Traces of an Italian Holocaust. “Backshadowing” and “Sideshadowing” 1938

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for the 80th anniversary of the Fascist anti-Semitic Racial Laws of 1938, first signed into law by the King of Italy at San Rossore near Pisa in September 1938, and of the subsequent expulsion of Jewish professors from Italian Universities, marked a highly significant moment in the compositions of a public history and memorialization, in the on-going history of a consciousness of this dark moment of fracture in modern Italian history (and its position within wider historical arc of Fascism and war). Quite apart from the complex and highly loaded question of the pertinence of generational and collective discourses of apology for historical wrongs, as hybrid civic, moral-political and historical acts[[1]](#footnote-1), such ceremonies also raise a series of unresolved questions about the role and meaning, and practical effect, of calendar commemorations, anniversaries, dates in the processing of historical legacy and in the cultural transmission and memory of recent history. Dates and anniversaries are a powerful shared matrix for memory and also a constraint and condition frame for interpretation[[2]](#footnote-2). This deceptively simple category thus carries remarkable weight in the long-term arc of evolving memory of the past and its cultural discourses, and the case of the Fascist Racial Laws with their tangled relation to the wider European Holocaust, the ebbing visibility of one in relation to the other over the long post-war era, can be shown to be a powerful case in point.

To start with some brief introductory reflections, in the pedagogy and cultural profile of the Second World War, in the context of the British university where I teach, World War Two is familiar to students in general outline and in start- and end-dates. Thus, when I present a course on the literature of in Italy. I often begin with these dates: I ask students for the dates of the war and most of them know enough from their school education, or more likely from films and television to answer 1939-1945. Some of them recall the specifics of these start-points and end-points: the invasion of Poland and Chamberlain’s dramatic radio announcement of his ultimatum to Hitler (“unless we heard from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us”); at the other, the surrender of Germany in May 1945, or of Japan in August, days after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I then ask them if they know the dates of the Second World War in Italy: invariably, no one does.

There is a complicated story of dates to tell to insert Italy into their historical frame of World War Two; a story about Mussolini’s hesitations through late 1939 and 1940, and then his rush to declare war in June 1940, convinced that the Axis was already sweeping towards victory; about the staggered liberation of different parts of the Italian peninsula over 1943, 1944 and 1945, before Liberation on 25 April 45, although war was only officially declared over a few days later on 2 May in Italy (and 8 May in Europe). Formally, it is then worth noting, Italy had in fact withdrawnfrom the war in an Armistice with the Allies already in Autumn 1943, before being overtaken by waves of invasions, occupations, Resistance, and a kind of civil war. So brutal a caesura did this moment in 1943 represent for millions of Italians, that one influential formula from the 1990s described it as no less than “the death of the nation”[[3]](#footnote-3), as if something other than “Italy” was left to muddle through the remaining months of the conflict. In other words, from the neat common-knowledge (we might say today Wikipedia-knowledge) of the date-line 1939-1945, for Italy’s war we have to move towards a more articulated formula that might look something like: 1940-1943 // [1943-1945].

From there, it begins to be possible to investigate how elements in this numerical formula have in profound ways shaped the understanding, memories and the literature of the war since 1945 in Italy; how these have changed form in complex ways to follow the confusing contours and shifts in post-war history, culture and politics, seamed with this fragmented chronology of the war, so that at times entire phases of the war’s history and chronology have been occluded, others recovered, or lost moments and experiences reclaimed. Thus, the period 1943-45 and within that in particular the anti-Fascist Resistance and the nexus of military and civilian struggle around it, profoundly marked post-war Italy, whereas, for example, the fighting war in Africa, on the Russia or southern Europe fronts of 1940-43, remained relatively invisible to the arenas of public memory, pushed to the margins of veteran or survivor groups and occasional memoirs; as did the experiences of hundreds and thousands of prisoners of war, on either side of the Axis-Allied divide; or indeed of the southern regions where the Allied landings and occupation arrived early, starting in July 1943, too early for the epic of the Resistance to run its course or embed itself in the shared imaginary.

The simple point I take from this sketch of a pedagogical experiment, is that, even before we begin to probe the detailed specificities (and stories) of individual, communal, collective and national experiences of history, and as we explore their processing in memory and cultural form, dates act as a template. The shapes of shared memories and cultural representations are set between starting-points, turning-points and endpoints – and therefore, implicitly and unavoidably, between implied causes and consequences – and the phases and periods that these simple dates map out are themselves already loaded, very often politically loaded, interpretations of history. The same goes, it should go without saying, for the pattern of commemoration and anniversaries, the markers of decades, quarter- and half-centuries, the conventional, banally numerical and yet always weighty and permeating moments of shared recollection and ceremony. These too have their own dynamics and their own capacity to change meanings in memory and history.

What holds for the general history of the Second World War is all the more pertinent for the even more elusive and ungraspable history (and the impenetrable meanings) of the Holocaust, with all its ramifications and local manifestations across Europe, enacted in and across so many borders and alongside the chaos of war; and and in particular for the deeply ambivalent and never fully resolved case of Nazi Germany’s prime partner and one-time model as a totalitarian state, Fascist Italy. Dates matter, here too, in history, memory and commemoration, whether marked in years or days and months.

If there were any doubt about this, we could usefully look at the debate that took place in the 1990s and early 2000s in Italy about the constitution of a national memorial day for the Holocaust, a debate which was in fact aligned with an international programme of official memorialization co-ordinated by the Stockholm forum for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. Most signatory nations of the Stockholm task force settled on 27 January, the date of the Soviet liberation in 1945 of Auschwitz, by the turn of the 21st century century firmly established as the essential symbol and metonym for the entire infernal universe of the Nazi genocides, as the most appropriate memorial day[[4]](#footnote-4). Italy too would fall into line with this transnational accord, marking its first Day of Memory on 27 January 2001. However, as Michele Sarfatti has recently documented in an illuminating essay, the earliest proponents of an Italian Holocaust memorial day, Ricardo Franco Levi and Furio Colombo, who would in due course present the proposal to the Italian Parliament, argued for the selection of 16 October instead of 27 January as the appropriate date for Italy, a date to mark the round-up and deportation of over 1000 Jews in Rome on that day in 1943, the single largest deportation in Italy’s own history of Holocaust violence – whose 75th anniversary we mark in 2018 - rather than a date of trans-European, universal and thus in some sense de-territorialized remembrance[[5]](#footnote-5). The model here was France, which had chosen the date of the Vel d’Hiv round-up of 1942, 16 July, for its first Holocaust memorial day (in 1993).

16 October or 27 January: the tension between a local, hidden but urgently Italian corner of Holocaust remembrance and an acknowledgement of the horrific scale of the European genocide, which precisely destroyed any respect of borders or citizenship amongst its many forms of violence to the person, is written out in debates over the calendar.

But there is an interesting anomaly or wrinkle in the debate between 16 October and 27 January, one that signals a larger pattern in Italian memory of both the Holocaust and World War Two in Italy, as alluded to above, and indeed a problem in Italy’s memory and historicization of the long arc of the Fascist regime from 1922 onwards: both memorial dates point to events belonging to the period 1943-1945 – 16 October 1943 and 27 January 1945 – during that period of occupation and civil war, as the focal point for the commemoration of Italy’s Holocaust and of the Holocaust in Italy. In doing so, both implicitly focus on Nazis, on occupation, on *external* agents in the persecution and murder of Italy’s Jews, and occlude Fascist or more broadly Italian anti-Semitism, as well as Fascist complicity and collaboration with the genocidal project and with Nazi violent more broadly during the Salò period. This is precisely the base assumption of innocence that has been forcefully challenged in recent historiography such as Simon Levis Sullam’s excoriating book *The Italian Executioners*[[6]](#footnote-6)*.* In the oscillation between 16 October and 27 January, and in the subsequent selection of the latter, the Holocaust was marked, it is implied, not as part of Italian history but rather as a crime visited on Italy and Italians (or victims on Italian territory) by occupiers. This was a pattern or perspective established well before the “Giorno della memoria” debates of the end of the century: thus, for example, Renzo de Felice could all but ignore the Salò years in his pioneering history of Fascism and the Jews in 1961; and go on to claim decades later, in a notorious phrase, that Italy “fell outside the shadow [*cono d’ombra*] of the Holocaust”[[7]](#footnote-7). At the same time, the emphasis on 1943-45 propped up the emerging myth of the “good Italian”, centred on the large number of Jews in Italy who were rescued, hidden, saved by non-Jewish neighbours, clerics and others, many and mostly true stories which clustered also around those years of Nazi occupation, persecution and deportation[[8]](#footnote-8).

This emphasis is not surprising given the longstanding patterns of historicization and memory in Italy since the end of the war: for a whole panoply of constitutive identity discourses and public debates, and indeed as noted for the very constitution of the post-war Republic itself in anti-Fascist values, until at least the 1990s, the period 1943-45 was an obsessively recurrent reference-point in cultural, civic and political discourse in Italy, working among other ways as a vast barrier in collective memory and consciousness to the processing of the preceding three years of war or indeed the preceding the 21 years of the Fascist regime; and, we might add, more pertinently in this context, occluding also the preceding five years of specifically local, state-sponsored, Italian anti-Semitic legislation and persecution, beginning with the press campaigns and then passing of the Racial Laws of September and November 1938, whose 80th anniversary was marked with such ceremony in Pisa in 2018.

For decades after the war, date patterns of national historical collective memory obliquely distorted the possibility of tracing an articulated memory of the Holocaust in and of Italy – and this kind of intersectional interference between distinct memory discourses is a significant feature of the public and cultural spheres of modern memory. In that 1990s debate surrounding the Holocaust memorial day proposal, for example, Sarfatti recalls that the jurist Alessandro Galante Garrone was a lone voice proposing 17 November, the date on which the major raft of anti-Semitic legislation was passed, unanimously, by the Italian parliament in *1938*, rather than the options referring to 1943 or 1945[[9]](#footnote-9). (Sarfatti himself proposed 30 November, the date of the Salò Republic police order in 1943 that labelled all Jews as foreigners and ordered their immediate arrest, a powerful moment of fracture in the pact of citizenship and emancipation which might be traced back as far as the Risorgimento, or indeed 1848; Sarfatti, ibidem) 17 November 1938, Galante Garrone argued, was the proper date for Italy to select to remember its own role in the Holocaust, but his was a lone and unattended voice.

Indeed, 1938 was for a long time during the post-war era, and to a degree still is, the half-forgotten shadow, the missing or ill-fitting key to the periodization of a specifically Italian history of the Holocaust; to an understanding of the Holocaust, as Furio Colombo subtly and memorably put it, as “*also* an Italian crime”[[10]](#footnote-10). In order to acknowledge this Italian aspect to the Holocaust, the date formula of its local history, echoing that proposed for the Second World War above, must be reshaped to look something like 1938-43//1943-45; and tracing the tentative, uneven and slow emergence of an acknowledgement of 1938 as a point of origin through the post-war field of Italian Holocaust culture, through its memory practices across various sectors and levels, is crucial to tracing the shifting ground of Italy’s acknowledgement of its own responsibility and role in the wider European genocide, and indeed to its own coming to terms with the problematic legacies of Fascism and its very history as a nation state. The stakes in stories swirling around this single date, it turns out, are very high indeed.

How, when and in what particular shape did 1938 emerge as a pivotal date and moment in understanding Italy’s Holocaust history? This question can be approached on different levels and using different kinds of sources and evidence. Perhaps the key contemporary turning-point in historiography, the new paradigm which definitively broke the de Felician assumption of a separation between Fascist anti-Semitism and the Holocaust – an assumed separation between 1938 and 1943, we might say -- once again came from Michele Sarfatti, with his influential formulation of a complex, entwined but never simplistically linear or causal tripartite sequence of Fascist persecution, first of Italian Jews’ *equality*, from 1922 to 1938; then of their *rights* starting with the institutionalized state-racism 1938; and finally, of their *lives*, from 1943, led by Nazis in collaboration with the Fascists of Salò[[11]](#footnote-11). On the level of a more pervasive if less anchored cultural history, however, such paradigm-shifts occur less in the explicit revisions of professional historiographical debate (or at least they do so only in so far as historiography also enters into public debate and cultural consciousness), and more likely in changes in the way stories and cultural patterns of understanding begin to point to the moment of 1938 (the Racial Laws, exclusions, racist campaigns, but also 1938 as a symbolic moment laden with meaning), in fragments and clusters over the long post-war era, beyond the purview of researchers, let alone the restricted and deeply knowledgeable (and memory-laden) circles of witnesses and gatekeepers of Holocaust knowledge. Within this cultural perspective – and simplifying what is a highly variegated and complex field[[12]](#footnote-12) – we can proffer as an hypothesis that there were two principal turning-points, loosely in the 1960s and the 1990s respectively, in this emergence of a new grade of visibility for and new forms of attention to the 1938 Racial Laws in Italian Holocaust culture, and thereby in its storytelling presence and prominence in accounts of recent history.

As is often the case in the Italian context when contemplating the knowledge and narratives of the Holocaust, as both an Italian phenomenon and as a universal human catastrophe, Primo Levi can serve as emblem and example. In the 1947 edition of his astonishing work of testimony, *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This a Man*), Levi’s focus is exclusively, searingly, on Auschwitz, as if he were mapping this place outside Italy, outside human comprehension, as somewhere that required projecting from afar deep into the consciousness and language of his Italian readers. Italy, Fascist and wartime Italy as much as his own intimate memories of his youth, are present only in shards of memory and flashback, a lost world. In the 1958 2nd edition of the book, however, now published by the leading house Einaudi, he adds a brief but telling new opening page, which frames his entire experience of Auschwitz with notes on his experience in Italy, focussed largely on his weeks in the Resistance before arrest and deportation. This new opening includes also one brief mention of the 1938 Racial Laws, likely his first published reference to them:

Avevo ventiquattro anni, poco senno, nessuna esperienza, e una decisa propensione, favorita dal *regime di segregazione a cui da* *quattro anni le leggi razziali mi avevano ridotto*, a vivere in un mio mondo scarsamente reale, popolato da civili fantasmi cartesiani, da sincere amicizie maschili e da amicizie femminili esangui.

(I was 24 years old, immature, inexperienced, and with a decided tendency, nurtured by that *condition of segregation that the Racial Laws had produced in me over four years*, to live in my own world, tenuously linked to reality, filled with civil Cartesian ghosts, earnest male friendships and bloodless female ones.)[[13]](#footnote-13)

*If This is a Man* will not return to the story of 1938: this is not yet the story Levi has to tell, nor one that his readers are ready to hear. But a shift clearly occurred in Levi’s mind not long thereafter; and we might posit, in the wider culture too: around this time, and with force from the mid-1960s, Levi began to conceive tentatively of another book, a book about his work as a chemist, a book not intended at all – initially at least – as a work of Holocaust history or testimony, but one which would grow in phases and layers over the following decade; and one of these layers would build up to a substantial and in some sense discrete sequence over the first 10 chapters of the eventual book, amounting to an intimate autobiography of a Jewish boy in Fascist Italy, before and after the Racial Laws of 1938. Not enough attention has been paid to this hidden-in-plain-sight dimension of Levi’s most original book, *The Periodic Table[[14]](#footnote-14),* to its shape as a book-within-a-book, to the significance of its genesis at a precise moment in the history of Italy’s reflections on the Holocaust, to its status as a distinct intervention in the cultural sphere and balance of memory, and to its profound impact after its publication in 1975. This latter is pertinent not least because of the absolutely determining role of *The Periodic Table* (with these chapters front and centre) in the striking American success of Levi upon its translation in the 1980s, and from there his emergence as a global icon of Holocaust witnessing and writing[[15]](#footnote-15).

What pushed Levi after the 1963 publication of *La tregua*, when he notably declared he had nothing further to say about the Holocaust[[16]](#footnote-16), to carve out space for a sustained narrative of Fascist Italy, of adolescence and persecution, pivoting around the lived experience of the 1938 Laws, embedded within his other and initially primary purpose of writing the autobiography of chemist, is a question open to further research[[17]](#footnote-17). But a key context undoubtedly lies in the conjunction between his developing plans and new forms of attention being paid to the nexus between Fascism, the Jewish experience and the Holocaust in Italy in precisely those years, including in circles close to Levi. Thus, de Felice’s book on Fascism and anti-Semitism was published, by Levi’s publisher Einaudi, in 1961. More crucial still, was the appearance in close succession of Giorgio Bassani’s *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (*Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini,* 1962) and Natalia Ginzburg’s *Family Sayings* (*Lessico famigliare,* 1963)[[18]](#footnote-18),both highly localised, intimate and autobiographical narratives, both hybrids of history and fiction, both family-centred, both lightly framed by politics and history; and crucially both pivoting around, precisely, Fascist anti-Semitism, anti-Fascism and the Racial Laws, in other words, around 1938 and its consequences.

The years around 1960 also saw a particular historical-political conjunction in Italy – a key anniversary of the Liberation, the centenary of Italian unification, and a deep crisis in government and civil order caused by the support of neo-Fascists for the governing coalition in 1960. Both Levi and Bassani had spoken at an anti-Fascist memorial event in Bologna in March 1961 and Levi had included in his public remarks further brief comment on the Racial Laws[[19]](#footnote-19). It is a commonplace in an international context – and this holds for Italy also, to a degree – to point to the early 1960s and the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem as a turning point in global Holocaust memory and culture; but the local inflections of this process and in particular its complex intersection with a beginning of a return to a consciousness of 1938 and its integration into the history of Fascism, Italy and the Holocaust (Bassani, Ginzburg, Levi) are less frequently acknowledged[[20]](#footnote-20).

If we jump forwards to the 1990s, another profound crisis in institutional politics and values following on from the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, with profound consequences for continental and global geopolitics, coincided with another marked shift in cultural attention paid to the Holocaust in Italy, and, once again, to 1938 within that. The 50th anniversary of the Laws in 1988 had undoubtedly acted as a watershed moment in academic and official contexts (since anniversaries matter, as we have argued here axiomatically), as had the space opened up by Primo Levi’s remarkable and ever-growing international reputation (following the English edition of *The Periodic Table*), which only grew following his death in 1987. This international dimension is significant, and not only for Levi. It is striking that key early signals in book publication of a 1990s shift in the mode and quality of attention to anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy, as a complex backdrop and complement to a by-now received pattern of Holocaust representation, could be said to have come from voices abroad, or more particularly from hyphenated Italian-emigrant voices: powerful examples here were Dan Vittorio Segre’s *Memoirs of a Fortunate Jew* (1985) and, even more crucially, Alexander Stille’s *Benevolence and Betrayal. Five Italian Jewish Families Under Fascism* (1991)[[21]](#footnote-21), both centred on or pivoting around the lived experience of inclusion and exclusion before, during and after the Racial Laws. Both worked radically to recalibrate the forms as well as the weight of attention paid to 1938: emphasis here, in a sense following on from both Ginzburg and Bassani, but in new kinds of narrative hybrids, was on family, communal history and experience, on contingent networks and allegiances, on mixtures of document, (auto)biography and narrative, as the protagonists of Segre and Stille all respond in the face of the aggressive violence of exclusion. These were recovered tales of youth and family life, as much as accounts of macro-historical events and the histories entwined with them were multidirectional; from different directions and positions within Fascist Italy outwards towards Palestine / Israel for Segre; towards Fascism, persecution or exile for Stille’s case studies; not in a linear propulsion from Racial Laws to Auschwitz. Both books were also radical – and here they perhaps followed on Levi’s tentative steps in *The Periodic Table* and further back in a crucial precursor to the entire field we are mapping here, Bassani’s *Ferrarese Stories*[[22]](#footnote-22) *­–* in retelling a history of a contingent moment against a multi-generational backdrop of Italy’s national history, stretching back as far as the 19th century and the Risorgimento emancipation. Italy’s Jews were becoming, in other words, litmus tests for citizenship of the nation from within, not so much symbols of “the other” or “outsider” – as a longstanding topos of the Jew, in general and relation to the Holocaust had it – as litmus tests for belonging and shared national identity. High institutional sympathy for this paradigm shift came in the very late 1990s and early 2000s from the President of the Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, as part of his personal campaign to reinvent Italian national identity and memory for the 21st century. Ciampi repeatedly wrote and spoke of the Racial Laws, of 1938 and not 1943, as the truly tragic moment of rupture in the Risorgimento ideal, as the death of the nation:

Le leggi razziali fasciste del 1938 […] segnarono […] il più grave tradimento del Risorgimento e dell'idea stessa della Nazione italiana al cui successo gli italiani di origine ebraica avevano contribuito in modo determinante, da Daniele Manin a Ernesto Nathan.

(The Fascist Racial Laws of 1938 […] marked […] the very gravest betrayal of the Risorgimento and of the very idea of the Italian nation, to whose success Italians of Jewish origin, from Daniele Manin to Ernesto Nathan, had made such a crucial contribution)[[23]](#footnote-23)

In this period, from the later 1990s, when an explosion of Holocaust memory fever was reaching its peak, nationally and internationally, several key works of re-narrativization of the Holocaust in Italy developed strands on display in their different ways in Segre, Stille, Ciampi and others: the focus on family, the conjunction with Italian national history and identity, and, crucially also the intimate on-the-ground reality of community, home and the neighbour, as both potential ally and betrayer, as fellow Italian or new-found enemy. The neighbour paradigm of the 1990s, parallel to and informed directly or indirectly by Jan Gross’s devastating contemporary work on Jedwabne in Poland[[24]](#footnote-24), had the power to recalibrate as the determining hypothetical question for Italy’s consciousness of the Holocaust as played out on its territory: now the question became “what did you [non-Jewish Italians] do for your Jewish neighbours (in 1938)?”, carefully and ideally contrasted with the earlier and tendentiously celebratory question, built on the broad assumption of the stereotype of the good Italian, “how many Jews did you [non-Jewish Italians] save (in 1943-45)?”.

Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* (*La vita è bella,* 1997) would merit a re-reading in this light – as a story of family, community, neighbours and exclusion in post-1938 Fascism as a template for its later (much weaker) exposition of the Lager phenomenon - but two other works from this period, from 1997 and 2001 respectively, stand as far stronger testimony to an emergent Italian inflection of the neighbours paradigm, projected on a clear vector back to 1938: first, Rosetta Loy’s *First Words* (*La parola ebreo*) and secondly Ettore Scola’s late *commedia all’italiana*, *Unfair Competition* (*Concorrenza sleale*)[[25]](#footnote-25). Both these works explicitly centre on the historical-moral quandary of friendship and neighbourliness posed by 1938 (echoed and refracted in 1943), on Jewish-non-Jewish relations at the moment of racist exclusion, on what happens when Jew and “gentile” are divided, friends and neighbours divided, within one street or one *palazzo*. It should be added that both these works, and many others that pivot to 1938 as a way of recalibrating Italy’s own response to the Holocaust, are also interrogations of Fascism and the Fascist party or of the Catholic church, that is of other structuring communities and ideologies out of which the Holocaust, its origins and consequences all grew and collided with in the Italian case. Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence that controversies surrounding the Church and the Holocaust had first exploded into public awareness in the 1960s, around the same time as an attention to 1938 was beginning to establish itself in Italian Holocaust culture, as if both were markers of a key stage of pluralization, intensification and complication in the historical standing of the Shoah itself in Italian (and other) cultural fields.

Like Sarfatti, we are not dealing in this phased cultural reshaping of the Holocaust through a slow, uncomfortable shifting of chronology with a game of simple causality and continuity; with the unveiling of a previously hidden point of origin. It is more complicated than that, more akin to the recovery of a nodal point, of convergence and divergence of multiple histories and also of re-imagining of lost histories, the contingencies of “what ifs” and “counterfactuals” that historiography struggles with, but narrative relishes. When the genocide is no longer primarily imagined as a sudden visitation from an invading force, its longer, local, caused trajectory necessarily raises new and complex forms of responsibility and regret, and indeed warnings for the future, and new forms of ‘thick’ narrative descriptions emerge in response.

This back-and-forth recalibration in scale, and kinds of causality and morality, points us to the usefulness of the unusual terms in my title, “backshadowing” and “sideshadowing”. These are terms which can bring into focus some of the underlying implications (and risks) of the ostensibly simple operation proposed here, of tracing when and how a collective culture and a field of representation shifts its starting-point, changes the date and thus the origin of a certain historical event and thus challenges its causes and meanings. In the field of the study of Holocaust memory and literature, the terms “backshadowing” and “sideshadowing” were first deployed by the late scholar Michel André Bernstein in his powerful 1994 book *Foregone Conclusions*[[26]](#footnote-26)*,* in which he railed against the recurrent tendency to revisit the 1930s in Holocaust writing, the pre-history of the extermination, *merely* in order to foreshadow in portentous and prophetic terms the camps, the genocide-to-come, to contemplate melancholically but necessarily and thus for Bernstein complacently the annihilation that *a posteriori* seems inevitable:

Backshadowing is a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they too should have known what was to come* (Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions*, p.16; emphasis in the original)

Primo Levi too had warned against a similar kind of historical distortion, looking back 40 years from 1979 to 1939, that moment of strange limbo for him personally and for Italy too, as Europe, but not yet Mussolini’s Fascist regime as we saw, plunged into war. It is telling for the argument we are making here that Levi navigates the question by tracing different chronologies here, as he reflects on a particular “optical illusion”, a risk of something close to Bernstein’s “backshadowing”, at a national level but also the newly distinct chronology of the Jewish community that is already diverging from the national story after the Racial Laws of 1938:

Dall’alto dei quarant’anni che ci separano ormai dall’agosto del 1939, lo stato d’animo ed il comportamento nostro di allora non possono che destare stupore, anche in noi stessi. Per «noi» intendo la minoranza ebraica in Italia, che a quel tempo era stata artificiosamente ritagliata dal resto del paese ad opera delle leggi razziali, e da due anni era bersagliata da una ininterrotta campagna propagandistica, offesa, relegata ai margini della società, calunniata, umiliata. Si tratta naturalmente di uno stupore antistorico, di quella specie di illusione ottica secondo cui, quando il futuro è ormai diventato passato, si pretende che esso si presentasse già allora, quando ancora era futuro autentico, decifrabile e deducibile come è il passato stesso: si tratta, appunto, del senno di poi, e del fenomeno per cui, a cose fatte, tutti si sentono retrospettivamente previdenti, e accusano gli altri di non esserlo stati[[27]](#footnote-27).

(From the height of the 40 years that today separates us from August 1939, our state of mind and behaviour at that time can only provoke amazement, in us as much as in anyone else. By “us” I mean the Jewish minority in Italy, which had at that time been artificially cut apart from the rest of the country by the Racial Laws and had been targeted with over two years of propaganda campaigns, offended, relegated to the margins of society, insulted, humiliated. Our amazement is of course anti-historical, a kind of optical illusion that makes us see the future, once it has become the past, as if it were already back then, when it still really was in the future, as decipherable and logically deducible as the past. This is, precisely, the wisdom of hindsight, which makes everyone feel like prophets and seers after all is said and done, and accuse others of failing to be so.)

This backshadowing is a form of anti-historical hindsight into history, as explained by Levi, but also, as Bernstein argues, a distortion in the ethics of memory and storytelling. Against “backshadowing”, he proposes a kind of recovered storytelling that privileges instead what he calls “sideshadowing”. Against a paradigm of tragic and apocalyptic inevitability, sideshadowing paradoxically underlines even more forcefully the human tragedy of what happened – precisely because the Shoah was *not* inevitable, as hindsight might make us believe. Sideshadowing stories “gestur[e] to the side, to a present dense with multiple, and mutually exclusive, possibilities for what is to come […] stresses the significance of randomness, haphazard, and unassimilable contingencies” (Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions,* pp. 1, 4). This eloquent formulation helps us explain how the recovery of and return to 1938 within the field of Italian Holocaust culture, in its uneven and still tentative emergence at different moments in the post-war era, has not only been a question of recovering lost history and hidden responsibility, correcting errors and filling gaps in the historical record and collective memory that help explain the causes that led to the Shoah, the historical substance of the Holocaust as “*also* an Italian crime”; but it has also brought with it a new kind of “sideshadowing” narrative that amounts to a shift in the way history, stories and memory are made to interact, to build a web of knowledge of Italy and its role in the Holocaust, its ethics and responsibilities. The process we have been tracing here is, in other words, not merely a process of shifting and substituting of dates, more even than simply bringing the Holocaust “home”, from a Nazi to also a Fascist and Italian historical phenomenon. The return to 1938 is also a turn a new, thick description of the lived experience of racist persecution and its possible presents and futures.

A powerful recent example of precisely this kind of thick description and recovery of the contingencies of history, is the work of a native of Pisa, Lia Levi, whose writings from *Una bambina e basta* (1994) to the recent, acclaimed *Questa sera è già domani* (2018)[[28]](#footnote-28). The latter is the story of a precocious young Jewish boy and his extended family in Genoa as the Racial Laws taken their effect,centred on the impact of the Racial Laws, on 1938, and on the lived experience, especially of children, of the trauma, loss and exclusion of that moment, felt precisely because its victims had no idea what it would all bring. The figure of the perplexed child allows Lia Levi to tap into that sense of uncertainty, confusion and fear, which is sustained until the final pages of the novel set on and around the Swiss border in 1944, one of many possible futures that the Racial Laws, that 1938 portended. The fear is in reality the fear of the victim for whom there cannot be, perhaps ever, the consolation of hindsight, who has lost their coordinates for understanding the world and how to act in it. It does not take a great leap of imagination or historical understanding to see in this resensitized conception of time and history, in this interplay of backshadowing and sideshadowing, a warning for how we use the temporality of history and narrative, act and consequence, in today’s world. We do not need to imagine a concentration camp around the corner, a foreshadowing of an inevitable end-point that has become over-familiar to the point of cliché, to understand the devastating violence and insidious human cost of racism in the here and now and its terrifying institutional legitimations. If it is happening now, we do not need to wait for hindsight, we do not need to know whether it will lead to some new Auschwitz, to judge it for what it already is.

1. For a study of official, state apologies, in the context of European empires and post-colonialism (including the case of Italy and Libya), see Tom Bentley, *Empires of Remorse: Narrative, Postcolonialism and Apologies for Colonial Atrocity*, London, Routledge, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the dynamics of anniversaries and commemorative events in public memory, see Warwick Frost, Jennifer Laing, *Commemorative Events. Memory, Identities, Conflict*, London

Routledge, 2013 (1st edition 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ernesto Galli Della Loggia, *La morte della patria: la crisi dell'idea di nazione tra Resistenza, antifascismo e Repubblica*, Bari: Laterza, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On the Stockholm forum, see Larissa Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance between the National and the Transnational: A Case Study of the Stockholm International Forum and the First Decade of the ITF,* London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michele Sarfatti, "Notes and Reflections on the Italian Law instituting the Holocaust Remembrance Day. History, Memory and the Present", *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, XII (2017) http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?issue=12&id=393. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Simon Levis Sullam, *The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascism*, Turin, Einaudi, 1961. The phrase on the “cono d’ombra” of the Holocaust was used by in an interview with Giuliano Ferrara, *Corriere della sera*, 27 December 1987. See Manuela Consonni, “ A War of Memories’, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, V (2006), pp. 43-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There is now a large, perhaps excessively large, literature on this topos, in relation to Fascism, the Holocaust, but also the occlusions of responsibility for Italian colonial and occupation crimes: see e.g. David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano*, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1994; Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2011; Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale,* Rome, Laterza, 2013; Claudio Fogu, "Italiani brava gente”in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. by Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kasteiner and Claudio Fogu , Durham, Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 147-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sarfatti, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a recent reprise, see e.g. Furio Colombo, “Dopo il giorno della memoria”, *Il Fatto*, 29 January 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista : vicende, identità, persecuzione*, Turin, Einaudi, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. To complicate this chronology and its starting-point, it would enough to cite, for example, the remarkable case of Eucardio Momigliano, who published two editions, as early as 1945 and 1946, of a book which directly addressed the issue of Fascist anti-Semitism (whilst also embracing a form of the ‘good Italian’ myth): Eucardio Momigliano, *40000 fuori legge* Rome, Carboni, 1945; *Storia tragica e grottesca del razzismo fascista*, Milan, Mondadori, 1946 (see p.29 for comments on Italians’ tolerance and benevolence towards Jews). Momigliano’s work was largely forgotten in the following decades. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Primo Levi, *Opere*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti, Turin, Einaudi, 2016, I, p. 141 (my emphasis; my translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Primo Levi, *Il sistema periodico,* Turin, Einaudi, 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On the US reception of Levi’s work, see Michael Rothberg and Jonathan Druker, “A Secular Alternative: Primo Levi's Place in American Holocaust Discourse”, *Shofar*, XXVIII (2009), pp. 104-126. *The Periodic Table* has also of course acquired a reputation as a great science book, but undoubtedly, its initial American success was led by its powerful evocation of Fascist Italy, the Racial Laws and allusions to the Holocuast. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Primo Levi, *The Voice of Memory. Conversations and Interviews 19*61-1987*,* ed. by Marco Bepoliti and Robert Gordon, New York, New Press, 2001, p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On the genesis of *The Periodic Table* see Marco Belpoliti, in Levi, *Opere*, I, pp. 1515-24; and Martina Mengoni, “Primo Levi, Autoritratti periodici”, *Allegoria*, LVI-LVII (2015), pp. 141-164. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Giorgio Bassani, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini,* Turin, Einaudi, 1962; Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare*, Turin, Einaudi, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Storia dell’antifascismo italiano*, ed. by Luigi Arbizzani and Alberto Caltabiano, Rome, Riuniti, 1964. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. On the Eichmann trial in Italy, see Manuela Consonni, “The Impact of the «Eichmann Event» in Italy, 1961”, *Journal of Israeli History*, XXIII (2004), pp. 91-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Vittorio Dan Segre, *Storia di un ebreo fortunato*, Milan, Bompiani, 1985; 1st English edition, 1987); Alexander Stille, *Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish families under Fascism*, New York, Summit Books, 1991; 1st Italian edition 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Giorgio Bassani, *Cinque storie ferraresi,* Turin, Einaudi, 1956. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. "Le leggi razziali tradimento della Nazione", *Repubblica*, 27 January 2005. On Ciampi’s campaign to strengthen and recalibrate a patriotic Italian collective memory, see Bjørn Thomassen and Rosario Forlenza, "Re-narrating Italy, Reinventing the Nation: Assessing the Presidency of Ciampi" *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* XVI (2011), pp. 705-725. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. / Jan T. Gross, *Neighbours : the Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001; and Omer Bartov’s compelling study of the long history of communities of his mother’s home town in Ukraine, *Anatomy of a Genocide : the Life and Death of a Town called Buczacz*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Rosetta Loy, *La parola ebreo*, Turin, Einaudi, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Michel André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions. Against Apocalyptic History*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Primo Levi, ‘Europa all’inferno’, in Levi, Opere, II, pp. 1471-3 (p. 1471). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Lia Levi, *Una bambina e basta,* Rome, E/O, 1994; *Questa sera è già domani,* Rome,E/O, 2018*.* For a rare study of Lia Levi’s work in the context of Italian Jewish women’s writing, see F. K. Clementi, “Natalia Ginzburg, Clara Sereni and Lia Levi: Jewish Italian Women Recapturing Cities, Families and National Memories”, *European Journal of Women's Studies,* XXI (2013), pp. 132-147. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)