

Licia Barocas

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An Italian from Egypt, at the age of 18 Licia Barocas came to Florence with her mother and her brother to study. She graduated in philosophy in October 1938. From that point on, as the family were Jewish, there was no prospect for them in Italy. Her brother Vinicio left for England, and after many hardships, remained there all his life, working as an astronomer. Licia returned with her mother to Alexandria, where from 1940 onwards the Italians were persecuted whereas Jews were discriminated against and therefore not interned. She returned to live and work in Florence as a translator and expert in the teaching of English.

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A girl at the Italian scientific high school in Egypt

Daughter of Alberto and Ida Orvieto, Licia Barocas was born in Alexandria, Egypt, on 8 March 1916, and had two older brothers; her father had already died when she was in high school¹. In Egypt the Italian community was second in number only to the Greeks. Later and at the end of the 1920s the Italians numbered about 60-70,000, with a very strong Jewish presence, initially above all from Tuscany. Licia's grandparents had also originally come from Livorno, before emigrating. While in Italy Jews constituted less than 1 per thousand of the total population, in Egypt they accounted for about 10% of the Italian population. It is estimated that their numbers reached nearly 5,000 in 1937. Their presence was considered advantageous due to their entrepreneurial and professional skills, so much so that Mussolini counted on their potential to strengthen the Italian presence in the Mediterranean². In

¹ The data can be inferred from the documents in ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Barocas Licia», in particular the enrolment form, Florence, 10 December 1934.

² Marta Petricoli, *La comunità italiana in Egitto*, «Polo sud. Semestrare di studi storici», 3, 2, 2013, pp. 21-30, and Ead., *Oltre il mito. L'Egitto degli italiani (1917-1947)*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2007.

Alexandria between 1927 and 1936 the chief rabbi was the Italian David Prato (1882-1951), who had completed his rabbinical studies in Livorno and Florence. Licia attended the Italian scientific high school in Alessandria, receiving good grades: all 8/10 except 7 in drawing and exemption from physical education³. In Egypt Italian schools were organized along the lines of those of the mother country, and if before wealthy families had preferred to enroll their children in the *Licée*, French being the *lingua franca* of local community, at the beginning of the thirties Italian authorities ordered that they be sent to Italian schools, where the teaching of foreign languages, lacking in the high schools in Italy, was added. Licia, as can be seen from her school-leaving diploma issued by the Foreign Ministry, studied the local variety of Arabic, French and English⁴. She was probably involved in the *Giovani Italiane*, the fascist female Italian youth organization; in those years the fascistization of the Italian community in Egypt could be said to be complete: according to the data collected by the Italian government in 1930 there were only 27 anti-fascists in Cairo, 7 in Port Said and 37 in Alessandria⁵.

Graduated in Florence during the «racial measures»

In July 1934 Licia Barocas's brother Vinicio, who was two years older, enrolled at the Università di Firenze, in the Facoltà di Scienze. A few months later, in December 1934, Licia enrolled in the Facoltà di Lettere. She came to Florence with her mother while her older brother, Valerio, then 30, remained in Alexandria where he worked as a doctor in a hospital. It emerges from university documents that Licia and her mother lived in the Santa Croce neighborhood, in via Magliabechi 7, care of Gherardi, next to the Central National Library, which was inaugurated in the autumn of 1935; they then

³ ASUFi, AC, SS, f. «Barocas Licia», Regno d'Italia, Ministero degli Affari esteri, Diploma della maturità scientifica, issued on 6 October 1934 presumably in view of enrolling in the university.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 3.

⁵ M. Petricioli, *La comunità italiana*, cit., p. 26.

moved to Viale Carlo Alberto 5 (currently Viale Giovine Italia, as the City of Florence re-named it in April 1947), where in 1938 the fascist Italian Youth Home was inaugurated⁶. In the academic year 1938-39 both brother and sister graduated, he in physics, she in philosophy, a degree course that few chose, compared to that of letters from the same faculty, and among those few very few women. Licia presented an application for graduation on 12 September 1938, on the eve of the publication in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* of the *Provisions for the defense of race in the fascist school*, and when the Università di Firenze was in the midst of carrying out the compilation of the 804 forms distributed to the personnel register those who were Jewish. The forms were to be turned in to the rectorate by 20 September⁷. On October 25, 1938, Licia defended her thesis on "Il pensiero filosofico di Pierre-Louis De Maupertuis" (The philosophical thought of Pierre-Louis De Maupertuis), mathematician and French astronomer, as well as popularizer of Newton. The candidate had a grade average of 27/30 and was awarded her degree with a final mark of 100/110.

Her supervisor was Paolo Lamanna, who had long professed a fervent admiration for the Duce, and that year he edited Mussolini's *La dottrina del fascismo* (Florence, Le Monnier, 1938). Among the members of the commission were Giovanni Calò, Guido Mazzoni, Mario Casella and Eugenio Garin⁸, who had already taken over from Professor Ludovico Limentani, who like the other «non-Aryan» professors of the university had received a letter of dismissal from the rector on 11 October. In Florence the Facoltà di Lettere

⁶ The addresses can be found the documents in ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Barocas Licia». The file on Barocas Vinicio is missing so data was collected from other sources. [Click here for P. Guarnieri's biographical sketch of Vinicio Barocas.](#)

⁷ Francesca Cavarocchi, Alessandra Minerbi, *Politica razziale e persecuzione antiebraica nell'ateneo fiorentino*, in Enzo Collotti (ed.), *Razza e fascismo. La persecuzione contro gli ebrei in Toscana 1938-1943*, vol. 1, Rome-Florence, Carocci-Regione Toscana, 1999, pp. 467- 510: 473-474. For the RDL n. 1390 of 5 September 1938 (GU, n. 209, 13 September 1938), see [Leggi fascistissime and the racial laws.](#)

⁸ ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Barocas Licia», her application for graduation addressed to the rector of the University of Florence, 12 September 1938, and the minutes of the graduation commission, 25 October 1938.

and Medicina were the most affected by the racial laws. Licia had taken the exam in moral philosophy with Limentani, the year before, on 16 October 1937; among the other professors she had had were Isaac Sciaky, Enzo Bonaventura and Attilio Momigliano, as appears in the examination records⁹. None of these were present at her thesis discussion because, as of October 1938, no Jewish professor could take part in exam or thesis commissions, as set out in one of Bottai's many ministerial circulars and signed by the Rector, Arrigo Serpieri. Serpieri's name and his signature appear also on the Licia Barocas's degree diploma.

As if nothing had changed?

The effects of the laws soon also directly concerned Licia. As in previous years, Licia applied for a reimbursement for the expenses for the university fees for the previous year: she had been reimbursed in full in the early years, but already in March 1938 the funding had been cut in half. In May 1939 it was denied completely on the basis of the resolution of the Direttorio della Cassa scolastica of 19 April 1939¹⁰. In fact, as of January of that year the Minister Bottai had canceled the right to subsidies and scholarships for Jewish students¹¹. It almost seems that Licia believed the subsidy could be granted as if nothing had changed, as if the anti-Semitic laws did not matter. She had no precise political ideas, but her family was relatively pro-fascist, like the vast majority of the Italian community in Egypt, even if the racial laws led them to change their minds¹². Her brother Vinicio, instead, was in November of 1938 already actively trying to leave Italy and in January of the

⁹ Ivi, record of exams taken along with dates and marks assigned by each of the three members of the commission.

¹⁰ Ivi, certificate of reimbursement made out to Licia Barocas by the Cassa scolastica: R. Università degli studi di Firenze, Cassa scolastica, 8 April 1937 for total reimbursement of fees 26 March 1938 and respectively for half of expenses on 26 March 1938 and on 4 May 1939 the rejection of the application.

¹¹ Ministerial circular dated 16 January 1939 and, respectively, 27 January 1939, cited in F. Cavarocchi, A. Minerbi, *Politica razziale*, cit., p. 505.

¹² Author's interview with Alberto Barocas, first-born of Valerio e nephew of Licia, 20 May 2019.

following year moved to England in search of a job. Unlike Vinicio, who was also recommended by a professor of his Facoltà di Fisica, Licia did not submit an application to the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning in London, nor to the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars in New York. Few women did so, and Licia perhaps lacked support. In the correspondence between the two organizations and her brother no mention can be found of Licia. It is her nephew Alberto Barocas who reveals that immediately after the racial laws, his aunt Licia returned to Alexandria in Egypt with her mother, where everyone had quite a difficult time¹³.

Twice persecuted

The Italian community in Egypt was also negatively affected by the racial laws, especially in Cairo and Alexandria, both because the welfare organizations lost the important contributions of Jewish doctors and because Italian schools lost their Jewish pupils and students. From June 1940, after the declaration of war by Italy, the organizations no longer received annual donations from the Italian government and the structures were sequestered by the Egyptian armed forces. Her brother Valerio was expelled from the Italian hospital in Alexandria, founded in 1923 and from 1927 named after Benito Mussolini, but managed to exercise the medical profession privately escaping internment, despite a 1938 law granting the right to exercise the medical profession only to Egyptian doctors, denying foreigners the right to practice¹⁴. Licia certainly could not hope to teach in Italian schools, so she started giving private lessons. With Mussolini's declaration of war alongside Germany, the British authorities demanded that the Italians in Egypt be

¹³ Communication from Alberto Barocas to the author, 13 May 2019.

¹⁴ See Aldo Prinivalli, *Ospedali e medici italiani in Egitto tra Ottocento e Novecento*, «Oriente moderno», 88, 2008, pp. 169-184: 181n. The Italian hospital of Alexandria was sequestered by the Egyptian military in 1940 and never return, although it had been funded by the Italian community. Barocas is not mentioned, but see Valerio Barocas, *Il fegato dei paesi caldi*, Ospedale italiano di Alessandria d'Egitto Benito Mussolini, sezione medica, Correggio, laboratorio farmacologico Recordati, extracted from «Argomenti di farmacoterapia», 4, 1937.

registered and interned, about 5000 men only in Alexandria. Paradoxically, things went somewhat better for the Italian Jews, as for the anti-fascists, because they were discriminated against to their least disadvantage, exempted, for example, from the seizure of their local assets¹⁵. Licia's brother, the doctor, was married to Cesira Casini, a Catholic and teacher from Rome he had known as a student when he attended the University in Rome; in 1941 they moved to Cairo with their two young sons Alberto and Claudio and for a period he worked in a hospital. In 1952 they came to Italy, to Genova, where he became health director of the Colonia Arnaldi in Recco; in 1958 they went to live in Rome¹⁶. Licia did not follow them in those journeys, but she also decided to settle in Italy like Valerio with his family, while their other brother Vinicio, the astronomer, remained in England.

An old photo

The Barocas had not registered themselves in 1938-39 as Jewish residents with the Municipality of Florence. There is no trace of them in the archive of the Florentine Jewish Community; they were not practicing. At the University archive, the file of the student Vinicio is missing and that of Licia was damaged in the flood. Her passport-size photograph is so deteriorated that it no longer shows her face. The last trace of her is a request signed by Licia Barocas on 23 July 1953 – at the time she was 37 and single – for a certificate attesting to her degree in philosophy, which she had received in 1938¹⁷. The request was sent from Florence, where Licia had returned to live¹⁸. She did not become a teacher of philosophy, the discipline in which she graduated,

15 Cf. M. Petricioli, *Oltre il mito. L'Egitto degli italiani*, cit., pp. 404-416.

16 See Clelia Cerqua Sarnelli, *L'ospedale Umberto I° del Cairo*, in AIDE, Associazione Italiani d'Egitto, website updated to 2011 (accessed 14 May 2019); this is the first Italian hospital, founded in 1903. The Baracos did not appear in the lists compiled by the AIDE. Some information, however, can be gleaned from *Ricordo di Claudio Barocas*, «Rivista degli studi orientali», 85, 2012, pp. 15-18.

17 ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Barocas Licia», request on stamped paper from L. Barocas addressed to the rector, 23 July 1953.

18 Probably in 1952; she died ten years later according to the recollections of her nephew.

but acquired a great command of English and lived doing translations and giving private lessons. As an expert in the teaching of English, she collaborated especially with the Valmartina publishing house in Florence, founded in 1951 with a specific literary linguistic vocation, and published various volumes, manuals, repeatedly reprinted, as well as translations.

Major publications

- *La versione in inglese. Raccolta di temi con premessa grammaticale sulle particolarità della lingua*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1958.
- *Le difficoltà della lingua inglese*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1959.
- Francesco Rodolico, *The Florentine Landscape*. With 52 photographs taken by the Author, English translation by Licia Barocas, Florence, Le Monnier, 1959.
- *What to Say. Cosa dire e come dirlo. Conversazioni pratiche inglesi con traduzione italiana e note grammaticali*, ed. by Licia Barocas, Florence, Valmartina, 1961.
- *Essential English for Foreign Students*, revised edition by C. E. Eckersley specially prepared for Italian schools by Licia Barocas, Florence, Le Monnier, 1961.
- *Robert Louis Stevenson, Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, adapted for recording by Sidney Stevens, Florence, Valmartina, 1963, 4 phonographic records, attached text with notes by Licia Barocas; 2nd ed. with introduction and explanatory notes by Licia Barocas, Florence, Valmartina, 1964.
- (ed.), *Gran Bretagna e Irlanda*, Florence, Valmartina, 1964.
- David Hicks, *Calling all Beginners. Corso di lingua inglese*, Italian ed. by G. Morris, enlarged by Licia Barocas, in co-edition with The British Broadcasting Corporation, Florence, Valmartina, 1965.

Archival sources

- ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Barocas Licia».

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