Cappuccino with Tullia Zevi

Maria Rita Latto (January 22, 2011)

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Tullia Zevi died Saturday at the age of 92. She was one of the historic post-war leaders of Italy's Jews and the only woman to ever hold the post of president of the country's Jewish communities. i-Italy met her two years ago. It was an honor for us. Here we re-publish that interview, where she talked about her life and her anti-Fascist militancy in New York.

Tullia Zevi will turn 90 at the beginning of February. Nevertheless she continues to be an important inspiration not only for the Jewish Italian community but for secular and progressive culture as well. She was the first woman to become president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities [3] (UCEI) which she led for over eleven years. She knew and associated with many anti-Fascist leaders, was active in the Partito d'Azione, and shared a deeply profound friendship with Amelia Rosselli, mother of the anti-Fascists Carlo and Nello Roselli. As a journalist for the American press she covered the Nuremberg trials and later Adolf Eichmann's trial which took place in
Jerusalem, and for many years she was the correspondent for the Israeli daily newspaper Ma'ariv. It was an intense life that Tullia Zevi narrated to her granddaughter Nathania in a book-interview Ti Racconto la Mia Storia (Mondadori, 2007) that covers 70 years of history beginning with the racial laws that were passed in 1938.

When I telephoned her to schedule an appointment, it was she who answered and we spoke about how important it is to make young people more aware of the theme of memory and the horrors of history that must not be repeated. When she learned that I have an eighteen-year-old daughter who is currently studying these events in school, she suggested, if I agreed, to bring her with me to the appointment. It was a rare opportunity which we welcomed with immense pleasure.

We arrived at Tullia Zevi's home in the heart of the Roman ghetto, steps away from the sculpture "the Mouth of Truth" and
Tiber Island, on a Sabbath afternoon. She welcomed us into her office and I couldn't help but notice that her desk was covered with the major daily Italian newspapers. There was also a copy of the Herald Tribune and a few open books. All were signs of continuous work, an insatiable curiosity, and a constant need to know more. During the conversation she paused a few times to take sips of cappuccino. Inevitably I asked about her life as a Jewish adolescent during the terrible years of Fascism: "Until 1938 we did not notice any difference. Of course we were not Catholic but we still felt Italian in every sense. My family had been in
Italy for about five centuries.

Then with the racial laws, which I call "racist," things changed, we had to emigrate. It was the summer of 1938 and we were on vacation in

Switzerland. My father was in
Milan, the city where we lived and where he practiced law as an attorney. Reading the text of the new laws right on that day was far-sighted; he realized that we could not return home, that unfortunately we had to give up everything: home, work, friends, and our way of life. We would be excluded from the social and civic life of the country – we who had been born and raised in
Italy. It was a departure without good-byes; it was very sad." Tullia Zevi took a sip of cappuccino then continued: "My father thought that we could continue to live in Europe, in
Paris, that he could open a law office with a French friend. But then events came to a head and the seeds of racism took root there, and in the summer of 1939 we had to leave on one of the last civilian ships that sailed from the
port of
Le Havre to the
United States."

I asked Tullia Zevi to talk about her life in
New York: "They were very interesting years. I started to play the harp in churches and synagogues. My brothers and I had each studied a different musical instrument. There I met my husband, Bruno Zevi, and we were married in the Spanish synagogue in
New York. I started working for a local Italian-American radio station and on short wave radio programs for NBC in
Italy." She took another sip of cappuccino while I asked her about the Italian-American community in New York: "They were very Fascist because there they received news filtered by Fascist propaganda, things like the trains ran on time, that there were no strikes. I joined a group of anti-Fascist exiles and we felt the need to tell the truth about the Fascist regime in
Italy. We commemorated the anniversary of Matteotti's and Rosselli brothers' assassinations. We would go to the Italian neighborhoods in
New York and other cities where the propaganda was distributed. But frequently they chased us away because they saw us as traitors."

I asked her to recount the story of Frank Sinatra's advances towards her, another episode in her book. She smiled and remembered that they were rather crude comments made by a hulking man who was in the famous singer's entourage, and it had taken place before she was married. It was a light aside before tracing her memories back in time, to Italy in 1946, the Italy that appeared before her after seven years in exile in the
United States: "My husband returned before I did because he joined the Resistance along with others in exile. I joined him after the war. I also decided to return to
Italy because the Jewish community had been destroyed, completely annihilated by the regime. I thought that my place was here, and I thought that it was my duty as a survivor to return and lend a hand. And I continued to work as a journalist."

While she finished her cappuccino, I asked if she thinks anything has changed after the horrors of the concentration camps, whether future generations should fear that what happened in the Holocaust will happen once again: "The seeds of intolerance are always lying in wait. Democracy is constructed so that we can be on the lookout for totalitarian regimes. But the danger is always there. A great American, Thomas Jefferson, said that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance and I believe that this should be our message to today's young people. We must not forget that the totalitarians were monsters. Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it; for this reason history is important as is the study of memory and history. But above all I tell young people: remember that democracy is supreme and it will cost tears and blood to recapture it."

Links
[1] http://test.iitaly.org/files/quadraro-tullia-zevi-312957434284
[2] http://test.iitaly.org/sites/default/files/slideshow_pro/Quadraro%20tullia%20zevi%203_1295743428.4
[3] http://www.ucei.it