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## **“Better Than Schools Teach It, More Accurately Than Our Fathers Tell It”**

### **The Educational Commitment of the CDEC, 1955-2005**

#### **ABSTRACT**

This article describes the dynamics that led the CDEC to engage with schools and to define its educational program during its first 50 years of activity. In its early phase, this took the form of self-education among young members of the Federazione Giovani Ebrei Italiani (FGEI; Jewish Youth Federation of Italy) within the Resistance and an antifascist paradigm. From the 1970s onward, its contribution to education on the memory of deportation and the Resistance developed from a perspective that diverged from that of the Istituti storici per la Resistenza (Institutes for the History of the Resistance). With the publication of deportees' testimonies and survivors' visits to schools, however, a unified view of the struggle for Liberation and of the victims of Nazism-Fascism persisted. In the late 1980s, historical research began to challenge these approaches. In the 1990s, amid renewed scholarly work on deportation and in response to a new wave of antisemitism and denialism, the CDEC began to devote itself to educational work in a more structured way. With the transition from the First to the Second Republic, attention to the Resistance declined. The paradigm shift was marked by the establishment of Holocaust Remembrance Day. Pedagogical reflection identified Auschwitz as an anthropological watershed. Subsequently, two developments defined new educational challenges: the establishment of museums and memorials in Italy and widespread access to the internet.

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## Introduction

This article is the result of a preliminary survey of educational initiatives at the CDEC, conducted on the basis of documents from the institution's historical archive covering its first 50 years of activity, from its founding to 2005. As the author has headed the CDEC's Education Department since 2017, the choice of this timeframe reflects the intention to provide a historicized account of the transformations that have shaped the CDEC's educational commitment, with sufficient critical distance and without reference to her own work.

## The Early Years—Educating Oneself

Founded in 1955, the CDEC was established with the explicit aim of “providing tomorrow's scholars and historians” with documentation on the Jewish tragedy and of disseminating the history of Jews in Italy and their contribution to the cause of freedom to a broad audience.<sup>1</sup> This defined a process that would concern the institution for decades to come: collection and preservation, research, and dissemination, within a national context of growing attention to the memory of political and racial deportation and to its inclusion within the antifascist experience and the Resistance.<sup>2</sup>

The CDEC's commitment to research, explicitly stated and ideologically motivated, was primarily directed at young Jews, so that they might learn from the errors and horrors of the past how to discern the right path to follow,<sup>3</sup> while preserving the memory of the “Martyrs”—a term borrowed from the antifascist paradigm and used indiscriminately to refer to both members of the Resistance and deportees.<sup>4</sup>

An article published in early 1960 in *Hatikwà*, the periodical of the Federazione Giovani Ebrei Italiani (also known as FGEL, Jewish Youth Federation of Italy),<sup>5</sup> inaugurated a season of reflections and initiatives aimed at responding to the “anti-Jewish wave,” to the period marked by swastikas, at both the local and international levels.

Statements contained in a letter in the readers' column of a national daily newspaper published on 29 November 1959, written by a student who, after visiting the first exhibition on deportation from Italy,<sup>6</sup> incredulously sought confirmation of what had

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<sup>1</sup> Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, Sezione Italiana, April 1956 (Venice, 1956), 3, Fondo Attività del CDEC 1955-1995 (unprocessed collection), CDEC Foundation Archives (hereafter ACDEC), Milan.

<sup>2</sup> Filippo Focardi, *Nel cantiere della memoria. Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe* (Rome: Viella, 2020), 170; Robert Gordon, *Scolpitelo nei cuori. L'Olocausto nella cultura italiana (1944-2010)* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013), 87.

<sup>3</sup> Relazione introduttiva tenuta dal Responsabile Dr. Roberto Bassi al 2° Convegno dei Collaboratori del C.D.E.C., Turin, December 25, 1956, 4, Fondo Attività del CDEC 1955-1995 (unprocessed collection), ACDEC. Bassi was among the founders and first head of the CDEC.

<sup>4</sup> Focardi, *Nel cantiere della memoria*, 167.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Di Porto, “Ieri” nella scuola di oggi,” *Hatikwà* 4, January, 1960, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Inaugurated in Carpi on 8 December 1955, as part of the initiatives for the tenth anniversary of Liberation, the “Mostra Nazionale dei Lager nazisti” (National Exhibition of Nazi Concentration Camps) was later reassembled and displayed in numerous cities until 1960.

occurred in the extermination camps,<sup>7</sup> challenged institutions and prompted survivors to testify to the horrors they had endured. This was only the first in a series of articles.<sup>8</sup> Present-day awareness of the Fascist past became the starting point for political engagement in antifascism. The young members of the FGEL carried forward the debate on education in the service of antifascism, personally committing themselves to promoting historical education on Fascism and civic engagement by questioning their parents' generation about their adherence—or lack thereof—to the regime. These choices were motivated by the desire for integration into the national antifascist myth and by the affirmation of an indissoluble link between Judaism and antifascism.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on the CDEC Foundation Archives, at the end of July 1960 the FGEL organized the first exhibition on Fascist anti-Jewish persecution,<sup>10</sup> which was set up during the customary summer camps.

### Before 1967—Within the Resistance Paradigm

In an article published in Israel in January 1960,<sup>11</sup> dedicated to the publication of the first catalogue of the CDEC Foundation Archives, Roberto Bassi<sup>12</sup> highlights the archive's usefulness as an “agent in the construction of history,” especially for young people, who “naturally shy away from vague and imprecise rhetorical celebrations” and wish to gain an in-depth understanding of the recent past—better than that taught in schools, more accurately than that narrated by fathers.<sup>13</sup>

Between 1961 and 1963, three booklets devoted to the experiences of Jews in Italy during Fascism, edited by Guido Valabrega, were published. These attracted interest among

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<sup>7</sup> The letter, sent to La Stampa by a student who signed herself as “the daughter of a Fascist who would like to know the truth,” was picked up by other newspapers. The article mentions *Paese Sera*.

<sup>8</sup> With reference to the problem of the continuity of the state apparatus in the transition from Fascism to the Republic: Claudio Pavone, *Alle origini della Repubblica. Scritti sul fascismo, sull'antifascismo e sulla continuità dello Stato*, new ed. (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2025), 95-99. On the lack of purging of school personnel, see the case study of Padua in Fabio Targhetta, “Tra selva normativa e schedatura di massa: I procedimenti di epurazione degli insegnanti di scuola secondaria,” *Rivista di storia dell'educazione* 1 (2018): 209-225.

<sup>9</sup> Guri Schwarz, “Nota introduttiva,” in *Diario di un partigiano ebreo gennaio 1940-febbraio 1944*, Emanuele Artom, ed. Guri Schwarz, new ed. (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2022), xiv.

<sup>10</sup> “Il CDEC al campeggio,” *Hatikvã* 4, nos. 7-8, July-August, 1960, 2.

<sup>11</sup> A Jewish political and cultural periodical, published in Florence (1916-1938; 1944-1974) and edited, at that time, by Carlo Alberto Viterbo.

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Bassi served as CDEC's general secretary from 1955 to 1960.

<sup>13</sup> L'archivio del C.D.E.C. e le vicende degli ebrei italiani nel periodo fascista (s.d.), 3, Fondo Attività del CDEC 1955-1995 (unprocessed collection), ACDEC. It should be noted that only in 1956 did the ANED amend its statute to admit former racial deportees, while the National Association of Italian Anti-Fascist Political Persecutees (ANPPIA) had already taken up the cause of compensation for the victims of antisemitic persecution, who had long been excluded from indemnities, a few years earlier. For further discussion: Paola Bertilotti, “Contrasti e trasformazioni della memoria dello sterminio in Italia,” in *Storia della Shoah in Italia: Vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni. 2: Memorie, rappresentazioni, eredità*, eds. Marcello Flores et al. (Turin: UTET, 2010), 58-114.

scholars as well as a broader readership<sup>14</sup> in the wake of the Eichmann trial,<sup>15</sup> but also encountered resistance due to their critical stance toward the communal leadership. Toward the end of the 1960s, Eloisa Ravenna<sup>16</sup> edited an excerpt devoted to the CDEC for the Associazione Nazionale ex deportati nei campi nazisti (also known as ANED, National Association of Former Deportees in Nazi Camps),<sup>17</sup> in which she stated that the institution had received its first grant from the Ministry of Public Education. The CDEC recorded an increase in requests for consultations from secondary school students and teachers and collaborated in initiatives promoted by other organizations, focused primarily on the Resistance and secondarily on deportation, such as the exhibition organized for Deportees' Day in September 1964.

### The 1970s—Education for Memory and the Fight against Antisemitism

In 1967, the link between the memory of antifascism and the memory of the Shoah began to fracture following the positions taken by the Italian Communist Party regarding the Six-Day War. The Italian Jewish community, internally divided, registered a rise in antisemitism that went beyond judgments of Israel's political and military strategy. The antifascist paradigm gradually lost ground in the reconstruction of postwar Jewish identity. In an essay devoted to schools and the Resistance published in the early 1970s, Ravenna drew the attention of those concerned with transmitting the spirit of the Resistance to younger generations to the connection between the struggle against fascism and the struggle against antisemitism,<sup>18</sup> as well as to the shortcomings of educational approaches that excluded Jewish resistance in Europe from the narrative, thereby depriving the fate of Jewish deportees of dignity by categorizing them as passive victims.<sup>19</sup>

In the following years, the CDEC's commitment would be characterized by the convergence of education regarding the memory of deportation and the Resistance with the fight against contemporary antisemitism. Research projects guided by teachers at the CDEC's headquarters, as well as initiatives undertaken by many young people—some of

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<sup>14</sup> Gli ebrei in Italia durante il fascismo, October 30, 1963, mimeographed pamphlet accompanying the publication of *Gli ebrei in Italia durante il fascismo* 3 (1963), following the publication of volumes 1 (1961) and 2 (1962), Fondo Attività del CDEC 1955-1995 (unprocessed collection), ACDEC.

<sup>15</sup> Despite these publications, Italy's role, reinforced by the trial, remained anchored to the image of a country that devoted itself to the rescue of the Jews, while the role of Fascism remained largely unacknowledged. See Valeria Galimi, *Sotto gli occhi di tutti. La società italiana e le persecuzioni contro gli ebrei* (Milan: Le Monnier, 2018), 89-112.

<sup>16</sup> Eloisa Ravenna was CDEC's general secretary from 1963 to 1973.

<sup>17</sup> Eloisa Ravenna, "Il centro di documentazione ebraica contemporanea," *Quaderni del Centro di Studi sulla Deportazione e l'Internamento* 4 (1968): 38-46.

<sup>18</sup> Eloisa Ravenna, "Resistenza e antisemitismo ieri e oggi," in *La Resistenza e la scuola*, ed. Istituto Storico della Resistenza Bresciana (Brescia: Editrice La scuola, 1970).

<sup>19</sup> Discorso della Dr. Eloisa Ravenna al IV Convegno dell'Ebraismo Progressista, Paris, March 24-25, 1973, Fondo Attività del CDEC 1955-1995 (unprocessed collection), ACDEC. In that context, the same themes are addressed and expanded upon, with reference to the relentless pace of antisemitic attacks from various origins: from the left, from the right, from the extraparliamentary factions of both sides, and from the most reactionary Catholics.

whom also came from the Jewish school system—became opportunities to establish contact with the broader world. For many participants, research proved to be a means of questioning preconceived or distorted ideas about Jews, or of filling gaps in knowledge. After Ravenna's death in 1973, the CDEC continued, despite its limited resources, to provide tools to a wide audience, above all through exhibitions. In 1975, two initiatives stood out: collaboration in the organization of an exhibition on the Resistance promoted by the Municipality of Milan at Palazzo Reale<sup>20</sup> for the thirtieth anniversary of Liberation, and the preparation of a volume intended for schools regarding the deportation and resistance of Jews in Italy, with a focus on local experiences, for the thirtieth anniversary of the Resistance and deportation from Tuscany.<sup>21</sup> The exhibition had an explicitly educational purpose. It presented the ideological components and social motivations of the struggle against Fascism and gave prominence to Jewish antifascists and members of the Resistance. Its success led to it being converted into a traveling exhibition.

Two years later, the CDEC initiated a project to read and review lower secondary school textbooks, identifying inaccurate information about Judaism and Zionism alongside antisemitic elements,<sup>22</sup> drawing on the expertise of the newly established sector devoted to the study and documentation of antisemitism.<sup>23</sup> That same year, it was invited to collaborate in the Polish government's initiative to establish an "international museum with a section dedicated to the Jewish Holocaust" at Auschwitz. For the Jewish world, this project carried particular significance at a time marked by a resurgence of neo-Nazi denialist pamphlets.<sup>24</sup> Also in 1975, the CDEC established an academic committee in order to strengthen the advisory and disseminatory functions—through exhibitions and audiovisual materials—within which its engagement with schools was situated.

The 1970s concluded with the co-curation of an exhibition<sup>25</sup> on another aspect of the Resistance, on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws: spiritual resistance, illustrated through drawings and biographies of authors selected by Miriam Novitch, curator of the Lohamei Haghetatot Kibbutz Museum.<sup>26</sup> The exhibition opened in the context of the public outcry triggered by the denialist statements of Robert Faurisson. The response from both lower and upper secondary schools in Milan and Lombardy was significant: more than one hundred classes visited the exhibition in the space of two weeks.

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<sup>20</sup> "Mostra della Resistenza," celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of Liberation, Palazzo Reale, Milan, April-June 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Giuliana Donati, *Ebrei in Italia: Deportazione, resistenza* (Florence: Giuntina, 1975).

<sup>22</sup> "Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea C.D.E.C.," *Bollettino della Comunità Israelitica di Milano* 9, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> A sector also called "Documentazione e studi sulla situazione degli ebrei in Italia" (Documentation and Studies on the Situation of the Jews in Italy) in *Breve Relazione del C.D.E.C. al 30° Congresso della F.G.E.I.* (Firenze 1977) (October 27, 1977), 2.

<sup>24</sup> The project for the Italian Memorial to the Deportees in Nazi Extermination Camps in Block 21 of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum was formally entrusted to the ANED and inaugurated in 1980. In agreement with the UCI and the CDEC, it was clarified that the memorial is dedicated to Italian deportees, both political and Jewish.

<sup>25</sup> "Aspetti di una resistenza ebraica al nazismo. Comunicazioni visive dai campi di concentramento," exhibition at the Biblioteca Trivulziana in Milan, 17 January-7 February 1979.

<sup>26</sup> The Ghetto Fighters' House was the first museum in the world dedicated to the Holocaust and Jewish resistance, founded by Holocaust survivors in Israel in 1949.

## After 1982—The Years of Experimentation

During the 1980s, CDEC researchers began working directly in schools. Thanks to a proposal and funding from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Center organized its first seminar on the history of Nazism and Fascism, deportation, and Jewish resistance in Europe, aimed at Italian Jewish schools. The methodological approach focused on engaging students through the “didactics of objects in the learning of history.”<sup>27</sup> The initiative began with third-year lower secondary classes at the Jewish school in Rome. The seminar was followed by a visit to the exhibition on the Resistance that was first displayed at the Palazzo Reale in 1975. The traveling version of this exhibition subsequently toured Italy and was also displayed in non-Jewish venues.

As the CDEC monitored the growth of antisemitism, which had been steadily increasing since the 1970s, in 1982—against the backdrop of the First Lebanon War—the Jewish minority was directly targeted by various sectors of public opinion. This had repercussions for the image of Jews, for Jewish self-awareness, and for relations between minority and majority groups. Initiatives for schools multiplied. The CDEC opened its doors to students and teachers for research in its library, including its audiovisual materials, the documentary archive, and the section containing studies and documentation on antisemitism. For lower secondary schools, both Jewish and public, study days on deportation and Jewish participation in the Resistance alternated with those devoted to antisemitism. During seminars, classes could visit the CDEC and learn about the institution and its research activities.

The link between the prevention of antisemitism and youth education is clearly illustrated by an initiative of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI) and the Jewish Community of Milan, which involved the CDEC and was made possible by compensation awarded following an antisemitic demonstration in Varese in 1979: a memorial visit to Dachau for 34 upper secondary students from Milan in the spring of 1986, with the aim of deepening knowledge of recent European history and promoting a culture of respect. The students’ work prior to their departure for the camp—with the section on the Nazi system of oppression and on racist prejudice being entrusted to the CDEC<sup>28</sup>—included the study of the ruling of the Court of Cassation and the reasoning behind the conviction of supporters of the Emerson Varese basketball team, linked to the far-right *Fronte della Gioventù* political movement, for apology for genocide.<sup>29</sup>

Toward the end of the 1980s, between 1987 and 1989, traces of the institution’s educational commitment, coordinated by Michele Sarfatti,<sup>30</sup> can be found in its biennial

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<sup>27</sup> “La storia dal vero,” *Shalom* 10, November 1980, 29.

<sup>28</sup> “Comunicato stampa della Comunità Ebraica di Milano,” 3 April 1986, Fondo Attività del CDEC 1955-1995 (unprocessed collection), ACDEC.

<sup>29</sup> Offense provided for under Italian law of 9 October 1967.

<sup>30</sup> A contemporary historian. Coordinator of the CDEC from 1982 to 2002, and director from 2002 to 2016.

and annual reports.<sup>31</sup> This commitment was primarily directed at Jewish schools in Milan and Turin and secondarily at public schools in Lombardy, through seminars devoted to persecution, the Shoah, and anti-Jewish prejudice. This period also saw the revision of educational materials such as the “Worksheets on Nazi Oppression,”<sup>32</sup> produced ten years earlier on behalf of the Union of Italian Israelite Communities (UCII) during the presidency of Raffaele Jona, a former *Giustizia e Libertà* partisan and entrepreneur.

The 1979 worksheets and their revision in 1987, the result of the work of various CDEC collaborators (including Guido Valabrega and Giuliana Donati) and of the relevant scholarly literature, offer a highly revealing snapshot of research conducted at the Center, of the relationship between teaching about the deportations and the Shoah and its evolution, and of the debate on denialism as it was taking shape in the 1980s. The structure and variety of the contents highlight the project’s pedagogical maturity. From a historiographical perspective, one can observe the gradual consolidation of the extermination of the Jews as a distinct field of research and study.

Seminar-based training for lower secondary schools remained firmly anchored in the study of the Jewish resistance during the Second World War,<sup>33</sup> with particular emphasis on the European dimension of the Shoah and on Nazism. Feature films and documentaries played a key role in enlivening the seminars.

### Around 1988—A Shift in Perspective

In 1988, a shift in perspective took place: while remaining anchored in the European dimension of the Shoah, deportation from Italy assumed greater prominence, and for the first time, a seminar addressed to schools also included the direct testimony of a survivor, Goti Bauer.<sup>34</sup> “1938: Le leggi contro gli ebrei,” a special issue of *La Rassegna mensile di Israel*<sup>35</sup> published in collaboration with the CDEC and edited by Michele Sarfatti, which was issued on the fiftieth anniversary of the promulgation of Fascist anti-Jewish legislation, attracted the interest of institutions engaged in human rights education. The original texts of the anti-Jewish legislation were published, together with a study of the treatment of the racial laws in history textbooks. Amnesty International Italy devoted an article to the CDEC,

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<sup>31</sup> *Relazione sull’attività svolta nel 1987-1988* (Milan: CDEC, 1989), 4, Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, ACDEC; *Relazione sull’attività svolta nel 1989* (Milan: CDEC, 1990), 5, Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, ACDEC.

<sup>32</sup> *L’Olocausto. Schede su alcuni aspetti particolari del sistema dell’oppressione nazista: Note, dati, elaborazioni realizzate a cura del Centro di documentazione ebraica contemporanea di Milano per conto dell’Unione delle comunità israelitiche italiane* (Milan: CDEC, 1979); later reviewed and reissued under the title *Lo sterminio degli ebrei. Schede su alcuni aspetti del sistema dell’oppressione nazista: Note, dati, elaborazioni realizzate a cura del Centro di documentazione ebraica contemporanea di Milano nel 1979 e aggiornate nel 1987* (Milan: CDEC, 1979).

<sup>33</sup> “Seminario per le III medie,” 7 and 8 April 1987, Fondo Attività del CDEC 1955-1995 (unprocessed collection), ACDEC. The program and the resources made available, such as the list of documents and literary texts on Jewish resistance, are preserved in the archives.

<sup>34</sup> Goti Bauer, born Agata Herskovits in Fiume on 29 July 1924. Deported from Italy to Auschwitz, she survived the Holocaust and became a witness.

<sup>35</sup> “1938: Le leggi contro gli ebrei. Numero speciale in occasione del cinquantennale della legislazione antiebraica fascista,” *La Rassegna mensile di Israel* 1-2 (January-August 1988).

announcing the beginning of a collaboration with the Centre for Human Rights Education in order to disseminate documents and articles on the curtailment of Jewish rights under Fascism<sup>36</sup> from a perspective detached from references to the Resistance.

This evolution between 1988 and 1989 was linked not only to advances in research on anti-Jewish legislation and deportation from Italy, but also to the CDEC's intention to investigate the role of Fascism in the exclusion and persecution of Jews.<sup>37</sup> Educational activity once again became centered on the Shoah, despite the Observatory on Antisemitism calling for educational responses to the rise in anti-Jewish prejudice,<sup>38</sup> within an increasingly intolerant and racist climate. The spread of antisemitic narratives was also noted, accusing Jews of exploiting the compassion of others, resulting in a weakening—and at times a rejection—of the memory of the Shoah, not only within radical right-wing circles. Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Europe entered a prolonged phase of political and social transition, marked by the crisis of ideological reference points following the end of the Cold War and, among other factors, by discrimination linked to immigration.<sup>39</sup> In these years, new shared value frameworks emerged at the European level, which were no longer tied to political systems legitimized through the Resistance. The victim paradigm and the memory of the Shoah—understood as foundational to postwar European identity—were identified as powerful cohesive forces both by Western European societies grappling with the challenge of multiculturalism and by societies in the former Soviet bloc aspiring to be admitted into Europe.<sup>40</sup>

With the CDEC's transformation from an association into a foundation in 1990,<sup>41</sup> educational work, on paper, did not constitute a priority, although it remained one of its activities. The institution was engaged in projects of national relevance, such as producing the aforementioned educational worksheets, as well as in consultancy work and interventions from its collaborators, and it was frequented by teachers and textbook editors, who made use of its library.<sup>42</sup> In this phase, schools appeared interested in the

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<sup>36</sup> *Educare ai diritti. Newsletter quadrimestrale di Amnesty International* 1 no. 2 (1991/92): 7-8.

<sup>37</sup> The "La legislazione antiebraica in Italia e in Europa" (Anti-Jewish Legislation in Italy and Europe) conference, held on October 17 and 18, 1988 and promoted by the Chamber of Deputies in collaboration with the UCIL and entrusted to the CDEC, should also be mentioned. The proceedings allowed for the publication of the texts of the anti-Jewish legislation enacted in Italy, France, Germany, and Austria, thus enabling comparative study, including for educational purposes.

<sup>38</sup> Adriana Goldstaub, "Il razzismo e l'antisemitismo in Italia," *Bollettino della Comunità Israelitica di Milano* 44, no. 2, supplemento, February 1988, 4-5.

<sup>39</sup> On the increase in public and private discrimination against minorities, also supported at the institutional level, see, for example, an article by Marina Morpurgo preserved in the CDEC Foundation Archives, "Negri, terroni, creperete tutti," *L'Unità*, March 29, 1989, 3, Milan section.

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of memory policies from the 1990s to the 2020s, see Valentina Pisanty, "Che cosa è andato storto? Le politiche della memoria nell'epoca del post-testimone," *Novecento.org. Didattica della storia in rete* 13 (February 2020, <https://www.novecento.org/la-didattica-della-shoah/che-cosa-e-andato-storto-le-politiche-della-memoria-nellepoca-del-post-testimone-6297/> accessed April 13, 2026).

<sup>41</sup> On 17 April 1990, by decree of the President of the Republic. The Foundation became fully operational on 1 January 1991. See *Relazione sull'attività svolta nel 1990* (Milan: CDEC, 1991), 2, Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, ACDEC.

<sup>42</sup> Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, *Relazione sull'attività svolta nel 1991* (Milan: CDEC, 1992), 8.

CDEC, while the CDEC primarily regarded schools as a field of investigation.<sup>43</sup> These inquiries would, a few years later, provide the basis for the development of structured educational training attentive to the shortcomings or distortions identified, for example, in school textbooks.<sup>44</sup>

In the spring of 1991, a volume edited by Liliana Picciotto entitled *Il libro della memoria. Gli ebrei deportati dall'Italia (1943-1945)*,<sup>45</sup> which was published by Mursia, was released. This work was the result of decades-long research conducted by the CDEC. The publication of research on deportation from Italy sparked significant interest within the school system. Meetings and public discussions on the Shoah were organized, as well as on denialism and antisemitism, phenomena whose marked increase—alongside racism—was recorded by the Archive on Antisemitism in the second half of 1992,<sup>46</sup> to such an extent that it disrupted the CDEC's routine work.

At the same time, civil and religious authorities—particularly in Milan—expressed solidarity with the Jewish community and with non-EU immigrants, who were targets of neo-Nazi and neo-Fascist violence,<sup>47</sup> through intercultural and interreligious initiatives. Growing public attention to episodes of antisemitism and racism led to numerous educational interventions on these issues. Using CDEC materials, an exhibition on antisemitism was organized in Trieste and Gorizia by the Association of Young Jews and the Regional Institute for the History of the Liberation Movement in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. The same period also saw the presentation of a legislative proposal on hate crimes, later known as the Mancino Law.

In the absence of a structured educational offering, CDEC interventions in schools were carried out upon request; nevertheless, reports by librarians and the Observatory highlight the Center's role as a mediator between resources, research, and educational needs. The Ministry of Public Education and its advisory bodies recognized, and acted upon, the need for a structured response from schools to the increase in intolerance. In 1993, a ministerial circular identified racism and antisemitism as educational issues and provided operational guidelines for addressing them in schools;<sup>48</sup> in 1994, another circular addressed the prevention of antisemitism through "Intercultural Dialogue and Democratic Coexistence:

<sup>43</sup> See Adriana Goldstaub, Laura Wolfsi Rocca, and Giovanni Battista Novello Paglianti, "L'immagine dell'ebreo in un gruppo di studenti veneti. Un'indagine antropologica con la tecnica del differenziale semantico," *La Rassegna mensile di Israel* 56, no. 3 (1990): 489-516.

<sup>44</sup> Laura Wolfsi Rocca and Giovanni Battista Novello Paglianti, "L'immagine degli ebrei e dell'ebraismo nei libri di storia della scuola media dell'obbligo," *La Rassegna mensile di Israel* 56, no. 3 (1990): 441-487, in collaboration with the CDEC.

<sup>45</sup> About Liliana Picciotto's research on the deportation of Jews from Italy, see her article in this issue of *Quest*: "From 'Il Libro della memoria' to 'Resistenti ebrei d'Italia'. A Personal Journey".

<sup>46</sup> That year saw tomb desecrations in Jewish cemeteries and the rise of anti-Jewish and Holocaust-denying propaganda by neo-Fascist factions in Italy, which had already occurred in France and Germany, while in Germany xenophobic violence against asylum seekers was widespread. See also "Anche l'antisemitismo cambia," *Bollettino Comunità Ebraica di Milano*, December 4, 1992.

<sup>47</sup> Province of Milan, "Milano contro l'antisemitismo per la solidarietà," December 14, 1992, Congress Hall, Via Corridoni. Speakers included Arrigo Levi, Carlo Maria Martini, Giorgio Napolitano, Paolo Mieli, Luisella Mortara Ottolenghi, Micha Guttman, Giuseppe Laras, Giampiero Borghini, and Tullia Zevi.

<sup>48</sup> *Razzismo e antisemitismo il ruolo della scuola* (Racism and Antisemitism: The Role of Schools), Pronouncement of the National Council of Public Education, March 24, 1993, transmitted by Ministerial Circular no. 138, April 27, 1993.

The Schools Project-Based Commitment.”<sup>49</sup>

The spread of the intercultural approach in schools also involved historical minorities such as the Jewish community. With the aim of fostering a culture of coexistence, an agreement was signed between the Ministry of Public Education and the UCEI. The following year, a further circular identified this approach as a tool for addressing antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia.<sup>50</sup>

Ministerial support enabled the CDEC to launch a project entitled “Chi sono gli ebrei” (Who Are the Jews), an audiovisual resource accompanied by a booklet on Shoah-related filmography, which was distributed to schools. Moreover, in 1993, thanks to a group of volunteers and supporters, the CDEC inaugurated its video library containing Italian and international materials on Jewish topics and contemporary history, in response to growing requests for visual documentation from schools and the media. Teachers from across Italy—also interested in guidance on the didactic use of audiovisual materials—constituted the bulk of its users. In a special issue of the educational research journal *Sisifo*, published by the Piedmontese Gramsci Institute, an article by Marcello Pezzetti<sup>51</sup> appeared on the didactic use of audiovisual materials in the “teaching of the Shoah.” This article reported on research conducted by the CDEC concerning the necessary preparation for students to understand educational interventions on the subject, as well as the equally necessary pedagogical preparation of teachers, alongside historical knowledge of antisemitism and anti-Jewish persecution.<sup>52</sup> The CDEC’s educational proposals—especially at the local level—included screenings, lectures, and survivor testimonies. From the late 1980s onward, on the initiative of the Association of Italian Jewish Women (ADEI-WIZO), survivors had begun speaking in the protected setting of private homes before deciding to enter schools. In 1995, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War—and in particular of the liberation of Auschwitz and the Liberation of Italy—a project was launched to collect video interviews with Jews who had survived deportation from Italy, conducted by Liliana Picciotto and Marcello Pezzetti. These interviews would form the Archive of Memory and later gave rise to the documentary film *Memoria*.

Situated between dissemination and education was the CDEC’s consultancy work for films such as *Life Is Beautiful* by Roberto Benigni, *Jonah Who Lived in the Whale* by Roberto Faenza, and *Schindler’s List* by Steven Spielberg. From the second half of the 1990s, these films contributed significantly to shaping the imagery of the Shoah and the forms of its representation within the school audience.

## Between 1998 and 2000—Memory Politics and Education

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<sup>49</sup> Ministry of Public Education, Ministerial Circular no. 73, March 2, 1994.

<sup>50</sup> Ministry of Public Education, “Campagna europea dei giovani contro il razzismo, la xenofobia, l’antisemitismo e l’intolleranza” (European Youth Campaign against Racism, Xenophobia, Antisemitism, and Intolerance), Ministerial Circular no. 56, February 16, 1995.

<sup>51</sup> On Marcello Pezzetti’s work at CDEC, see the article co-authored with Ruggero Gabbai in this issue of *Quest*: “Building Memory: The Creation of the CDEC’s “Archivio della Memoria” and the Film *Memoria*”.

<sup>52</sup> Marcello Pezzetti, “Le immagini della Shoà. Documentari storici per le scuole,” *Sisifo* (October 1993): 59-61.

In this period, attention to new technologies and multimedia languages emerged through the “Destination Auschwitz” project,<sup>53</sup> which ran from 1998 to 2000. This CD-ROM brought together historical texts, archival and contemporary images, a historical atlas of twentieth-century Europe, maps, and virtual reconstructions of Auschwitz-Birkenau, developed in consultation with survivors. These reconstructions aimed to visually represent not only the mechanisms of exterminating Jews, Roma, and Sinti, but also the physical layout of the camp. Research conducted in public and private archives and in Italian and foreign libraries made it possible to acquire previously unpublished documentary material.<sup>54</sup> The European Commission rewarded the project for its innovative character and supported the distribution of 10,000 copies to upper secondary schools.

On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the anti-Jewish laws, the CDEC participated in joint initiatives or projects promoted by other institutions and schools, including a volume for upper secondary students,<sup>55</sup> prepared by the Chamber of Deputies. More frequently, these took the form of public events addressed to large numbers of student groups, sometimes rhetorical in nature, such as the reading of reflections by prominent cultural figures. The anniversary marked a turning point in reflections on the complex relationship between Jews and Italian institutions under Fascism, with the state assuming a leading role in promoting initiatives to raise public awareness of the persecution of Jews in Italy.<sup>56</sup>

In 1998, the volunteers working in the video library, coordinated first by Liliana Picciotto and later by Marcello Pezzetti, formed the first core of educators specifically dedicated to schools.<sup>57</sup> A project on the history of the Shoah, general Jewish history, and Jewish identity designed by the video library supported these educational interventions. Their teaching methodology was developed through observation and analysis, particularly for lower secondary schools, and the educators documented each intervention in a written report.<sup>58</sup>

In lower secondary schools, educators introduced the reality and long-term history of the Jews before addressing prejudice and the Shoah; in upper secondary schools, researchers offered lectures combined with survivor testimonies. Alongside Goti Bauer, Nedo Fiano and Liliana Segre participated in these initiatives. Auschwitz constituted the central focus, although antisemitism and other related topics were also addressed.

Four elements characterized the CDEC’s independent educational program, shaped by its research and classroom experience: the structuring of a recognizable and recurring educational program; access to the Center’s research and documentary resources; the production and didactic use of audiovisual and multimedia materials; and the combination of place-based education with the pedagogical use of testimony.

The year 1998 also marked the CDEC’s engagement in educational trips and residential professional development courses for teachers at Auschwitz, which were curated by

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<sup>53</sup> Project in collaboration with the Proedi Editore publishing house (2002).

<sup>54</sup> *Destinazione Auschwitz*, Rome, July 10, 2000, Archivio didattica 2000, ACDEC.

<sup>55</sup> *La persecuzione degli ebrei durante il fascismo. Le leggi del 1938* (Rome: Camera dei deputati, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Valeria Galimi, “La persecuzione degli ebrei in Italia (1938-1943). Note sulla storiografia recente,” *Contemporanea* 5 (2002): 587.

<sup>57</sup> Maurina Schinasi, interview by the author, June 18, 2025. Pia Masnini and Nicoletta Salom were regular members of the group.

<sup>58</sup> *Corrispondenza scuole*, 1998, *Interventi nelle scuole 1997-1998*, intermediate archives of the CDEC, ACDEC.

Marcello Pezzetti on the CDEC's behalf until 2006. That same year, the Ministry of Public Education launched a project entitled "The Twentieth Century: Youth and Memory," involving more than 400 schools, which it continued for the following three years. Many participated and undertook memory trips, particularly to Auschwitz or Mauthausen.<sup>59</sup> Since 1989,<sup>60</sup> Auschwitz had been at the center of intellectual debate in France, promoted by *Pardés* and the Alliance Israélite Universelle, intertwining religious, philosophical, historical, literary, and educational elements within Jewish thought. In 1995, this reflection reached Italy via a translated monograph.<sup>61</sup> Ethical questions were posed primarily within philosophical and educational contexts and were particularly taken up by the Catholic world, which, at a paradigmatic level, identified Auschwitz as the focal point of reflection on the genocide of the Jews, transforming it into a concept endowed with meaning for the present.<sup>62</sup> Within this framework, the CDEC assumed the role of a historiographical interlocutor in teacher training.<sup>63</sup>

On the invitation of the Ministry of Public Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CDEC participated in the Forum on the Holocaust, which was held in Stockholm in early 2000. This led to the Foundation's official inclusion in the Italian delegation and in the Italian "task force" of the intergovernmental organization later known as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.<sup>64</sup>

Following discussion with the Ministry, the Foundation submitted a funding request for research on the teaching of the Shoah in Europe and in Italy. Starting from a mapping of educational activities within the Jewish sphere and at sites related to the Shoah across the country, the project aimed to develop an effective educational strategy to be offered to schools. The project text outlined the reasons why, according to its proponents, the study of the Shoah should be prioritized within the history of the twentieth century.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, the proposal anticipated several educational issues linked to the spread of new technologies: young people's perception of living outside of history, the acceleration of change creating a generational gap, and the resulting loss of relevance attributed to

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<sup>59</sup> Alessandra Chiappano, "Educare ai luoghi della memoria" (s.d.), [https://www.italia-liberazione.it/ita/doc/Chiappano\\_06RE.pdf](https://www.italia-liberazione.it/ita/doc/Chiappano_06RE.pdf), accessed May 19, 2026.

<sup>60</sup> The year the proceedings of the "Penser Auschwitz" conference, held in Senato from 5 to 7 November 1988 for the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, were published.

<sup>61</sup> Shmuel Trigano, ed., *Pardés: Pensare Auschwitz* (Milan: Edizioni Thàlassa De Paz, 1995).

See, for example, Enzo Traverso, ed., *Insegnare Auschwitz. Questioni etiche, storiografiche, educative della deportazione e dello sterminio* (Turin: IRRSAE Piemonte - Bollati Boringhieri, 1995); Giuseppe Vico and Milena Santerini, eds., *Educare dopo Auschwitz* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1995); Gadi Luzzatto Voghera and Ernesto Perillo, eds., *Pensare e insegnare Auschwitz* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2004). These were the years in which the Holocaust began to be publicly commemorated by the Catholic Church, following the initiation of dialogue between Jews and Catholics. The issue of the Church's responsibilities was addressed in the document *We Remember: A Reflection on the Holocaust*, published in March 1998 by the Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism, chaired by Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, "Antisemitismo e Shoah," no. 7 (24 October 1996), organized by the Società Umanitaria.

<sup>64</sup> *Relazione sull'attività svolta nel 1999* (Milan: CDEC, 2000), 5, Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, ACDEC.

<sup>65</sup> It should be noted that between 1996 and 2004, the chronological limits of the three school cycles—elementary, middle, and upper—were modified: the final year included the teaching of twentieth-century history by Ministerial Decree 682/96 from the Ministry of Public Education, better known as the "Berlinguer Reform."

knowledge of the past. The history of the Shoah, it argued, could become a tragic yet decisive lesson for younger generations, educating them in democracy without slipping into ideological rigidity or the banality of politics.

At the turn of the millennium, the Shoah was interpreted as the central event of the twentieth century, in a “post-ideological” phase of the role and values attributed to historical events within Italian culture.<sup>66</sup> In the same years, Western culture placed the Shoah at the center of public memory as an ethical point of reference for democratic systems founded on the protection of human rights.<sup>67</sup> In 2001, for the first time, the CDEC’s annual report dedicated a specific section to highlighting its educational and didactic commitment, which from the following year would designate a distinct area of activity.

In preparation for the first Holocaust Remembrance Day, in the final months of 2000 the Foundation developed and published a *Workbook (Quaderno di Lavoro)*,<sup>68</sup> a dossier of documents, testimonies, and historical analyses, released on its newly established website. The publication of these workbooks continued for two more years, while in 2004 a chronology of the Auschwitz camp was published. It is worth noting that the first workbook—dedicated precisely to Holocaust Remembrance Day—offered a Shoah-centered interpretation of the meaning of this civic commemoration. Unlike the wording of the law, it explicitly mentioned the collaboration of Fascist Italian governments in the arrest and deportation of Jews.

With the establishment of Holocaust Remembrance Day, a new phase began in the conception and planning of Shoah museums and memorials. The CDEC participated in the work of the committees promoting the Shoah Memorial in Milan and followed the debate surrounding the creation of the National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah (MEIS) in Ferrara. Shortly thereafter, it also became involved in planning the Shoah Museum in Rome.

In the early 2000s, the expression “Shoah education” entered common usage and became the object of reflection and study. The CDEC organized a national conference entitled “La didattica della Shoah. Il contributo del mondo ebraico all’insegnamento della Shoah nella scuola italiana: esperienze, metodologie prospettive” (Shoah Education: The Contribution of the Jewish World to Teaching the Shoah in Italian Schools—Experiences, Methodologies, Perspectives).

The decade inaugurated by Holocaust Remembrance Day marked a significant evolution in the CDEC’s educational production in comparison to the previous decade. The focus shifted from reflection on the representation of the Shoah<sup>69</sup> to reflection on the relationship between history and memory—two moments within the process of cultural elaboration of the Shoah—at whose center remained the complex relationship between knowledge and education.

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<sup>66</sup> See Gordon, *Scolpitelo nei cuori*, 271.

<sup>67</sup> Focardi, *Nel cantiere della memoria*, 182. For a reflection on the need to be prepared to effectively and decisively combat discrimination, see Pisanty, “Che cosa è andato storto?”

<sup>68</sup> *Fondazione CDEC onlus*, 27 gennaio 2001. *Quaderno di lavoro per il “Giorno della memoria” ad uso delle scuole* (Milan: December 2000).

<sup>69</sup> Marcello Pezzetti, “Rappresentare la Shoah, trasmettere la memoria,” in *Educare dopo Auschwitz*, eds. Giuseppe Vico and Milena Santerini (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1995).

During this period, the CDEC began developing the historical and architectural groundwork for a major national documentary exhibition, “Dalle leggi antiebraiche alla shoah. Sette anni di storia italiana 1938-1945” (From the Anti-Jewish Laws to the Shoah: Seven Years of Italian History, 1938-1945), displayed at the Vittoriano in Rome from 15 October 2004 to 30 January 2005. Of particular interest was the display of the autograph texts of the anti-Jewish laws and the files of the Committee for Research on Jewish Deportees. The documentation was complemented by archival film footage and by video interviews with survivors produced by the CDEC.<sup>70</sup> In 2007, the first digital exhibition on anti-Jewish persecution in Italy was completed and made available online, presenting three hundred documents accompanied by explanatory texts.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, a printed exhibition entitled “1938-1945 La persecuzione degli ebrei in Italia” (1938-1945: The Persecution of Jews in Italy) was produced for students, in two formats: one for institutional venues and one for schools and municipalities.

The curatorial approach of exhibitions in this phase reflects the institution’s intention to disseminate its work to the public while continuing to rely on historical critique, without yielding to the subjective narrative of the witness—a figure increasingly shaping public discourse on memory and onto whose disappearance anxieties about Shoah’s loss of relevance for younger generations were projected.

This educational framework remained unchanged until 2004, when the department was left without leadership. Some activities continued, while others came to an end. A few months earlier, a secretariat had been established in Rome, operating in collaboration with the Center of Jewish Culture of the Jewish Community of Rome, to support and organize school visits from survivors and witnesses of the Shoah in central and southern Italy.<sup>72</sup> This office took the name Progetto Memoria. Several years would pass before a new Education Department would be established in a new phase of the institution's history.

## Conclusion

Over its first 50 years of activity, the CDEC’s educational commitment developed through both continuity and discontinuity, gradually becoming structured in relation to scholarly advances and to the demands and transformations of the political, cultural, and institutional context. Its educational experience thus emerges as the result of a non-linear process, marked by experimentation, interruptions, and renewals, as well as by the tension between historical research and educational responsibility. This legacy constitutes an indispensable prerequisite for understanding subsequent developments and represents a heritage to be reactivated and put back into circulation.

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<sup>70</sup> *Relazione sull’attività svolta nel 2004* (Milan: CDEC, 2005), 3, Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, ACDEC.

<sup>71</sup> Michele Sarfatti and Alessandra Minerbi, eds., “La persecuzione degli ebrei in Italia 1938–1945,” digital exhibition published online in 2006 at [www.museoshoah.it](http://www.museoshoah.it), accessed May 19, 2026. The website was redesigned in 2022 and is now available at <https://shoahmuseum.cdec.it/>, accessed May 19, 2026.

<sup>72</sup> Sandra Terracina, interview by the author, June 11, 2025.