

The "Gold of Rome" in Fascist Hands

Marina Melchionda (January 26, 2010)



Interview with Carlo Lizzani, director of "L'oro di Roma" - The Gold of Rome (1961). The movie will be presented in New York on February 3 in occasion of the celebration of Remembrance Day 2010. Find the whole calendar of events dedicated to the Jewish community in Rome below the article

The screening of the "Gold of Rome" (1961) on February 2 will represent one of the best moments of this year's commemoration of Remembrance Day (January 27) in New York. It is the first movie that recounts the facts behind and before the final deportation of the Jews of Rome: on September 26, 1943 Nazi Colonel Herbert Kappler summoned the highest representatives of the Jewish community of Rome ordering them to collect 50 kgs of gold within 36 hours. The punishment in case of failure or disobedience was the detention of 200 people. Gold was collected and brought but on October 16, 1943 nothing could save 1259 Jews from deportation: it was the beginning of the end for the Jewish community of the Ghetto of Rome.

The movie was only one of the first directed by Carlo Lizzani on the subject. "Achtung! Banditi!" - Attention, Bandits! (1951); "Il processo di Verona" - The trial of Verona (1963); "La guerra segreta" - The secret war (1965); "Mussolini ultimo atto" - Mussolini last act (1974) are just a few of the most famous.

We reached Lizzani and talked about his "The Gold of Rome" and his personal commitment to the preservation of Memory.

Let's start from your movie "L'oro di Roma" (The Gold of Rome). What were the reasons that brought you to make it?

They were mainly personal. Being born in 1922, I had witnessed the rise and fall of the Fascist regime, and my life had always been touched by the political, economical, and social changes it brought in. I was only 16 in 1938 when I saw my Jewish classmates being expelled from school. Afterwards, I became part of the Resistance and many of my companions were persecuted. I dedicated my first movie as a director "Achtung!Banditi!" (1951) to the issue, and it was only the beginning of a long career focused on the theme. 1953 was the year of "Cronache di poveri amanti" (Chronicles of miserable lovers), based on Vasco Pratolini's novel. It was when Giacomo Debenedetti came up with his successful book "16 Ottobre 1943" that I decided to start working on "L'oro di Roma". I collaborated with him, and based much of the story on the "chronicles" and historical reconstruction he made of the round-up in the Jewish ghetto of Rome. Of course my work, it being a movie, was fictionalized and many characters were invented... but, still, all together they formed a good mirror of the society of the time. The film had good success and ultimately gave greater fame to the book.

Had you experienced difficulties of any sort in the making of the movie?

Well, actually yes. Just before I started working on it, I spent a whole year in China and when I came back I found a sort of McCarthyism in the country. "The power" considered all of us people who worked in the cinema field as comunists. Producers didn't want to have anything to do with me. "Cronache di poveri amanti" (Chronicles of Poor Lovers), as an example, was a candidate for the "Palma d'oro" at the Festival of Cannes. The president of the jury that year was Jacques-Yves Cousteau who two years later told scriptwriter Sergio Amidei that my movie did not win the first prize because of "externalpressure " coming from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I looked at it, and I still do, as an offensive to neorealist cinema, that brought on the screen the poor, dramatic side of Italy. Fortunately this quite bland form of McCarthyism did not last long, and in 1960 I could finally talk a producer into the making of the movie.

How did the Italian audience respond to the movie? Afterwards it came out in an historic moment when people wanted "to forget"...

Actually,, what astonished me more than the reaction of the Italian public was the lack of collaboration, or maybe it is better to call it "caution", of the Jewish community in Italy. Of course I was given permission to enter the synagogues and film in different areas of the ghetto, but still I felt that at the beginning they didn't like the idea of this movie. I think that they were those that, more than the others, wanted to forget or avoid to think of what had happened less than 20 years before. I surely expected them to more "warmly"welcome my project.

How is/was the Jewish community of Rome different from the others in the country? How did you depict it in the movie?

The Jewish microcosm in Rome was not any bigger than the others located in the country or in Europe. What I think characterized it the most was the feeling of "Optmism" that its members kept up to the very end. Some of them entered the gas chambers and still thought that there would be a way out...



They simply could not conceive, understand, what was happening to them. Moreover, the fact that they lived in Rome gave them even more hope. It was the city of the Pope, a place of historic glory. They felt somehow protected, stronger. That's why in the movie I depict them as a reactive community: they had the strength to fight.

"The Gold of Rome" also features a deep analysis of the figure of Kappler, the German colonel that organized the round-up in the ghetto on October 16. As a director that widely researched him, how do you explain the efforts of the President of Federal Germany Gustav Heinemann(1973) and of chancellor Helmut Schmidt (73-74 e 76) to rehabilitate his figure and save him from the death penalty?

I find it absolutely unfair. He tortured and murdered - or had other people doing it under his orders - many of my (Jews and non-Jews) companions and friends. He was the "director" of the occupation of Rome. Italian cinema, and especially "Roma città aperta" (Rome open city) by Roberto Rossellini, never discounted him of any of his faults and crimes.

From the "Gold of Rome" on, you dedicated the greatest part of your career to the issue of Fascist persecutions in Italy and in the occupied territories. Did you feel you were engaged in a personal mission?

Yes, I always felt the mission to fight against the Fascist dictatorship. In 1942, I met director Giuseppe de Sanctis and writer and poet Pietro Ingrao who invited me to collaborate with the magazine "Cinema" which was directed by Vittorio Mussolini. We slowly created an anti-fascist, or better, a Communist branch within it. That happened when we found out that the fascist calls for (fascist) revolution, anti-capitalism (that became anti-semitism), and anti-bourgeoisie, eventually rooted back to the Marxist theory (let's not forget, in fact, that Mussolini was a socialist at the beginning of his career).

As many of my companions, thus, I became communist/socialist at the age of 18-20, and lived and looked with more consciousness at what was happening around me. It became natural for me to watch and read politically-oriented movies and books, and get more and more interested in the political changes of my time, both in Italy and abroad. This eventually affected my future cinema career and brought me to make my own movies on the subject. "Il processo di Verona" and "Mussolini ultimo atto" are just a couple of the movies I directed through which it is possible to reconstruct the entire story of the Fascist party, from foundation to end.

You directed both documentaries and movies on the subject. How do you choose the "format" of your works?

Much depends on the market demands. As an example, there has been a moment a few years ago that cinema was living a period of crisis and TV preferred to broadcast documentaries rather than films. That's when I worked on 'Maria Josè, l'ultima regina' (2002), a product conceived exclusively for TV. The reason for this is that in history artists of any kind always had to submit their creativity to the needs and will of those who finance the production or the audience. Now it has gotten a little better for writers, painters... but the cinema and theatre fields are obviously still entrapped in this game of roles.

Holocaust Cinema has very much changed in the latest period. Movies like "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (2008) and Benigni's "La Vita è bella" would have been inconceivable before. Is this an evolution or a devolution?

I appreciated Benigni's effort to analyze the issue from another point of view, or maybe under another perspective. I also liked "Train de vie", "The Pianist" and others of the kind. It is necessary to adapt the format and the kind of product you want to propose to the taste of the public, especially of new generations. This is the only way to help preserve the memory of what has happened, and prolong its wave. People like psychological and historical romances, want to understand the reasons, the feelings, the sentiments of those who lived the tragedy of Holocaust. They are emphatic in some way, and try to identify and imagine themselves in that context.



Why is it important to screen your movie on Remembrance Day? And why present it to the New York public?

First of all, because many of my movies are well-known in America; but this is not one of them. I really think that it is a complete and interesting portrait of that particular episode. Second, because I think New York is very sensitive to the issue, since the Jewish community living here has strongly contributed to its cultural and economical growth. Third, because it is important to show America that Italy has not forgotten the horrors of the past, continues to preserve the memory of what has been, and is committed to passing it on to the new generations

February 1, 6:00 PM

NYU Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò

24 West 12th Street, NYC

Film screening | **Confortorio** By Paolo Benvenuti, 1992

February 2, 7:30 PM

JCC IN Manhattan, 334 Amsterdam Avenue, NYC (@76th St.)

Film screening | **Una Storia Romana**

A Roman Story: Enrica Sermoneta, Post-screening discussion with Pupa Garribba, writer and film maker.

February 3, 6:30 PM

Museum of Jewish Heritage, 36 Battery Place, NYC

Film Screening | **L'Oro di Roma**, By Carlo Lizzani

(1961, 110 min, Italian w/English subt.)

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