Researches and Teaching Experiences
on the Fascist “Racial Laws” in High Schools:
A Case Study of the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” of Rome

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Abstract. The devastating effect of the Italian racist legislation of 1938 on middle and high schools is the object of this study, with a focus on the particular case of the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” of Rome. The research has been carried out within the educational project L’Archivio del Visconti e la Storia (“The Visconti Archive and History”), with the active participation of the school students. The purpose of the project was to provide students with historical method tools and to raise their awareness, as well as a civic and ethical reflection, on the Shoah topics. The survey, developed mainly through the examination of unpublished documents contained in the Lyceum’s archive, led to the identification of 58 Jewish students and a teacher, Maria Piazza, expelled from the school because of the “racial laws” in 1938. Many oral and written testimonies on the traumatic experiences of the students have also been collected. The Lyceum has recently dedicated to the expelled students and teacher a commemorative plaque, to keep alive the memory of all the victims of the fascist anti-Jewish persecution.

Keywords: Shoah; Italian racist legislation; Expulsions from Italian schools in 1938; Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” of Rome; Maria Piazza; School archives.

The fascist anti-Jewish norms enacted in 1938 affected the entire Italian educational system. The conference Le “Leggi razziali” del 1938 e l’università italiana offered the opportunity to outline a very broad and detailed picture of what happened in the universities. This paper is an elaboration of the contribution I presented at the conference, in which I meant to shift the focus to secondary education, at the middle and high school level1.

The data show a strong incidence of the 1938 racist decrees both on primary and secondary schools: altogether about 5400 school students were expelled. Indeed, in Rome alone there were about 1600 expulsions, and of these, more than 500 took place at the secondary level2. These numbers provide a general snapshot of the situation, but they do not show the actual impact that the application of the fascist “racial laws” had on the single scholastic realities. Therefore, the examination of particular cases can enlighten specific aspects, such as the distribution of Jewish students in the different types of schools and areas of the city. The analysis may also highlight the serious consequences of the forced interruption of the educational process.

The present study focuses on a particular and significant case: that of the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti”, a school located in the center of Rome, that has a long-established history. It is a high school with a classical curriculum, that during the late 1930s also included the lower “gymnasium” (corresponding to the three-year middle school). The school has always been attended by many students from Jewish families living in nearby areas.

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I would like to make a premise: the survey, that led to identifying the exact extent of the 1938 expulsions from this school, was born both from the need to achieve a historical reconstruction, but also and above all, from a didactic need. Raising awareness among high school students of the complex issues of the Shoah is not easy, and the interventions implemented by the schools are not always valid and effective, capable of profoundly affecting the consciences, as well as providing a correct historical framework. The topics are not studied in a systematic way in the schools, and the initiatives are left to the sensitivity and spontaneity of the teachers. In high schools’ History programs, the Shoah is in general addressed, but not every professor finds the time to delve deeply into the subject. The various commemorative occasions - October 16, January 27 - are not always effective: there is often a lack of preliminary preparation, and the students themselves are sometimes passive in dealing with the topic. They often experience these events as formal, repetitive, and not very fruitful. On the other hand, the meetings students have with witnesses and survivors of the Shoah are always very incisive. They produce lasting effects on the minds of students, but, unfortunately, with the passage of time, these encounters are now increasingly rare. These considerations push the most committed teachers to propose new projects and to experiment more effective ways to actively involve the students in serious and in-depth studies of specific aspects of the Shoah.

With the purpose to experiment didactic strategies that would make students more conscious and involved, as even protagonists of the process of historical reconstruction, I conceived in 2013 the project “The Archive of Visconti and History”, which is still in progress. A study laboratory was created to conduct research with the students in the school’s historical archive, and as the object of investigation we chose a very dramatic and meaningful event, for the students distant in time, but also very close to their daily experience: the expulsion, due to the “racial laws” in 1938, of same-aged Jewish students from their own school, the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti”.

The devastating effects of the Italian anti-Jewish legislation, known to students in a general way, have become the subject of a detailed study, that has considered sources not yet systematically investigated. The students participated with the teacher in the carrying out of the research. They focused on the data collection, both from primary and secondary sources, and then contributed to the interpretation and re-elaboration of their findings. This approach allowed the students to acquire a scientific investigation method and produced concrete results of considerable interest. As a matter of fact, the systematic analysis of these archival sources had never been done before, the results would help to detail the more general historical framework.

The research also helped to uncover and contact some living former students expelled from the school in 1938, who with their direct testimonies transmitted a rich heritage of memories and humanity to today’s students, bequeathing them a decisive contribution to their growth and education.

Our intent was to bring out a profound, psychological link between the events of anti-Jewish persecution, which increasingly appear remote and not entirely comprehensible to the current students, and the reality in which they live daily. Checking how much those events have affected the lives of girls and boys like them, who took the same courses in their own classrooms, helped students better understand historical events of vast and dramatic importance, while more effectively stimulating their active involvement in the learning process.

The project, therefore, was developed taking into account two objectives: on the one hand, to carry out a correct work of historical reconstruction (or at least to provide the method and an example, on a small scale, of how historical research should be carried out), and, on the other hand, to raise students’ awareness towards the Shoah, thus contributing to their civic education, as well as historical education.

Various groups of students, guided by the teacher, over the last five years undertook the archive work, taking part in the research planning phase and in the choice of the method to be used for recording data. Since no official list of the expelled students exists in scholastic documents, only
through a careful examination and comparison between the registers of two school years, 1937-1938 and 1938-1939, was the identification of the expelled Jewish students attained. The useful information was examined, all the relevant elements were recorded, and a database model was constructed. Thus, the data relating to the students and their parents reported in the registers were all inserted in the database, together with other significant indications: for example, the note attesting the withdrawal of the diploma by the students in October-November 1938, for the subsequent enrollment in the Jewish school.

The research was extended to the Archives of the Jewish Community of Rome, where we found a valid support and useful information. We have examined many “race declarations” (“Dichiarazione di appartenenza alla razza ebraica”), the infamous form that all the Italian Jewish families, included those of “Visconti” students, had been obliged by the fascist regime to complete. With these additional data, it was possible to confirm or clarify the results of our survey. We then verified the possible subsequent presence of the students in the Jewish school by consulting the records of all the enrolled students.

After sorting and evaluating the data, the results of the survey follow: 58 Jewish students of Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” suffered the discriminatory effect of the “racial laws”. It was truly a considerable number. Since in Rome over 500 secondary school students (lower and higher grades) were expelled, the “Visconti” students represented more than 10% of the total. In relation to the Lyceum school population (middle and high school) there were about 6/7% of students expelled, distributed in a very varied way, in some classes the total numbers exceeded 10%. The majority of students expelled by “Visconti” afterward attended the Jewish school, but not all of them did. For some students, the scholastic experience ended with the expulsion from state school, a traumatic, indelible event in their lives and education.

Our students were able to reflect upon several other results of the research. The most disconcerting consideration was that: on the registers we found only an absence of names, a void that nevertheless corresponded to the far more terrible absence of the students from the desks of the “Visconti” classrooms in October 1938. The research revived the effects of this terrible persecution, and it led to reflection on the incurable wound that it could have caused on the impressionable minds of adolescent boys and girls, who were in midst of their formative years. We tried to figure how the school had changed after the expulsion of the Jewish students, suddenly “erased,” and how their schoolmates reacted. Many of them perhaps did not understand the meaning of what was really happening, and they were struck by the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of their classmates, as a profound and evident injustice. But no one succeeded in expressing his bewilderment, given that they had been accustomed under the fascist regime to consent and tacitly accept all rules and regulations despotically imposed upon them.

Several testimonies speak of the bewilderment and sorrow of absence that did, in some cases, lead to an awareness regarding the true nature of the fascist regime. But still, all of this realization, when it happened, occurred in private, in general silence. No one in the school did or said anything to react to the terrible injustice. Furthermore, the analysis of the reports of the official meetings of the Lyceum faculty, in the scholastic archive, did not highlight anything out of the ordinary that was happening, no comment or consideration of the expulsions emerges from these documents.

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3 I would like to thank for her kind help Dr. Silvia Haia Antonucci, in charge of the ASCER.
4 Marisa Cinciari Rodano (born in 1921), former student at the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” and afterwards senator of the Italian Republic, recalls the impression she had when, returning to school in October 1938, she did not find her two Jewish schoolmates and her teacher Prof. Maria Piazza. She claims that it was the moment when she became aware of what fascism really was. Her testimony was given in a conference held on April 26, 1994 at the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” (“Donne della scuola nella Resistenza a Roma”, published in: ANNPIA (1994), pp. 87-88).
The dismissals from the schools happened, in fact, in a silent way, with a general public indifference, true or simulated, that surrounded them. The act was violent but implemented in such a way as to avoid reactions: the students “simply” never returned to school after the summer holidays, as if in those three months they had vanished into thin air, evaporated from the classes, and (as to us in a chilling way it turned out to be) their names had disappeared from all the school records, without even a note. We know that the racist decrees on the schools were among the first to be implemented as part of the racial exclusion policy adopted by the fascist regime: the Minister of National Education Giuseppe Bottai made sure that they were approved in September, before the beginning of the lessons expected by mid-October. He did this precisely to prevent Jewish students and teachers from starting the new school year prior to the implementation of the decrees5.

After being expelled from school, most of the “Visconti” students had the opportunity to continue their studies in the Jewish school. There already existed in Rome, since 1925, the Jewish elementary (primary) school “Vittorio Polacco”, and after the promulgation of the “racial laws” its enrollment grew from 400 to 700 students. But, there were no schools for Jewish students to attend higher levels. The Jewish Community took action very quickly to allow the boys and girls to refrain from interrupting their middle and high school studies, and a school was soon established in a rented villa in Via Celimontana, near the Colosseum. Over this period of time we have collected writings and testimonies from the same former students we interviewed. Almost all the expelled students in Rome enrolled in the school in Via Celimontana, including those “Visconti” students6.

Furthermore, teachers who were also expelled from various schools in Rome, or from other cities, taught there, and they were among the best teachers in service. There were also those who, very young, had just attained their professorship - such as Emma Castelnuovo, the daughter of the distinguished mathematician Guido Castelnuovo7 -, but they were no longer allowed to enter state schools. Altogether, about forty teachers expelled from the public schools taught there. The school curricula were similar to those of the public school. The environment of the Jewish school was animated by a positive desire to react to persecution and promote excellence despite adversity. The school indeed was characterized by a very high quality of teaching, and the brilliant results in the final exams confirmed it: the students also had the praise and recognition of the Royal Commissioners. The school later had to be transferred and was settled in Lungotevere Sanzio and in Via Balbo, but all the courses had to stop in 1943 with the Nazi occupation of Rome. The intense work to preserve and guarantee a cultural education for young people was certainly an exemplary demonstration of Resistance by the Jews to persecution.

As part of this entire project, archival research was accompanied by an attentive analysis of the set of fascist laws and decrees “for the defense of the race”. The students also examined historical essays and testimonies that helped to shed light on important details and gave rise to the extension of the research, even in directions not initially planned. For instance, we discovered that a Jewish teacher of the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti”, the Professor of Sciences Maria Piazza, was forced to leave teaching due to the fascist legislation.

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5 Regio Decreto-Legge 5 settembre 1938-XVI, n. 1390. Provvedimenti per la difesa della razza nella scuola fascista. The Decree declares: “Students of Jewish race cannot be enrolled in schools of all levels, whose studies are recognized as having legal effect”. The fascist “racial laws” on school were then integrated into the Regio Decreto-Legge 15 novembre 1938-XVII, n. 1779. Integrazione e coordinamento in unico testo delle norme già emanate per la difesa della razza nella Scuola Italiana (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 1938).

6 The Jewish school was created thanks to the active work of the exponent of the Jewish Community Guido Coen. On the Jewish school in Rome see: Antonucci S. H. & Piperno Beer G. (2015), pp. 47-51; Fishman D. (2019).

7 Emma Castelnuovo (1913-2014) after the war taught Mathematics in the public secondary schools. Guido Castelnuovo (1865-1952) taught at the University of Rome from 1891 to 1935, he gave a fundamental contribution to the study of algebraic geometry.
Maria Piazza had taught in the Lyceum from 1929 to 1938, and after the dismissal she continued to teach in the Jewish school. Her name was found by consulting the documents of the school’s archive, but then it too disappeared, just like that of the students. The teacher was recalled in many oral and written testimonies of former students, thus allowing us to have a good idea of who she was. In addition to being an accomplished and effective professor of Sciences, Maria Piazza was a valuable scholar and researcher. In 1932 she had obtained the “libera docenza in Mineralogia” at the University of Rome. Moreover, she was the author of articles for the *Enciclopedia Italiana* and of an important manual of Mineralogy and General Geography. She lost all these positions in the years 1938-1939, due to the racist laws.

Guido Castelnuovo enlisted Maria Piazza to hold courses of General Chemistry in the so-called “clandestine university,” a program created to overcome the problem of university studies, foreclosed to Jewish students, that gave them the opportunity to obtain a university-level preparation in the sciences. The ingenious solution was found in the autumn of 1941 by Guido Coen with the fundamental collaboration of Guido Castelnuovo. They established a connection with the Director of the “Institut Technique Supérieur” of Fribourg in Switzerland, Guido Bonzanigo, which offered distance learning courses, without the obligation of attendance. Although they could not obtain officially recognized certification, the students were able to advance their studies. After the liberation of Rome in 1944, Guido Castelnuovo obtained validation for the exams from the Minister of Public Education Guido De Ruggiero, a point that allowed students to conclude their university studies in the shortest time possible, and with great success. About thirty students took courses at the “clandestine university.” Seven of them had come from Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti”.

After the war, Maria Piazza resumed teaching at the Lyceum “A. Righi” where she would end her career, and also continued to hold courses at the University of Rome. Maria Piazza’s professional story is a significant example of the effects of the racist legislation, being Piazza both a high school teacher and a university teacher. A monographic study on her is currently being conducted by me, as a development of this research.

Two students expelled in 1938, that we were able to meet and interview directly, Gino Fiorentino and Piero Piperno, spoke enthusiastically of Professor Piazza, and they highlighted many interesting details of her professional life. The oral testimonies of the expelled students have been of great interest for the research and for my students, strongly affected by the words and stories of those who had personally experienced the devastating consequences of fascist persecution, when they were their age.

The first meeting took place with Gino Fiorentino, who had welcomed the invitation to return to his old high school in 2017 for a long conversation with us, an occasion that was partly recorded and filmed. The pages of school records suddenly came to life for our students, and all that the arid absence of names did not say became instead a living reality, full of memories and feelings. Gino Fiorentino was expelled when he was 15, after having brilliantly undertaken his fifth “gymnasium” at “Visconti”. His course of studies was abruptly interrupted in the middle of high school, leaving him a deep wound, from which he never completely recovered. He continued his studies at the Jewish...

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8 Maria Piazza (1894-1976) is remembered by various testimonies: her former students Gino Fiorentino and Piero Piperno gave us many interesting information about her, as a teacher at “Visconti” and later at the Jewish school. A colourful portrait of Maria Piazza is outlined by her former student Fabio Della Seta (Della Seta, 1996).

9 The manual is: Almagià R. & Piazza M. *Mineralogia e geografia generale: con numerose illustrazioni, carte e tavole fuori testo. Corso di geografia ad uso degli istituti tecnici superiori*, vol. 1, Napoli: F. Perrella, 1934. The book was one of those excluded from all schools in 1938, since it was written by Jewish authors. In addition to being expelled from schools, Maria Piazza was also expelled from several scientific societies and she could no longer teach at the University of Rome.

school, and then he took courses at the “clandestine university” mentioned above. He then graduated with ease in Engineering after the war, thanks to the solid preparation already received. He was able to provide us with valuable and detailed information on that period. Gino Fiorentino made it clear to my students how awfully he had lived the silent indifference over the persecution of the Jews students. He said that after his exclusion from the Lyceum no schoolmate looked for him anymore, and he felt his former school as a hostile place. For many years he did not talk of that experience even to his family. Only in a few cases did he accept an invitation to return to the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti”. The current students welcomed him with enthusiasm and warmth, these moments most likely reconciled him with the past and with the school just before the end of his life.

Sometime later, we had a subsequent opportunity to meet and interview another former “Visconti” student, Piero Piperno. With his memories of expulsion, of the Jewish school, and the following dramatic events of his family during the Nazi occupation, he too helped to broaden the picture of those years. We have also recently been able to contact another former student, Angelo Perugia, for an upcoming interview.

The insidious fascist “racial laws” struck Jewish students in their crucial years of adolescence and education, and the sting of exclusion inevitably conditioned their life and subsequent choices. But the experience of expulsion and the sentiment towards the school concretely responsible for that act were not the same for everyone. Each witness was able to share a different personal reaction and a particular aspect of the common experience of persecuted students. Their school history was also conditioned by a little difference in age. All of them remained deeply marked, but most of the younger ones apparently overcame the trauma more easily.

Piero Piperno, born in 1927, for example, had been expelled after attending the first year of middle school (first “gymnasium”) at the Lyceum “Visconti”, and he decided to enroll again in 1944, after the liberation of Rome, in order to complete his studies in the same Lyceum. He, thus, showed no aversion to the school that had excluded him. Like him, many other Jewish students continued and completed their studies in public schools after the end of the Nazi occupation.

A different case is that of Gino Fiorentino, born in 1923, who had been expelled halfway through his high school studies. As we mentioned before, despite the positive results of his subsequent studies, his memory of the expulsion remained traumatic. Students of his age carried on their studies in a very troubled way, through many adversities and obstacles, that could not always be overcome.

Students born in 1919 or 1920 had even greater difficulty, with regards their continuation of studies. They had just finished high school, having taken the State exam in July 1938, but then they were denied access to the university, an otherwise normal next-step in education after the Lyceum. These students were indeed the most penalized, their life choices were profoundly conditioned. In fact, they could have resumed their studies only after several years of interruption - from 1938 to 1944 -, more or less at the age of 25. But in most cases, returning to school was certainly too late, because meanwhile, with increasing difficulty, they had to look for a job to cope with the immediate needs of life. This situation certainly marked their education and professional future in a decisive way.

Finally, we considered the situation of oldest students, relative to the consequences of the “racial laws”, as is the case of the famous economist Franco Modigliani. Born in 1918, he was able to

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11 The information on Gino Fiorentino, who died in December 2017, are taken from the interview he gave us in 2017. Talks with his family members were also helpful. Other interviews can be find on the web, in particular I point out the one to Gino Fiorentino and his wife Emma Alatri, recorded in 2011 by the “Centro di Cultura Ebraica di Roma”.

12 There were about fifteen “Visconti” Jewish students who had just finished their studies in July 1938. The research on them is still in progress. A few of these students took advantage of the rare opportunities to undertake university-level studies offered by the Catholic Universities, such as the Lateran and the Gregorian, that allowed access to some of the most brilliant Jewish students.
complete his high school studies at the Lyceum “Visconti” before the promulgation of the fascist legislation, and he was already attending university in 1938. According to the racist laws he was allowed to complete his studies, but, in pursuing an academic career, he would not have been able to do so in Italy. As such, he had to go abroad, another loss for Italian culture.\(^{13}\)

As institutions, schools in Italy were one of the great victims of anti-Jewish persecution. Excluding Jewish students and professors from schools was an act of great violence, and indeed, it was a prelude to other unimaginable violence. Our analysis of the effects of the fascist anti-Jewish legislation has highlighted the important role of the school as a crucial node and mirror of society. Therefore, it is now essential, above all in the schools, to defend freedom of thought and equal rights by preserving the memory of violated rights, to educate young people so that they may recognize and combat all forms of injustice and discrimination.

Surveys have revealed a microcosm of lives and different situations. Indeed, we gathered many other testimonies of sons and daughters of expelled students, and these showed the presence of many ties and affections, even sometimes lasting friendships and marriages among the former students who experienced fascist persecution. The project brought out a reality kept silent in the archive, that told us the struggles and sufferings of many young people.

Most of the students, along with their families, managed to escape the Nazi persecution among many difficulties. Nevertheless, our research dramatically brought out the names of two students who could not save themselves: Giovanni Carlo Della Seta and Lello Frascati. They were arrested on October 16, 1943, during the Nazi round-up in Rome, and were deported to Auschwitz, from where they never returned.

The didactic purpose of the project led to the organization of several conferences, during which our students had the opportunity to present some results of the research.\(^{14}\) The overall results of the study on the expulsions of 1938 at the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti”, along with all the collected testimonies, will be published in the next months.

In the school year 2017-2018 I proposed to extend this research project to other schools and it was promoted a Network of schools entitled School and Memory - Italian Schools Archives, coordinated by the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti”. The aim of the Network is to collect the data on the expulsions of 1938 of an increasing number of schools, and to compare and elaborate the results of research in a common database, on the model of the one we have already prepared. Thus, we can outline the experience of expulsions in a capillary and increasingly complete form. The Network also includes various public educational institutions, archives, libraries, and other associations committed to defending historical memory.

As a significant part of the project, I proposed to remember and honor the “Visconti” students and teacher, who were victims of fascist persecution, in a visible and permanent way, by placing a large commemorative plaque in our school’s courtyard. The inauguration has been held at the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” on January 31, 2019, with a conference attended by many representatives of government institutions, the Jewish Community of Rome, direct witnesses of expulsion, family members, students who conducted the research, and all the students of the school.\(^{15}\)

\(^{13}\) Franco Modigliani (1918-2003) moved to the United States in 1939, where he pursued a brilliant academic career, he taught for many years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1985.

\(^{14}\) The most significant conferences organized at the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” on the racist laws of 1938, as part of my project “The Archive of Visconti and History”, were held on: January 29, 2015; January 30, 2017; January 31, 2018; May 3, 2018. The conferences were attended, among others, by representatives of the Jewish Community of Rome, the International Master in Shoah Education at the University of Roma Tre, the Fondazione Museo della Shoah. For more information about the project see the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” website.

\(^{15}\) On my project “L’Archivio del Visconti e la Storia” and all the related events, see the Lyceum “E. Q. Visconti” website: https://www.liceoeqvisconti.edu.it/index.php/offerta-formativa/l-archivio-del-visconti-e-la-storia
From here forward, all the names of the victims of the fascist anti-Jewish laws, inscribed on the plaque, will constantly remind of the shameful historical memory of this event. They will also inspire civic responsibility and vigilance in all current students to thwart any renewed violation of fundamental human rights.

**PROFESSOR AND STUDENTS EXPELLED FROM THE LYCEUM “E. Q. VISCONTI” IN 1938**

**Prof. Maria Piazza**

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*Liceo “E. Q. Visconti”, Progetto “L’Archivio del Visconti e la Storia”*

Commemorative plaque, January 2019
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