

Cecilia (Marcella) Calabresi

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Cecilia Calabresi originally wanted to move to the United States, something her brother and sister managed to do, but was forced by circumstance to stay in Florence, in hiding. Several years after the war had already ended, she chose to leave Italy anyway.

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[Renata Calabresi](#)

Family history and education

Born in Ferrara, on 1st February 1902, the daughter of industrialist Ettore Calabresi (1870-1937) and Olga Minerbi (1876-1964), Cecilia came from a wealthy family. The middle child, she was younger than Renata, but older than their brother Massimo. She attended Liceo Ludovico Ariosto, one of Ferrara's most prestigious high schools, and completed her studies there in 1917 with flying colours. Although she also took a diploma in education from Scuola Normale Carducci, qualifying her to teach in primary schools, Cecilia applied for a place at the Facoltà di Lettere of the Istituto di studi superiori pratici e di perfezionamento di Firenze on 29th October 1919 and formally enrolled there on 1st January the following year¹. Of 94 students on the course that year 54 were women (compared to just 5 women out of 20 students for Philosophy). Cecilia moved to Florence, where she and her sister lodged in a pensione at Piazza Donatello 12. Together they moved in the city's antifascist intellectual circles and frequented venues such as the Circolo di Cultura (subsequently destroyed by the fascists and closed down by the authorities in 1925) and the Biblioteca Filosofica. One of their most frequent

¹ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Calabresi Cecilia». Addresses, school grades and dates are given in the many documents contained in the folder labelled «Registro della carriera scolastica» [«School career records»]. I have consulted the lists of students enrolled in each Faculty of the University during the academic years pertaining to this study; these lists are held in the Sala rari della Biblioteca Umanistica [the Rare Book Section of the Humanities Library of the University of Florence], however, the various fonds have been moved and are currently being reorganized.

haunts was the home of Signora Amelia Rosselli, whose sons, Carlo and Nello Rosselli, were the same age as Cecilia and her sister. The Rosselli home, in Via Giusti, was close to the sisters' pensione and to the house at Via Masaccio 102 which the Calabresi family were to purchase in 1921. It was to this address that they then moved, together with their parents, who had left their Via Savonarola home in Ferrara to live alongside their three children².

A model student, Cecilia graduated with a first-class honours degree in March 1925, with a thesis on «Alcassino and Nicoletta», an anonymous mediaeval French love story. Cecilia's professors included Pio Rajna, Felice Ramorino and Guido Mazzoni.

As apparent from the curriculum vitae presented to the Emergency Committee in New York, following her graduation Cecilia was able to gain research experience at the University of Heidelberg and the University of Rome³. She obtained a diploma in German from the Istituto Storico Germanico in Rome and, from 1934 to 1938, worked on an in-depth study of the German writer and poet Ludwig Tieck's links with Italy. Judging by the exhaustive index attached to the application sent to the ECADFS, her work was well advanced⁴. Nonetheless, it was not yet published by 1939, when her brother and sister, together with so many others, ended up on the list of authors who were disapproved of by the regime⁵. Despite this, two volumes Cecilia translated did manage to get published in time, by the Bompiani publishing house in Milan and Bemporad in Florence respectively, both going to press in 1938.

² See Patrizia Guarnieri, *Italian Psychology and Jewish Emigration under Fascism. From Florence to Jerusalem and New York*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 161-166.

³ NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 48, f. 40, «Calabresi Cecilia», 1939.

⁴ Ivi, «Declaration by the director of the Institute Giuseppe Gabetti», 19 January 1939. For more on him see Giuseppe Dolei, *Giuseppe Gabetti*, «Belfagor», 56, 2001, pp. 577-594.

⁵ See *Autori le cui opere non sono gradite in Italia*, list held in the Archivio storico diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari esteri, Rome, reproduced in Giorgio Fabre, *L'elenco. Censura fascista, editoria e autori ebrei*, Turin, S. Zamorani, 1998, pp. 474-481: p. 475.

Plans to leave and family obligations

Cecilia's father died in 1937 and two years later the family were riven again, following the promulgation of Italy's new racial laws. Her brother Massimo emigrated to the USA in September 1939, with his wife Bianca Maria and their sons, Paolo and Guido; her sister Renata followed them two months later. Cecilia wanted to leave Italy too and, to that end, had in January of that year already arranged for two letters of presentation to be written to help her find work abroad: one by Giuseppe Gabetti, director of the Istituto di Studi Germanici in Rome; the other by Professor Mario Casella, a renowned philologist at the University of Florence. A file was opened in her name at the ECADFS in New York, as was one for Renata to. In March 1939, Paolo Contini, the sisters' lawyer cousin from Ferrara who frequented the New School, passed the sisters' names on to Miss Drury (who initially mistook them for cousins too).

Unlike her older sister, Cecilia failed to meet the academic prerequisites of the Emergency Committee, having neither the qualifications needed to be a university lecturer, nor a university post. Many in similar circumstances applied and tried their luck nonetheless. For Cecilia the main hurdle to crossing the Atlantic was probably posed by her mother, who had only recently been widowed. Of the three siblings, Cecilia was, objectively, the one who had least hope of finding suitable employment in the United States and who, moreover, had the most biddable temperament. Consequently, it was Cecilia, unmarried and unemployed, 37 years old in 1939, who stayed in Florence with their mother⁶.

From the documentation available to us it is impossible to tell exactly how Cecilia spent the war years. It was, undoubtedly, a difficult time: the two women were forced to stay in hiding, in Tuscany, using forged papers. Written on the post-office identity card issued to Cecilia in Florence on 27th January

⁶ P. Guarnieri, *Italian Psychology*, cit., pp. 159-160.

1944 is the surname Carli, with year and place of birth given as 1903, Avellino. Her mother, Olga Carli di Mori Giacomo, had visited the Florence city council registry office to declare the temporary transfer of her family of two, saying they were officially registered as residing in the municipal area of Avellino⁷.

Following the end of the war, the family deliberated over what to do next. Once it became evident (after some years) that Cecilia's brother Massimo had no chance of being readmitted to his academic post at the University of Milan (the institution from which he had been sent away), and that, similarly, their sister Renata had no hope of a position in Rome or Florence, they decided they would all be reunited in the United States. Olga, who as a mother was covered by the scope of family reunification, was given permission to join her children; this meant that in 1949 she was able to fly to the US, landing at Idlewild (now JFK) airport. Cecilia had to wait, yet again, although she was at least somewhat freer to prioritise herself and her own needs: it was now Renata's turn to take over caring for their mother who was to live for many more years. Cecilia stayed at home in Florence at Via Guerrazzi 21. She was diagnosed with breast cancer, but again coped with this set-back valiantly. She refused to give up on the idea of studying and working, but what prospects did she have? She was certainly not lacking in talent, yet, for her too, moving to America appeared to be the most solid and appealing prospect even in the post-war years.

Emigrating post-war: Canada

On 23rd May 1949, Cecilia sent an official request to the Rector of the Università di Firenze, asking for a certificate stating the courses she had taken, the number of hours studied per week, her professors' names and the grades she had gained. These documents were to come in handy: on 30th

⁷ G. Calabresi private papers, post-office identity card, Florence, 27 January 1944.

September she enrolled at the Library School of McGill University in Montreal, which had come under the jurisdiction of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences since 1940 and was the first institution in Canada to grant a Bachelor of Library Science (BLS), also accredited by the American Library Association.

On the enrolment form she stated: that she had “no religious affiliation”; that she had worked in Florence at the Biblioteca Nazionale, as well as for a publishing house (no further details given); and that she had translated books from German to Italian. In the space provided for the names of friends and relatives who could act as referees, she included the names and addresses of her sister Renata Calabresi, in New York, her brother the cardiologist Massimo Calabresi in New Haven and Professor Guido Calogero, 7350 Churchill Road, Montreal⁸. Calogero had taught Philosophy in Florence at Magistero [the Faculty of Education], from 1931 to 1934, thereafter in Pisa, until he was divested of his post for his antifascist leanings, after which he spent some months in the Murate prison in Florence. Calogero was teaching at McGill at the time and would certainly be a useful contact for Cecilia. She graduated from the school for librarians with a “B” grade in October 1950.

To NYC, thanks (maybe) to the actress who dubbed Greta Garbo's voice

Cecilia did not return to Italy after her time in Canada. Indeed, her mother seems to have tried every means possible to get her to stay in New York. The family story concerning how Signora Olga contacted the well-known Italo-American actress and dancer Francesca Braggiotti (Florence 1902 – Marbella 1998) to help the process would appear to be very likely: she too was from Florence and was born, just like Cecilia, in 1902, making it probable that the two women could have already known each other somehow. Braggiotti, who

⁸ McGill University Archives, Montreal, Quebec, *Students Records*, f. «Calabresi Cecilia». See also <<http://www.archives.mcgill.ca>> (accessed 28 November 2018) and P. McNally, *McGill University. Graduate School of Library and Information Studies*, «ELAN, Ex Libris Association Newsletter», 2004, Special Issue (Summer), pp. 3-7.

had had a role in *Scipione l'Africano* (1937) and dubbed Greta Garbo's voice, was awarded the *Croce di cavaliere dell'Ordine della solidarietà italiana* by Italian president Luigi Einaudi in February 1949. Olga hoped that Francesca would be able to intercede with her husband and help speed up Cecilia's visa application: Braggiotti's husband was John Davis Lodge, the lawyer and former actor who had embarked on a political career in the state of Connecticut (where Massimo Calabresi was living), and who was a candidate for the governorship in 1951, as well as the brother of Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. (Massachusetts senator from 1947 to 1952). Whatever the truth of that story, Cecilia did settle in New York and the two sisters and their mother were able to live together once again, in Manhattan.

Cecilia spent her early days there seeking appropriate employment. Unable to find a job as a librarian, she worked in an international bookshop for many years and gradually began to do translation work again: she translated a German book for Florence's La Nuova Italia publishing house in 1973.

Guido Calabresi reminisces about how, on retiring, his aunt became a culturally active New Yorker, taking him and his brother Paul to the opera, museums and other cultural events⁹. She missed Florence terribly but would never move back permanently, even though it was to remain a favourite destination on her globe-trotting travels with Renata, which became more frequent following the death of their mother Olga in 1964.

Cecilia Calabresi passed away in her city-centre apartment in Central Park West, NYC, in March 1985.

Major publications

- Alja Rachmanowa, *Una fanciulla fra i tartari della Russia*, translated by Cecilia Calabresi, Florence, Bemporad, 1938.

⁹ Guido Calabresi, written testimony to author, 28 November 2018.

- Carl Zuckmayer, *Maddalena*, translated by Cecilia Calabresi, Milan, Bompiani, 1938.
- Walter F. Otto, *Spirito classico e mondo cristiano*, translated by Cecilia Calabresi, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1973.

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