

Fanny (Fruma) Rubinstein

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A Polish Jew of Russian origin, a graduate from Palermo, author in 1938 of a Le Monnier book on the great problems of her time, including racism, she was disbarred from the MD Association of Florence. In 1940 she managed to obtain a visa and left from Genoa to go to New York. She was 43, alone, and jobless, and had to start a new life in a foreign country. Unfortunately, little is known of her after her arrival in America: perhaps she changed her surname, or moved again, seeking new opportunities.

A non-linear academic career

Fruma Rubinsztejn (later transliterated into Rubinstein) was born on 14 May 1897 in Navahrudak (Nowogródek in Polish), at the time part of the Russian Empire. The town, in which an important Jewish community lived, later passed to Poland in 1921 with the peace of Riga and, after the Second world war, was incorporated into Belarus¹.

Her parents were Moise and Chasia Rubinsztejn, and she studied in the nearby high school in Lida². She enrolled in the University of Padua on 26 May 1923, for the academic year 1922-23. Later she decided to move to Palermo and asked the *rettore* for a leave, which was granted on 11 December 1925. On 16 January 1926 she notified the Sicilian University that: «the sudden death of my father forces me to go back immediately to Poland to take care of family matters, meaning I won't be able to attend this University for this year»³. She asked for a transfer back to Padua, perhaps as

¹ On the Jewish community and the Nazi occupation, see: *Novogrudok* in Shmuel Spector, Bracha Freundlich (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Jewish Communities, Poland*, vol. VIII, *Vilna-Białystok-Nowogródek Districts*, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2005, original Jewish edition available online at: <<https://www.jewishgen.org>> (accessed 3 March 2020).

² ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Rubenstein Fruna (Fruma) [sic]», enrolment form for the Università di Firenze, 22 December 1935.

³ Archivio storico of the Università di Palermo (ASUPa), f. «Rubinstein Frumi», letter from F.

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it was closer to her home, but she kept studying in Sicily. She graduated on 30 October 1930 with a thesis in medicine (*medicina operatoria*) titled: «the nervous discipline of the female genital organs»; she was awarded a mark of 92/110. Her supervisor was Gaetano Parlavecchio, an important figure in the academic field and full professor in therapy and surgery⁴.

Work in Florence until 1939

She got her license in Catania in 1931 and started working privately in Enna⁵. It is probable that she chose Sicily because she already knew someone on the island, as in Palermo there was a small community of foreign Jewish medical students. We can't tell if they knew each other, but the German Gertrud Lange, who graduated in Palermo for the second time in 1934, in March 1935 moved to Florence just like Fruma, where she started working as a paediatrician⁶.

In fact, in October 1935 Fanny – this was the name Fruma chose during her stay in Italy – enrolled in Florence at the biennial specialization course in paediatrics. She graduated on 13 July 1937 with a mark of 67/70⁷. While in Florence, she lodged in via Andrea del Castagno 27 with the Scitrug, a Jewish family of retailers originally from Livorno⁸.

In March 1939 she published, with Le Monnier, an ambitious book: *Alla ricerca della verità* [*Searching for truth*], in which – moving from a theistic and

Rubinstein to the rector, 16 January 1926. My thanks to Alessandro Hoffmann for the archival research and the biographical suggestions he provided.

⁴ Ibid., minutes of the graduation examination, 30 October 1930. On Parlavecchio, see: Alessandro Porro, *Parlavecchio, Gaetano*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 81, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2014 <<https://www.treccani.it>> (accessed 5 March 2022).

⁵ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Rubenstein Fruna (Fruma) [sic]», request to the rector, 8 October 1935; letter to the secretariat of the Medicine Faculty in Florence, Enna, 14 November 1935.

⁶ See: Alessandro Hoffmann, *Storia di una famiglia di origine ebrea a Palermo*, Palermo, Qanat, 2017. On Gertrud Lange see in the portal Francesca Cavarocchi, *Gertrud Lange* (2022).

⁷ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Rubenstein Fruna (Fruma) [sic]», application to the rector, 8 October 1935; minutes of the master's degree, 13 July 1937.

⁸ Ibid., enrolment form, cit. On the deportation of Vittorio Benedetto Scitrug to Auschwitz, see: Centro di documentazione ebraica contemporanea, *I nomi della Shoah, ad nomen* <<http://digital-library.cdec.it>> (accessed 5 March 2022).

spiritualistic point of view – she offered a view on traditional religions, but also on phenomenon such as telepathy and spiritism. Moreover, she traced the steps and peculiar traits of the «western civilization» and ended by discussing the problem of race⁹. Fanny paid her homages to Mussolini and Fascism, as bearers of «the luminous idea of cooperation between classes and between people»¹⁰.

The book, despite its naivete and intellectual stretches, was a testimony to Fanny's vivacity and her wide interests. What she aimed to prove, moving from an in-depth literary analysis was the unscientific nature of the racial theories:

The high number of geniuses in the people who should belong, according to the racial classifications, to inferior races, is the best argument against the theory of racial superiority. Who could deny that Christ, the Arab Averroes, Spinoza, Freud, Lombroso, Einstein, Ehrlich, Wassermann, Metschnikoff, Heine, Schopenhauer, Bergson... in a single moment of illumination managed to gift humanity more than millions of mediocre dolichocephalic men, that they could boast the surest complex of harmonies, both exteriors and internals[?]

The division between noble and plebian races does not withstand historical analysis, and it has been proved wrong by many influential sociologists¹¹.

«Among the valorous scientists who contributed a large amount to discredit the racial theory», the author granted «a first-rank position» to Napoleone Colajanni, who proved «thanks to recent historical facts, the absolute and exclusive importance of social and political factors in the shaping of the mentality and the wealth of one people»¹².

Fanny closed her book with a «conciliatory» proposal, based on the primacy of the concept of nation and with a prediction that would be proved dramatically wrong in the following months: «[despite] the exceptions crisis between the governments of various states, among the people united by the same Western civilization, a new spirit of cooperation and collaboration is

⁹ Fanny Rubinstein, *Alla ricerca della verità*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1938.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

emerging, unknown in the previous centuries»¹³.

On 30 January 1939 the Fascist trade union of MDs (which had replaced the MD Association) disbarred her from the professional order, following the racial laws¹⁴. In February she pledged for a suspension asking the trade union to wait for the result of the appeal to the Ministry of Interior, as she had asked to be allowed to stay in the country, considering she was a «Russian exile living in Italy since 1920» and that she had always shown «a deep understanding of Fascist doctrine», as proven by her book recently published¹⁵. However, in the meantime, she also started preparing for her departure, as on 27 May 1939 she asked the University of Palermo to send her back her high school diploma, «to sit the State exam abroad»¹⁶. On 1 December 1939 the secretary of the Trade union, Umberto Torrini, wrote to her again, notifying her that her appeal had been rejected, since «even more so» the expulsion was applicable to «foreign Jews without [the Italian] citizenship»¹⁷.

Emigration

Fanny left alone to New York. She managed to obtain a in quota immigration visa in Naples on 26 January 1940, becoming part of those few who could enter the United States without the affidavit of an American citizen. As she was departing on the Rex she did not mention friends or relatives, but provided an address: 52 Pleasant Avenue, White Plains, NY¹⁸. At the end of

¹³ Ibid., p. 206. Fanny was listed as one of the «Jewish authors» who were forbid from publishing and whose publications already printed were withdrew from commerce, see: Giorgio Fabre, *L'elenco. Censura fascista, editoria e autori ebrei*, Turin, Zamorani, 1998.

¹⁴ Archivio Ordine dei medici di Firenze (AOMFi), *Fondo medici chirurghi cessati* (MCC), *Fascicoli personali* (FP), f. 797, «Rubinstein Frumi», letter signed by the provincial secretary of te Sindacato Umberto Luigi Torrini, 30 January 1939.

¹⁵ Ibid., letter to Sindacato provinciale fascista medici, 6 February 1939.

¹⁶ ASUPa, f. «Rubinstein Frumi», letter from F. Rubinstein to the rector of the Università di Palermo, 27 May 1939.

¹⁷ AOMFi, MCC, FP, f. 797, «Rubinstein Frumi», letter from U.L. Torrini to F. Rubinstein, 1 December 1939.

¹⁸ The Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org>> (accessed on registration, 5 March 2022).

May, when she filled the naturalization form, she gave a new address: «c/o Ginsberg», Bronx, 1254 Sherman Avenue¹⁹. The documents for the following years are scarce: we don't know if Fanny decided to change her surname because she married or maybe, as many immigrants did, to anglicise it. Similarly, we don't know if she moved to another country or died prematurely.

On 22 September 1944, a few weeks after the liberation of Florence, the medical commission of the Tuscan Committee of Liberation reinstated her in the medical order. However, on 30 November 1947 she was declared «untraceable» and disbarred definitively²⁰.

Archival sources

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Francesca Cavarocchi

Translated by Nicola Cacciatore

¹⁹ Cfr. The National Archives at Philadelphia, *Declarations of Intention for Citizenship, 1/19/1842 - 10/29/1959, ad nomen*, available online at <<http://www.ancestry.com>> (accessed on registration, 5 March 2022).

²⁰ AOMFi, MCC, FP, f. 797, «Rubinstein Frumi», resolution of the Consiglio of the Ordine, 30 November 1947.

Cite as:

Francesca Cavarocchi, *Fanny (Fruma) Rubinstein* (2022), in Patrizia Guarnieri, *Intellectuals Displaced from Fascist Italy. Migrants, Exiles and Refugees Fleeing for Political and Racial Reasons*,

Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2019-

<<http://intellettualinfuga.fupress.com/en>>

e-ISBN: 978-88-6453-872-3

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Publication date: 19 March 2022.