

## Noemi Susani Duru

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A doctor of medicine in 1937, that year she was one of just ten women who qualified to practice, out of the 253 doctors who qualified at the University of Siena. But with the racial laws she was removed from the professional register. She was not the sort to give up. In search of work: she set off by herself on the Marco Polo for countries she did not know. She can be seen smiling, on the saddle of a dromedary, in Palmyra, in a group photograph which she was able to send to her family, who had remained in Naples<sup>1</sup>.

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### A family with so many women

She was born in Livorno, in via delle Ville, which no longer exists, on 4 March 1908, when her parents were listed on documents as resident in Turin<sup>2</sup>. Noemi Regina Sofia was their eldest child, followed by Marcella Regina on 8 June 1910, and by Margherita on 29 January 1914. Her father, Angelo Susani (4 June 1878 - 6 March 1966), was a teacher of mathematics and physics in high schools, and he often found himself transferred from one school to another on the peninsula and in Sardinia;<sup>3</sup> his wife Lydia Salmoni (Florence 13 March 1877 - Naples 17 June 1964) did not follow him everywhere. Noemi and her sisters were thus all three born in the same seaside town, because in Livorno Lydia (or Lidia) could count on the kindness of her Sahadun aunts, the sisters of her mother Amalia.

She wanted her girls to have a musical education and to learn two foreign languages, as she had done in attending a French boarding school in Egypt,

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<sup>1</sup> For the photo, see the gallery [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> AOMFi, MCC, FP, f. 907, «Susani Noemi», Comune di Livorno, Ufficio di stato civile, «Estratto atto di nascita 1908 di Noemi Susani», 16 April 1938. For images of Livorno at this period, see those published on the site <[www.bellamilivorno.it](http://www.bellamilivorno.it)> (accessed 5 January 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Direzione generale per l'istruzione tecnica, *Ruoli di anzianità dei presidi e dei professori dei rr. istituti tecnici commerciali, per geometri ed inferiori isolati*, Rome, Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, 1 October 1933, p. 19.

where her large family – four brothers and a sister – had lived for a few years for the business affairs of their father, Giacomo Salmoni. So the education of the three Susani girls had to include music, French and English, regardless of the studies that each would later undertake. And Noemi, who played the piano, had made up her mind to become a doctor.

After high school and a leaving certificate obtained on 6 August 1924,<sup>4</sup> she enrolled at the University of Naples, the city where she was living with her family, in the elegant residential area of Vomero, with Liberty-style villas and buildings, since her father Angelo was teaching mathematics and physics at the Mario Pagano Technical Commercial Institute, in Santa Maria in Portico, founded in 1923 and named after an eighteenth century Neapolitan jurist<sup>5</sup>.

At the age of twenty-one, Noemi requested to leave the University of Naples, where she was then a fourth year student in the Faculty of Medicine, and twenty days after obtaining this, on 29 October 1929, she applied to enrol in the fourth<sup>6</sup> year of the same Faculty in Florence<sup>6</sup>.

### **Graduation and hospital practice**

Already when a student in Naples she had begun to practice, as a volunteer, at the ancient Ospedale della Pace, in the city centre, and she had felt «more and more disgusted and above all discouraged» in seeing how patients, often prostitutes, admitted to hospital for syphilis were treated<sup>7</sup>.

I was suffering chiefly because I could not talk about these things in the family with my mother, I who on the contrary normally told her everything [...] then one day there was a suicide ... A woman admitted to hospital for three weeks threw herself out of a

<sup>4</sup> ASUFI, AC, SS. f. «Susani Noemi», high school certificate, Naples, 6 August 1924.

<sup>5</sup> The M. Pagano Institute in Naples is still in existence, but in 1957 moved from its original location to its current one in via Andrea d'Isernia (historical notes can be found on the website for State schools in Campania <[www.gm-edu.it](http://www.gm-edu.it)> (accessed 5 January 2022)).

<sup>6</sup> ASUFI, AC, SS. f. «Susani Noemi», registration form filled in and signed by her on 29 October 1929. The file contains, among other things, her exams and marks obtained.

<sup>7</sup> Brief typewritten translation of an unpublished short story by Noemi Susani, «The oldest profession in the world», undated, made by Gabriella Sacerdote Fontana, whom I thank for sending me a copy. I am indebted to Nadir Caruana, a student in my Cultural History course, for establishing an initial contact with Mrs Sacerdote and for some bibliographical information.

window left open through an oversight. That day I left the Ospedale della Pace, wearing a white coat, never to set foot in it again... my heart full of pain, which soon became rebellion. Why so much pain, so much suffering, so much injustice in life. Is it possible that people do not ask themselves before judging 'those women there' why they have sunk so low... Is it possible that none of these 'proper' women, none of them, ever wonders how they would have reacted in their place?»<sup>8</sup>

In Florence, she was able to gain hospital experience at the Santa Maria Nuova hospital through the medical clinic and the surgical clinic, and in the obstetric-gynaecological university clinic<sup>9</sup>. But these were not easy years for her, apparently also because of a disappointment in love. The fact is that she had fallen far behind in her exams, and starting from February 1935 she had submitted several times an application to the rector on stamped paper to be enrolled outside of the course<sup>10</sup>.

At last on 3 November 1937 she graduated, defending her thesis dealing with «Lymphogranuloma in childhood» before a committee of eleven professors, including the chairman Ferruccio Schupfer (1867-1952) and of course her supervisor, the renowned Professor Carlo Comba, from the pediatric clinic. She obtained a final mark of 92/110<sup>11</sup>.

Immediately afterwards she passed the qualifying exam to practice professionally as a surgeon at the University of Siena, in 1937, as verified by the certificate she obtained<sup>12</sup>. There were not many women who achieved that objective: there were just ten in the list of 253 qualifying doctors in Siena in that session; 243 male graduates from all over Italy, and of the ten female

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> ASUFI, AC, SS. f. «Susani Noemi», see «Ospedali presso cui si compie la pratica», signed by the rector of the University of Florence, undated.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, requests from 1935 to 1937.

<sup>11</sup> AOMFI, MCC, FP, f. 907, «Susani Noemi», copy of the degree certificate, authenticated by the notary Giulio Cirri of Florence, Florence, 22 April 1938; the law firm she contacted was in via degli Speciali 1, in the heart of Florence. Noemi Susani's typewritten thesis is kept, as well as in digital format, in the Biblioteca biomedica, Università di Firenze, *Tesi storiche*, T.L.61.11 <[onearch.unifi.it](http://onearch.unifi.it)> (accessed 5 January 2022).

<sup>12</sup> AOMFI, MCC, FP, f. 907, «Susani Noemi», certificate on stamped paper from the University of Siena, signed by the rector, 2 April 1938.

doctors – including her – one was German, one other Polish, probably both Jews who had fled their respective countries<sup>13</sup>.

### **In search of her own road**

She decided to stay in Florence, and took up residence there on 12 April 1938. As a student she stayed at the Morandi guest house in piazza Santissima Annunziata 2, or in via Fra Bartolomeo 18;<sup>14</sup> as a new doctor she changed her address again several times in the space of just over a year. She is found living at via Ricasoli 5, the same street where a quite well-known Livorno family of Jewish origin lived, that of Arnaldo Bonaventura, a journalist and musicologist, librarian at the Cherubini Conservatory, and his son Enzo, who was teaching psychology at the University. Then she moved to the nearby via Cavour 48 and a few months later to via Sant'Egidio 12: always in the centre, near the Duomo, near to the University, as well as to the city hospital of Santa Maria Nuova and the Istituto degl'Innocenti beneath Brunelleschi's portico in piazza Santissima Annunziata. Doctors who wished to specialize in pediatrics could gain some experience in that ancient orphanage for abandoned children, and of course in the Anna Meyer children's hospital, where the university pediatric clinic was located, run by the professor under whom she had graduated. Carlo Comba (1870-1951), a Waldensian and a pupil of Giuseppe Mya, was also the director of the provincial ONMI and even earlier he had been president of the Federazione degli Aiuti materni, created to provide assistance in breastfeeding especially to working mothers, whether single or married<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> *Elenco dei candidati che hanno superato l'esame di Stato nella sessione dell'anno 1937 per l'abilitazione all'esercizio della professione di medico chirurgo*, «Ministero dell'Educazione nazionale. Bollettino ufficiale», 67, 19, 7 May 1940, pp. 1064-1072.

<sup>14</sup> These two addresses alternate in the papers of his file in ASUFI, AC, SS. f. «Susani Noemi»; the later addresses are obtained from documents in AOMFI, MCC, FP, f. 907, «Susani Noemi». A Morandi hotel a few metres from Piazza SS. Annunziata still exists today.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Patrizia Guarnieri, *Dagli Aiuti materni all'ONMI: l'assistenza alla maternità e all'infanzia del fascismo*, in Lucia Pozzi, Marco Breschi (eds.), *Salute, malattia e sopravvivenza in Italia fra '800 e '900*, Udine, Forum-SIDeS, 2007, pp. 59-83, and Ead., *Guardare avanti: Firenze per la cura dell'infanzia*, in Enrico Ghidetti (ed.), *Una nuova sanità per Firenze capitale. Atti del convegno, 19-*

In April 1938 Noemi planned to enter a *concorso* for ordinary assistant at the hospital in Rome,<sup>16</sup> and she gathered various documents which she would need, especially later: a certificate of «good moral and political conduct» requested and obtained from the Naples Prefecture; the declaration that nothing against her was found in the Criminal Records Office, issued to her by the Livorno Public Prosecutor's Office; the certificate of Italian citizenship issued on stamped paper by the Municipality of Naples with the stamp of the local prefecture to authenticate the signature<sup>17</sup>.

At the same time, on 28 April 1938, she made a formal request to the «Chairman of the Doctors' Union» of the province of Florence to be entered in the professional register, and for this purpose she also presented her documents and paid the fee<sup>18</sup>. The official and correct name was «Fascist Doctors' Union», since in 1935 the regime had decreed a new legal framework for the health professions,<sup>19</sup> and the provincial secretary was Dr Umberto Luigi Torrini, who, on the same day, registered the new member. From then on she could follow her profession in private practice or, to begin with, in some local authority rural practice, even though the doctor's salary was low and the work was tiring. In any case, it did not last long for Noemi.

### **First her father, then her sisters and herself: expelled or disbarred**

«Jews in Naples infiltrating all professional sectors» was the headline of an unsigned article in the newspaper «Il Mattino» of 4 September 1938<sup>20</sup>.

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20 novembre 2015, Florence, Polistampa, 2016, pp. 163-193.

<sup>16</sup> AOMFi, MCC, FP, f. 907, «Susani Noemi», evidently declared by her for this purpose, the Municipality of Naples issued her a certificate of good conduct, stamped and signed by the prefect on 23 April 1938. In the file all the documents listed in the text, including the extract of the birth certificate requested from the Municipality of Livorno.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Noemi Susani to the chairman of the Fascist Doctors' Union, 28 April 1938.

<sup>19</sup> RDL n. 184, 5 March 1935, *Nuova disciplina giuridica dell'esercizio delle professioni sanitarie*, in GU n. 64, 16 March 1935.

<sup>20</sup> The article is quoted by Francesco Soverina, *L'autunno del fascismo a Napoli. Dalle leggi razziali alla dissoluzione del fronte interno*, «Meridione. Sud e Nord nel mondo», 15, 2/3, 2015, pp. 175-208: p. 177. See also Vincenzo Giura, *La comunità israelitica di Napoli 1863-1945*, Naples, ESI, 2002.

At the end of that year, her father was forced to leave his post as a professor at the Mario Pagano Institute in Naples, by the decree of 12 December 1938 from the Ministry of National Education. Angelo Susani was one of 106 Jewish teachers expelled from Italian technical and professional institutes who, unlike their fellow teachers in high schools and teachers' colleges, were not even specified by name and surname when the lists or numbers of the expelled were published in «Il Giornale della scuola media»<sup>21</sup>. With other colleagues expelled like him, he offered private lessons gratis to Jewish children removed from their classes<sup>22</sup>.

Prospects for the future had also become dark for Noemi's sisters. Marcella, who after the Naples Conservatory had started playing as a violinist in the San Carlo orchestra, was expelled<sup>23</sup>. Margherita, who had graduated in mathematics in December 1937 and married the lawyer Jacob Sacerdote on 9 January 1938, had settled in Turin because her husband worked there, but the savings bank had fired him because he was a Jew.

The impossibility of working, which immediately affected school and university staff belonging to the «Jewish race», also affected professionals, including doctors, after a few months. On the basis of the law of 29 June 1939, on the «framework for the exercise of the profession by citizens of Jewish race», «Susani dott.ssa Noemi di Angelo» was also removed from the professional register, together with 48 other colleagues enrolled in the same register of the province of Florence, all declared of Jewish race<sup>24</sup>. The

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<sup>21</sup> See Michele Sarfatti, *La scuola, gli ebrei e l'arianizzazione attuata da Giuseppe Bottai*, in Liliana Di Ruscio, Rita Gavina, Bice Migliau (eds.), *Le leggi antiebraiche del 1938. Materiali per riflettere e ricordare*, Rome, Pubbliprint, 2007, pp. 53-60, which refers to the «Giornale della scuola media», 8 January 1939, p. 10, and 9 February 1939, p. 2. Angelo Susani is in the index compiled by Annalisa Capristo and Giorgio Fabre, *Il registro. La cacciata degli ebrei dallo Stato italiano*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018, p. 164, with a guide to the measures of the provisions of the Ministry of National Education (on which cf. also MEN, «Annuario», 1938 and 1939),

<sup>22</sup> This is mentioned by F. Soverina, *L'autunno del fascismo a Napoli*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Marcella Regina Susani Collinet (Livorno 8 June 1910 - Naples 30 August 1986) married Oscar Collinet (?-1981).

<sup>24</sup> See the original analysis by Lucrezia Nuti, *Medici e fascismo: espulsioni politiche e razziali ed epurazioni a confronto*, Perugia, Morlacchi, 2021, with preface by Patrizia Guarnieri, *Radiati dall'albo professionale per motivi politici e razziali*.

Provincial Board passed a unanimous resolution at its meeting of 1 March 1940. But the communication was sent to her in advance by letter from the zealous secretary of the Fascist Union, Umberto Luigi Torrini, who also referred to the certificate of discrimination, should she have it. This certificate, which could be obtained upon request and after a certain procedural process from the Demorazza (the Directorate-General for Demography and Race) at the Ministry of the Interior, granted a benefit in respect of anti-Jewish measures to those who could provide documentation of special war service or services to fascism. Nothing, however, suggests that Noemi Susani had asked for this or had the requisite qualifications. In the province of Florence there were only four registered doctors who obtained it. The disbarred doctors could no longer carry out their work, except to deal with Jewish patients. Ironically, and through ministerial delays, it was only in April 1940 that the Ministry of National Education published, in the «Gazzetta ufficiale dello Stato», the list of candidates who had passed the State examination for medical qualification over two years and a half earlier. Paradoxically, Dr Noemi Susani «di Angelo» became qualified to practice medicine when a law had already taken away her right to do so<sup>25</sup>.

### **The decision to leave (engaged or not)**

However, she did not remain to wait. If the Fascist Union of Doctors had sent her the letter of disbarment on 15 January 1940, she certainly did not receive it. Noemi was no longer in Florence; she was no longer even in Italy or in Europe. On Christmas Eve 1939 she had sailed from Brindisi for Syria.

It was a risky departure, according to what she recalled many years later in a short account published in 1989 in a French magazine and the following year in a collection of «experiences» intended for Italian middle school children<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> GU, «Supplemento ordinario», 18, 101, 29 April 1940, Rome, Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Essay by Noemi Susani Duru in Anna Maria Bruzzone, Luciana Pasino (eds.), *Lettura esperienza. Antologia per la scuola media*, Turin, SEI, 1990, later reprinted in *Memorie di famiglia*.

The two versions do not completely coincide, certain details are not correct<sup>27</sup>. It was she who ditched her fiancé, the notary, who opposed her decision to leave the country just before their mothers could agree on the wedding date, she said in 1989, priding herself that she had always been independent, from a young age, and impulsive<sup>28</sup>. There had already been the breakup of a previous engagement with a doctor from Naples, well known to the family, and more painful. Neither Attilio nor Vittorio were Jewish, and the first failed wedding was due to the fact that the wealthy «Aryan» family of the young Attilio did not wish to be related to Jews, who were later declared of an inferior race, and were left without work<sup>29</sup>.

For the intrepid Noemi, the problem was not leaving, but getting to where she could earn a living. Perhaps that is why she did not consider the United States, where foreign doctors could not practice until after passing the exams for the American doctors' licence. She began looking at job advertisements in medical journals and writing everywhere, «from South Africa to Australia». The replies seemed similar to each other; in her words they all declared themselves happy and honoured to hire her as a collaborator, as long as she could assure them that she was «*chrétienne*» or at any rate, if she was not, as long as she was in a position to convert within five or six months of her arrival.

It is not entirely believable that in this period, and in countries not threatened by Nazism and Fascism, this was the only impediment, especially since there were so many Jews looking for work, and the Italians had arrived years after the Germans to example. These difficulties were certainly increased by her

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*I giovani tramandano le storie dei nonni, da un'idea di Giordana Menasci e Anna Orvieto, Rome, Litos Roma, 2013, pp. 18-20 <[www.pitigliani.it](http://www.pitigliani.it)> (accessed 5 January 2022).*

<sup>27</sup> For example, the occupation attributed to her father, from which he was expelled, is incorrect, and she could not have had fourteen family members deported to concentration camps as early as 1939. Noémie Duru Sisani [sic], *C'était la nuit de Noël, «"Ensemble". Le mensuel protestant du Sud-Ouest*», 47, December 1989, pp. 4-7.

<sup>28</sup> I learned of the broken engagements from the conversation with her niece, Gabriella Sacerdote, December 2021; cf. with N. Susani, *C'était la nuit de Noël*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Evidence to the author from her niece Gabriella Sacerdote, December 2021.



being a woman and qualified in a profession considered not for women. There is, however, some evidence to confirm that Noemi Susani was looking for a job in her field abroad in various distant countries, preferably English-speaking.

Instead, she found it in another part of the world, where French predominated, among Catholic nuns, thanks to a Vatican missionary.

### **An oasis in the desert**

Her name appears in the volume of the «Medical Directory» for 1942, where the lists of doctors registered with the Royal College of General Practitioners of the UK and the colonies were published, and more precisely in the list of *temporary registered practitioners*, but with the sole indication of the qualification, «MD Florence 1937», and an *address uncommunicated*<sup>30</sup>. In the UK Medical Registers of the following year, her name appears in the *Foreign List*, and with the address Via Giuseppe Bonito, 29, Vomero, Naples. Identical details were published in the Medical Register of 1947. She had registered on December 13, 1939<sup>31</sup>. Meanwhile, she found work in a medical analysis laboratory in Florence, underpaid and exploited as a Jew. One day she was introduced to a friar who urgently needed to do some analyses and leave. She helped him and in talking she revealed to him that she was Jewish and could not find work even abroad. Had she ever thought of offering her services to Christian missions? She had only to write to the appropriate secretariat in the Vatican sending her qualifications; the friar hinted to her that he was a missionary. Anyway, the next day she forwarded everything to Rome, and a fortnight later she received a job offer at a Catholic mission in

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<sup>30</sup> *The Medical Directory, 1942. London Provinces Wales Scotland Ireland Abroad Navy Army & Air Force Temporarily Registered Practitioners*, London, J. & A. Churchill Ltd., 1942, p. 2294, in the «temporary registered practitioners», digitized copy in <[www.ancestry.it](http://www.ancestry.it)> (accessed by login 5 January 2022).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. «The Medical Register for 1943», p. 2060; «The Medical Register for 1947», p. 2259. These registers in the series «UK Medical Register 1859-1959» are digitized and viewable at <[www.ancestry.it](http://www.ancestry.it)> (accessed by login 5 January 2022).

Palmyra, Syria<sup>32</sup>. It was November 1939.

She rushed to find how to reach that place in the middle of the desert. To begin with, it was necessary to get a place on the steamship, then she could take a train to Damascus and from there somehow reach Palmyra. However, the steamship from Trieste for that month had already left: she had to wait for the next one, which set sail on 22 December, and then stopped at Venice and Brindisi on 24 December. She decided to embark from Brindisi, in Puglia, in order to go south before departure and spend the last days with her family in Naples. She recalled that on Christmas Eve it was her mother who accompanied her to the port: the ship Marco Polo was waiting for her<sup>33</sup>.

It had been the flagship of the Austrian merchant navy, with the original name of Kaiser Franz Josef, launched by the Trieste shipyard in 1911; in 1919, with the passing of Trieste to Italy, it began to fly the Italian flag and changed routes and names several times, even taking on that of President Wilson. Sold once again, from 1936 she sailed the Adriatic under the name of Marco Polo on the Trieste-Alexandria route to Egypt. She was able to carry nearly 2,000 passengers, with just 125 in first class<sup>34</sup>. It seems that it was only upon boarding, when she handed over her passport and work certificate, that she realized she had forgotten her exit permit from the Foreign Ministry. So she was simply told that she could not leave, and she flew into a rage from despair, since she was Jewish and did not want to stay in Italy a day longer. It was in vain that her mother tried to calm her down; to no avail the police chief looked for some regulation that provided an exception suitable for her case. Then suddenly, perhaps because it was Christmas Eve, according to the

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<sup>32</sup> N. Susani, *C'était la nuit de Noël*, cit., p. 6. According to her, it was the mission of Jésus Réparateur, to which perhaps this publication is relevant, which I have not been able to find: *Constitutions de la Société de Jésus Réparateur*, no place or publisher, 1933.

<sup>33</sup> This part of Noemi's 1989 French story matches her story in Italian of the following year, later reprinted: see the pages in A.M. Bruzzone, L. Pasino (eds.), *Lettura esperienza*, cit., later reprinted in *Memorie di famiglia*, cit., pp. 18-20.

<sup>34</sup> News and photos from the motor ship Marco Polo in <[adriatica.altervista.org](http://adriatica.altervista.org)> (accessed 5 January 2022). After 8 September 1943 it was seized by the Germans, and on 12 May 1944 it was sunk at the entrance to the port of La Spezia to prevent its use by the Allies.

protagonist's story, the miracle happened: at the sound of the steamer's siren, the boarding clerk printed the permit stamp on her passport and wished her a safe journey and good luck<sup>35</sup>.

### **In Palmyra: quite a different life**

She certainly managed to reach Palmyra, an oasis in the Syrian Arab desert with a population centre that was then about 300 people – as made clear by the entry written in the *Enciclopedia italiana* in 1935 by the orientalist Giorgio Levi Della Vida<sup>36</sup>, who had been expelled from the university for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to fascism in 1931 and emigrated to the United States in September 1939<sup>37</sup>. Palmyra had always been a destination of foreign travellers susceptible to its allure and of expeditions for archaeological excavations, but it was by the French that the development of the site was promoted in the 1920s and 1930s<sup>38</sup>.

In less than a year after arriving, in the city known also as the «bride of the desert», Noemi married Raymond Duru, a French architect who had been working in Syria since at least 1936 and was sharing in the excavations of the agora. Their wedding invitation card allows us to be precise: Palmyra, 17 October 1940<sup>39</sup>. That same year, during the excavations he was conducting with Henri Seyrig (1895-1973), *directeur général des antiquités* in Syria during the French mandate, her husband Raymond discovered a large house

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<sup>35</sup> I summarize from *Memorie di famiglia*, cit., p. 19. It is clearly an account somewhat fictionalized for the audience of middle school students to whom it was addressed.

<sup>36</sup> Giorgio Levi Della Vida, Renato Bartolini, *Palmira*, in *Enciclopedia italiana*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1935 <[www.treccani.it](http://www.treccani.it)> (accessed 5 January 2022).

<sup>37</sup> She left Naples with a permanent visa under quota on the Vulcania on 20 September 1939 <[heritage.statueofliberty.org](http://heritage.statueofliberty.org)> (accessed by login 5 January 2022).

<sup>38</sup> On the French excavation operations, and on Henri Seyrig's group to which Duru belonged, see Chiara Zanforini, *Palmira gli anni del mandato*, especially pp. 8-13 <[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)> (accessed 5 January 2022). A Unesco World Heritage Site since 1980, the enhancement of the Palmyra site was later carried out by Syrian archaeologists, in particular by Khaled al-As'ad, director of the archaeological site and the museum for forty years, murdered in August 2015, during the war that has convulsed Syria since 2011, with systematic destruction of cultural heritage by ISIS.

<sup>39</sup> The wedding invitation is reproduced here in the [gallery](#).

decorated with stucco and mosaics<sup>40</sup>.

And what about her? No documentation has so far come to light on exactly what work awaited her in Palmyra, but in family memory it is handed down that she still often found herself providing treatment among prostitutes, Syrian girls who lived in brothels for French soldiers. Even the experienced nurse Washiba did not want to enter these places, disreputable for a decent woman. In one of her short stories, Noemi recalled an emergency in which she found herself, when the mother superior of the mission had finally, after many scruples, decided to call her, because one of the girls in her house had a haemorrhage. She was in the ninth month of pregnancy, the medical captain was absent, his lieutenant was ill. It was up to her, and her alone, seeing that the God-fearing nurse refused to. Noemi rushed to the house, outside the town, behind the fort and beyond the first dunes. The girl lost the child but she was saved, and all the other girls went to thank the doctor: «that night remained in my memories» – wrote Noemi – «as one of the most astonishing, strangest, richest and most packed with emotions that I've ever lived through»<sup>41</sup>.

Certainly Noemi's life had radically changed in a short time, thanks to her having learned languages, her previous experiences in the hospital and her enterprising character: she can be seen smiling, on the saddle of a dromedary, in a group photograph with civilians, a man and a woman, and French soldiers.

The whole area of Syria and Lebanon was under the French mandate from 1920, recognized by the League of Nations,<sup>42</sup> and by July 1940 control had passed to the collaborationist Vichy regime, with a High Commissioner

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<sup>40</sup> Christiane Delplace, Jacqueline Dentzer-Feydy (eds.), *L'agora de Palmyre. Sur la base des travaux de Henri Seyrig, Raymond Duru et Edmond Frézouls*, Bordeaux-Beyrouth, Ausonius éditions - Institut Français du Proche-Orient, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Noemi Susani, unpublished story, undated, typescript sent to me by her niece, Gigliola Sacerdote.

<sup>42</sup> AA. VV., *Grande Libano e Siria*, «Oriente moderno», Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino, 6, 2, 1926, pp. 86-95.

appointed by Philippe Pétain, until the British defeated the forces linked to the Vichy government. Syria proclaimed independence in January 1944, but this became effective when French troops withdrew in April 1946. In the meantime, in 1945 it sided with the Allies.

### **Liberated people in Naples, deportees in Rome, partisans in Piedmont**

Coming out of Syria in those turbulent years was for them neither desirable nor possible. Where to go? Raymond certainly did not intend to return to his country and take her to Nazi-occupied France. As for Naples, where Noemi's family lived, it was the city most affected by British and American aerial bombing attacks between 1940 and 1943, over a hundred, with about ten thousand dead. The central and working-class districts were the most damaged: the gutted buildings, the almost demolished port as the main base for Axis troops to Africa, and so the main target of Anglo-American aviation<sup>43</sup>. Among the population there rose a sort of «impulsive anti-fascism», until the revolt throughout the long September of 1943, culminating in the famous Four Days of Naples from 28 September to 1 October 1943, which allowed the city to free itself from Nazi occupation before the arrival of the Allies, and before the project to deport Italian Jews. In Naples the racial laws were immediately repealed.

Noemi's parents and sisters were saved. Even Margherita and her husband Jacob, having decided not to emigrate as they had wanted, had left Turin and, following the recommendation of their father Angelo Susani, had gone down to Naples, where they still remained; there their daughters were born, Gabriella in 1941 and Viviana<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> See at least Gloria Chianese, «Quando uscimmo dai rifugi». *Il Mezzogiorno tra guerra e dopoguerra, 1943-1946*, Rome, Carocci, 2004, and Gabriella Gribaudi, *Guerra totale. Tra bombe alleate e violenze naziste. Napoli e il fronte meridionale 1940-1944*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Noemi's 'Piedmontese' uncle, Jacob Sacerdote (Voghera 29 December 1908 - Naples 13 October 1968) would have been an authoritative source of information on the Jewish Community in Naples, deputy to its very old chairman Lamberto Foà for many years and then chairman himself. For some interesting notes, see *Giornata della Cultura* - Sandro Temin: «150

Italy, however, was divided. It was not easy to exchange family information between Africa and Italy, even if some letters did arrive, to the great joy of the recipients, and it was not easy even from one city to another on the peninsula. Some of their relatives were living in Turin:<sup>45</sup> her maternal uncle Augusto Salmoni, who had moved there, and his sons Bruno (1912-2008) and Alberto (1918-2011), who mixed with the Turin anti-fascist circles. Bruno had a degree in Medicine, Alberto was a student of the Faculty of Chemistry together with Primo Levi, and in their circle of Jewish friends he introduced Bianca Guidetti Serra, a law student he had met in 1938. After 8 September 1943, Noemi's cousins both joined the partisan resistance. Bruno at one point tried to cross over to southern Italy but, failing to do so, joined the Mantua fighting group, which also sent units to Naples<sup>46</sup>. Alberto joined a Giustizia e Libertà brigade with Paolo Gobetti, son of Piero and Ada, who was acting as messenger to their hideout, together with the young Bianca. In May 1945 it was Ada Gobetti, deputy mayor after the Liberation, who celebrated the civil marriage between Alberto and Bianca<sup>47</sup>. It was only after the war that they finally resumed regular contact with Noemi and the good news could be celebrated: rescues, births, marriages.

On the other hand, the news they received about their uncle Riccardo Salmoni (1867-1944) was tragic. A widower, over seventy years old, he had not moved from Rome, and on 16 May 1944 – the capital would be liberated by the Allies on 4 June – he was arrested at his home, in via Flaminia 314,

years together», «Moked», 29 September 2013 <[moked.it](http://moked.it)> (accessed 5 January 2022).

<sup>45</sup> Written evidence to the author from her niece, Gabriella Sacerdote, 14 December 2021. I have no details of Augusto's eldest son, a merchant, Aldo Salmoni (1906-1953).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Associazione nazionale combattenti FF. AA. regolari guerra di liberazione, *Gruppi di combattimento Mantova e Piceno* <[www.combattentiliberazione.it](http://www.combattentiliberazione.it)> (accessed 5 January 2022); I have also been able to use passages from the unpublished «Diary» by Bruno Salmoni, kept in the private archive of the family, whom I thank.

<sup>47</sup> See Bianca Guidetti Serra, *Bianca la rossa*, Turin, Einaudi, 2021, chapter 1. On the site dedicated to her by the National Committee for the Celebrations of Bianca Guidetti Serra (19 August 1919 - 24 June 2014) is a brief profile of her husband Alberto Salmoni, with whom she had a son and from whom she separated in 1963 <[www.biancaguidettiserra100.eu](http://www.biancaguidettiserra100.eu)> (accessed 5 January 2022); see further Ada Ortona, *Alberto Salmoni*, «Ha Keillah», 3, June 2011 <[www.hakeillah.com](http://www.hakeillah.com)> and for both brothers CDEC, Digital Library, by name <[digital-library.cdec.it](http://digital-library.cdec.it)> (accessed 5 January 2022).

taken to the Fossoli camp, and after a little more than one month deported to Auschwitz<sup>48</sup>. It was an official of the Foreign Ministry, a former Italian consul in Moscow, later in Casablanca, who had reported him to the German command: he had demanded immediate payment of a considerable amount (which was not owed, in the victim's view), in exchange for his silence. At the end of August, Jacob Sacerdote filed a complaint against him at the ministerial commission for the purge, not having yet had the news that his uncle had not survived<sup>49</sup>. «It would appear that the Deputy High Commissioner has so far not decided to submit De Franchis to the judgment of purge», was the prompt reply, signed by minister Alcide De Gasperi, on 18 January 1945, which caused further bitterness in the Susani-Sacerdote family<sup>50</sup>.

### **Qualification in medicine: neither in France nor in Italy**

In 1945 Noemi and her husband moved to Morocco, which was a French protectorate. In essence, they went where Raymond had important jobs to do, and more specifically to Marrakech, where he had been appointed head of the town planning department. While following him, Noemi tried to continue working in the hospital environment, and did so both in Marrakech and in Casablanca<sup>51</sup>. Richard was born in 1947, and when the child was ten, in 1958 – two years after the proclamation of independence of Morocco – they

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. in the entry «Salmoni Riccardo» in Yad Vashem, *The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names*, with some discrepancies in dates of birth and place of death, the pages of testimony issued by Margherita Susani Sacerdote and Viviana Sacerdote Di Segni <[yvng.yadvashem.org](http://yvng.yadvashem.org)> (accessed 5 January 2022).

<sup>49</sup> Typewritten letter from Jacob Sacerdote to the Foreign Minister, Commissione ministeriale per l'epurazione, 24 August 1944, reproduced in CDEC, Digital Library <[digital-library.cdec.it](http://digital-library.cdec.it)> (accessed 5 January 2022).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, draft letter from Minister De Gasperi to Jacob Sacerdote, 18 January 1945. It is not clear what happened to the informer Carlo De Franchis. In 1949, at the request of the committee for research on deported Jews, Jacob Sacerdote declared that De Franchis had been readmitted to his career «in relation to the general atmosphere of the moment» and appointed consul in Gibraltar; *ibid.*, letter from Jacob Sacerdote, 19 January 1949.

<sup>51</sup> According to her son Richard Duru, administrator of the profile dedicated to Noemi Regina Duru (containing some information which is incorrect when compared with the documents), in <[www.myheritage.it](http://www.myheritage.it)> (accessed by login 5 January 2022).

moved to Bordeaux, where Raymond was offered the post of department head of the Bâtiments de France. Duru initiated important and fruitful excavations in the region, continued his career and his publications increased<sup>52</sup>.

In France, however, Noemi's qualifications, having been obtained in Italy, were not recognized, nor was her professional experience, gathered in countries where she had practiced while they were under French mandate or protectorate. In Italy, Dr. Susani was reinstated ex officio in the professional register of the reconstituted association of doctors and surgeons of the province of Florence, after the liberation of the city in August 1944 and the consequent abolition of racial laws. On 30 November 1947, however, the council of the association then removed her again from the Register, having concluded that she was untraceable and had lapsed in paying her annual subscriptions, which were requested as back payments<sup>53</sup>.

Thus Dr. Susani Duru was no longer formally authorized to practice medicine in Italy, except by updating her dues with a significant outlay of money<sup>54</sup>. Nor was she licensed to practice in France, except by taking the exam for medical qualification in the country of which she was not yet a citizen, more than twenty years after having obtained it. At that point the still pugnacious doctor gave up.

In June 1963 she received French naturalization<sup>55</sup>. With her family in Italy she

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<sup>52</sup> Among several, see at least: Maurice Dunand, Raymond Duru, *Oumm el-'Amed, une ville de l'époque hellénistique aux échelles de Tyr*, Paris, Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1962.

<sup>53</sup> The notification of arrears and the request for back payments from the reconstituted Order to previously disqualified persons is also found in the other cases examined. See MCC, FP, f. 907, «Susani Noemi», note on headed paper from the chairman of the Association of Doctors of Florence, Pietro Siciliani, 30 November 1947, on the resolution to cross off Susani.

<sup>54</sup> The request for arrears seemed frankly unacceptable to those who had been unjustly expelled, complained a Jewish colleague of Noemi Susani to the Association of Doctors of Florence, who after escaping to Indochina and Australia planned to return to live and work in Florence. See AOMFi, MCC, FP, f. 769, «A.E. Curth Murray-Aynsley», letter from A.E. Curth Murray-Aynsley to ENPAM and to the Association of Doctors of Florence, 18 March 18 1963; and here Lucrezia Nuti, *Annemarie Eleonore Curth Goldberg Murray-Aynsley* (2021).

<sup>55</sup> The naturalization order n. 7705x61-33, 7 June 1963, was published in the «Journal officiel», 16 June 1963.



always maintained intense reciprocal ties. Aunt Noemi's name is the one that Viviana, daughter of her sister Margherita, chose for her firstborn. Born in Jerusalem – where her mother, with a degree in physics, and her engineer father moved in 1968 – later coming to live in Rome, Noemi Di Segni has been president of UCEI (Unione delle Comunità ebraiche italiane) since 2016<sup>56</sup>.

Noemi Susani died, aged 95, in Pau, an artistic city near the Spanish border, on 25 April 2000,<sup>57</sup> when in Italy the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation from Nazi-Fascism was being celebrated.

### Principal publications

- *C'était la nuit de Noël*, «"Ensemble". Le mensuel protestant du Sud-Ouest», 47, December 1989, pp. 4-7.
- Essay in Anna Maria Bruzzone, Luciana Pasino (eds.), *Lettura esperienza. Antologia per la scuola media*, Turin, SEI, 1990, reprinted in *Memorie di famiglia. I giovani tramandano le storie dei nonni, da un'idea di Giordana Menasci e Anna Orvieto*, Rome, Litos Roma, 2013, pp. 18-20 <[www.pitigliani.it](http://www.pitigliani.it)>

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- Private archive of Susani-Sacerdote family.
- AOMFi, MCC, FP, f. 907, «Susani Noemi».
- ASUFi, AC, SS. f. «Susani Noemi».

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<sup>56</sup> See *Custode della memoria. A colloquio con Noemi di Segni, presidente dell'Ucei*, «Il Sismografo», 24 January 2020 <<http://ilsismografo.blogspot.com>> (accessed 10 January 2022).

<sup>57</sup> Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE), *France Death Index 1970-2000*, «Noemi Regina Sofia Susani» <[www.myheritage.it](http://www.myheritage.it)> (accessed by login 5 January 2022).

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