

Renzo Luisada

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He was an Italian Jewish painter, who exhibited his artwork and published his illustrations before and after migrating. Between 1936 and 1939 he also played a leading role in assisting Italian Jews and foreign refugees. In the fall of 1939, he and his wife Paola Malvano – a writer and Zionist activist herself – arrived in Mandatory Palestine with their two little girls. After working for a decade in agriculture, Renzo moved to Tel Aviv with his family and finally resumed painting, teaching art, and exhibiting his works. For the Luisada brothers and sisters it was a diaspora: none of them returned to live in Italy. Neither did their sons and daughters, who now live in Israel and the United States.

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The family in Tuscany: between Livorno and Florence

The third of four children, Renzo was born in Florence on 27 October 1905 into a family of doctors, lawyers and painters from the Jewish bourgeoisie of Livorno¹. His father Ezio (Livorno 1870 - Florence 1933), born in Livorno to Augusto Luisada (1833-1880), a Sephardic native of Livorno, and Isabella Tiring (1847-1927), originally from Istanbul, was a well-respected physician and the author of medical and philosophical books and scientific articles published in Italian, American and German journals². As early as 1898, Ezio Luisada was already affiliated with the Masonic lodge «La concordia» in Florence, and like many of his Freemason brothers, he was among the donors to the *Società per il pane quotidiano* [Society for the daily bread], in which other Florentine Jews were also active as donors, following a

¹ The other children were: Aldo Luisada (1901-1987), Elsa Luisada Ghiron (1902-1981) and Gabriella Luisada Ben-Arieh (1919-2007).

² See, among others, Ezio Luisada, *Il calore come agente fisiologico, fisiopatologico e terapeutico*, Florence, Società tipografica fiorentina, 1911; Id., *La vita universale, l'intelletto e la metapsichica sulle tracce del pensiero scientifico*, Rome, Casa ed. Luce e ombra, 1924; Id., *La fisica e le proprietà dell'anima generale e individuale*, Florence, Parenti, 1927.

consolidated practice among Italian liberal Jews of involvement in local secular philanthropy³. After serving as a major in World War I, Ezio opened a hydrotherapy clinic in via Cavour in Florence,⁴ and lectured in physical therapy at the Istituto Superiore of Florence⁵. Renzo's mother, Elisa Rignano (1881-1943), was also from Livorno; his grandmother Emma Aghib (1859-1946) belonged to a wealthy family of coral and precious wood merchants and married Vittorio Rignano (1860-1916), a lawyer, painter and photographer who was well established in the circles of intellectuals and artists of Livorno; in 1882, she commissioned a musical composition for a family wedding from composer Pietro Mascagni, who was her age and also from Livorno⁶. It was Renzo's maternal grandfather Vittorio, one of several painters of Jewish origin in Livorno during the Belle Époque, who inspired and recognized the child's precocious talent, even though – as family tradition tells – he warned him not to make a profession of his artistic inclinations⁷. Renzo's passion for the arts and decision instead to make them his main activity became a source of tension in the family, especially with his father Ezio.

³ Il pane quotidiano in Firenze, *Relazione di Arturo Linaker sull'andamento morale ed economico della Società. Bilanci e risultati statistici dal 1905 al 1912*, Florence, Spinelli, 1913, p. 16. On the role of Jews in secular charitable organizations in liberal Italy, see Luisa Levi D'Ancona Modena, *Giving and Dying in Liberal Italy: Jewish Men and Women in Italian Culture Wars*, in Abigail Green, Simon Levis Sullam (eds.), *Jews, Liberalism, Antisemitism. A Global History*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 153-182.

⁴ Daniela Roccas, Rosanna Supino (eds.), *L'apporto degli ebrei all'assistenza sanitaria sul fronte della Grande Guerra*, Turin, Zamorani, 2017, p. 230.

⁵ «Annuario del Ministero della pubblica istruzione», 1922, p. 230. The Istituto Superiore di Studi Pratici e di Perfezionamento eventually became the University of Florence.

⁶ Roger Flury, *Pietro Mascagni. A Bio-Bibliography*, London, Greenwood, 2001, pp. 165, 173. On the Aghibs and the connection between the families, see Flora Aghib Levi D'Ancona, *La nostra vita con Ezio e ricordi di guerra*, edited by Luisa Levi D'Ancona Modena, Florence, Firenze University Press, 2021.

⁷ *Avigdor Renzo Luisada - Biography*, edited by his family, in *Luisada Avigdor Renzo* <<http://www.luisada.com>> (accessed 21 December 2021).

The beginnings as a painter and illustrator between Florence and Rome

In the 1920s, the Luisadas lived in Florence at Viale Milton 43⁸. Renzo graduated from the classical high school Michelangiolo, and after completing his military service in the Alpine Corps, he enrolled in the Faculty of Letters of the University of Florence (a.y. 1923-24). Since he had not taken any exams, he decided to transfer to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, where he studied, between 1925 and 1928, with Felice Carena and Ennio Pozzi. His studies at the Academy and immersion in the Florentine educational environment «resulted in a strong, affectionate bond with classical art, such an elemental influence that it has remained with him all his life»⁹. In his own words, «the fine finish and completeness of classical art attracted me during my art studies, and the classical tendency is quite evident in my sketches from the years 1921-1930»¹⁰. His precocious skill in sketching and his solid classical training led him to specialize in portraiture, while, influenced by impressionism, especially Cezanne, he also painted landscapes and still lifes. Renzo's choice to become a painter led to tensions with his father, who refused to support him during his studies. In this period of existential crisis, for the first time Renzo approached Zionism, a movement that had various followers among young people and some intellectuals of the Florentine Jewish community¹¹. In 1928-29 Renzo moved to Rome to study at the Accademia di San Luca, where he had been awarded a prestigious recognition. After the Roman experience he returned to live in Florence, at via Cesare Abba 2, in an apartment owned by his father Ezio, which perhaps indicates a reconciliation between the two¹². In Florence, Renzo enrolled

⁸ ASUFI, AC, SS, b. 139, f. 2719, «Luisada Renzo», letter from Renzo Luisada to the rector of the University of Florence, 31 October 1923. I wish to thank Professor Patrizia Guarnieri for the reference.

⁹ Dov J. Stier, *Avigdor Renzo Luisada, The Artist and His Work. An Interview*, Tel Aviv, Isart, 1982, p. 8.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Massimo Longo Adorno, *Gli ebrei fiorentini dall'emancipazione alla Shoà*, Florence, La Giuntina, 2003, pp. 15-16, 40-42 and *passim*.

¹² Archivio storico del Comune di Firenze (ASCFI), *Comune di Firenze, Serie Lavori e servizi pubblici*, 2.4.9, b. 20, f. 45. Another apartment in the same building belonged to Bice Cammeo,

again at the university, in Physics, in the Faculty of Sciences; despite having successfully passed various exams (Inorganic Chemistry, Mathematical Analysis, Analytic Projective Geometry, scoring 30/30 in each of them), in 1932 he finally dropped out. Meanwhile, he worked as an illustrator primarily of children's books and continued to paint, particularly landscapes and still lifes. In Florence he was in contact with local and foreign painters who attended the Academy, among them, for example, Yehezkel Streichman, a Lithuanian Jewish painter and ceramist, who had migrated to Palestine in 1924, and was enrolled in the Academy in Florence from 1928 to 1931. Luisada would meet Streichman, at that point an established painter, many years later in Israel¹³.

Renzo and Zionism in the 1930s

In Florence, Renzo resumed his Zionist activism. In November 1931, when he and others initiated a conversation among the youth of the Florentine community, he reflected on his own Jewish identity:

By appealing to that remnant of Jewish conscience which certainly everyone more or less felt at their core, by urging them to clarify it to themselves and to bring it back from a purely negative condition to a new operational dignity [...] he recommended the study of Judaism, starting with the language and history, which is almost ignored by the majority. [...] He then said it was our duty to know the past of our fathers in order to be aware of the value of what they handed down to us, and so that our children would not, some day, accuse us of having given up, out of laziness or thoughtlessness, something true and vital, more

a Jewish activist who, since the early years of the Twentieth century, had contributed to various initiatives to assist children and the unemployed in Florence. On Bice Cammeo (1875-1961), see Patrizia Guarnieri, *Tra Milano e Firenze Bice Cammeo a Ersilia Majno per l'Unione Femminile*, in Giovanna Angelini, Marina Tesoro (eds.), *De amicitia. Scritti dedicati a Arturo Colombo*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2007, pp. 504-515. For the context of other Italian Jewish women activists and philanthropists, see Luisa Levi D'Ancona Modena, *Jewish Women in Non-Jewish Philanthropy in Italy (1875-1938)*, «Nashim. A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues», 20, November 2010, pp. 9-33. Bice's brother, Federico Cammeo (1872-1939), a scholar of ecclesiastical law, was a professor from 1925 and Dean of the Faculty of Law of the University of Florence from 1935 until his expulsion due to the racial laws in 1938. Federico died a year later, while his widow Clotilde Levi Cammeo and their eldest daughter Maria were arrested in Florence and deported to Auschwitz in June 1944.

¹³ D.J. Stier, *Avigdor Renzo Luisada*, cit., p. 6. Yehezkel Streichman, *Recent Work*, Tefen, Open Museum, 1991.

necessary than any other good we could leave them¹⁴.

In January 1932 Renzo was in Turin to lead a discussion on Zionism;¹⁵ two months later, between 23 and 27 March 1932, he was one of the three organizers of the study week to honor the tenth anniversary of the death of Shmuel Zvi Margulies, who had been chief rabbi of the Community of Florence, teacher of Alfonso Pacifici and father of religious Zionism in Italy¹⁶. It was through the activities of the Italian Zionists that Renzo met Paola Malvano (1908-2003). The Malvanos were a well-known Jewish family from Turin – a distant relative, the lawyer and councillor of State Giacomo (1841-1922) had been an Italian diplomat and politician, secretary of the ministry of Foreign Affairs and a senator¹⁷. Paola remembered how the whole extended family (including grandparents and uncles) lived in a beautiful building in Turin and how they defined themselves as «Italians of Jewish religion»¹⁸. A pupil of Augusto Monti, who was a writer and well-known anti-fascist, Paola frequented the circles of anti-fascist intellectuals, which included Leone Ginzburg, Cesare Pavese, Beppe Fenoglio, Norberto Bobbio and others. In 1930 she published a novel, *Val D'Oltra*, with a preface by Augusto Monti himself, who was enthusiastic about the young writer¹⁹. In the same years, she became close to Zionism and, although she was an anti-fascist, she distanced herself from such friends as Leone Ginzburg, who, in the meantime, had joined the movement of Justice and Freedom, which had been founded in 1929²⁰. Among the young Zionists active in Turin, in 1932 Paola participated, with her sister, in an organized trip to *Erez Israel*, which

¹⁴ *Cronaca fiorentina*, «Israel», 17, 12, 3 December 1931, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Da Torino*, «Israel», 17, 22, 11 February 1932, p. 7.

¹⁶ *La settimana di studio nel decimo anniversario di Rabbi Scemuèl Zevi Margulies*, «Israel», 17, 29, 31 March 1932, p. 3.

¹⁷ Bruno Maida, *Dal ghetto alla città. Gli ebrei torinesi nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento*, Turin, Zamorani, 2001, pp. 253-254.

¹⁸ Paola Malvano, Orit Shwarz, *Val D'Oltra ve sipurim aherim*, Tel Aviv, Bitan, 2000 (in Hebrew).

¹⁹ Ead., *Val D'Oltra: racconto*, with an introduction by Augusto Monti, Turin, Fratelli Buratti, 1930.

²⁰ Arturo Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere. Gli ebrei italiani e l'emigrazione in Palestina prima della guerra (1920-1940)*, Genoa-Milan, Marietti, 2003, p. 107.

had an impact on their subsequent life choices²¹. She wrote an article about this experience including her reflections on the rediscovery of her own identity and the enthusiastic description of the life of the pioneers, of life in the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* (agricultural cooperatives)²².

In the meantime, in 1933 Renzo and Paola married and, after a few months in Turin, they moved to Milan where their first daughter Laura was born on 23 December 1934. During these years, Renzo continued oil and tempera painting, working as an illustrator for children's books, and exhibiting;²³ between 1933 and 1935, he collaborated with the Florentine publishing house Salani, illustrating, among others, two books for the series «Grandi piccoli libri», *Don Chisciotte* and *Mitologia*,²⁴ and, for the series «Piccoli libri per la patria», *Il fascismo* by Enrico Bianchi, in addition to *Martino Crusoè e l'isola misteriosa*, translated from English into Italian by Ester Modigliani²⁵. Renzo continued to be active in the Milanese Zionist circles and wrote plays for children on the occasion of various Jewish holidays such as *Purim* and *Tu Bishvat*²⁶. Meanwhile, the family grew with the birth of the second daughter Dina, born in Turin on 11 September 1938.

Activism for foreign refugees and Italian Jews

In its daily work you have been the Comitato, indefatigably, day and night, seven days a week, even on the Shabbath, to the anger of rabbi

²¹ Ibid., pp. 63-65.

²² Paola Malvano, *Impressioni di un viaggio in Erez Israel*, «La Rassegna mensile di Israel», s. II, 7, 9, January 1933, pp. 420-424.

²³ See, for example, *Milano. Inaugurazione di mostra di pittura*, «Israel», 21, 28, 30 April 1936, p. 7.

²⁴ *Don Chisciotte*, abridged edition by Enrico Bianchi, Florence, Salani, 1933; Enrico Bianchi, *Mitologia*, Florence, Salani, 1933.

²⁵ Enrico Bianchi, *Il fascismo*, Florence, Salani, 1935; Thomas Charles Bridges, *Martino Crusoè. Avventure di un ragazzo in un'isola misteriosa*, translated by Ester Modigliani, illustrated by Renzo Luisada, Florence, Salani, 1935. Also see the digitized illustrations in the database *Capti. Contemporary Art Archives Periodical Texts Illustrations* <<http://www.capti.it>> and at the sites *Letteratura dimenticata* <<http://www.letteraturadimenticata.it>>, and *Luisada Avigdor Renzo*, cit. On the publishing house, see Ada Gigli Marchetti, *Una difficile obbedienza al regime: l'editore Adriano Salani*, in Massimo Castoldi (ed.), *Piccoli eroi. Libri e scrittori per ragazzi durante il ventennio fascista*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2016, pp. 77-82.

²⁶ *Conferenza Luisada*, «Israel», 22, 14, 31 December 1936, p. 7.

Castelbolognesi; but we told him that we were trying to save lives, and that for such a purpose all religious laws (with few exceptions) could be neglected. You have done so much for us refugees that later historians should be aware of it²⁷.

With these words Hans Froehlich saluted Renzo Luisada. Froehlich was a German Jewish refugee, who had been aided, like hundreds of his fellow citizens fleeing Nazi Germany, by the Assistance Committee for Jewish Refugees from Germany, founded in 1933 in Milan. Renzo had been an active member of the Committee since 1936, first as secretary and later as chairman, closely collaborating with Raffaele Cantoni and Umberto Nahon. While Cantoni and Nahon have been the subject of various historiographical investigations, Luisada's role on the committee is generally only hinted at, even in the research dedicated to him as a painter²⁸. After the promulgation of the racial laws in 1938, the committee became the *Comitato di assistenza agli ebrei in Italia* (Comasebit) [Assistance Committee for the Jews in Italy] by extending assistance to the Italian Jews who were in need, with the aim of helping as many Jews as possible leave Italy. Luisada, like Cantoni and others of Comasebit, tried to mobilize the Union of Jewish Communities, which had been founded in 1931, and local communities such as those in Rome to find funds, office space and volunteers²⁹. But the two organizations, the Union and Comasebit, were soon bitterly at odds. The Union, which served as a referent for the Ministry of Interior, viewed with distrust the presence in the Comasebit of Zionists and politicians who were suspicious to the regime.

²⁷ Center for Jewish History (CJH), New York, Leo Baeck Institute (LBI), AR 25276, *Hans Froehlich Collection, Correspondence, Personal Correspondence*, b. 2, f. 18, «Luisada, Renzo, 1969-1974», Hans Froehlich to Renzo Luisada, n.d. but from the early 1970s. For the consultation of the collection, which has been entirely digitized, see <<https://archives.cjh.org>> (accessed 20 December 2021).

²⁸ See *Avigdor Renzo Luisada - Biography*, cit.; D.J. Stier, *Avigdor Renzo Luisada*, cit.; information on Luisada's role can be found in Klaus Voigt, *Il rifugio precario. Gli esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945*, vol. 1, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1993 (German ed. 1989), particularly pp. 375-385; on Cantoni, see *ibid.*, pp. 255-264 and *passim*, the bibliography in note 40 *infra*, and Sergio Minerbi, *Un ebreo fra D'Annunzio e il sionismo. Raffaele Cantoni*, Rome, Bonacci, 1992; on Nahon, see A. Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere*, cit.

²⁹ Massimo Leone, *Le organizzazioni di soccorso ebraiche in età fascista*, Rome, Carucci, 1983, pp. 156-160.

Distrustful also of the vast autonomy of its activities, the Union had refused the financial support that came instead from the American Jewish organizations, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS, based in New York), HICEM (the European branch of HIAS) and Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)³⁰. As can be seen from the Comasebit's statistics, 647 and 385 refugees had been helped in 1938 and the first quarter of 1939, respectively³¹. Among his various missions, Luisada first went to Paris to meet with HICEM executives in 1937,³² and then to Ventimiglia, at the end of March 1939, to distribute the sum of 9,000 lire to foreign Jews stranded in the city, and to organize a Comasebit branch on the Riviera by involving Ettore Bassi³³. As he had already done in the past, in April 1939 Luisada lamented with Ascoli, president of the Union, «Italian Jews' lack of interest in the problems of refugees» and the «indifference (of Italian Jews) to their conscience and to History»³⁴. Among several activities, in May 1939 Luisada also proposed to Angelo Sullam of Venice to convert the sanatorium for tuberculosis in Merano, managed by the local community, into a retirement home for elderly Israelites, thus freeing up beds for refugees in Milan, Trieste and other cities³⁵. In June 1939, he wrote Umberto Nahon from Milan that he had been to Paris

to settle matters with the Joint, but given the complete renewal of its management [...] I was unable to finalize things in that way and I had to act otherwise. Together with Raffaele (Cantoni) we are considering the best way to meet the obligations we have taken upon ourselves³⁶.

³⁰ Paolo Veneziano, *Ombre al confine. L'espatrio clandestino degli ebrei stranieri dalla Riviera dei fiori alla Costa Azzurra 1938-1940*, Saluzzo, Fusta, 2014, pp. 27-33. On the Comasebit and the role of the international Jewish organizations in Italy in the 1930s, see K. Voigt, *Il rifugio precario*, cit., pp. 244-264 and 375-416.

³¹ The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP), Jerusalem, *Collection of Jewish communities, Italy Organizations, Delasem*, b. 94, Assistance Committee for the Jews in Italy, Milan, «Specchietto statistico sull'attività del Comitato di Assistenza per gli Ebrei in Italia di Milano durante l'anno 1938 e il primo trimestre del 1939».

³² M. Leone, *Le organizzazioni di soccorso ebraiche*, cit., p. 122.

³³ P. Veneziano, *Ombre al confine*, cit., pp. 86-87.

³⁴ Luisada to Ascoli, 22 April 1939, cit. in M. Leone, *Le organizzazioni di soccorso ebraiche*, cit., p. 160.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ CAHJP, P239, *Archivio U.S. Nahon*, b. 9, R. Luisada to Umberto Nahon, Milan, 8 June 1939.

As part of its activities, Comasebit organized summer camps for young Italians to prepare them for *Aliyah*. However, not only were there constant funding problems, but ideological differences also existed between religious Jews such as Leo Levi and Nahon himself, and secular Jews such as Enzo Sereni, with whose positions Renzo was more attuned. In the summer of 1939, three campsites were organized in Alano Piave (Belluno), Pontedera and Orciano Pisano – the last two on the properties of Giulio Racah. These campsites were intended as «a preparatory center for children aged 12 to 15 who were to leave with the next Aliyah of young people»³⁷. Forty-five Italian youths would be selected at the camp and sent to Palestine with the certificates that Nahon had obtained from the Jewish Agency. In these crucial months in which the regime's stranglehold seemed to tighten more and more, Renzo sought also to increase the number of visas from the Jewish Agency, as can be seen from the following letter of June 1939:

Dearest Umberto,
just yesterday I was in Rome at the consulate to find information on the certificates and thus, I was able to see that between the many applications we submitted and those that were already sitting there, there are 80 applications, which means from 200 to 250 people. You can imagine what a disappointment it will be for many and how difficult it will be to select the 35 lucky ones. [...] Frankly, it seems to me that the proportion of 35 visas out of all the certificates is too unfair, if one considers that refugees from various countries will be able to take advantage of special certificates. [...] We are on track for vocational re-education courses and I believe that by early July, 60 or 70 youths will be able to regularly start their agricultural training, in the Tuscan centers that Giulio R. has made available and in a center in Lombardy, which Raffaele was able to secure³⁸.

In the end, only ten youngsters left for Givat Brenner, the kibbutz that had been co-founded in 1928 by Enzo Sereni³⁹. According to Leone's statistics, Comasebit achieved «significant and rewarding» success in assisting about a thousand refugees per month, distributing more than one hundred thousand

³⁷ CAHJP, *Collection of Jewish communities, Italy Organizations, Delasem*, b. 94, R. Luisada to Comitato assistenza Torino [Assistance Committee Turin], 7 July 1939.

³⁸ CAHJP, P239, *Archivio U.S. Nahon*, b. 9, R. Luisada to U. Nahon, Milan, 20 June 1939.

³⁹ A. Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere*, cit., pp. 180-181.

food rations, and organizing the expatriation of about a hundred refugees to Palestine, 200 to America and 750 to other European countries. The intense activity of Comasebit was interrupted on 16 August 1939, when Luisada was notified of the order to suspend all assistance activities. However, while the Comasebit was officially dissolved on 30 August, the activities of distributing funds to refugees continued clandestinely⁴⁰. On the same 30 August, Nahon asked Renzo to go to Trieste to assist «a few hundreds» of refugees on the ship Galilee, which had been stopped en route to Palestine and was «somehow waiting» to reach it⁴¹. Since he was too busy in Milan, Renzo did not go to Trieste while the anguish for the present circumstances and the impending decisions was building up. On 2 September 1939, he wrote to his friend Nahon as follows:

Dear Umberto,

As you can imagine very agitated days have followed my return: unsuccessful attempts to secure a trip, indecision about the best course of action given the lack of preparation and the small children, so that things have come to a head and nothing was resolved. My sister-in-law received a telegram from her husband saying that an American steamer was about to leave Naples for [Palestine] last night, and she rushed with her child, without even a suitcase, to Rome by plane and from there, to Naples by car, even though she knew that there was no longer any space available. At this moment, we still don't know if she managed to leave. Meanwhile, there are complications due to the bankruptcy of our office. That is, notice of the definitive dissolution of the administrative board has arrived. [...] Accounting ledgers, [all] correspondence [are] in the hands of the liquidator [...] Meanwhile, even the short-term work [...] is severely compromised, causing serious damage to many clients⁴².

Another letter came soon after, on 9 September:

Our life is still very difficult [...] and my work only consists in asking for money of this and that (the very few whom one can find, and the very few who give) and giving the proceeds to a small group of 'distributors', [...] The liquidation process is almost over (thanks also to Federico) and I

⁴⁰ The Delegation for the Assistance of Jewish Emigrants (*Delegazione per l'Assistenza degli Emigranti Ebrei* or Delasem) was formed on 1 December 1939. See M. Leone, *Le organizzazioni di soccorso*, cit.; Rosa Painsi, *I sentieri della Speranza. Profughi ebrei, Italia fascista e la Delasem*, Milan, Xenia, 1988; Sandro Antonini, *Delasem. Storia della più grande organizzazione di soccorso in Italia durante il fascismo*, Genoa, De Ferrari, 2000.

⁴¹ CAHJP, P239, *Archivio U.S. Nahon*, b. 9, U. Nahon to R. Luisada, 30 August 1939.

⁴² *Ibid.*, R. Luisada to U. Nahon, 2 September 1939.

am thinking about joining my sister- and brother-in-law⁴³.

The in-laws to whom Renzo referred in his letter were Carla Malvano and her husband Giulio Muggia from Venice with their two children. Renzo's younger sister, Gabriella, had also already arrived in Tel Aviv with a certificate from the WIZO (Women International Zionist Organization) and had made Aliyah on 23 July 1939;⁴⁴ his brother Aldo and his sister Elsa, who had married Angelo Ghiron, had left instead for the United States, where their uncle Emilio Carlo Luisada also took refuge⁴⁵. On 29 September 1939 Renzo and his family moved out of their home in Milan, legalized their position with a certificate and prepared to leave for Palestine.

Arrival in Erez Israel: the *moshav* of the *Italkim*, Tel Dan

On 16 November 1939, Renzo and his wife Paola officially made Aliyah⁴⁶; Renzo changed his name to Avigdor, and initially moved to Tel Aviv where both their sisters, Gabriella Luisada and Carla Malvano with Giulio Muggia and children, lived. After a short time, the Luisadas joined other families of Italian origin in a *moshav* (agricultural cooperative) and dedicated themselves to agriculture. In a letter to his friend Hans Froehlich in New York, where the latter had arrived after being assisted as a refugee in Milan, Renzo describes his life in the *moshav* as follows:

We are a few Jewish families from Italy, we have organized ourselves as a cooperative, sharing tasks [and] agricultural tools (precisely to make it possible through shifts to undertake other complementary activities), although the amount of money invested is unequal and proportional to each family's possibilities, and only our dwelling and family life will therefore be separate.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid., R. Luisada to U. Nahon, 9 September 1939.

⁴⁴ A. Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere*, cit., pp. 109, 376.

⁴⁵ In 1940, Emilio was residing in New York whereas in March 1941, his son Augusto was still unable to join him with his family. See CJH, LBI, AR 25276, *Hans Froehlich Collection, Correspondence, Personal Correspondence*, b. 2, f. 16, «Luisada, Emilio and Angelo Ghiron, 1939-1941», Angelo Ghiron to H. Froehlich, 7 February 1941.

⁴⁶ A. Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere*, cit., p. 370.

⁴⁷ CJH, LBI, AR 25276, *Hans Froehlich Collection, Correspondence, Personal Correspondence*, b. 2, f. 17, «Luisada, Renzo, 1941-1942», R. Luisada to H. Froehlich, 19 July 1941.

As Renzo comments further, he inevitably neglected his intellectual work:

After nine hours of work, all we have left in the evening is to go to sleep, and all that was usual intellectual work is necessarily put aside. My brushes wear out little [...]. However, it would be unfair to say that I have completely neglected it because for a few hours a week, I have always given drawing lessons, even here, in the nearest center, and this has made it possible that in the next school year, I will be appointed professor at the school there (of 6 or 7 classes) and thus, I will have some hours of teaching every week [...]. I have also done some work as illustrator, but I have done little or no real painting.

The *moshav* in which the Luisadas lived together with other *Italkim* families (of Italian origin), the Fanos, the Bachis and the Colbis, was called Tel Dan in honor of Dante Lattes, and was located near another larger *moshav* (Hadar, which means citrus in Hebrew, because oranges used to be grown there) to the north of Tel Aviv, ten kilometers from the Mediterranean Sea, in what is now Hod HaSharon⁴⁸. Although his brother-in-law Ghiron, husband of his sister Elsa, had submitted an *affidavit* in 1940 to move to America, Renzo and his family remained in the *moshav*⁴⁹. His choice was «prompted not only by general Zionist considerations, but also by practical considerations, that is, in order to reduce family expenses to a minimum and have a way of supplementing the scarce earnings that the city could have offered to our usual profession with agricultural work». In the same letter, Renzo describes the country, and the life in the *moshav*, with the eyes of a painter:

Days like ours are filled with work never finished according to schedule, and even the moments of rest are short and dedicated to the study of the language. It is difficult to give you a clear idea of our life without starting off by describing the country; it is a gentle, diverse nature, with wide horizons, closed in by the mountain chain of Judaea, a series of hills or dunes covered by the dense green of orange groves [that are] surrounded by long rows of cypresses, and dotted with small villages, isolated houses, *kibbutzim* stretching for kilometers along or not far from the «kvish» (paved road) that from Tel Aviv through the Sharon plain, where we are, leads up to Haifa. All the Mediterranean characteristics of

⁴⁸ Oral interview of the Author with Dina Wardi, Jerusalem, June 2021. Among the other families were also Elena Colombo, her husband Augusto Bachi and their children; cf. A. Marzano, *Una terra per rinascere*, cit., p. 109.

⁴⁹ CJH, LBI, AR 25276, *Hans Froehlich Collection, Correspondence, Personal Correspondence*, b. 2, f. 16, «Luisada, Emilio and Angelo Ghiron, 1939-1941», A. Ghiron to H. Froehlich, 14 October 1940.

Italy, which mix there with the characteristics of Northern Europe, are shown here in their defined character, lush flowers, pure sky, undecided colors⁵⁰.

Although Renzo portrayed it as «gentle nature» and did not complain, life in the *moshav* was very hard especially because he, like the other Italians, had no experience in the sector. Expert consultants who were supposed to come and help them did not arrive and, despite working very intensely, Renzo and the others did not succeed in making it a profitable business, and the products were barely enough for family consumption. In the words of his daughter Laura, this agricultural experiment was a failure, and within a few years only three families remained in the *moshav*, the Fanos, who stayed the longest, the Bachis and the Luisadas, until they could find another accommodation⁵¹. Laura remembers how they spoke Italian at home and how, as a very young child, she had to serve as a 'bridge' between them and the surrounding society.

Although they were isolated in the *moshav*, the news from Europe would still arrive. In another letter to Froehlich dated April 1942, Renzo described their anguish over the news from Europe:

Our reluctance to believe in the tragedy of so many brothers is so suddenly shaken when it is confirmed by someone close to us, and for a while we are no longer able to isolate ourselves within the small frame of our daily life by continuing to ignore and forget what seems to us so sadly burdensome [...] our life continues without major changes; the hardship of each day prepares for the hardship of the following day, the outcomes, as always in rural life, are slow to come even if good, and they are not always good. But – apart from that – the concern for the future persists, as Jews of Erez Israel in particular, and as Jews in the world in general, for we are not yet given to see any light for ourselves in the early dawn of the world of tomorrow. This notwithstanding, we work and want to delude ourselves that we are participating in the construction of this world. [...] Let us hope that [Cantoni's] great aspiration to see fascism fall, and with it all that host of violent and mediocre people who followed it on its journey, will soon come true.

Renzo did not send the letter and, in July 1943, he added:

⁵⁰ CJH, LBI, AR 26276, *Hans Froehlich Collection, Correspondence, Personal Correspondence*, b. 2, f. 17, «Luisada, Renzo, 1941-1942», R. Luisada to H. Froehlich, 19 July 1941. Emphasis added.

⁵¹ Phone interview of the Author with Laura Luisada Snir, Jerusalem, 22 December 2021.

just three months later, the event in the last sentence of this letter has already occurred! [...] fascism has fallen. This event that seemed to never come has finally arrived! [...] a great ray of light now brightens the gloomy horizon of war. [...] It is terrible to think how many deaths and how many ruins this liberation cost Italy⁵².

Renzo, like many, did not realize that this was only the beginning of the most dangerous phase for the Jews who had stayed in Italy, including his mother Elisa and his grandmother Emma, and many cousins who were deported from Livorno and Milan and never returned⁵³.

Life in Tel Aviv

The Luisadas remained in the *moshav* Tel Dan until 1947, when they moved to Tel Aviv where Renzo worked mainly as an illustrator and teacher of painting and art history. Since he was not very familiar with Hebrew, the first years were very hard, but by gaining experience, he managed to enthrall his students, whether children or adults, guiding many to discover the world of Italian culture and art for the first time. Illustrating children's books remained his main activity, as childhood, in the words of his daughter Laura, was a world «with which he had a special relationship»⁵⁴. Considered one of the best Israeli artists in this field, he was among the contributors to the «magic lantern» (*Panas Kesem* in Hebrew), a transportable instrument that illustrated children's stories through slides⁵⁵. In 1948, the year of Israel's independence, Renzo was among the organizers of and participants in the Israeli pavilion at the Venice Biennale with the group New Horizons (*Ofakim Hadashim*). Among his other works, the drawings in the book *Safa Ahat* [A language] illustrated

⁵² CJH, LBI, AR 25276, *Hans Froehlich Collection, Correspondence, Personal Correspondence*, b. 2, f. 17, «Luisada, Renzo, 1941-1942», R. Luisada to H. Froehlich, 26 April 1942, 27 July 1943.

⁵³ For the 8 members of the Luisada family who were deported from Livorno and Milan, see the relative files in the *CDEC Digital Library* <<http://digital-library.cdec.it>> (accessed 21 December 2021).

⁵⁴ Interview of the Author with Laura Luisada Snir, cit.

⁵⁵ The collection of drawings for the «magic lantern» can be found, along with many other children's books that Luisada illustrated, in The Ruth Youth Wing for Art Education, Israel Museum, Jerusalem. For some images and a list of the published books see the site *Luisada Avigdor Renzo*, cit.

the various stages of the life of the *oleh*, the new immigrant: the ship, the port, house interiors, etc., *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*⁵⁶. Between 1951 and 1956, his style moved towards abstractionism, while preserving a peaceful and lyrical quality above all in the choice of colors⁵⁷.

In 1955 Renzo and his family moved again to Ramat Gan, where several other Italian families lived, including the families of both Renzo's and Paola's sisters, the Cividallis, also from Florence, and others⁵⁸. It was Gualtiero Cividalli who introduced him as a teacher of painting to his son Piero, who would reminisce later: «Renzo was not only a teacher in the ordinary sense of the word, because in the process of opening up and illuminating for me the secrets of the profession, he also opened my eyes and taught me to look at a work of art in a new light»⁵⁹. Among his other activities, Renzo also tutored privately and continued to work as an illustrator, particularly for children's books;⁶⁰ he mainly published in Hebrew, but some publications were translated by his wife Paola⁶¹. In 1946, 1952 and 1956 Renzo visited Italy and exhibited his works. From 1965 he taught in secondary schools and colleges for art teachers, continuing his painting activity and personal and group exhibitions in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Venice and Paris, where he lived for a year with Paola in 1962⁶².

Renzo's drawings entered the kitchens of many Italian Jewish homes through his illustrations of the first and main Italian Jewish recipe book, *La cucina nella*

⁵⁶ Nir Nataeli, *Safa Ahat*, Tel Aviv, Tebersky, 1950 (in Hebrew).

⁵⁷ Cf. D.J. Stier, *Avigdor Renzo Luisada*, cit., p. 18.

⁵⁸ On Gualtiero Cividalli (1899-1997) and his family, see Patrizia Guarnieri and Luisa Levi D'Ancona, *Gualtiero (Beniamino) Cividalli* (2019).

⁵⁹ Piero Cividalli, *Mabat Ishi* [*Sguardo personale*] <<http://www.luisada.com>> (accessed 21 December 2021). In Hebrew.

⁶⁰ A list of the publications and some images can be found at the site <<http://www.luisada.com>> (accessed 21 December 2021).

⁶¹ Among Paola's translations see: Eliezer Smoli, *All'ombra dell'albero*, Rome, Fondazione per la gioventù ebraica, 1959. After her first visit to Italy in the aftermath of the war, in 1949, Paola wrote the story *Sulla via del ritorno*, which was published together with other short stories in *Val D'Oltra e nuovi racconti*, Turin, Grafiche Alfa editrice, 1979 (cf. fn. 65).

⁶² Cf. the biography and list of exhibitions in *Luisada Avigdor Renzo*, cit.

tradizione ebraica, which came out in 1970, first of many editions⁶³. Throughout his life Renzo continued to promote Italian culture particularly through conferences and courses in art history, activities for which in 1970, he received the honorific title of *Cavaliere della Repubblica Italiana*, one of the many recognitions he had in the 1970s and 1980s. He continued to draw and paint in his studio in Ramat Gan even after a first heart attack in 1972. His style returned to structure in the 1970s, with well-defined shapes and colors. Renzo Luisada painted until his death in Ramat Gan in 1987. He left behind his two daughters and his grandchildren. Significant is a comment of his on memory and oblivion with regard to Raffaele Cantoni, but also himself, during the «terrible» years of the war:

With the exception of the memory of his friends, the passing [of Cantoni] is already falling into oblivion. Two books remember him: the first is the *Storia degli ebrei in Italia* [History of the Jews in Italy] by Attilio Milano; the second, *Gli ebrei in Italia sotto il fascismo* [The Jews in Italy under Fascism] by Dr. De Felice, speaks about him repeatedly, and in a modest footnote I am also mentioned by name (as a collaborator of the Milan committee). This second book [...] is a thorough investigation of those terrible years. Given all that, one can now die in peace⁶⁴.

In 1987, when Renzo died, his second child Dina Wardi, a psychotherapist, founded with others the non-profit organization Amcha, for the social and psychological support of first- and second-generation survivors in Israel⁶⁵. While maintaining a profound connection with Italy and its culture, no one of the Luisada family ever returned to live there.

Major publications

For a list of Renzo Luisada's personal and group exhibits since 1936, for images of his paintings and drawings and for a list of the books he illustrated,

⁶³ Giuliana Ascoli Vitali-Norsa, *La cucina nella tradizione ebraica: ricette di cucina ebraica, italiana, askenazita e sefardita*, with illustrations by Renzo Luisada, Padoa, Adei Wizo, 1970.

⁶⁴ CJH, LBI, AR 25276, *Hans Froehlich Collection, Correspondence, Personal Correspondence*, b. 2, f. 18, «Luisada, Renzo, 1969-1974», R. Luisada to H. Froehlich, 10 May 1972.

⁶⁵ Of Renzo's daughter, see: Dina Wardi, *Le candele della memoria. I figli dei sopravvissuti dell'Olocausto: trauma, angosce, terapia*, Florence, Sansoni, 1993 (2nd ed. Milan, Pgreco, 2013). On Amcha see <<https://www.amcha.org>> (accessed 21 December 2021).

see the bilingual (Hebrew/English) site *Luisada Avigdor Renzo*, <<http://www.luisada.com>>, curated by his family.

- Renzo Luisada, *L'epos biblico nell'arte figurativa*, Città di Castello, Unione arti grafiche, 1962.
- Renzo Luisada, *Pittura e scultura*, «Il Ponte», 14, 12, December 1958, pp. 1872-1878.

Selected Italian volumes illustrated by Renzo Luisada:

- *Don Chisciotte*, abridged edition by Enrico Bianchi, Florence, Salani, 1933.
- Enrico Bianchi, *Mitologia*, Florence, Salani, 1933.
- Enrico Bianchi, *Il fascismo*, Florence, Salani, 1935.
- Thomas Charles Bridges, *Martino Crusòè: avventure di un ragazzo in un'isola misteriosa*, translated by Ester Modigliani, Florence, Salani, 1935.
- Eliezer Smoli, *Pionieri*, translated from Hebrew by Paola Malvano Luisada, Rome, Fondazione per la gioventù ebraica, 1958.
- Id., *All'ombra dell'albero*, translated from Hebrew by Paola Malvano Luisada, Rome, Fondazione per la gioventù ebraica, 1959.
- Giuliana Ascoli Vitali-Norsa, *La cucina nella tradizione ebraica: ricette di cucina ebraica, italiana, ashkenazita e sefardita*, Padua, Adei Wizo, 1970.

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Luisa Levi D'Ancona Modena

Translated by Francesca Parmeggiani

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