

Ezio Levi D'Ancona

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«I have had to leave Naples, my chair, the university, even the academy presidency, and I find myself living in Florence», so confided Professor Levi D'Ancona to a friend in February 1939. At the age of 54 he was forced to start over, if not for himself, for his five children, then aged between 2 and 21. Thus he set off for the United States, in search of university work, believing that he would shortly be reunited with his children; in reality he saw only one of them again.

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Family history and education

Born in Mantua on 19 July 1884 into a Ferrarese family of Sephardic origin, Ezio Levi was a student at the Collegio Ghislieri and obtained a literature degree, conferred by the Università di Pavia, in 1906. He concluded his post-graduate studies at the Istituto di Studi Superiori in Florence with a thesis on 14th century poetry; he won an award for the thesis from the Accademia delle Scienze di Torino, and the work was subsequently published. A student of Pio Rajna and Alessandro D'Ancona, Levi married D'Ancona's niece, Flora Aghib (1895-1982), in 1916. Ten years later, in 1926, he added his wife's maternal surname – indeed his teacher's surname – to his own, becoming known forthwith as Ezio Levi D'Ancona. The couple had five children: Antonio Giacomo in 1917, Mirella Luigia in 1919, Vivaldo Ernesto in 1921, Pier Lorenzo Arturo in 1926 and Viviano Ludovico Emanuele in 1937. Although they had relationships with other Jewish families, the Levi D'Anconas were not themselves practising Jews.

Philologist and Hispanist, Levi D'Ancona began his career as a literature teacher in secondary schools in Lucera and Naples and from 1912-1918 he

was a literature professor at the R. Accademia Militare in Leghorn¹. From 1918-19 he taught comparative literature at the Istituto Superiore di Magistero Femminile in Florence until 1923, after which he took up a post teaching Neo-Latin literature at Palermo University. In the April of 1925, having signed Gentile's Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals, he requested a transfer to Naples, where the literature faculty, honoured to acquire a «highly valuable expert of Romance literature [...] opted to forgo» the standard procedure for engaging employees².

Specialising in the study of Spanish language and literature, he became a professor at Madrid University between 1929 and 1931; from 1934 to 1936 he taught on the summer courses at Santander University and gave lectures at various conferences abroad. He was a member of the Hispanic Society of America in New York from 1937³.

Excluded and expelled but «discriminated»

Following termination of service on 30 November 1938, as per ministerial decree no. 446 and the promulgation of the Italian racial laws, Levi D'Ancona was expelled on 14 December 1938. He was replaced by 34-year-old Professor Salvatore Battaglia (Catania 1904 – Naples 1971), who had moved from Catania in order to study at the University of Florence, under his own teacher, one Mario Casella, a fervent antifascist and anti-Gentilian. Levi D'Ancona was also removed from the Istituto Superiore di Magistero paraggiato femminile Suor Orsola Benincasa of Naples, ousted from the presidency of the Reale Accademia di Archeologia, Lettere e Belle Arti of Naples and the Società Napoletana di Storia Patria, not to mention his exclusion from the directorship of the Biblioteca Hispanoamericana. He

1 As per the CV, in English, presented to the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, in New York, 1939. Cf. NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 87, f. 27, «Levi D'Ancona, Ezio», 1939-41, c.v. 1939.

2 ACS, MPI, DGIU, *Divisione I, Professori ordinari, 3° versamento (1940-1970)*, b. 268, f. «Levi D'Ancona, Ezio», Faculty Board, session of 3 November, 1925.

3 NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 87, f. 27, «Levi D'Ancona, Ezio», 1939-41, as per CV of 1939.

requested «discrimination on account of exceptional merit» (the word «discrimination» paradoxically being synonymous with «exemption»). He felt justified given that he had served in the navy from 1912 to 1922, had been made a second lieutenant in the army in 1936, not to mention the recognition conferred on him as officer of the order of the Italian Crown and commander of the Spanish Crown and the Romanian Crown. In consultation with the «Demorazza» (the census for the Jewish population) his application was eventually accepted and processed by Minister Bottai in September 1940, at which point Levi D'Ancona had already gone abroad⁴. Regardless, the concessions granted him thanks to so-called «discrimination» were minimal and only exempted him from a number of minor discriminatory measures (as per Royal Decree-law no. 1728, 17 November 1938) but certainly did not lead to his reinstatement at the university.

Difficult decisions for the whole family

Having left Naples and their home in Via Girolamo Santa Croce 12, the whole family moved to Via Giovanni Bovio 23, in Florence. Friends and relatives of the family who had also been affected by the racial laws had taken the decision to leave Italy altogether, moving to Palestine or the United States. Ezio began to seriously consider the possibility himself and Charles S. Singleton (1909-1985), a young Dante scholar from Johns Hopkins University, who at that time was staying in Florence with his wife for research purposes, suggested that Ezio participate in a conference being held in New Orleans, with a view to seeking work in an American university. Thus, he decided to leave for the States with his 20-year-old daughter Mirella; her English, however, was no better than his own. Flora on the other hand knew the language well and it appears that her father Arturo convinced her to accompany Ezio (instead of Mirella) in order to establish academic contacts,

⁴ Antonella Venezia, *La Società Napoletana di Storia Patria e la costruzione della nazione*, Napoli, Federico II University Press, 2017, p. 183.

ultimately for «the future of our children»⁵. The idea was that the children would stay temporarily with their maternal grandmother between the house in Florence and the Fattoria D'Ancona villa in San Piero in Frassino (Ortignano, Arezzo). The grandmother was an elderly widow and it would have fallen to the only daughter, 20-year-old Mirella, to look after everyone, including the youngest child who was just two years old.

On the advice of Mary Sinclair Crawford, professor of Old French and dean of women at the University of Southern California, on 22 March 1939, Levi D'Ancona made contact with the International Institute of Education of New York, which had links to the Emergency Committee for the Aids of Displaced Foreign Scholars. In a letter, written in perfect English, almost certainly by his wife, he explained his situation, described his competencies and asked for help to «continue his intellectual career, by working with an American university and completing the books he had started»⁶. The ECADFS had already received recommendations on his behalf from The Women's League of the United Synagogue of America and from an acquaintance at the Library of Congress in Washington, and others would arrive. One such was from an American woman who made sure to mention the familial connection between Levi D'Ancona and Enrico Fermi (their wives were second cousins) and highlighted the difficult situation in which the couple found themselves⁷.

Always with his wife at his side

Ezio and Flora D'Ancona set sail from Genoa on the *Saturnia* on 10 December 1939, travelling on a temporary visa which would allow them to go to New Orleans; the professor had been invited to the Modern Language Association Congress, presided over by Henry Carrington Lancaster from Johns Hopkins University. They arrived in New York on 21 December and at immigration

⁵ From the unedited memoir of Flora Aghib, *La nostra vita con Ezio*, Firenze 1981, Levi D'Ancona private archive, courtesy of Vivaldo Levi D'Ancona.

⁶ NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 87, f. 27, «Levi D'Ancona, Ezio», 1939-41, letter from E. Levi D'Ancona, 22 March 1939.

⁷ *Ibidem*, the woman's name is illegible.

declared their contact in the States to be Charles S. Singleton from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore⁸. Just the day before, Carrington Lancaster had written to Stephen Duggan of ECADFS recommending his Italian colleague and Old French expert⁹.

When they first arrived, they stayed with Laura and Enrico Fermi in their home in Leonia, New Jersey. The renowned scientist made it clear however, much to Levi D'Ancona's dismay, that he would be able to do very little for Ezio, given that their respective academic disciplines were so different. Ezio and Flora took a hotel room in Manhattan, reserved for them by an acquaintance who lived and worked in New York; she was the sister of the head of a school in Naples where Ezio had previously taught (the Magistero Femminile Suor Orsola Benincasa)¹⁰.

Once in New York, Ezio immediately requested an appointment with the secretary of the ECADFS and on 9 January 1940, he attended an interview, accompanied by Flora: «a small man-leonine head» noted Miss Drury, always attentive to the appearance of those she helped. She found Mrs Levi's English impeccable and initially believed her to be a native speaker, though her husband's limited grasp of the language became obvious immediately and indeed, the couple spoke to each other in Italian. In her notes she wrote: a distinguished «middle aged couple. Quite nice, but distant»¹¹. The professor produced several letters of reference and his CV, which contained a list of 7 possible referees, all American except for one French person and a single Italian, one Giovanni Gentile, a senator and former minister of education. Levi D'Ancona boasted approximately 200 publications, excellent French and Spanish, some Portuguese and Romanian, as well as receptive knowledge of

⁸ Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed on registration, 20 November 2018).

⁹ NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 87, f. 27, «Levi D'Ancona, Ezio», 1939-41, letter from H. Carrington Lancaster to S. Duggan, 20 December 1939.

¹⁰ F. Aghib, *La nostra vita con Ezio*, cit.

¹¹ NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 87, f. 27, «Levi D'Ancona, Ezio», 1939-41, *Interview Memorandum* of Miss Drury, 9 January 1940. Documents and reports referred to later in the text are contained in the same file.

English and German; he was looking for work as a teacher either of Spanish or Provençal and he also offered to teach medieval French, Italian and Spanish literature courses.

The difficulties were greater than he could have imagined. In February he was engaged, briefly, as a guest professor at the Texas Technological College of Lubbock, as a substitute for a teacher on sick leave. Ezio imagined that he would get work at the University of Austin, Texas, and notified Miss Drury that said university would probably ask the ESADFS¹² to provide funding for him; his assumption came to nothing, however. On 11 April 1940, it was the ECADFS who found him a position at the City College of New York in the Romance Languages department, but this too fell short of expectations.

Vicissitudes and help getting a work permit

In order to find work, Ezio urgently needed to obtain the documents that would allow him to remain in the USA, all the more so because his son Vivaldo, following a long series of changes in circumstance, was about to join his parents in America. Ezio applied both to the American consulate in Ciudad Juárez for a permit and, as many European emigrants were doing, to the Mexican consulate in El Paso, in order to get into Mexico and from there re-enter the States. Once again, he turned for help to a Jewish organisation, consisting mainly of women, on the advice of the wife of Sydney Meyers, a musician and prominent film editor of New York, and known to Levi D'Ancona through mutual friends¹³. On 1 June 1940 he wrote to the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) in El Paso, Texas, which was also home to an organisation dedicated to assisting emigrants - the Committee for Service to

¹² Ibid., letter from Ezio Levi D'Ancona to Miss Drury, dated 1 March 1940.

¹³ *Sidney Meyers, movie director* [obituary] «New York Times», 5 December 1969. His wife was Edna Ocko Meyers. At that time, Meyers (1906-1969), who had studied at CUNY and grown up in a family of Polish Jews who had emigrated to East Harlem, worked for the Federal Arts Project of the Work Projects Administration; it was during this period, in 1937, that he directed the film *People of the Cumberland*.

the Foreign Born¹⁴.

The case was taken on by Fanny Hutman Zlabovsky who had been assisting European immigrants at the NCJW for twenty years, and she helped them navigate the process, which was far more complicated and difficult than they had envisaged. They had to show that they had money enough to live on without relying on welfare assistance in Mexico. In order to obtain a permanent visa in the States, Ezio needed to produce a professor's contract, lasting two years, from an accredited academic American institution, and in addition prove that he had previously worked as a professor. Levi D'Ancona had received an offer from the Mary Whiton Calkins Foundation at Wellesley College, the most prestigious women's college in Massachusetts, but it was only for a year. The American consul in Mexico even went so far as to ask whether the foreign professor was really essential to the American institution that intended to engage him and not in competition with an American. Zlabovsky advised the couple to bring her their documents so that she could examine them directly. On 30 June the Levi D'Anconas arrived in El Paso, at which point it became clear that, not only was the contract at Wellesley for one year only, but that he had no documentation to support his declarations regarding his academic positions in Italy, having believed that his word would be sufficient.

The corroboration of various American colleagues, who attested to his qualifications, added weight to Levi D'Ancona's case. In an effort to break the deadlock, the Italian consul in El Paso accompanied him to the American consulate in Juarez, together with a representative from the Council of Jewish Women; he was, however, denied a *non-quota visa*, for the aforementioned reasons. On 1 July 1941 he decided to return to El Paso, but due to a law that had taken effect on the very same day, he was not able to get back into Texas without a permit from the American consul; this too was denied him. Thus,

¹⁴ For this letter and all correspondence connected to the request for a residence permit in the USA, see The University of Texas at El Paso Library, *Fanny Zlabovsky-National Council of Jewish Women case files*, MS 508, C.L., b. 1, f. 41, «D'Ancona, Ezio Levi», 1940.

he was obliged to stay in Mexico but, despite having a Mexican visa, the fact that he had gone there without official documentation (which had later become necessary), meant that he had to follow a highly complicated process to legalise his entry.

The situation seemed impossible but, in the end, it was the NCJW in New York that approached the State Department in Washington to request a resolution to the Levi D'Ancona case. After an obligatory wait of seven weeks in Juarez, things appeared to be looking up but, once again, Levi D'Ancona was thwarted by the lack of documentation regarding his academic career in Italy; a visa would only be granted to the couple as part of the Italian quota, following an assessment by the American consulate in Italy. It then emerged that only the American consulate in Lisbon could evaluate the quotas of Mediterranean countries – an additional hurdle for the couple. Finally, on 21 August 1941, they received a positive response.

Too much stress

Ezio and his wife left immediately; they stopped in New York in the same hotel, the Emerson, at 111 West 75th Street, and at the end of October, set off for Wellesley to settle in before the new teaching post began. The intervention of the president of Wellesley College, an exceptional person and the first female captain of the USA Navy, would prove critical; Mildred H. McAfee (1899-1994)¹⁵ had put pressure on the American consulate in Mexico, as well as going personally to the state department in Washington on behalf of Levi D'Ancona, as documented in correspondence archived by the NCJW. She claimed that he was necessary to her college, but given that she could not offer him the fellowship, which lasted one year, she suggested splitting the 5000-dollar salary over two years, as a way to satisfy the requisite

¹⁵ Elizabeth G. Hendricks, *Mildred McAfee Horton (1900-1994). Portrait of a Pathbreaking Christian Leader*, «The Journal of Presbyterian History», 76, 2, 1998, pp. 159-174, and Regina T. Akers, *Horton, Mildred McAfee* in Susan Ware (ed.), *Notable American women. A Biographical Dictionary Completing the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge (MS), Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 311-313.

condition of the visa application. Although the proposition was deemed not entirely satisfactory, the permit was, nevertheless, finally granted.

Thus, everything was resolved much to the satisfaction of the NCJW; for the organisation, the Levi D'Ancona case represented an important precedent, valuable in their future work with others in similar situations¹⁶. As for Ezio, his appointment as the Mary Whiton Calkins visiting Italian professor at Wellesley College was indeed temporary and some months later, he had to start all over again in his search for work. Furthermore, he received the news that his brother Enrico had died suddenly during a chemistry experiment¹⁷. Ezio's health had deteriorated with all the stress and he was admitted to the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, where he passed away on 28 March 1941. With the exception of Vivaldo, who at 20 had just arrived in the USA, Ezio died having never seen his children again.

The ECADFS remained in contact with Ezio's widow, who found work teaching in women's colleges in New York State and later in Virginia. The couple's children who had stayed in Italy escaped to Switzerland in January 1944 and in September 1946, Mirella, then 27, and her 9-year-old brother Viviano came to New York.

The Ezio Levi collection, consisting of 887 volumes, 1597 pamphlets, 14 (incomplete) literature and Neo-Latin papers (some French, mainly Spanish classics), donated by Flora in 1958, is held at the humanities library of the Università di Firenze.

Major publications

- *Francesco di Vannozzo e la lirica nelle corti lombarde durante la*

¹⁶ The whole case is referenced in NCJW, in a detailed report about «Levi D'Ancona Ezio», 27 March 1941, containing the intense correspondence between June and October 1941 between the various people and entities cited; see The University of Texas at El Paso Library, Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, *Fanny Zlabovsky-National Council of Jewish Women case files*, MS 508, C.L., b. 1, f. 41, «D'Ancona, Ezio Levi», 1940.

¹⁷ He was director of Callegri e Chigi in Ravenna, researching synthetic rubber, a state secret at the time, and consequently retained his employment despite the racial laws. Written testimony of Viviano Levi D'Ancona, 6 January 2019.

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- *Storia poetica di Don Carlos*, Pavia, Mattei & C., 1914.
- *Poesia di popolo e poesia di corte nel Trecento*, Leghorn, Giusti, 1915.
- (Ed.), *Il libro dei cinquanta miracoli della Vergine, edito ed illustrato da Ezio Levi*, Bologna, Romagnoli-Dall'Acqua, 1917.
- *Piccarda e Gentucca. Studi e ricerche dantesche*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 1921.
- *Poeti antichi lombardi. Prefazione, commento, note e bibliografia di Ezio Levi*, Milan, Cogliati, 1921.
- *Uguccione da Lodi e i primordi della poesia italiana*, Florence, Battistelli, 1921.
- *Nella letteratura spagnola contemporanea. Saggi*, Florence, La Voce, 1922.
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- The University of Texas at El Paso Library, Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, *Fanny Zlabovsky-National Council of Jewish Women casefiles*, MS 508, C.L., b. 1, f. 41, «D'Ancona, Ezio Levi», 1940.
- Flora Aghib Levi D'Ancona, *La nostra vita con Ezio*, Florence, July 1981, unedited typescript. (The original containing the handwritten dedication: «To my Mirella in memory of her Papa» is held in the Luisa Levi D'Ancona private archive in Jerusalem).
- *Fondo Ezio Levi*, Medieval and Renaissance Studies Department, Università di Firenze; index cards, Humanities Library, Florence <<https://www.sba.unifi.it>>.
- USCSF, *Visual History Archive*, from interview with Mirella Levi D'Ancona by Marta Baiardi, 16 March 1998.

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