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Production, Myth and Misprision in Early Holocaust Cinema

“L’ebreo errante” (Goffredo Alessandrini, 1948)

Abstract

This essay examines the production, style and narrative mode of a highly significant, if until recently largely forgotten early Italian Holocaust film, Goffredo Alessandrini’s “L’ebreo errante” (“The Wandering Jew”, 1948), starring a young Vittorio Gassman and Valentina Cortese. The film is analysed as a hybrid work, through its production history in the disrupted setting of the post-war Roman film industry, through its aesthetics, and through its bold, although often incoherent attempts to address the emerging history of the concentration camps and the genocide of Europe’s Jews. Emphasis is placed on its very incoherence, its blindspots, clichés and contradictions, as well as on its occasionally sophisticated genre touches, and confident stylistic and formal tropes. These aspects are read together as powerfully emblematic of Italy’s confusions in the 1940s over its recent history and responsibilities for Fascism, the war and the Holocaust, and of the potential for cinema to address these profound historical questions.

In the immediate months and years following liberation and the end of the war in 1945, the Italian film industry went through a period of instability, transition and reconstruction just like the rest of the country, devastated and destabilized as it had been by the wars and civil wars since 1940, not to speak of more than two decades of dictatorship.¹ In parallel with the periodization of national politics, where the transition is conventionally seen as coming to an end with the bitterly fought parliamentary elections of April 1948, the post-war instability of the film industry can be given a *terminus a quo* at the emblematic re-opening of the Cinecittà film studios in Rome in 1948, following several years of

1 On the post-war film industry, cf. Vito Zagarrío, *L’industria italiana tra crisi della produzione e boom dell’esercizio*, in: Callisto Cosulich (Ed.), *Storia del cinema italiana*, vol. 7: 1945/1948, Venezia 2003, pp. 363–387.

use as a displaced persons camp.² Between 1945 and 1947, modes of film production as the industry recovered were often improvised and highly localised, not quite artisanal but certainly fluid and fragmented, yet nevertheless showing remarkable signs of vitality and dynamism in the face of both material difficulty and problematic continuities with the heavily Fascistized industry of the 1930s–1940s. In standard accounts of film history, this contingent set of conditions has been understood as laying the basis, almost accidentally, for some of the key practices and aesthetic tenets of neo-realism as it emerged in precisely these years, for example the use of location shooting, rough film-stock, non-professional actors and compelling contemporary narratives subjects. But this was far from the only or even the most representative feature of Italian films made in that period and that committed politicized and broadly leftist cinema was by no means the only template against which to interrogate recent history through film. Indeed, it is something of an anachronism to map back onto the period 1945–1948 critical categories that were only defined and settled *a posteriori* and that at the time were part of a wider and more fluid spectrum of possibility, debate and practice. This essay looks at the production, style and narrative mode of one important, if until recently largely forgotten film from 1948, Goffredo Alessandrini's "L'ebreo errante", starring a young Vittorio Gassman and Valentina Cortese, as a powerful example of that other perspective on Italian film history and its relation to the war and Fascism. "L'ebreo errante" is a film that displays, both in its production conditions and production values, a decidedly disjointed aesthetic that is a long way from neo-realism, but which nevertheless addresses compelling questions about the recent war, and in particular the concentration camps and the genocide of Europe's Jews, questions that no other Italian film of the moment proved capable or willing to address so directly nor so centrally. It is also a film that is heavily symptomatic of the complex lines of international mobility converging on Rome in the immediate post-war years, with actors from across Europe passing through the city, along with refugees, DPs, fleeing Nazis and migrating Jews, as well as many tens of thousands of returning soldiers or former prisoners. "L'ebreo errante" is read here precisely through its strained incoherence, its multiple blindspots, its prejudices, clichés and contradictions, as well as through its often sophisticated, multi-genre touches and varied stylistic and formal tropes, as a powerful emblem of Italy's early confusion or misprisions in processing its recent history and responsibilities, in deciphering the wider meanings of the war and what was later

2 Cf. Noa Steimatsky, The Cinecittà Refugee Camp (1944–1950), in: *October*, no. 128, Spring 2009, pp. 22–50.

called the Holocaust, and in the potential for film to capture and improvise narrative out of these challenges.³

1 Production and Networks

Goffredo Alessandrini was 44 years old in 1948 and had been a major figure in the Fascist-era film industry, directing both light *telefoni bianchi* comedies (e. g. “La segretaria privata”, 1931; “Seconda B”, 1934) and military, historical and colonial epics, with clear Fascist overtones (e. g. “Luciano Serra pilota”, 1938; “Giarabub”, 1942; “Noi vivi”, 1942). His wide spectrum of experience and striking abilities as a director certainly fed into the unusually varied patchwork of different modes and genres of filmmaking stitched together in “L’ebreo errante”, in what looks in retrospect like an unacknowledged symptom of the difficulty in dealing with genocide in 1947 in Italy, but which was also undoubtedly made possible by the sheer verve of this director’s filmography and the toolbox at his disposal.

The transition to post-war and to a post-Fascist democracy for figures such as Alessandrini was as complicated and ambivalent as it was for very many figures across vast sectors of the Italian state and civic society. His near contemporary Roberto Rossellini, who had also been a highly active director in the early 1940s working with the military through the structures of the Fascist film industry, swiftly launched himself into a Christian-humanist, anti-Fascist, neo-realist mode that obscured for decades his previous work and made him something of a hero of the new cinema. Alessandrini, in contrast, a far more established and more compromised figure, was never able to reach the same level of success after the war. He was, however, only minimally prevented from working officially because of his associations with the regime: alongside figures such as Augusto Genina and Carmine Gallone, he was banned from filmmaking activity for only

3 After a long period of neglect, the film has been the subject of a handful of recent studies, which I draw on here: Damiano Garofalo, *Deicides, Sacrifices and Other Crucifixions. For a Critical Reinterpretation of Italian Holocaust Cinema*, in: *Modern Italy* 22,2 (2017), pp. 143–153; Alessandro Izzi, *Repression and Nightmares. Italian Cinema in the Shadow of the Shoah*, in: *Trauma and Memory* 5,3 (2017), pp. 78–89; Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz*, Toronto 2007, pp. 31–32; Emiliano Perra, *Conflicts of Memory. The Reception of Holocaust Films and TV Programmes in Italy, 1945 to the Present*, Oxford 2010, pp. 33–38.

six months.⁴ He returned first with a realist melodrama, “Furia” (1947), before shooting “L’ebreo errante” in 1947. The censor’s *nulla osta* for the film was obtained on 17 January 1948, countersigned by *sottosegretario* at the ministry Giulio Andreotti on 22 January, and the film went on general release in February 1948.⁵

The film was produced by a company called Cinematografica Distributori Indipendenti (C.D.I. or DI), as the name suggests more usually associated with distribution than production, and this is in itself symptomatic of the temporary and improvised arrangements that characterized this moment. C.D.I. produced only a handful of Italian films between 1946 and 1952, including comedy vehicles for Totò (“Fifa e arena”, 1948; “Totòtarzan”, 1950), other comedies and a melodrama, “Aquila nera” (1946), directed by Riccardo Freda who also directed a version of “Les Misérables” for Carlo Ponti in 1948, productions which shared several actors with “L’ebreo errante” including the female lead Valentina Cortese. Some C.D.I. films are credited to the producer Nino Angioletti, a relative of the literary figure Giovanni Battista Angioletti who was responsible with Alessandrini (and a further group of credited writers), for the treatment, adaptation and updating of the Biblical myth of the Wandering Jew that had been elaborated and disseminated since the middle ages and famously reprised in Eugène Sue’s vast 19th-century serial novel “Le Juif errant” (1844–1845). Sue’s novel was in fact only marginally concerned with the eponymous Jew and is not likely to have been a direct source for Alessandrini’s film in any of its detail; generalized features of the myth and interferences from popular culture, imagery and even earlier film versions are more probable sources.⁶ Angioletti the writer was a figure associated with the 1920s and 1930s mode of highly stylized, dense and evocative literature known as *prosa d’arte*, and in some of the staged and rhetorical aspects of the script of “L’ebreo errante”, we can no doubt see the hand of this figure and his literary formation. In the choice of the text itself, it is possible to see Alessandrini and Angioletti rejecting and remaking Nazi attempts to appropriate the myth for its

4 On the ‘défascistisation manquée’ of the film industry, cf. Marie-France Courriol, *Cinéma et expérience totalitaire. Le laboratoire du genre du film de guerre dans l’Italie fasciste (1935–1943)*, PhD dissertation, Université de Lille-III (2015), pp. 478–492.

5 The censor certificate is available at URL: http://www.italiataglia.it/files/vistizi1000_wm_pdf/3676.pdf (2. 11. 2020). It indicates that one cut was required (see below p. 147).

6 The earliest elaboration of the myth on film was a striking short by pioneer Georges Méliès, “Le Juif errant” (1904), now at URL: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xhfcki> (2. 11. 2020). A popular British version, “Wandering Jew” (director M. Elvey, 1933), starred German exile and anti-Nazi actor Conrad Veidt, later to appear as the Nazi Major Straesser in “Casablanca” (director M. Curtiz, 1942). Veidt also starred in a 1934 British version of “Jew Suss” (director L. Mendes), often contrasted to the virulently anti-Semitic Nazi version, “Jud Süß” (1940).

own virulent anti-Semitic campaigns, including in a notorious propaganda film overseen by Goebbels, “Der ewige Jude” (director F. Hippler, 1940), which chronicled the Nazi invasion of Poland and the depravity and vices of the Jews, and appeared in the same year as the widely successful fiction film “Jud Süß” (director V. Harlan, 1940) which shared many of the same profoundly racist stereotypes.⁷

The film was shot on studio sets in the Farnesina area of Rome – and on land behind them in the Grottarossa area⁸ – which belonged to the historic Italian production company Titanus. Titanus had its origins in the Lombardo Company, founded by Gustavo Lombardo as far back as 1904 in Naples, and having gone through various renamings, temporary closures and refoundings, it still operates today.⁹ Like other producers, indeed like Cinecittà, Titanus was forced to suspend its production activities between 1944 and 1948, although its studios remained available for rental by other producers after the war, as happened with Alessandrini’s film. Titanus would re-launch after 1948 with its highly successful wave of new melodramas directed by Raffaele Matarazzo and starring Amedeo Nazzari, starting with “Catene” (1949).

Several of the crew and actors, both lead and minor, in “L’ebreo errante” allow us to trace multiple lines of connection to contemporary films, producers (Titanus and others) and genres, including classic works of neo-realism, melodrama, historical drama and comedy, all of which underscore the complex webs of intersection sustaining the Italian industry at this moment, and thus also the permeable and hybrid modes in which some of these films addressed contemporary subject-matter such as the war and its legacy. The range of the cast also confirms the distinctly international flavour of Italian film in this late 1940s moment, well before the better-known period of glamorous cosmopolitanism and international co-production of the 1950s–1960s in Rome (Hollywood on the Tiber): “L’ebreo errante” included players from Italy, Germany, Austria, France and Russia, among others.

The lead actor was a young Vittorio Gassman (spelled Gassmann in the credits), later one of the greatest figures of stage and screen in Italy, who was already building a reputation as a stage actor (between 1945 and 1947, he had played in Arthur Miller’s “All My Sons” and in “Hamlet” for Luigi Squarzina, as well as in Cocteau for Luchino Visconti), but who had only played in a few unheralded films before “L’ebreo errante”. His major breakthrough would come the following year with “Riso amaro” (director

7 “Jud Süß” was shown at the curtailed wartime Venice film festival in September 1940.

8 Gassman recalled the shooting locations; cf. Giacomo Gambetti, Vittorio Gassman, Roma 1999, p. 88.

9 Aldo Bernardini/Vittorio Martinelli, *Un secolo Titanus. Cinema*, Roma 2005.

G. De Santis, 1949). Gassman's part-Jewish background possibly explains his intense participation in Alessandrini's project, although this was never a prominent feature of his public profile then or after.¹⁰ (Several other actors on the project were also Jewish, including for example Cesare Polacco, who had worked regularly with Alessandrini in the early 1940s and in other C.D.I. productions.) Gassman worked also with Riccardo Freda in "Il cavaliere misterioso" (1948) along with another minor, but significant player from "L'ebreo errante", Giovanni or Hans Hinrich, an Austrian actor (and director in his own right) who plays the camp commandant Albert Schuster. Hinrich had also appeared in Freda's "I miserabili", noted above, along with Valentina Cortese (and a young Marcello Mastroianni), with script contributions from Mario Monicelli, who is also indicated in some sources as an uncredited writer for "L'ebreo errante". Cortese had already become an established star in the early 1940s, working with a string of major directors including Alessandrini. Shortly after shooting "L'ebreo errante", she signed for 20th-Century Fox and worked between Hollywood and Italy for several years. The elderly Jewish scientist Epstein in Alessandrini's film was played by Pietr Scharoff (sometimes: Petr Sharov), a Russian actor (as well as theatre director and former pupil of Stanislavski and Meyerhold), who also worked several times for Freda and with Cortese on different film projects, including a 1950 film with Cortese, "Donne senza nome" (director G. von Radvanyi), a film which has, remarkably, been recently revealed as containing a small speaking role as an extra played by Nazi refugee and war criminal, former Nazi Governor of Krakow, Galicia and official in Salò, responsible for the murder of more than 100 000 Jews, Otto von Wächter. Wächter died in Rome in 1949, possibly poisoned, whilst waiting to take the ratline route to South America with the help of Vatican figures such as Bishop Alois Hudal.¹¹ Also appearing in a small role as Cortese's fiancé in "Donne senza nome" was Lamberto Maggiorani, almost exclusively remembered today as the non-professional actor and factory worker plucked from obscurity to play the father in Vittorio De Sica's neo-realist classic "Ladri di biciclette" (1948). The contingent lines of convergence in biography, history and film history that bring Maggiorani, Wächter, Cortese and Scharoff together on the same set are head-spinning, somewhere between farce and tragedy.

10 Cf. e. g. Roberto Zadik, Gassman era ebreo?, in: Mosaico, 26.10.2017 (URL: <http://www.mosaico-cem.it/cultura-e-societa/taccuino-di-roberto-zadik/gassman-era-ebreo-a-17-anni-dalla-sua-morte-ricordo-di-uno-dei-piu-grandi-attori-italiani>); 2. 11. 2020).

11 Wächter's post-war story is the subject of a BBC podcast by Philippe Sands, *Intrigue. The Ratline*, BBC Radio 4 (2018); cf. episode 5: "La forza del destino", for his work at Cinecittà. Now also in book form: Philippe Sands, *The Ratline*, London 2020.

Further minor players and webs of connection link “*L’ebreo errante*” to high canonical works of neo-realist cinema: for example, the devious servant and Nazi spy in Paris, Hans, is played with vigour by the Austrian-born actor Harry Feist, who is far better known for playing Roberto Rossellini’s Nazi officer and torturer Major Bergmann in “*Roma città aperta*” (1945), for many the first and essential archetype of the corrupt, cruel Nazi in post-war European cinema. (His sinister control over Rome from the comfort of his desk in Rossellini’s film is emblematic of precisely the kind of cold Nazi rule over occupied Europe carried out by officials such as Wächter.) If anything, Feist’s reprise of a similar role of the heartless Nazi in “*L’ebreo errante*” is even more devious, as he is disguised in his initial scenes as the loyal servant to his Jewish master Blumenthal (Gassman), before turning on him when Paris is occupied by his Nazi masters. (Feist was also in Freda’s “*Aquila nera*”, clearly something of a sister-film in terms of casting and production to “*L’ebreo errante*”). A minor German in the film, Müller, is played by Carlo Jachino, an established composer and musicologist who, among a handful of other screen appearances, had also played the tramp in “*Ladri di biciclette*” accosted by Lamberto Maggiorani and his son in their desperate effort to locate the eponymous thief of the bicycle. And finally, the French patriot Deschamps who clashes with the selfish Blumenthal as the Nazis close in was played by Amilcare Pettinelli, one of the voice-over narrators of Visconti’s “*La terra trema*” (although some credits give the alternative name Aristodemo Pettinelli).

There is a kind of gossipy, film-world fascination with all these lines of connection, but they make a more serious point also about the intersecting webs, personal and professional networks, and also fluid interchangeability of people and technical skill that made up the film world at this moment (indeed at any moment, as this is an industry of rapid, rolling convergences and divergences between different projects), as well as the role of Rome in the 1940s as an extraordinary maelstrom of transient figures and groups. In terms of the implications of this for film history, there is clearly no watertight distinction to be made, therefore, between high and low, neo-realist and popular, and indeed Italian and international production; and “*L’ebreo errante*” confirms this hybridity, as we shall see, not only in its production but also within its complex narrative, formal and stylistic fabric.

After release in February 1948, the reception of “*L’ebreo errante*” was reasonably positive. It ranked seventh at the box office in the 1947/1948 season and – in an interesting acknowledgement of the need for the Italian cinema industry and the wider culture to tackle such issues as the Holocaust, but also an indication that this was an exceptional attempt to do so – Angioletti was awarded a Special prize at the Nastro d’Argento ceremony for 1948, cited “per il significato morale del Soggetto”. Emiliano

Perra has studied in detail the cluster of newspaper and magazine reviews of the film,¹² linking it to a handful of other rare, attempts to say something on screen about the Holocaust in the 1940s; “Il monastero di Santa Chiara” (director M. Sequi, 1949), “Il grido della terra” (director D. Coletti, 1949), and an unmade script project from Vasco Pratolini, “I fidanzati”. Perra notes that there were fewer press reviews than might be expected of “L’ebreo errante” simply because as it clashed with the release dates of Chaplin’s “Monsieur Verdoux”.

Nevertheless, a spectrum of responses pointed, on the one hand, to the clearly Christian, sacrificial thrust of the film and, on the other, to its attempts to capture the reality of the concentration camps. This spectrum derives primarily from different ideological positions in different newspaper organs – “La nuova stampa” (the post-war name for the relaunched “La stampa”) emphasized the realism, “L’osservatore romano” the Catholic message – but it is also found within single reviews, which perceive all too clearly the uneven variety of positions within the film itself: as a review in “Il nuovo corriere della sera” review put it, “è uno strano film ... sbanda, curiosamente, tra l’allegoria e il documentario” (8 February 1949). Reviewers were also well aware of the sheer technical virtuosity of Alessandrini’s direction, one commenting on “La narrazione ... fluida e ... un ritmo sicuro e avvincente. Abbiamo notato alcune sequenze veramente ben riuscite, valorizzate ancor più da una splendida fotografia” (“Intermezzo”, 15 April 1948).

2 Provisional Knowledge: the Holocaust in Italy, 1947–1948

This pullulating, dynamic world of film production rubs up against the profound historical and moral problem of the Holocaust in “L’ebreo errante” and the result is surprising, forced and uncertain in equal measure. How did Angioletti, Alessandrini and the makers of this project begin to confront such a problem and what was the state of awareness and remembrance of what we now call the Holocaust in Italy in 1947–1948? Certainly there was next-to-nothing of a prior film tradition to draw on: as Perra confirms, it was “one of the earliest attempts to represent the concentration camps, not just in Italian cinema but also in European cinema”. A clue to the practical measures taken by Alessandrini to address this comes in two unusual on-screen credits:

- Ambientazione ebraica: Alessandro Fersen
- Ambientazione campo concentramento: Aldo Bizzarri

12 Perra, *Conflicts of Memory* (see note 3), pp. 35–38.

Both these figures are significant. Fersen was born in Lodz in 1911, then in the Russian Empire, grew up in Italy and became a leading figure in Italian-Jewish theatre, as well as in modern Italian theatre more broadly, after the war.¹³ He was one of the co-authors, with writer and artist Carlo Levi, of the 1949 film “Il grido della terra”, mentioned above, a Zionist drama of emigration from post-war Italy to Palestine and the struggle for statehood against the British, which contains clear echoes of the Holocaust and the persecution of the Jews as the precursor to the struggle for Israel. Fersen played a small role in “Grido” as a rabbi and for both this and “L’ebreo errante”, as the credits suggest, he was the source of what is a surprising level of attention to Jewish community and ritual in “L’ebreo errante”: for example in group scenes in the Paris synagogue or in the recital of the ‘Shema’ and ‘Kaddish’ prayers at poignant moments in the film (although including also at somewhat anomalous moments). For all of its somewhat tone-deaf Christological narrative framework, then, Fersen ensured that in the detail and texture of Jewish life shown on screen, there is a degree of sensitivity and accuracy.

Bizzarri, on the other hand, credited as adviser for the ‘concentration camp setting’, takes us directly into the historical reality of the Nazi camps and, again, to a surprising, if qualified level of accuracy in the presentation of the camp scenes, which take up the entire second half of the film. Like Angioletti, Bizzarri moved in literary circles in the 1920s and 1930s and was not without Fascist sympathies, writing for the journal “Novecento” and then travelling abroad as a cultural attaché to Chile, France, Portugal and Hungary. In Hungary in 1944, he was arrested for anti-Nazi activities and deported to Mauthausen. Immediately after the war, he published two insightful, if now largely forgotten books about Mauthausen, one analytical and factual and the other narrative and fictional: “Mauthausen città ermetica” (1946) and “Proibito vivere” (1947).¹⁴ The former is an acute sociological analysis of the camp ‘system’, its structure and rules both

13 There are other connections in post-war Holocaust culture to Italian-Jewish figures from the theatre, who also worked in film and this is a field that requires further research. Another example is Leopoldo Trieste, later a regular character actor in dozens of films for Fellini, Rossellini, Risi and other *commedia all’italiana* productions, who wrote a play in 1947 called “Cronaca”, an intense drama about betrayal, revenge and a kind of redemption, centred on a Jewish concentration camp survivor Daniele. As Perra points out, “Cronaca” was adapted for the screen in 1953 as “Febbre di vivere” (director C. Gora), with all reference to Jewishness and the Holocaust eliminated; Perra, *Conflicts of Memory* (see note 3), pp. 40–41. On “Cronaca”, cf. Charles Leavitt, *Italian Neorealism. A Cultural History*, Toronto 2020, pp. 118–122.

14 Aldo Bizzarri, *Mauthausen città ermetica*, Roma 1946; id., *Proibito vivere*, Milano 1947; cf. Robert S. C. Gordon, *An Intellectual at Mauthausen: Aldo Bizzarri Between Essay, Fiction (and Cinema)*, in: *Laboratoire italien*, no. 24, 2020 (URL: <http://journals.openedition.org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/laboratoireitalien/4521>; 10. 8. 2020).

written and unwritten; the later a fictionalized account of imprisonment in Mauthausen, which sets storytelling itself at the heart of the representation of the camps. A group of prisoners gather on successive Sundays to tell each other stories and recite poems (a play on Boccaccio's plague stories in the "Decameron"), but each meeting is more precarious and poignant than the last, as one or more of the group are missing, either moved on to other camps or dead from exhaustion, starvation or murder. "L'ebreo errante", too, makes a point of showing its viewers several deaths in the camp, punctuating its central heroic narrative of rebellion and escape.

Bizzarri's experiences at Mauthausen flag up also an ambiguity in "L'ebreo errante". The concentration camp in the film is not named, but it is clearly located in the diegesis in Poland. This and perhaps the later emergence of Auschwitz as the name of the emblematic extermination and concentration camp has led some critics to assume that the setting is indeed Auschwitz. This would possibly be confirmed by the sign at the entrance, 'Arbeit macht frei', a feature of Auschwitz, Dachau and some other camps, but by no means of all Nazi camps. Bizzarri's role, and the central setting within the camp – repeatedly and powerfully evoked in several scenes by Alessandrini – of the quarry, with its steep inclines and back-breaking labour, a notorious feature of the Mauthausen camp, as well as the general look of the camp Appellplatz, suggests that the imagined setting is as much Bizzarri's Mauthausen as Auschwitz, or at least an amalgam of the two. It is of note also that neither gas chambers nor tattooed numbers are evoked in the film at any point, despite the central role of both in the history and the image of Auschwitz as it emerged later in the post-war era.¹⁵

This blurring in the evocation of the concentration camp site, even with the guiding hand of a camp survivor and even in a film that does a lot of work in its second half – unlike its theatrical and melodramatic first half, and alongside several more implausible and stylised elements in this second half – to document concrete elements of the reality of the Lager, is intensely symptomatic of this moment of partial or incomplete Holocaust awareness in the mid-late 1940s. If the spread of images and basic awareness of Nazi atrocities was wide across Europe and the world thanks to the reportages of the camp liberations in 1944–1945 and aspects of the Nuremberg trials, the details were of-

15 There was a working gas chamber at Mauthausen, using Zyklon B just as at Auschwitz, but it worked on a smaller scale and is less central to the symbolic memory of the camp. Cf. Bruno Maida, *La camera a gas a Mauthausen* (URL: http://www.deportati.it/gas_maida-pdf; 2. 11. 2020). Of the major camps, only Auschwitz used tattoos. Mauthausen was more generally prominent in Italy and the Italian press in 1945; cf. e. g. the headline in "Avanti!", "Mauthausen: nome d'eterna infamia. / I 'campi di concentramento' – Uccisi col gas, la benzina e con le sevizie – Mezzo milione di uomini bruciati nei forni" (27. 5. 1945).

ten blurred or shaky, the balance of geography, chronology and quantification frequently skewed, exaggerated or inaccurate. An example with echoes in the script of *“L’ebreo errante”* is the widely circulating Soviet figure of 4 million victims at Auschwitz alone, only later corrected to the current established figure of around 1 million. *“L’ebreo errante”* makes a revealing similar mistake in numbers and chronology, when one of its minor characters, in a Parisian synagogue in 1940, laments that “*millioni di fratelli sono stati uccisi*”; although we now know the full force of the genocide, first by bullets and then by gas, only began to produce mass deaths on this scale in 1941, with a rapid acceleration following the Wannsee conference of January 1942.

The state of awareness of the Holocaust, in Italy and more generally, was not only determined by correct or incorrect information, however. *“L’ebreo errante”* is also part of the first phase of reflection and response, of the first cultural and collective processing of the meanings of the war, Nazism and Fascism, and their crimes, including the persecution of the Jews. Key aspects of this early moment in understanding include a confusion and blurring of victims, such that the specificity of the Jewish genocide was not yet fully crystallized as distinct, in some sense qualitatively and quantitatively different from other seams of murderous Nazi violence. *“L’ebreo errante”* does focus on the Jews –unusually for this moment – but it does so in ways which struggle to pin down the specificity of their condition and history and which broadly overlays Christian myth and morals onto its specific Jewish narrative. But it would be anachronistic to dismiss this as symptomatic merely of error or wilful misrepresentation, since a universalising and Christianising, or better Christian humanist thrust was a powerful feature of early post-war response. This was most apparent in widespread rhetorical evocations of categories such as ‘man’, ‘mankind’, the ‘human’, thrown into turmoil and crisis by the epochal disaster of Nazism and the camps. We can see this at work in well-known deportation narratives by both Jewish and anti-Fascists victims, from Primo Levi’s book-title *“If This is a Man”* (1947) to Robert Antelme’s *“The Human Species”* (1947); or, in semi-Christianized and semi-mythical form, in the title of a deportation memoir such as Gino Gregori’s *“Ecce homo Mauthausen”*; or in Alberto Moravia’s existentialist reflections in his 1946 essay *“Uomo come fine”*.¹⁶ And it is worth noting also another tension, within Italy, between the relative scarcity of early accounts that point to a specifically Italian role in this history, and the more prevalent tendency to adopt the vast scale and universal challenges

16 Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, Turin 1947; Robert Antelme, *L’Espèce humaine*, Paris 1947; Gino Gregori, *Ecce homo Mauthausen*, Milano 1946; Alberto Moravia, *L’uomo come fine* (1946), later published in: id., *L’uomo come fine*, Milano 1964.

posed by the genocide as a means to set to one side or simply not conceive of an Italian aspect to the Holocaust; to pay attention to stories from elsewhere in this regard, and especially to German, Nazi perpetrators. “L’ebreo errante” certainly fits within this clear trend, one that would last for decades, as its narrative makes not a single reference to Italy or Italians, as it traverses fictional territory from Germany to Palestine, France, and Poland.

An understanding of the state of knowledge and the categories available in the later 1940s to describe the phenomenon of the genocide can help us read “L’ebreo errante” not – or not only – with the facile critical eye of hindsight, through what is ‘wrong’ or ‘inappropriate’ in it, but instead as embedded in a specific way of seeing characteristic of its historical moment and of a particular mode and moment in the history of filmmaking.

3 “L’ebreo errante” (1948)

With all the converging lines of people, places and memories of the recent past, in the midst of the difficult transition from Fascism to the Republic, in an unstable but dynamically re-emerging film industry, “L’ebreo errante” emerges, perhaps unsurprisingly, as itself a patchwork. It tells its story, or stories, in two halves of approximately 48 minutes’ duration each, the first split across three principal sites and time periods, including one long flashback, and the second staged entirely in and around a Nazi concentration camp in Poland. The film starts in Germany – Frankfurt, we later learn – in 1935 (screentime appx. 8’); we return in flashback to New Testament Palestine (introduced by the superimposed title: “20 secoli fa, a Gerusalemme”; appx. 10’); on completion of the flashback, we return, via a brief time-lapse journey through anti-Semitic medieval Europe (1348 and the Black Death in Germany; Ferdinand and Isabella’s Spain in 1492), to 1935 (appx. 3’), before fading forward to Paris in 1940. A segment of sentimental and communal melodrama amongst the Jewish community in Paris (appx. 23’) is followed by their arrest, scenes at a Paris train track, cattle-trucks, and finally arrival in the unnamed concentration camp of the second half.

The narrative is somewhat complex and worth tracing in some detail. A destitute vagabond desperate for help (“dovete salvarmi”) visits a wise old man whom we later learn is a famous scientist, Epstein, in the Frankfurt Jewish community. On leaving, the vagabond collapses and seems to die, but is reborn the following morning as a young man, although Epstein recognises him by his eyes. In a flashback to Biblical Jerusalem, the young man tells his story: he is Matteo, a rich merchant who mocks Jesus as a “falso profeta” and as complicit with the Romans. He refuses to ask for Jesus’s aid when his

son is mortally wounded by a viper, despite his wife's pleas. Seeing Christ at Golgotha, Matteo smashes a water-jar offered to his lips and Christ curses him to become the "wandering Jew": "il mio cammino è breve ormai, ma tu camminerai nei secoli dei secoli, finché la verità non sarà discesa in te". Matteo thus cursed is seen wandering through deserts, unable to die, through the centuries back to the present, 1935. Epstein, his niece Ester looking on, is sympathetic ("è un infelice che soffre"), but he cannot help, science cannot help. Matteo is left hardened with bitterness and hatred of both God and his fellow man.

We move forward five years to Paris in 1940, where Epstein and his niece have taken refuge among the exiled 'Eastern European Jewish Community', now in turmoil with Nazi occupation imminent. They agree to appeal for help to Blumenthal, an immensely rich, hard-hearted Jewish financier. Blumenthal is of course Matteo, the wandering Jew, now with a blond Aryan lover Elena, a devout manservant Hans and a luxurious déco apartment. Matteo argues with and mocks his moneyed French companions, because he will happily work with the Germans; he fobs off Epstein and his niece with a useless cheque. But something in Ester moves him (Elena comments acidly, "preferisci quella piccola sporca ebrea a me") and when the Germans reach Paris, he goes to join the group at the Jewish community. The Gestapo arrives, searching for Epstein, accompanied by Elena as an informant and then Hans, now unmasked in full Nazi uniform. After interrogation and tense searches, Matteo declares "Io sono uno di loro" and he joins Ester and the others under arrest and on the deportation train.

On arrival in the concentration camp, we enter a new world and meet a cluster of new characters as we follow the entry process – the gate, a speech from the Commandant, striped uniforms and numbers, line-ups and identification, work and barrack assignments, beatings and leerings, a woman (Luisa) who rebels, shoots a soldier and commits suicide electrocuted on the barbed wire. The film chronicles the camp scene, spending a long time especially – in long-shot and deep-focus – on complex quarry sequences, watching the prisoners at back-breaking labour, overlooked by zealous guards. One prisoner is shot dead and we witness his corpse carried by a railtruck up a hill, arms spread in an echo of Golgotha. Slowly, unevenly, plot reasserts itself: the Nazis try to force Epstein to reprise his neurological experiments on prisoners; he refuses and is executed in the Appellplatz ("Fratelli, io muoio per la giusta causa! Amatevi sempre!"). Matteo and his fellows plan an escape, using dynamite and an elaborate series of steps, including also Ester, now assistant to camp Commandant Schuster. Following a series of explosions, gunfights, rocky mountain and river chases, Matteo and Ester reach a bucolic cottage and find peace. Finally, however, Matteo learns from a local peasant and partisan that one hundred prisoners will be executed if he is not captured: leaving Ester to sleep, he turns himself in and is finally able to die through

his own Christ-like sacrifice, for his people and for justice (“ho un debito da saldare da molto tempo ... il mio cammino è finito”). The final rolling title reads: “Il sacrificio fu così compiuto nell’amore di tutti gli uomini com’era nella parola del Signore. E una nuova speranza illuminò il cuore di un popolo che un fanatismo implacabile voleva cancellare dalla Terra.”

As this summary suggests, the film is a bazaar of modes and genres, focal points and visual-narrative styles, a bricolage. Its movements in time and space are multiple and uneven (Frankfurt in 1935 is only briefly marked as deep in the Nazi period; the grasp of the genocide in 1940 is unsure and the camp loosely located, as noted above). Its genres are many and intersecting: there is a sentimental romance (Matteo and Ester), at times a melodrama of love set against the travails of history, at others a love triangle of betrayal across lines of wealth, class and race (Matteo, Ester and Elena), and finally also a bucolic love idyll in the country cottage after the escape; there is a Nazi spy story, of disguise and secrets, akin to Hitchcock’s “Notorious” (1946) (Hans, Elena, the luxury Paris set); there is a Biblical epic or proto-peplum in the flashback sequence; there is a brief scene from a battlefield war film, as we see Paris bombed and in flames using special effects; and in the camp sequences, we find sustained instances of prison, POW and escape movie genres (handsome, heroic prisoners, evil guards, secret plots, bombs, guns and escape), all entirely inappropriate to the historical experience of the Jewish victims of the Final Solution. It is the case, however, that these genres and the mode of Resistance chime clearly both with the genre of partisan or Resistance films, in an Italian context, but also with the image of Jews in rebellion apparent in one strong early mode of Holocaust remembrance in post-1948 Israel and elsewhere, which laid particular emphasis on the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, on Jews as Resisters to combat the stereotype of the Jew as passive victim.¹⁷ Finally, “L’ebreo errante” is also, of course, a historical film and a Holocaust film *avant la lettre*, with many of what would become stock tropes of the genre.

This modal or generic variety is accompanied by a parallel variety and indeed sophistication in cinematography, although it is also striking that Alessandrini – and his experienced cinematographer Václav Vích and editor Otello Colangeli – create patterns of connection across periods and style by using certain shots and perspectives recurrently, especially medium-long-shot crowd scenes and diagonal, low- or high-angle tracking shots. For example, the market and crowd scenes in Jerusalem, the Jewish community and synagogue interiors in Paris, the train station sequence and the several quarry and

17 On this dynamic in Israel, cf. e. g. Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million. The Israelis and the Holocaust*, New York 1991.

Appellplatz sequences in the camp all share a similar economy of frame, shot and editing, which constructs a collective or a crowd setting, navigates it and traces hidden relations, looks, intimate dramas within these public spaces. Alongside these, there are also recurrent modes of filming interior sets, spaces and sequences, centred on only a handful of characters rather than the crowd, shot and edited to build moments of intensity and revelation, using equally complex and sophisticated, expressionist or melodramatic techniques: here, we might point to the study and cloistered courtyard of Epstein's home in Frankfurt; Matteo's grand home in Jerusalem and later his luxury apartment in Paris – especially striking is the geometrical staging of the four- (indeed five-)way sequence when Matteo talks to Epstein in one room, Elena meets Ester in another, and Hans spies on both – or Schuster's quarters in the camps, especially an oddly expressionistic sequence when a Nazi superior visits to meet Epstein, and Ester looks on hidden behind screens and witnesses the dramatic dialogue in silhouette.

There is both misprision and complexity in these rich arrays of genres and techniques. And for our purposes here, both are pertinent and both point to an analogous fluidity in the film in terms of narrative focalization and perspective, and thereby of the historical and moral lenses through which this film attempts to grapple with the perhaps insurmountable central challenge of narrating the Holocaust in Italy in 1947.

The moral focus of the film is heavily weighted towards its eponymous hero, Matteo the Wandering Jew, and this anti-Semitic millennial myth inevitably distorts its perspective on Jewish history, on the genocide and its specific causes and agents, through its apocryphal, Christianizing gauze. But Matteo is interestingly also more multi-faceted than this suggests: he is a 'nationalist' in Biblical Palestine, a wealthy leader who is above all anti-Roman, anti-imperial, and for this reason resents Christ's message of peace. In Paris, although consumed with cynicism, and now the very embodiment of the anti-Semitic stereotype of the greedy, selfish, rich financier, this very darkness nevertheless offers him insight into the deeper realities of power and violence – thus, only he sees that capital and power will happily flow from patriotic France to the new Nazi masters and the rich will stay rich. He has a telling 'Ozymandian' moment with Elena, an illumination won by his centuries of wandering, as he watches the German tanks roll into Paris: "[i tedeschi] credono di stampare le orme sulla pietra ma non si rendono conto di camminare sulla sabbia". And such insight lays the groundwork for his eventual intuition of the power of brotherhood, sacrifice, community, indeed love, once he undergoes his dramatic and emblematic conversion, leading to his ultimate sacrifice. One might argue, in other words, that there is a politics to Matteo's mythical narrative arc that is not exhausted by its undoubtedly inept Christianizing thrust.

Furthermore, the myth of the Wandering Jew, although misjudged and unfortunate as a matrix on which to build any coherent understanding of the Holocaust, is occa-

sionally deployed in the film to raise resonant issues, in particular questions of history and memory. The Biblical legend and Matteo's wanderings link the Nazi genocide to millennial Christian traditions of anti-Semitism, to its history, legends and myths, which are shown as real and lasting. This is by no means self-evident in the historiography: the connection was widely disavowed after the war, not least in certain Church circles. (The modern, eugenic, race-science foundations of Nazi anti-Semitism, by some contrasted to Christian deicidal anti-Semitism, is also hinted at in the film through the Nazi's obsession with Epstein and his scientific genius.) Matteo's despair at his suffering is also framed at the start of the film as explicitly a problem of memory, of the cursed weight of memory, as well as of persecution itself – "voglio perdere la memoria ... dimenticare il mio dolore" – thus raising in a discordant key a foundational future problem of the post-Holocaust era. Thus, historical time, the millennial time of myth, and memory are all alluded to through Matteo's story, even if only in snatches, under-developed and submerged by a morass of other seams.

Alongside Matteo, there is at least one further key focal character in the film, Lucas Epstein (to whom we can add Ester, as a third minor focalizer between the two men, making up a kinship and moral triangle). The film opens with Matteo's encounter with Epstein; it pivots as they meet again in Paris (when Ester first talks directly to Matteo); later it turns again with Ester and Matteo's love dialogue on the deportation train (here Epstein is to one side and still hostile to Matteo); and finally, Epstein and Matteo are executed in two closely parallel scenes in the camp square. Epstein is himself a complex figure. He is both the great scientist, and thus a figure of modernity – indeed, Matteo initially comes to him in the forlorn hope that modern science might be able to save him from his ancient curse – but also the embodiment of a humane wisdom of the ages, rabbinical in his moral clarity, with a dose of New Testament preaching of brotherhood ('fratellanza'), all expressed with an equanimity captured by Scharoff's subtle acting style, in contrast to Gassman's histrionics. Epstein is certainly not lacking in courage to criticise: he is deeply hostile to Matteo in Paris, before Ester convinces him of his capacity to love, and to the Nazis in the camp. It is through Epstein also that the same vocabulary of the 'human', of 'man' in crisis, that we saw permeating early post-war responses to the Holocaust, enters the discourse of "L'ebreo errante": for Epstein, Matteo's is 'il dolore di un uomo che sconta un dolore da secoli', he cannot be 'uomo tra gli uomini', because he is incapable of loving them and sharing their suffering. It is precisely this capacity to feel empathy, to feel the suffering of others, that Matteo discovers by the end of the film and which leads to his final gesture: 'si può essere felici quando c'è tanto dolore nel mondo?'; he asks Ester, echoing Epstein directly. Finally, Epstein seems literally to take on the voice of Christ cursing Matteo when he curses the Nazi officers in terms of their inhumanity: "state distruggendo voi stessi! Voi non siete più uomini ... Sconterete questa bestemmia

con la vostra stessa vita!” As the moral ballast of the film, Epstein’s concurrent emanation of Jewish, Christian, communal, scientific and communal-political value motifs, a sort of merged, blurred figure of plural human dignities, is possibly closer to the heart of the film’s moral force and flaws than any other figure.

One final dimension of “L’ebreo errante”, one surprising misprision or misstep in its representation of the camps that seems tellingly out of place, but also not without its significance for the nascent cultural imaginary of the Holocaust, is the sexualisation and homo-erotic charge that emerges in the camp sequences. For much of the film, sexuality is either absent or constrained: Ester and Matteo’s love is chaste and morally pure, in contrast to stock hints of moral and sexual ‘Nazi’ decadence in Elena’s luxuriance and ravenous desire. In the concentration camp arrival scenes, this changes: Ester is stared at lasciviously by a guard; Luisa is consigned to the camp brothel, before her act of rebellion and death. Otherwise the women are separated, to the fore largely as witnesses to executions, as mourners forced to look on by the SS (an interesting staging of the difficulty and necessity of witnessing). It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that a heavily homo-erotic thread emerges in this setting: a Kapò picks out Davide, an artist, and repeatedly tries to seduce him (“un cultore della bellezza ... anch’io a mio modo”, he says staring at Davide’s body). Indeed, this is the point where the censors intervened with the script of “L’ebreo errante”, rejecting a line inviting Davide to sleep in the same bed as the Kapò. The same Kapò has Matteo shaved, staring on with a smile at his makeover. Far more pervasively, and a clear historical anomaly with regard to the northern Polish setting of the camp, all the male prisoner-workers in the quarry are shown half bared, their often strikingly beautiful bodies glistening, variously at work, thirsty and starving, beaten and shot, rebelling and fighting.

A French publicity poster for the film (fig.) perhaps captures best the power and strangeness of this conjunction as much as any single frame from the film: erotic male bodies are shown in full rebellion mode, the title motif of the Wandering Jew and thus the genocide relegated to the bottom corner. Once again, as in other ostensibly skewed misprisions in “L’ebreo errante”, this eroticized dimension has its own history and context: the Nazi as sexually ‘depraved’ figure was already a prevalent myth and stereotype, one that “Roma città aperta” has deployed for example with particular force, in its homosexual-Nazi characters (including Feist’s Major Bergmann); and one that would continue through the popular fascination with Nazi brothels in the 1950s, for example in the notorious 1955 novel “House of Dolls” by Ka-Tzetnik 135633, and then explode into the wave of Nazi sex and porn films of the 1960s–1970s (e. g. “Pasqualino settebellezze”, director L. Wertmüller, 1976; “Il portiere di notte”, director L. Cavani, 1974), as well as in more serious historiographical analyses of the homoerotics of Nazi military, party and youth rituals.



Fig.: "L'ebreo errante" (director G. Alessandrini, 1948), French publicity poster.

In other words, here as in many other aspects of this teeming bazaar of a film, Alessandrini seems somehow to capture in fragments certain rather resonant or refractive intuitions and to lay down lines and figures of cultural imagination that will be further developed throughout the history of imagining the Holocaust on screen, well beyond the somewhat anomalous production conditions, the ambivalent mix of relations between the film's creators and its subject-matter, and the transitional historical moment of Italy in 1948.