funding for an unspecified research project, and he continued to teach.

The post in Australia

In the end the Department of Economics established a post for economic geography.

From several candidates he was chosen as lecturer from March 1947; on 4 July 1949 this was renewed for three years from 1 January 1950³⁴. In October 1947 he was appointed member for Australia of the *Bibliographie Géographique Internationale*, in 1951 for the International Geographic Union, president of the Western Australia Naturalist Club.

1952 was a year of great changes: he married again, to Melva Smith (1917-2006), an Australian with an Irish father, who the year after bore him his third child; and he decided to return to Europe with her for a period. He took a 10-month sabbatical starting in March and planned to go to the United States as well, where geographers would be meeting at Washington in August that year, for their Seventeenth International Congress³⁵. He brought forward his departure on 19 June on the *Queen Mary* with the intention of going to Seabrook in New Jersey, as is shown by his boarding documents³⁶. Why? Seabrook had been for some years the headquarters of the Johns Hopkins University Laboratory of Climatology, which quickly became the mecca of climatologists the world over, where an international group of experts worked under the leadership of Charles Warren Thornthwaite (1899-1963), who was also in charge of the new classification system for climate and the

³⁴ UWAA, Cons 116, P275, V1, f. «Gentilli Joseph», minute of the vice-chancellor, 10 March 1943, «Grant from C.S. & IR. Funds», preceded by minutes of the University Senate, Resolution 305, 21 December 1942. Here too the documentation on academic affairs and the scientific awards mentioned in the text: the application for the position of lecturer is on 24 February 1947, accepted 21 March to run from 1 March; the post is renewed on 7 July 1949 for three years from 1950, and again on 24 June 1952 for three years from January 1953.

³⁵ *Proceedings. Eighth General Assembly and Seventeenth International Congress, Washington, D.C. August 8-15, 1952*, Washington (DC), International Geographical Union, 1952; a record of the various sections is in *International Geographical Congress, Washington, 1952*, «The Geographical Journal», 119, 1953, pp. 81-90.

³⁶ See Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, under name* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/>> (accessed by log-in 15 February 2020).

champion of climatology's autonomy. Gentilli had already devoted himself to this topic, with two volumes on *The Raw Materials of the World and Australian Climates and Resources* published as early as 1946, and had followed Thornthwaite's formulae in preparing the cartography for *Australian climates [cartographic material]*³⁷. Landing in New York on 24 June 1952, on his own, he was arrested as a subversive and detained for two weeks without ever knowing exactly the reasons for his arrest³⁸. In March 1953 he returned home with Melva, on board the Himalaya³⁹.

He sought to make Australia known in Italy and to Italians, and vice-versa, both by studies in his special field and by writings and activities aimed at a wider public. In 1952 he published a volume for post-World War II Italian emigrants: *Australia terra promessa*, and dedicated some of his climate studies to his own country, «Al Friuli cu l'amor di un fi lontan». With the aim of making Italian culture and language known (and not so much to organizing entertainment for immigrants) he helped in the opening of the Dante Alighieri Society in Perth in 1954, of which he was secretary and then president. The first president was Francesco Vanzetti from Padua, who had emigrated to Albany at the age of 17 and was from 1929 a part time lecturer in Italian at UWA, where he organized a small Italian circle with his students⁴⁰. At the university where he had worked for 15 years Gentilli was promoted to

³⁷ Cf. J. Gentilli, *Australian climates [cartographic material]: Thornwaite formulae*, no name but Perth, W.A., 194-?, is visible online in the digitized copy of the National Library of Australia <<https://catalogue.nla.gov.au>> (accessed 15 February 2020). See «Quarterly Summary of Observations Made at Seabrook», New Jersey, 1 July 1952 – 30 September 1952; «Publications in Climatology», 5, 7, 1952, and John Russ Mather, Marie Sanderson, Charlie Warren Thornthwaite, in *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies*, ed. by Patrick H. Armstrong, Geoffrey Martin, London, Bloomsbury, vol. 18, 2015, pp.nn.

³⁸ This episode is related by Flavio Lucchesi, *L'Australia di Joseph Gentilli, geografo italiano nel Quinto continente*, in *Joseph Gentilli*, cit., pp. 79-110: p. 83, to who Gentilli himself related it during his research stay in Perth.

³⁹ See National Archives of Australia, Fremantle, Western Australia, *Passenger Lists, 1897-1963*, Reel 129, February-April 1953, under name, available online su <<https://www.ancestry.com/>> (accessed by log-in 15 February 2020).

⁴⁰ Gentilli, *The Unbent Poplar: Francesco Vanzetti and his Times*, Nedlands (WA), Department of Geography, University of Western Australia, 1988. Cf. also Dorothy Erickson, *Vanzetti, Francesco Cesare Luigi Stefano (1878-1967)*, in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, cit., vol. 16, 2002 <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/>> (accessed 15 February 2020).

senior lecturer in economic geography from January 1955 and, as with the former position, had it renewed after three years in 1958. His career was thus scarcely fast-moving, even though he is regarded as a founder of the UWA Geography Department set up in 1964⁴¹; he was promoted to Reader in Geography from 1965, with the usual three-year renewal. He acted as head of department for just three months, standing in for Professor Martyn Webb, from January to March 1967. He often asked for study leave: he took it in April 1958 for the following year; on 27 July 1960, he asked for it to teach as an associate professor of geography at Montana State University, where he gave up moving with his family because of his wife's ill health⁴². His university then granted him an annual study leave from March 1966, and again one from June 1973⁴³.

He returned to Italy from time to time. In 1959 he went with his wife and took their son Neil⁴⁴. Nor was he absent when in March 1966 a geography day was held in honour of Renato Biasutti in San Daniele del Friuli itself. It fell to him to write the opening account published in «Sot la nape», the bulletin - more popularizing than scientific - of the Società filologica friuliana. While the geographer Lucio Gambi (1920-2006), a former fighter and courier for the Resistance, urged the necessity of breaking with the tradition in which more than a few Italian geographers had sided with fascism and racism,⁴⁵ Gentilli did not dissociate himself from the prevailing version of the continuity of

⁴¹ Thus, for example, Annette Alafaci, *Gentilli, Joseph Hefetz (1912-2002)*, in *Encyclopedia of Australian Science*, 10 October 2005, latest update 7 February 2011 <<http://www.eoas.info/>> (accessed 15 February 2020), with a partial list of honours and scientific awards received. On the various promotions and their dates, I refer to the archival documentation. See F. Lucchesi, *L'Australia di Joseph Gentilli*, cit.

⁴² I thank Neil Gentilli for his testimony, 14 October 2021. The Department of Geography at the University of Montana had been opened in 1956 with geographer Vincent Shaudys (1927-2013) and first cartographer Jacquelyn Beyer (1925-2020).

⁴³ UWAA, Cons 116, P275, V1, f. «Gentilli Joseph». His service record information, with various dates, was compiled by Maria Carvalho, Reid Library, UWA, 20 March 2019, whom I thank.

⁴⁴ They returned on the Neptunia on 23 November 1959, see *National Archives of Australia, Fremantle, Western Australia, Passenger Lists, 1897-1963*, Reel 173, November-December 1959, under name, available online at <<https://www.ancestry.com>>, accessed 15 February 2020).

⁴⁵ Cf. Lucio Gambi, *Uno schizzo di storia della geografia italiana*, Turin, Einaudi 1973 and Id, *Geografia e imperialismo in Italia*, Bologna, Patron, 1992.

Italian geography, of which Biasutti is seen as the representative case. On this commemorative occasion, in the town which was Biasutti's birthplace as well as his, he made no more than a reference to the «very difficult days of the war» during which the master «despite temptations and blandishments managed to remain faithful to his principles and not prostitute racial teachings»⁴⁶.

An odd expression, this last. Gentilli could not have been unaware that Biasutti, with his teachings on the biology of race desired by the minister Bottai, had seemed most suitable for guaranteeing that the racist message would be transmitted to young people at university, as his colleagues at the University of Florence agreed at the time. Nor that in 1937 he had claimed «for geography in Florence the proud boast of having anticipated and later worthily accompanied the glorious undertaking which led to the founding of the Empire»⁴⁷. He could not have failed to see that the various editions of *Le razze e i popoli della terra* boasted many innovations but implemented only «slight, painless alterations that managed to avoid most carefully the embarrassment and nuisance of a self-critical account. Merely scrolling through the indexes, between the first edition of 1941 and the last in 1967, one would scarcely say that in the meantime the world had changed so dramatically»⁴⁸.

When Gentilli published his memoirs at nearly 80 years of age - more than half a century after the race laws and in an Australian magazine - he stated at the outset that they were «neither dramatic, nor touching nor contentious».

⁴⁶ J. Gentilli, *Renato Biasutti: un grande geografo friulano*, conference held in San Daniele 20 March 1966, «Sot la nape», 20, 1968, 1, pp. 59-64, and 2, pp. 56-64.

⁴⁷ Quoted by C. Pogliano, *L'ossessione della razza*, cit., p. 392. The reference, of course, to Renato Biasutti, *Le razze e i popoli della Terra*, Torino, Utet, 1941 (I ed.), 3 vol.; later revised and expanded, 1953-1957 (II ed.), 4 vol.; e 1959 (III ed.), 4 vol.; also Gruppo universitario fascista, Firenze, *Corso di biologia delle razze umane, dalle lezioni del Chiar.mo prof. Biasutti*, Firenze, S.A. Editrice Universitaria, undated but 1939-40.

⁴⁸ C. Pogliano, *L'ossessione della razza*, cit., p. 412; even more harsh and dismissive is the verdict of Roberto Maiocchi, *Scienza italiana e razzismo fascista*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1999, pp. 165-166. See further Enzo Vinicio Alliegro, *Antropologia italiana. Storia e storiografia 1869-1975*, Firenze, Seid, 2011, pp. 304-311.

In these pages he claimed, without trying to prove it, that Italian geographers did not underwrite the Abyssinian affair of 1935, and that among them there was «not a trace of antisemitism»⁴⁹. He touched on the *Race Manifesto* and the scientists who had supported it without naming names. All geographers and anthropologists knew each other slightly, and if the drafter of the the manifesto of racism, Guido Landra of Rome (1913-1980), was a minor figure in academic terms, to present the community of those scholars as uninvolved in the racist ideas that were circulating seems to depend precisely on the choice that so many adopted not to re-open wounds that had never healed. All the more because he sought to establish a link of mutual recognition with Friuli, and was also an advocate from 1965 of a Friulian university, in Udine, which then came about in 1976⁵⁰.

He retired ten years later, on 31 December 1977, with the title of Honorary Research Fellow, which was renewed year by year until 2000. He continued to do research, and was among the first to address climates changes and their impact. His long and productive scientific activity brought many prizes and awards: in 1993 he received the prestigious John Lewis Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia.

He died on 8 August 2000, aged 88.

Major publications

A complete bibliography in Javier Grossutti e Flavio Lucchesi (eds.), *Bibliografia di Joseph Gentilli*, in *Joseph Gentilli geografo friulano in Australia*. Atti della giornata di studio (San Daniele del Friuli, 25 May 2001), Udine, Comune di San Daniele del Friuli - Litografia Designgraf, 2001, pp. 159-167.

- *Atlas of Western Australian Agriculture*, Crawley (WA), The University of Western Australia Text Books Board, The University Bookshop, 1941.

⁴⁹ J. Gentilli, *Orme sulla via*, cit., pp. 41-42.

⁵⁰ Id., *Per una università friulana*, «Bollettino Camera di commercio industria artigianato e agricoltura», Udine, November 1965, reprinted in *L'università friulana di Joseph Gentilli 1965/66*, s.l., Istitut Ladin-Furlan, 2007.

- *Atlas of Western Australian Agriculture [Cartographic Material]*, Crawley (WA), University of Western Australia Text Books Board, 1941.
- *Australian Climates and Resources*, Perth, Whitcombe & Tombs, 1946.
- *Present-Day Volcanicity and Climatic Change*, Nedlands (WA), Geographical Laboratory, University of Western Australia, 1949.
- *A Geography of Climate*, Nedlands (WA), University of Western Australia, 1958.
- *Climates of Australia and New Zealand*, Amsterdam-New York; Elsevier, 1971.
- *Sun, Climate and Life*, London, Blond Educational, 1971.
- *Australian Climate Patterns*, Melbourne, Thomas Nelson (Australia), 1972.
- *Physioclimatology of Western Australia*, Nedlands (WA), Dept. of Geography, University of Western Australia, 1978.
- With Carlo Stransky and Charles Iraci, *Italian Roots in Australian Soil: Italian Migration to Western Australia, 1829-1946*, Marangaroo (WA), ItaloAustralian Welfare Centre 1983.
- *The Settlement of Swiss Ticino Immigrants in Australia*, Nedlands (WA), Dept. of Geography, University of Western Australia, 1988.
- *The Unbent Poplar: Francesco Vanzetti and his Times*, Nedlands (WA), Dept. of Geography, University of Western Australia, 1988.
- *Tracks Along the Way. Thoughts and Views from my Life*, «Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal», 11 1990, pp. 93-127; later translated as *Orme sulla via. Pensieri e riflessioni sulla mia vita*, with an introduction by Francesco Micelli, Udine, Ribis, 2001.
- With Giacomo Corna Pellegrini (editor), *L'Australia oltre il 2000*, Milano, Unicopli, 1999.

Archival sources

- Archivio storico dell'Università di Firenze (ASUFI), Stati di Servizio, f. «Gentilli Giuseppe».
- The University of Western Australia Archives (UWAA), Cons. 116, P275, V1, f. «Gentilli Joseph».

Bibliography

- *Joseph Gentilli geografo friulano in Australia. Atti della giornata di studio (San Daniele del Friuli, 25 May 2001)*, Udine, Comune di San Daniele del Friuli - Litografia Designgraf, 2001 (with bibliography).
- Annette Alafaci, *Gentilli, Joseph Hefetz (1912-2002)*, in *Encyclopedia of Australian Science*, 10 October 2005, latest update 7 February 2011 <<http://www.eoas.info/>>.
- Patrick Armstrong (ed.), *Studies of West Australian Weather: Essays Presented to Dr. Joseph Gentilli Following his Retirement from the Position of Reader in Geography at the University of Western Australia*, Nedlands (WA), Dept. of Geography, Univ. of Western Australia, 1979.
- Patrick H. Armstrong, *Obituary: Joseph Gentilli*, *Australian Geographical Studies*, 39, 2, 2001, pp. 249-252.
- Patrick H. Armstrong, Geoffrey J. Martin (eds.), *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies*, vol. 25, London, Continuum, 2006, pp. 34-41.
- J. Cramb, *Obituary: Joseph Gentilli 13th March 1912 to 1st August 2000*, «Bulletin of the Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society», 13, 2000, pp.109-111.
- John Dodson, *Obituary: Joseph Gentilli*, «Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia», 83, 2000, p. 99.
- Javier Grossutti, *Gentilli Joseph (Giuseppe)*, in *Nuovo Liruti. Dizionario biografico dei Friulani*, vol. 3, L'età contemporanea, ed. by Cesare Scalon, Claudio Griggio e Giuseppe Bergamini, Udine, Forum, 2011, pp. 1651-1654, ed. online <<http://www.dizionariobiograficodeifriulani.it/>>.

- Valerio Marchi, *Negli occhi e nel cuore. I Gentili ebrei friulani testimoni della Shoah*, Bari, Kappa Vu Storia, 2017.

Patrizia Guarnieri

Translated by Tom Dawkes

Cite as:

Patrizia Guarnieri, *Giuseppe (Joseph) Gentili (2020)*, in Ead., *Intellectuals Displaced from Fascist Italy. Migrants, Exiles and Refugees Fleeing for Political and Racial Reasons*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2019-
<<http://intellettualinfuga.fupress.com/en>>
e-ISBN: 978-88-6453-872-3
© 2019- Author(s)

Open Access article published under license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Publication date: 20 May 2020.

Updated 15 October 2021.