

Giselda Biancalani Schapira (Sorell)

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Giselda Biancalani was not Jewish, although married to a Jew and without children, was a biochemist, with various academic publications and international connections, employed at the Università di Firenze. She was forced to leave a year before the racial laws. She was not expelled but arbitrarily demoted to school teacher in a provincial technical institute. In order to join her husband, who had sought refuge in New York in 1939, she changed jobs, country and even her last name.

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Studies and career

Giselda Biancalani was born in Florence on 2 April 1902, daughter of Alfredo and Natalina Margherini. She attended the Istituto di studi superiori e pratici di perfezionamento in the same city and in 1925, when the institute had become a university, she graduated in chemistry. After passing the state qualifying exam, she was admitted as an intern at the Istituto di farmacologia and tossicologia at the Scuola, which in 1933 became the Facoltà di Farmacia in Firenze. In the meantime, she attended the courses required for her to specialize in pharmacy. On 1 March 1927 she was appointed voluntary assistant; on 1 January she became contract assistant and on 6 November 1928, having successfully completed a competition, a full-fledged assistant in the university's Istituto di Farmacologia e Tossicologia, with «tacit annual renewal»¹. She took the Oath of Allegiance to the Partito nazionale fascista before the rector in March, 1929². According to the yearbook of the ministry of Educazione nazionale in 1935, Giselda was assistant in the Gabinetto di

¹ ASUFI, AC, SS and above all *Stati di servizio* (series in the process of being re-organized), f. «Biancalani Giselda».

² Ivi, R. Università di Firenze, *atto di giuramento*, 2 or 20 [?] March 1929.

materia medica of the Reale Università di Firenze, in via degli Alfani no. 33³. The cabinet was directed by professor Giusto Coronedi, director of the Scuola di Farmacia and subsequently dean of the Faculty until 1935. He was a renowned pharmacologist, originally from Bologna, and contributed to the creation of a veritable school of pharmacology, which involved students who later went on to embark on university careers, such as Pietro Niccolini and Mario Aiazzi Mancini⁴.

Giselda did not proceed in her career as much as her male colleagues did, although she played a very active role both in teaching and in research. As assistant in the Istituto di Farmacologia she collaborated in particular on biochemical and microbiological investigations into the nervous system with Giovanni Favilli, an aide at the Istituto di Patologia generale, directed by Alessandro Lustig (Triest 1857 – Florence 1937, of Jewish origin), who in 1930 had won a fellowship at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research in New York. He then returned to Florence and later left for England⁵. Of the same age, both from Florence and with anti-fascist convictions, the two were bound by common scientific interests of acknowledged quality, as shown by their work on the Brucella – a bacteria that strikes humans and other mammals – which received funding from the Ella Sachs Plotz Foundation for the Advancement of Scientific Investigation in Boston from 1932 to 1936⁶.

Favilli chose to leave the Università di Firenze for that of Perugia for the academic year 1936-37. The great Lustig died in 1937. Giselda also left the

³ *Annuario del ministero dell'Educazione nazionale*, Rome, Istituto poligrafico and Zecca dello Stato, 1935, p. 144.

⁴ Giuseppe Armocida, *Coronedi, Giusto* in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 29, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1983 (available online at <<http://www.treccani.it>>, accessed 14 November 2018).

⁵ Massimo Aloisi, *Favilli, Giovanni* in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 45, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1995 (available online at <<http://www.treccani.it>>, accessed 14 November 2018).

⁶ Correspondance of the Foundation, but for a subsequent period, in Countway Library of Medicine, Collection, Joseph C. Aub Papers, 1918-1974 (inclusive), Series V, Professional Activities and Associations Records, 1927-1971, b. 14, f. 2-4, Ellas Sach Plotz Foundation, 1940-1961.

Istituto, where she served as a paid assistant (whereas her husband was only a volunteer) and after having recently received a raise in salary⁷. The service record states simply: «ceases due to appointment to another office», in March 1937. It seems that she went to work in a less prestigious environment, in a small town (Viareggio), far from home, as a teacher of chemistry and industrial chemistry, with an open-ended contract at the private Istituto tecnico commerciale Carlo Piaggia, characterized by a business curriculum. But why?

Contrasts with the director

In February the director of the Istituto di Farmacologia e tossicologia had complained about Giselda with the rector: for the last 15 days Giselda Biancalani «had not been to the Institute because she was ill», as clearly emerged from the medical certificate. The director had «ABSOLUTELY no intention of coming to the laboratory every morning at 7:30 to give lessons and supervise lab exercises at the Scuola di Farmacia» – which is what one presumes Giselda did – and therefore demanded that provisions be taken, otherwise he would close the Scuola⁸. To make things worse, «Mrs. Schapira», according to the director Mario Aiazzi Mancini, there were rumors that perhaps she had gone to the beach. On the same date, 7 November 1937, the director wrote the rector, again on letterhead, a «very reserved» letter: he intended to clarify Mrs. Schapira's position once and for all, a decision he had put off out of respect for his predecessor. The person in question was Professor Emeritus Giusto Coronedi, 74 years of age, retired since 1935; from that point on his disciple had encountered difficulties with the new director. «As of last year Mrs. Biancalani Schapira HAS NEVER done her job as required by the circumstances». The Istituto di Farmacologia had been transferred and

⁷ ASUFI, AC, *Stati di servizio*, f. «Biancalani Giselda».

⁸ ASUFI, AC, b. 1937/10D II, f. «6 June 1937», on Biancalani Schapira (contains 11 documents), two letters by Mario Aiazzi Mancini addressed to the rector, both 7 February 1937.

the whole chemical laboratory «is in a shameful mess, the collection of chemical drugs and vegetal drugs is in disarray, the library is a mess...». Aiazzi Mancini held Giselda responsible for all of this. As a result, he had been busy for months trying to find another «position for the above mentioned woman»: he had made «as many as three trips to Rome PRECISELY on her account and I am optimistic that a solution will be found». If this did not turn out to be the case, he would make sure that his laboratory would not become «an asylum for invalids or a hangout for parasitic good-for-nothings»⁹. He counted on the support of the rector, Arrigo Serpieri, who was to enforce the application of the racial laws, and who that very day responded by way of the pro-rector: the latter guaranteed maximum reserve and informed Aiazzi Mancini of how he could deal with the incriminated «assistant Dr.»: according to the law, the directors of institutes could choose not to confirm permanent assistants, provided the motivation was communicated by July¹⁰.

From the Università di Firenze to the Istituto tecnico in Viareggio

There was no need. Evidently, the director's efforts to find a solution for Giselda Biancalani Schapira through the ministry of Educazione nazionale were successful, and the results quick. On 12 February a ministerial telegram stated that the assistant had been appointed full time teacher of chemistry and study of commodities in the Reali istituti tecnici commerciali beginning in September 1938 and that she had been assigned to the Istituto in Viareggio¹¹. Giselda was informed that she should present herself immediately at the Istituto.

Giselda was to be paid once she actually began working at the institute. This is why the pro-rector Giorgio Alberti requested that Giselda submit the relative declaration. She replied, after a few days, that her doctor forbade her

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Ivi, letter to pro-rector Giorgio Abetti, 1 February 1937.

¹¹ Ivi, MEN telegram to the rector of the University of Florence, 12 February 1937.

to begin working¹². Until 7 March 1937 the university had to pay her in her role as assistant. On stamped paper she requested that the rector issue certificates regarding her uninterrupted service performed as dedicated assistant and as full-fledged assistant, position earned following a regular competition, and attesting the annual renewal of her contract¹³.

At the Istituto tecnico commerciale of Viareggio, the commission of professors, undecided whether to name the school after the nephew of the Duce, Sandro Italico Mussolini, or after Carlo Piaggia, in 1935 opted for the illustrious voyager¹⁴. Giselda Biancalani, pharmacological chemist, who had a number of academic publications in her CV, especially on the nervous system, was to teach the students in the study of commodities for little more than three years, until November 1940¹⁵.

To be with her husband

The following year much worst happened to her husband and to many others. At the age of 32 Giselda had married Carlo (Karl) Schapira, a Rumanian doctor of Jewish origin. He was two years younger than Giselda and had graduated in Medicine in 1930 at the Università di Firenze, where they met. With the promulgation of the racial laws, she did not lose her job. She was from a Catholic family and had no children. Carlo, on the other hand, was immediately dismissed from the Clinica ortopedica of the university and was removed from the professional school in Florence where he was working¹⁶. Carlo decided to leave for New York in 1939. Giselda remained in Italy until shortly after the country entered the war, in June 1940.

¹² Ivi, letter from Giselda Biancalani Schapira to the rector, 17 February 1937, following the communication from pro-rector Giorgio Alberti, 13 February 1937.

¹³ Ivi, Giselda Biancalani Schapira, request addressed to the rector of the University of Florence Arrigo Serpieri, on stamped paper, 1937.

¹⁴ «Istituto Tecnico Commerciale pareggiato a indirizzo mercantile Carlo Piaggia. Annuario», 1937, p. 19.

¹⁵ NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non grantees, b. 43, f. 43, «Biancalani-Schapira, Giselda», 1942-44, c.v., s.d.

¹⁶ See Angelo Ventura, *Appendice, in Il fascismo e gli ebrei*, Rome, Donzelli, 2013, p. 173.

In answer to the question on the form that asked «Reason for displacement from academic or professional career in Europe», Giselda wrote «to join [my] husband, a Jew»¹⁷. On 27 October she boarded the ship *Excambion* in Lisbon, alone, to cross the ocean and join Carlo. In Italy she had left a steady job and the affection of her family, who lived in via dei Benci no. 3 in Florence. When she arrived at the port in New York she was met by Carlo, whom she had not seen for two years. He had written her that they had an apartment at no. 2039 Broadway¹⁸.

Judging by appearances

Giselda knew English, French and German, in addition to Italian. In the initial phase in New York she had a job at the Applied Research Laboratory in Dayton, New Jersey, where she seems to have carried out tests primarily on hormones and vitamins¹⁹. She applied immediately for the «first papers» to legalize her situation in the United States. In searching for a new job at the beginning of 1942 she applied to the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, where she was registered with the National Refugees Committee as a chemist. She considered herself to be a scholar and she had in fact been an academic for ten years.

Miss Drury received her for an interview on 16 February 1942. This is what she noted down:

A capable appearing woman, clean cut and direct. Is an Italian Catholic, married to a Jew. He left Italy first, she followed him as soon as she could (two years later). She must have been a very handsome young woman. Good features, fine [...]. But unnaturally heightened color on the cheeks makes her look a bit older than her forty

¹⁷ NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non grantees, b. 43, f. 43, «Biancalani-Schapira, Giselda», 1942-44, card 5522.

¹⁸ As to their staggered arrival in New York, see Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (access after registration 15 November 2018). Giselda is recorded as being Jewish and there is also an error in the spelling of her last name: Schapira Biancalian [sic]. Moreover, her father's address is given as via Benchi [sic] and her husband as Carlos [sic].

¹⁹ NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non grantees, b. 43, f. 43, «Biancalani-Schapira, Giselda», 1942-44.

years²⁰.

At the end of the notes Giselda is described as a biochemist and toxicologist, with a certain number of publications. Her job in the US is also indicated, the one in Dayton, as well as that of her husband, orthopedist²¹.

Teacher or scholar?

As to Giselda's last job in Italy, the teaching job in Viareggio, the secretary of the Emergency Committee felt she needed to obtain further information. What did this position actually correspond to? The doubt surfaced with Italian applicants, since Italians called themselves «professors» even if they did not teach at the university, whereas assistance from the EC was available in theory only to academics, or at least those with the title of *privat dozent*, although there were frequent exceptions.

To clarify the case, Miss Drury contacted Howard Rosario Marraro, an associate professor of Italian Literature and Language at Columbia University, who was of Sicilian origin but a naturalized citizen. Marraro explained, of course, that the Regio Istituto Carlo Piaggio in Viareggio was a secondary school. Consequently, anyone who taught there was a school teacher, not a university professor²². The explanation was given without Marraro being aware of Giselda's previous academic position, and it certainly did not help her. It did not take into account that, although her last three years were spent in a secondary school, for ten years Giselda had carried out her teaching and research activity in a university laboratory of pharmacology and toxicology, with evident scientific results. In her attached résumé it is clearly stated that at the Università di Firenze «she has taken active part in the didactic and scientific work of the Institute, giving a regular course of lessons on arguments inherent to chemistry, and pharmaceutics; taking an active part in

²⁰ Ivi, Miss Drury's interview with G. Schapira, 16 February 1942.

²¹ Ivi.

²² Ivi, letter from H.R. Marraro to Miss Drury, 11 April 1944.

performing the scientific, toxicological and chemical research of the Institute»²³. Moreover, prior to 1940 she had published thirteen academic papers and participated in congresses and international projects, one also linked to a foundation in Boston²⁴. In Drury's own dossier for Giselda she was described as a chemist with a specialization in biochemistry and toxicology. Nonetheless, in a subsequent form, completed in typescript by the ECADFS, of the two positions «assistant» and «teacher» only the latter is checked²⁵. As a result Biancalani Schapira did not qualify as a «displaced scholar». Her file with the New York Committee was updated three times²⁶. Immediately following the first meeting, on 18 February 1942, Miss Drury noted down that she had referred the case to Dr. Waelach; a year later, on 23 February 1943, she wrote that there had been no further contacts, so the case was closed. Nonetheless, on 15 November 1943, as someone in the US Army was looking for information about healthcare professionals in northern Italy, Miss Drury provided the name Giselda Biancalani Schapira, pointing out, however, adding further confusion about the profession of the person in question, that for medical doctors the Army should contact another organization, not the ECADFS.

Change of name

There is no further trace of her. We learn from the daughters of Dr. Mario Volterra, a colleague of Giselda's husband at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, that Carlo had decided to change his name from Schapira to Sorell²⁷. We find her again as Giselda Sorell in the list of passengers boarding a ship

²³ Ivi, c.v., s.d.

²⁴ Among which see Giselda Biancalani, *Variazioni della composizione chimica lipidica dei centri nervosi cerebrospinali, sotto l'influenza di alcuni veleni (III Comunicazione)*, «Archivio di fisiologia», 29, 1931, pp. 519ff.

²⁵ Form dated 4 March 1944, in NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non grantees, b. 43, f. 43, «Biancalani-Schapira, Giselda», 1942-44.

²⁶ Ivi, updates by B. Drury, 16 February and following.

²⁷ Personal communication from Giovanna and Sara Volterra to the author, Florence, 20 February 2019.

for the United States. But since she is «in-bound», that is a US citizen, there is no information about her occupation, whereas it is known where her husband worked. It emerges that in September 1948 she lived in New York, at 457 W 57th Street, and this address is kept by the couple in the following years. In January 1954, the US Embassy in Rome contacted the rector of the Università di Firenze to obtain information about her. The rector referred the Embassy to Mario Aiazzi Mancini, that is, precisely the man who had forced her out of the Istituto²⁸.

After 1948 Giselda Sorell came to Italy alone or with her husband for three successive years, from 1952 to 1954, sometimes boarding a ship in France for the return journey. In November 1956 she took a plane for the first time, Trans World Airlines, Inc. 823/1, from Rome to New York²⁹.

The couple had decided to stay in New York. They certainly maintained contacts with other emigrants, including some from Florence, both doctors like Mario Volterra and others, like the sculptor Dario Viterbo and his wife Ada Vera Bernstein³⁰.

Giselda Biancalani Sorell died on 1 May 1983³¹.

Major publications

- *Variazioni della composizione chimica lipoidica dei centri nervosi cerebrospinali, sotto l'influenza di alcuni veleni (III Comunicazione)*, «Archivio di fisiologia», 29, 1931, p. 519 ff.

²⁸ Note from the rector of the Università di Firenze to the US Embassy, February 1954, in ASUFI, AC, *Stati di servizio*, f. «Biancalani Giselda».

²⁹ See Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search*, «Giselda Sorell» <<https://libertyellisfoundation.org>> (access after registration 15 November 2018). Data on arrivals in the US at the Ellis Foundation are available only up to 1957.

³⁰ Hand-written card from Giselda and Carlo Sorell to Ada Vera Bernstein, 14 November 1961, communicating sincere condolences on the death of Dario Viterbo, in the Biblioteca Marucelliana, Florence, *Fondo Viterbo Dario e Bernstein Ada Vera*, <<http://siusa.archivi.beniculturali.it>> (accessed 21 February 2019).

³¹ See *Social Security Death Index* (SSDI), database of deceased who were registered with Social Security in the USA, *ad nomen* <<https://www.fold3.com>> (accessed 10 November 2018).

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- *The Lipoid Composition of the Cerebro-spinal Centres as Influenced by Neurotropic Substances*, «Archivio di fisiologia», 33, 1934, pp. 261ff.
- With G. Favilli, *Richerche sulle sostanze idrocarbonate specifiche dei batteri del gruppo Brucella. Isolamento di un polisaccaride della varietà Br. Abortus*, «Lo Sperimentale», 88, 1934, pp. 337-344.
- *The Composition of the Lipoids of the Encephalo-spinal Nerve Centres as influenced by Neurotropic Substances (Free and Esterized Cholesterol in the Spinal Medulla)*, «Archivio di fisiologia», 34, 1935, pp. 487-490.
- *Ulteriori indagini biochimiche intorno ai polisaccardi ricavati dai batteri del gruppo Brucella*, «Lo Sperimentale», 90, 1936, pp. 450-455.

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