

«I nostri compagni d'America»: The Jewish Labor Committee and the Rescue of Italian Antifascists, 1934-1941

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After the German army's invasion of France in June 1940, hundreds of Italian antifascists, most of whom had been refugees in this country for over a decade, were part of the massive exodus that moved into the yet unoccupied South. Many found refuge in the Southwest region where Silvio Trentin's bookstore, the Librairie du Languedoc in Toulouse, now served as a clandestine rallying and dispatching point¹. Some found temporary havens in the mountain villages of the Pyrenees. General Secretary of the Italian Socialist Party Pietro Nenni remained in hiding in Palanda, a village of the Ariège; while prominent leader of *Giustizia e Libertà* Emilio Lussu established temporary quarters near Foix. Many others, like socialist representative Giuseppe Modigliani, relocated to Marseille. Even in the South, however, the situation of Italian antifascists was precarious and no different from that of the German, Austrian or Czechoslovakian anti-Nazis. Article 19 of the Armistice convention that the Vichy government signed with the Third Reich stipulated that French authorities were to «surrender on demand» all persons whom the Gestapo would request². The most prominent leaders of the opposition movements to the Nazi régime topped these lists, and the situation was the same for Italian antifascists now requested by the Mussolini police.

In this desperate situation, many refugees looked to America as a safer place of exile. All contemporary accounts of the relief and rescue operations for these political expatriates mention the help of American «friends», or «comrades», who obtained the precious visas and provided passage to the

United States (Fry, 1997; Lussu, E., 1956; Lussu, J., 1967; Garosci, 1953; Fittko, 1991). In his *Diplomazia clandestina* (1956), Lussu frequently referred to «i nostri compagni d'America». Lussu in fact included at least two groups in this category. The expression referred to the Italian intellectual refugees who, like Gaetano Salvemini, Max Ascoli or Lionello Venturi, were already in the United States before 1940 and had founded the Mazzini Society in December 1939 (Tirabassi, 1976, pp. 141-58; also 1984-1985, pp. 399-425; and 1984, pp. 295-313; Casalino, 2000, pp. 16-23). Yet, he also designated as the «American friends» or «comrades» the Italian-American sections of the American labor movement whose active intervention he recognized. Similarly, in *Surrender on Demand*, Varian Fry, who represented the New York based Emergency Rescue Committee, clearly acknowledged the role played in rescue and relief by the main American labor organization, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In addition, both Lussu and Fry mentioned the presence of Frank Bohn, presented as the AFL representative, who reached Marseille a few days before Fry in August 1940 (Lussu, E., 1956, pp. 10-11; Lussu, J., 1967, pp. 24-28; Fry, 1997, pp. 7-12).

This paper focuses on the second category of the «American compagni», members of the American labor movement through their links to other organizations created to liberate European victims of fascism and Nazism. The help extended to Italian exiles by the Italian-American locals of the main garment workers' unions did not simply result from ethnic solidarity. Nor did these locals limit their solidarity to Italian refugees. The unions that operated on their behalf were part of a larger anti-Nazi and antifascist struggle organized under the aegis of the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), a group founded in New York in 1934. The role of the JLC, often subsumed under the name of the AFL, has not been adequately acknowledged in this context. The scope of the JLC's solidarity was more political than strictly labor oriented and more to the left than the AFL ever could be. In addition, although Italian antifascists were not the JLC's most numerous and immediate protégés, focusing on its interventions on their behalf sheds light on the relations between the two groups of American «compagni» mentioned by Lussu or other antifascist militants.

A network of inter-related labor organizations

It is indeed incomplete to ascribe solely to the American Federation of Labor, or even to the Italian-American locals in the unions affiliated to it, the relief and rescue of political leaders of the European social-democratic movement. Such a construction is wrong for at least two reasons. The first one was the AFL's adamant opposition to any relaxation of the country's immigration laws whose formulation it had greatly influenced. Not only did the quota system

since 1924 considerably restrict the number of immigrants from non Anglo-Saxon countries (especially Italy). But since the beginning of the Depression, these quotas had been drastically reduced to 10 per cent of their capacity. The only exception to these rules was the admission «above the quotas» of intellectuals, artists or scientists, who were offered at least a two year contract by an American university or cultural institution. This provision had allowed the arrival of many German, Italian and Austrian refugees fleeing their political regimes and the Third Reich's antisemitic laws (see for instance: Fermi, 1971; Wyman, 1985; also 1984; Morse, 1967; Feingold, 1970; Breitman and Kraut, 1987; Friedman, 1973).

Like thousands of German and Austrian intellectuals, some prominent Italians, such as Gaetano Salvemini or Enrico Fermi, had benefited from this rule. But in no way were these persons recognized as political refugees, they were simply counted as immigrants by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. After the Anschluss in 1938, President Roosevelt's creation of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Political Refugees (PACPR) was a first step toward recognizing the particular plight of German and Austrian Jews, as well as of the prominent persons whose political roles or writings had condemned them to certain arrest by the Nazi authorities. Yet, to qualify for a recommendation by the PACPR, these persons required at least two affidavits testifying to their good moral and political (e.g. non communist) character. Like «non quota» intellectuals they also needed to prove that they were not «likely to become a public charge» and could obtain a work contract in the United States. Even for persons whose fame had reached the United States prior to their demand for admission, a position in an American university was not easy to obtain. But for prominent and certainly for more obscure labor and political leaders, employment was much more problematical. And when the INS services fell under the province of the Justice and State Departments in June 1940, political justification became even more difficult to establish to satisfy the conservative personnel in the Visa division who feared the emergence of «fifth column» Nazi or communist militants in the US (Alien Registration Act or Smith Act, June 1940; Israel, 1966).

The second reason why the AFL could not act alone on behalf of persecuted European socialists was its traditional apolitical stance and isolation from European labor and socialist movements. Since its foundation under the leadership of Samuel Gompers in the late XIXth century, the Federation remained isolated from the socialist dominated international labor movement. Fearing involvement with any political party and suspicious of socialists both in the United States and in Europe, it had refused to be part of the Second International founded in 1889 and remained isolated when the latter reconstructed itself as the Labor and Socialist International (LSI) in 1923. On the level of in-

ternational trade union affiliation, the AFL had briefly (1913-1919) been part of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), but had not renewed its membership after World War I for the same political reasons that kept it isolated from the Socialist International.

After 1924, however, AFL new president William Green was less sectarian in his understanding of European labor and politics than his predecessor. He understood that the Mussolini régime did not bring pride but misery to the workers and pledged the AFL's support to the Antifascist Alliance of North America which was founded by the two main labor unions in the garment trades, the International Ladies Garment Workers (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA)³. After the advent of the Third Reich in Germany, Green unequivocally condemned the tragic and complete destruction of the German labor movement that occurred during the week of May 2 1933. He was equally adamant on the question of Nazi persecution against Jews. Thus at the October 1933 convention, the AFL voted to boycott German made goods and German services, «a boycott to continue until the German government recognizes the right of the working people in Germany to organize into *bona fide*, independent trade unions of their own choosing, and until Germany ceases its repressive policy of persecution of Jewish people» (AFL 1933 Convention, *Proceedings*, pp. 466-73. On the boycott: Gottlieb, 1982).

The context of the rise of Nazism gradually led the AFL to come into the orbit of international labor. The IFTU in particular actively sought its financial and moral support to combat Nazism and fascism now spreading in Europe. The outbreak of the Civil war in Spain in 1936 finally triggered the AFL executive committee to resume its membership to the International Federation. IFTU president, Walter Citrine, had made two journeys to the United States to that effect⁴. Yet because of its previous isolationist and non-socialist stance, the AFL remained remote from the social-democratic movement embodied in both the IFTU and LSI. Its leaders had little knowledge of and personal contacts with European labor and socialist opponents to the totalitarian régimes in their countries. Especially the rescue of these leaders or lesser known militants could not have taken place without the intervention of the JLC.

The JLC was founded in New York in February 1934. Its leaders were all former Jewish immigrants who had arrived in the United States in the 1900's; most of whom were Bundists in the Russian Empire. Dating back to 1897, the Bund (General Jewish Workers' Union of Russia, Lithuania and Poland) was both a socialist revolutionary party and a general union devoted to the defense of Jewish workers and the protection of Yiddish culture in the Pale and later in the diaspora. Bundism dialectically combined the values of proletarian internationalism with the defense of an oppressed culture and people. It inscribed universal socialism in a messianic, but secular and non Zionist,

Jewish culture. The many Bundists forced into exile by the repression that followed the 1905 revolution in Russia quickly formed the vanguard of the Jewish labor movement in the United States in the garment trades as well as in the fraternal order of the Workmen's Circle. David Dubinsky, ILGWU president since 1932 (and AFL vice-president 1934-1936), and Sidney Hillman, ACWA president, were among them. The unions over which they presided and the Workmen's Circle represented some 400,000 workers and became the pillars of the Jewish Labor Committee. Baruch Charney Vladeck, the JLC founder, remained its president until his untimely death in 1938. One of the foremost Bundist representatives in the Pale, Vladeck quickly became involved in the Socialist Party of America after he emigrated. He was elected twice on the socialist ticket to the Brooklyn Board of Aldermen. In 1937, as a member of the American Labor Party, he was part of the La Guardia coalition in the New York City Council. As manager of the «Jewish Daily Forward» since 1918, he was able to obtain the support of the Yiddish daily paper to the JLC (on the JLC see: Malmgreen, 1991, pp. 20-35; also 2000, pp. 4-20; Lebowitz and Malmgreen, 1993; Jacobs, 1996, pp. 391-417; Collomp and Groppo, 2001, pp. 211-47; Collomp, 2000, pp. 23-31).

Because of its political and geographic origins, the JLC's attention primarily focused on the victims of antisemitic and political persecution in Germany, Austria and Poland. The Bund, by now a major political party in inter-war Poland, had become affiliated to the Labor and Socialist International in 1930. This connection allowed Vladeck and other JLC officers contact with the main organizations and leaders of the Socialist International and its trade union corollary the IFTU. Knowing that any large scale humanitarian program to welcome refugees was impossible given the US immigration laws, they made it their mission to save the leading circles of the social-democratic left in Europe and to sustain their underground activity. Vladeck himself traveled twice to Europe in 1935 and 1936. He remained in close contact with the leaders of the Polish Bund and of the German and Austrian Social Democratic Parties as well as with dissident (but non-communist) groups to the left of the SPD. In the 1930's several of these leaders were given temporary refuge, passage and financial support in the United States. The JLC and the AFL jointly ran the Labor Chest for the relief of victims of Fascism and nazism whose funds were sent to the International Solidarity Fund (formerly the Matteotti Fund) which the LSI and IFTU had jointly created (Jacobs, 1996; Collomp and Groppo, 2001).

The garment trade unions (ILGWU, ACWA) and the many smaller Jewish labor or political organizations that constituted the JLC participated in and strongly sustained these operations⁵. As ILGWU president, AFL vice-president, treasurer of the JLC and of the Labor Chest, David Dubinsky was at the core of this solidarity network; his office formed the point of intersection between

these different organizations. He also went to Europe to attend the conventions of the International Federation of Clothing Workers to which the ILGWU belonged. In this context, and because in 1935 he served as AFL representative to the International Labor Organization in Geneva, he was in frequent contact with IFTU and LSI leaders (Collomp, 2000).

The Italian connection

It was Luigi Antonini (Cannistraro, 1985, pp. 21-40; Tintori 2002-2003; Zappia, 1994), however, who directed Dubinsky's and other JLC leaders' attention to the plight of Italian antifascists. Head of the ILGWU Local 89 of New York dressmakers whose membership was exclusively Italian-American⁶, Antonini pointed out at the ILGWU 1934 convention that although «Italians had been the first to feel the fascist blow» they were omitted in the JLC and ILGWU calls for a fund for labor and socialist German and Austrian refugees or underground movements. To correct this oversight, Antonini, in advance of a larger collection, sent a first check to Pietro Nenni, secretary general of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in exile in Paris. He also invited Giuseppe Modigliani, former socialist representative for Bologna and head of the PSI's reformist group, to participate in the celebration of Local 89's XVth anniversary in November 1934⁷. The goal of Modigliani's visit was to place Italy on the JLC leaders' map of fascist countries, and, equally important, to acquaint Italian-American workers with the reality of the oppressive Mussolini régime. The practical purpose was to raise funds to sustain the work of the expatriates in France, and, by so doing, to deflect the philo-fascist tendencies rampant in American Italian communities (on philo-fascism in the US: Diggins, 1972; Luconi, 2000. On antifascism: Varsori, 1984; Ottanelli, 2001, pp. 178-96).

Organized by Serafino Romualdi, editor of *Giustizia*, the Italian version of the ILGWU organ *Justice*, and by Augusto Bellanca, head of ACWA Italian Local 63 of coat-makers, Modigliani's lecture tour helped establish a durable political bond between the Italo-American garment trades unions and the antifascist exiles in France. From November 1934 to the end of March 1935, Modigliani was invited to speak in over a dozen cities. He lectured labor audiences from New York City to the West Coast, with stops in Rochester, Boston, Providence, Buffalo, Toronto, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Seattle and Los Angeles. At the end of the tour, Dubinsky presented him with a 10,000 dollar check collected at these rallies. The money was to accrue to the Fondo Americano which Modigliani had organized within the Matteoti Fund for «the development of antifascist activities outside of Italy and for the support of refugees from the Mussolini régime». Although the fund had been collected at trade union meetings,

Modigliani made sure that the Italian Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (CGL) would not be the sole beneficiary. «The activities of Italian anti-fascists are primarily political», he wrote to Antonini⁸. At the end of his tour, Modigliani was offered a monthly column in *Justice*. He was also made honorary president of Local 89 whose leaders offered him a radio set, «the magical instrument» of modern times «perché vi giungano d'ogni dove le parole, i canti, le voci e le armonie del mondo; perché possiate essere i primi a sentire l'annuncio dell'immane giorno liberatore»⁹.

To reinforce these connections, Pietro Nenni and Modigliani invited Antonini to attend the International Conference on the war in Ethiopia held in Brussels in October 1935. There he met many LSI and IFTU leaders, including LSI general secretary Friedrich Adler, and head of the Russian Social-Democratic Party (Menshevik) Raphael Abramovitch. Both Adler and Abramovitch were to be among the first JLC protégés to reach the United States in the fall of 1940. Antonini also met Edo Fimmen of the International Federation of Transport Workers and of course Bruno Buozzi of the Italian Confederation of Labor. He also became acquainted with many Italians in exile: some 30 former members of the Italian parliament as well as with members of *Giustizia e Libertà* (GL). Antonini also visited Toulouse, where he was invited by the Federazione del Sud Ovest del PSI, and Nice¹⁰.

In the following years several forms of support to the antifascist movement prolonged and strengthened these contacts. On Antonini's recommendation, the JLC agreed to sustain the publication of both *Il Nuovo Avanti* (organ of the Socialist Party in exile) and *Giustizia e Libertà* with a subsidy of \$500 a year each. This decision was taken despite Modigliani's criticism of GL¹¹. The JLC in effect decided to remain aloof from the inner divisions within socialist parties and movements in exile. In the case of German socialists it had responded to the demand of the representation of the Social Democratic Party in exile (SOPADE), while simultaneously encouraging Neu Beginnen, a movement ideologically situated to the left of the SPD (Jacobs, 1996). Antonini or Dubinsky formulated all recommendations concerning Italians to the JLC. When the war broke out in Spain, the ILGWU created a special relief fund, Labor Red Cross for Spain, which had raised \$100,000 by December 1936. But it also responded to many demands from the PSI several members of which had participated in the Garibaldi Battalion in November 1936. In the succeeding months, Pietro Nenni pressed Dubinsky or Antonini with many demands. They were generally met accordingly. «The money received from America has actually saved us», Nenni wrote to Antonini on July 27 1937. In March 1938, Garibaldi Battalion commander Randolfo Pacciardi came to the United States to enhance American financial support and moral solidarity for the Republican and antifascist cause¹². Between the war in Spain and increasing difficulties of survival for many

refugees, demands from the Italian expatriates became even more frequent and urgent. The ILGWU sent a monthly remittance of \$100 to help support the aged veterans of the Italian socialist and labor movement. Another went to the widows and orphans of Italian volunteers who had died in Spain. In 1940 the ILGWU also set up an Italian Refugee Fund which distributed contributions to various antifascist causes in France; all accrued to the Modigliani Fondo Americano within the Matteotti or International Solidarity Fund¹³.

Was rescue possible?

After the fall of France, the JLC wasted no time in trying to work out a mechanism to obtain emergency visas to the United States for the European social democratic leaders now trapped in precarious and risky situations in the Southern zone. In addition, some were interned in concentration camps, where conditions were more than unsanitary¹⁴. «For the leaders of the labor movement now living in Lithuania and in France, the situation has become more tragic from day to day», wrote JLC executive secretary Isaiah Minkoff to Dubinsky on June 26 1940¹⁵. Minkoff was to be the mastermind of the rescue operation which eventually saved over 500 persons between September 1940 and July 1941. Under Minkoff's guidance, not only did the JLC establish lists of its Polish Bundist and Russian Menshevik political friends in most immediate danger, but it also urged several other groups in New York to do the same. The German Labor Delegation which, under Rudolf Katz's executive leadership, represented the German Social-Democrats in the United States, the Italian Emergency Rescue Committee, headed by Lionello Venturi to represent Italian antifascists, and the JLC constituent bodies, especially the ILGWU, all contributed names. For all these groups the JLC oversaw the operation. The letter which Minkoff wrote to Secretary of State Cordell Hull in July 2 1940, containing a first list of some 400 names, was also signed by David Dubinsky, Alexander Kahn, who since Vladeck's death was the manager of the «Jewish Daily Forward», and by AFL president William Green. On the next day, July 3rd, Minkoff met with Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long in Washington to ensure the progress of what would be known, in State Department parlance, as «the AFL list». The AFL's politically neutral (and especially anti-communist) stance was indispensable in obtaining the approval of State Department executives¹⁶.

In directly addressing its demand to the State Department, the JLC was side-stepping and acting in advance of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Political Refugees which only on July 26th became the sole conduit by which exceptional demands could be made. Breckinridge Long acknowledged the JLC list and assured Minkoff that he had requested «the consuls to

give every appropriate consideration to these persons' applications for visas»¹⁷. Yet to obtain these «emergency» or «visitors' visas» affidavits were required certifying that the persons mentioned were not communists and would not be «likely to become a public charge». In the letter to Cordell Hull, Minkoff carefully explained the similar risks incurred by refugees in all totalitarian regimes: Ussr, Nazi and fascist ruled countries.

Because of their opposition to Fascism, Nazism and Communism, the majority of these men and women were forced to flee their countries, Germany, Austria, Czecho-Slovakia, Italy, Russia, Poland. Most of them were until recently in Paris. Now they have found a temporary refuge in Toulouse and other parts of France. But as you are undoubtedly aware, the present government, acceding to the demands of the government of Germany, has agreed to hand over all these pro-democratic refugees to the Gestapo.

This, Honorable Sir, will be the fate of great and noble men and women, whose only crime is their firm belief in Democracy, Freedom and Tolerance, unless they find an immediate place of refuge in the United States, the traditional haven of all hunted and persecuted, and the only remaining one in this sad and tragic world¹⁸.

The drafting of the lists required the cooperation of those acting as heads of these political and national groups both in the United States and in France. For Italian refugees, the list was established from at least two sources. Lionello Venturi provided names of prominent intellectuals and liberal antifascists, among whom former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Italian ambassador in France, Count Carlo Sforza, as well as several members of *Giustizia e Libertà*. It was Modigliani, however, from Toulouse and later Marseille, who supplied a list of stranded *compagni* who should also receive visas. According to his first estimate, «the total number of those who must leave will not exceed 50» (including those already mentioned by Venturi)¹⁹. He cabled these lists to Serafino Romualdi of the ILGWU or directly to Minkoff. Those interned in concentration camps were even less likely to be able to leave than those in hiding. Finally, by the end of July, Modigliani offered a list of 28 names which he directly sent to the American Consul in Marseille and cabled to the JLC. Among them were Modigliani himself and his wife Vera Funaro, Emilio Lussu (GL), Franco Venturi (Lionello's son), Alberto Cianca (editor of *Giustizia e Libertà*), Aldo Garosci (GL) and his wife Madeleine, Silvio Trentin (GL), Alberto Tarchiani (former editor of «Corriere della Sera»), Rinaldo Pacciardi (head of Republican Party and commander of Garibaldi battalion), Pietro Nenni (PSI), Nicola Chiaromonte (journalist and Garibaldi battalion), Bruno Buozzi (CGL), Giovanni Angelo Tasca (PCI), Giuseppe Faraveli (journalist and underground labor movement in Italy), Giuseppe Saragat (PSI). The list, however, like those of the other national groups, changed as

more names were included or it became apparent that some persons originally included would not or could not leave. By the end of August, the State Department declared that the list was now closed²⁰.

On August 2, Modigliani met Frank Bohn, known as the «AFL representative», but who in fact had been appointed and jointly financed by the JLC, the German Labor Delegation and the Italian Emergency Refugee Committee²¹. Modigliani however pointed out that Bohn's support would come to nothing if Washington did not obtain passage for the refugees through Spain and a boat from Lisbon: «Lisbon is the only port of embarkation for America, nothing will be accomplished unless Washington obtains a safe conduct for a boat to be chartered for this specific purpose»²². Transportation was not the only crucial problem. As Lisa Fittko, who with her husband Hans organized clandestine nightly crossing of the border through the mountains, has so well explained, crossing the Spanish border was illegal both because of the French authorities' regulations that rarely granted the necessary exit visas, and because the Franco police often arrested refugees at the border or in Spain²³. In addition, money, or the lack of it, was always a problem, not simply for transportation, but also for surviving from day to day. Apparently Frank Bohn delivered some money to Modigliani upon arrival. From New York, Romualdi cabled to Modigliani that the ILGWU had pledged passage for 15 refugees and the JLC for a dozen more for whom it sent \$5000. But Romualdi insisted that Modigliani «should ask Ascoli, Salvemini, Venturi, etc. to organize a committee to raise funds from individuals»²⁴.

Given these extraordinarily adverse conditions, not all designated Italian refugees were either able or willing to leave. Sforza and Alberto Tarchiani, mentioned on Venturi's list, had reached England in a last minute scramble from Bordeaux in late June. From England, they first reached Montreal and then the United States where they contributed to the activities of the Mazzini Society²⁵. Among those left behind, some could not be found, while others preferred to stay in hiding. The need to simultaneously obtain in time the required passports (many had been deprived of their original citizenship), visas, money and means of evacuation was almost impossible to meet. The reluctance of the State Department or consular services to comply when cases seemed dubious to them added to the anxiety. Modigliani himself never went to America, in spite of his wife's insistence and Dubinsky's and Antonini's many entreaties for him to do so²⁶. He feared he would be recognized if he carried forged papers. Like the most prominent German social-democratic leaders Rudolf Breitscheid and Rudolf Hilferding, also in Marseille²⁷, Modigliani was loath to resort to illegal conduct. «Sneaking out of the country on false passports would be a disgrace to the entire labor movement», he said to Varian Fry. But Bohn's scheme to have Modigliani, Breitscheid and

Hilferding, among others, sail on a boat from Marseille floundered when the Italian Armistice Commission discovered the plan. After Frank Bohn was called back to the United States in late september 1940, it was Varian Fry, and Emilio Lussu who, for the sake of the Italian comrades, continued to try and solve the cases of those who still looked to America as a better refuge²⁸.

Emilio Lussu has reported his own resourcefulness in providing ways of exit for his protégés. In the winter of 1941, he was able to evacuate Alberto Cianca, Aldo Garosci, Leo Valiani, «i fratelli Pierleoni», Nicola Chiaromonte, «and about ten others»²⁹ to the North African coast. From Algiers they reached Casablanca but remained stranded there for months. It was finally with the help of Lussu's contacts in the English War Office representation in Lisbon, where he decided to go to find a solution for his friends in Casablanca, that they were given passage to America. The JLC's final list of arrived refugees reports these Italians as arriving in New York on board the Nyassa in August 1941³⁰.

Similarly, Pacciardi organized the rescue of some of his political friends of the Republican Party through the North African route. But he was the only one who escaped from the group's arrest in Oran (Algeria). As reported by Lussu, the financial means for this operation came from the several groups of American friends in the United States: the ILGWU through Antonini, the ACWA through Augusto Bellanca and the Mazzini Society through Max Ascoli³¹.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from this brief account of American labor's struggle to rescue antifascist leaders. First of all, it was not the AFL itself which acted, although its support of these operations was vital to the State Department's agreement to deliver emergency visas to those refugees designated on the «AFL list». Rather, the garment trades unions, ILGWU and ACWA, were the leading institutions in labor's struggle to obtain the rescue of Italian antifascists. The JLC, of which these unions were the twin pillars, gave a wider political purpose and a more efficient framework to American labor's response to Nazism and Fascism than either isolated unions or the AFL could have provided. The rescue operations that took place from July 1940 were entirely directed by the JLC. They would not have taken place had not the JLC been in close contact with European leaders through the 1930's. The ILGWU's international role was central in that context.

Not many Italians were among the number of refugees whom the JLC was finally able to save. Among the 544 persons who had reached the United States by July 1941, the most significant numbers were Polish, Russian (Mensheviks), German and Austrian refugees. Only a dozen were Italians. Frank Bohn's failure to bring Giuseppe Modigliani, the ILGWU's hero, to

America is a symbolic representation of the larger failure to provide refuge to a significant number of Italian labor and socialist leaders. Most Italian refugees who reached the American coast were in fact members of *Giustizia e Libertà* who, once in the US, contributed to the development of the Mazzini Society. This indicates that the JLC, or the ILGWU and ACWA, did not limit the scope of their action to the officers of labor organizations and party leaders. In this respect, the frequently cited argument that a split existed between the mass of Italian-American workers and the more elite intellectual members of the Mazzini Society is questionable. On the contrary, this study reveals that the Italian locals of the ILGWU and ACWA supported GL members as well as labor and party leaders. Lussu's public recognition of the funds and help he obtained from the American unions for the support and rescue of many GL members testifies that the split was not as wide as has been claimed. In this context, at least at this stage of the war, and well before the Cold War, Luigi Antonini's support of Italian socialists in exile seems more disinterested than has been suggested several times³².

If rescue was the most dramatic part of the JLC's action, it was not the only one. The financial support consistently afforded to the antifascist leaders, through Modigliani and Pietro Nenni, was a less conspicuous form of action than achieving to bring them to the United States. But it was no less important for the survival of most of these leaders – among them Modigliani, Lussu, Nenni, Buoizzi, Saragat – who eventually returned to Italy after the fall of Mussolini in 1943 and participated in the reconstruction of their country.

As Lussu remarked in 1956, «To day, after so many years, I wonder why we were trying to reach the United States with the risks and dangers that this entailed. It would have been easier to ask our American friends the necessary financial support to stay in France, and from there continue our underground struggle against fascism, against the Germans and the Vichy government, and spare no effort to reestablish links with Italy» (Lussu, E., 1956, p. 12, my translation). What accounts for the desperate scramble to reach the United States, he suggests, may have been that the American unions saw emigration as the only solution. And indeed the JLC's success in obtaining the visas was a strong incentive for the refugees to use them and to avail themselves of the money that came along with them. Eventually, after the last rescue of GL members from Casablanca, and when it was no longer possible to reach the United States, it was Lussu's option for underground activity that prevailed.

One may also suggest that JLC leaders, all former exiles themselves, were perhaps unconsciously replicating their own history by organizing the rescue of a new generation of refugees fleeing antisemitic and/or political persecu-

tion. Against the constraints of the narrow immigration policy and State Department regulations, they were fulfilling the age-old aspiration that the United States should be a place of refuge for the persecuted people of Europe. More precisely, they hoped to save from destruction the social democratic ideal itself by offering the main leaders of its movement protection from torture, incarceration or death.

Notes

- ¹ S. Trentin, former professor of public law at the University of Venezia, was one of the leaders of antifascist movement Giustizia e Libertà. During the Spanish Civil War, his bookstore had become a sort of international meeting center.
- ² *Surrender on Demand* was the title of Varian Fry's account of his mission in Marseille as an agent of the Emergency Rescue Committee: Fry, 1945. References in this paper are to the reprint edition, 1997.
- ³ Green, 1926; Diggins, 1972, pp. 112-13. The ACWA was not affiliated to the AFL. It remained independent from it until 1934. And severed this tie again in 1936 to become part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).
- ⁴ Walter Citrine at the AFL 1934 Convention, *Proceedings*, pp. 435-42; Citrine was also in the US in 1936, and AFL's return to the IFTU was implemented at the 1937 Convention, *Proceedings*, pp. 628-30.
- ⁵ Yet the ILGWU and ACWA links to the AFL were shortly to be severed. From 1935, these two unions participated in the foundation of the rival CIO. The ACWA which was an AFL affiliate only in 1934, became a steadfast pillar of the CIO. The ILGWU, expelled from the AFL in 1937, remained independent until 1940 when it resumed its affiliation to the old Federation.
- ⁶ By the summer of 1934, Local 89 with a 40.000 membership had become the largest local in the ILGWU. In recognition of the fact, Antonini was elected ILGWU first vice-president in 1934.
- ⁷ ILGWU 1934 Convention, *Proceedings*, pp. 162-65, 327-31; Antonini to Pietro Nenni, Aug. 6 1934, ILGWU Records (Kheel Center of Labor and Management Archives, Cornell University), Antonini Papers (hereafter AP), 5780/023, Box 35 Folder 1. *La Strenna commemorativa del XV anniversario della fondazione della Italian Dressmakers Union, Locale 89, ILGWU*, compiled by the Italian Labor Education Bureau, New York, 1934.
- ⁸ Modigliani to Antonini, May 26, 1936, Dubinsky Correspondence, ILGWU Archives, 5780/02, B8, F1C.
- ⁹ On Modigliani's tour see: *Justice*, Dec. 1934, p. 16; Jan. 1st 1935, p. 4; Jan. 15, 1935, p. 5; Feb. 15, 1935, p. 3. Dubinsky Correspondence, B118, F1-4; Romualdi to Antonini, Feb. 7, 1935, AP, B35, F1; B36, F4; ACWA Records (Kheel Center), Augusto Bellanca Papers, 5619 B146. «So that you may hear from every place the world's songs, words, voices and harmonies; so that you maybe the first to hear the announcement of the sure to happen day of liberation».

- ¹⁰ Antonini's account of his trip in AP, B46, F4.
- ¹¹ Modigliani to Antonini, July 13, 1935, AP, B35, F1; Antonini, to Alberto Cianca, editor of *Giustizia e Libertà*, Antonini sent a telegram of condolences to Giustizia e Libertà after the assassination of Carlo and Nello Rosselli in 1937, AP, B18, F6.
- ¹² Nenni to Antonini, AP, Dec. 6 1936, Feb. 12 1937, B36, F4; Fausto Nitti to Antonini, Fev. 4 1938, AP, B18, F1.
- ¹³ Nenni to Antonini, July 27 1937, Dubinsky Correspondence, B8, F1C; Dubinsky to Schevenels, Dec. 17 1938, *ibidem*. Apparently the ILGWU did not send help to the battalion organized by Carlo Rosselli, although anarchist leader Carlo Tresca had intervened on this behalf; Romualdi, memo on the Italian Refugee Fund, Jan. 19 1940, and the PSI's executive committee's advice against setting another fund than the Modigliani Fund, Feb. 2 1940, AP, B18, F1C.
- ¹⁴ Lussu (1956, p. 9) mentions that among Italians Fausto Nitti and Luigi Longo were in the concentration camp Le Vernet. Many other former combattants from the Spanish civil war were interned, not to mention hundreds of Spanish refugees, German and Austrian anti-Nazis.
- ¹⁵ Minkoff to Dubinsky, JLC Records (Robert Wagner Labor Archives, Bobst library, New York University), B12, F2. Simultaneously to its rescue operation in France, the JLC led another operation for the Polish Bundists who since the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 had found refuge in Lithuania. The Soviet invasion of this country in June 1940 forced these people to find another place of asylum. The JLC was able to obtain visas for over 108 families of them and passage through Ussr. They arrived on the West coast of the United States via Japan through the fall of 1940 and early months of 1941.
- ¹⁶ JLC Records B39, F1. The letter is reproduced in Lebowitz and Malmgreen, 1993, pp. 99-100. See also, State Department Records, National Archives, RG 59, 811/111.
- ¹⁷ Breckinridge Long to William Green, July 3rd 1940, JLC Records, B39, F1. Wyman, 1985, is the best account of the PACPR and of the State Department functioning on this question, pp. 137-51.
- ¹⁸ JLC Records, B39, F1.
- ¹⁹ Modigliani to JLC, July 18 1940, JLC Records, B39, F1.
- ²⁰ Modigliani to Monsieur le Consul des Etats-Unis, Marseille, July 31st 1940, JLC Records B39, F1. See first stage of the Italian list in Lebowitz and Malmgreen, 1993, pp. 108-9. On August 19 1940, W. Green sent what was the third and final list to Breckinridge Long, JLC Records, B39, F2.
- ²¹ JLC Records, B40, F36. Minutes of JLC Executive Committee meeting, January 3rd 1941, on the 12,226.50 dollars spent by Frank Bohn in France before his departure, Frank Bohn received \$7000 which was financed by the JLC (\$3000), the Italian group (\$2000) and by the German group (\$2000). The outstanding debt was to be distributed to the three groups accordingly.
- ²² JLC Records, B39, F1.
- ²³ Fittko, 1991. Attempting to cross the Spanish border, Walter Benjamin committed suicide.
- ²⁴ Romualdi to Modigliani, cablegram, August 1st 1940, JLC Records, B39, F1.

- ²⁵ Lussu, E., 1956, p. 7. Romualdi's memo to Minkoff about Tarchiani in Montreal, Aug. 16 1940, JLC Records, B39, F2.
- ²⁶ «We beg you intensify and accelerate your efforts in our behalf. You are the only one who can exercise influence in Washington», Vera Modigliani to Dubinsky, Dec. 27 1940, Dubinsky correspondence, B8, F1C. Antonini was still arranging for Modigliani to come, in the fall of 1941, for instance Antonini to Avra Warren, Visa Division, State Department, Nov. 3 1941, AP, B35, F4. Finally, after the German invasion of the Southern zone in France, Modigliani and his wife escaped to Switzerland with the help of Joyce Lussu (Lussu, J., 1967, pp. 78-105).
- ²⁷ Rudolf Breitscheid was the head of the German Social Democratic Party, Rudolf Hilferding had been Minister of Finance in the Weimar Republic.
- ²⁸ Fry, 1997, pp. 22-23, 54-55. Breitscheid and Hilferding were arrested in Arles on February 8 1941. Hilferding was assassinated (or committed suicide) in prison, Breitscheid died in Buchenwald in 1944.
- ²⁹ Joyce Lussu mentions (1967, p. 51) that altogether there were 17 refugees to send to America.
- ³⁰ Lussu, E., 1956, pp. 13-21. Minkoff papers (Robert Wagner Labor Archives, Bobst Library, New York University), «Persons rescued by the Jewish Labor Committee», B6, F10, see also B9, F38. Antonini to Vera Modigliani, announcing the arrival of Cianca, Natoli, Chiaromonte and the Pianas (two young Italian workers) August 21 1941, AP B35, F4. Leo Valiani, who for a time had been a member of the Italian Communist Party, went to Mexico, not to the US.
- ³¹ Lussu, E., 1956, p. 13; Antonini to Dubinsky, April 21 1942, letter written à propos Emilio Lussu's presence in New York, «on a special and important mission», Dubinsky correspondence, B8, F1C; Antonini asked Dubinsky to give \$1000 to E. Dupont (E. Lussu) «to be transmitted for the relief of Italian refugees», April 3 1942, AP, B35, F5. See also E. Lussu's account of his brief visit to the US (1956, pp. 45-50).
- ³² Maddalena Tirabassi underlines that Gaetano Salvemini himself had publicized the notion of a split between the mass of Italo-American workers and the recent exiles. She also agrees that the split was not as wide as he claimed: Tirabassi, 1984-1985. According to Cannistraro (1985), Salvemini was very critical of Antonini for his coming to terms with pro Mussolini Generoso Pope. Cannistraro stresses Antonini's ambitious drive for the leadership of the ethnic community.

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