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Between Scholarship and Cultural Activism

The CDEC and the Changing Nature of the Italian Memoryscape.
Interviews with the Former and Current Directors: Michele Sarfatti
and Gadi Luzzatto Voghera

ABSTRACT

This contribution aims at presenting and contextualizing the interviews made to the recent and former directors of the Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea (CDEC), offering basic elements to introduce the readers to the history of the institution and the context in which it operates, while at the same time raising some questions regarding current challenges.

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Introduction

The history of the Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea (Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center, CDEC), founded in Milan in 1955, is inseparable from the broader evolution of the modern Italian Jewish condition, the perceptions of contemporary antisemitism, the memory of the Fascist persecutions, and the ways in which the Shoah has been represented within the Italian public sphere. From its origins as a volunteer-driven initiative promoted by the Federation of Italian Jewish Youth (FGEI), originally dedicated to collecting dispersed documentation on the Jewish contribution to the Resistance as well as on Mussolini's racist policies,¹ the CDEC has grown into a national research center whose activity spans archival preservation, digital humanities, Holocaust education, and the monitoring of present-day antisemitism. In these pages, I will offer a brief introduction to two interviews, one with Michele Sarfatti, scientific Director of the CDEC from 2002 to 2015, and the other with Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, who took on the same role in 2016. Both are historians by training, of two distinct generations. The first is a specialist in Fascist antisemitism² who grew into the directorship from within the ranks of the institute, while the latter came to the role having previously worked as a scholar in other institutions and has major publications in the history of Jewish emancipation as well as antisemitism in its most recent forms.³ Both have had to tackle the responsibility of managing a small but important cultural institution, which, since the 1990s, has had to manage growing requests and expectations. These dialogues have been conceived for publication in this special issue dedicated to the history of the CDEC in the belief that they might offer a privileged vantage point from which to examine the transformations of the institution and, through it, the shifting terrain of Italian Jewish history and memory.

As Sarfatti recounts, when he entered the institution in the early 1980s, the documentary landscape was marked by a "repressed knowledge." Astonishingly, there was no systematic, critical corpus of the 1938 racial legislation and the administrative guidelines that accompanied it. This absence was not merely technical; it was symptomatic of a refusal to confront the indigenous nature of Italian racism. There is a stark contrast between the climate in which Sarfatti began working at the Center and the context in which he retired at the end of his mandate as Director, which essentially progressed from silence and inattentiveness to the monumentalization of the Holocaust in public memory and the reassessment of Fascist antisemitism within and without the field of historical scholarship. Liliana Picciotto's systematic reconstruction of the list of names of those deported from

¹ On the Federation, its political orientation, and the birth of the CDEC, see Guri Schwarz, *After Mussolini: Jewish Life and Jewish Memories in Post-Fascist Italy* (London-Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013), 88-92. For more on the CDEC, its origins, and its activities, see, beyond the other contributions published in issue: Liliana Picciotto, "Eloisa e il CDEC," *La Rassegna mensile di Israel* 47, no. 1-3 (1983): 9-44; Michele Sarfatti, "La Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea," in *Funzioni dei centri di storia e cultura ebraica nella società contemporanea*, ed. Michele Sarfatti (Milan: Proedi, 1998), 45-50.

² Michele Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronaca dell'elaborazione delle leggi del 1938*, new ed. (Turin: Zamorani, 2017) (originally published 1994); Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

³ Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, *Il prezzo dell'eguaglianza. Il dibattito sull'emancipazione degli ebrei in Italia (1781-1848)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1998); Luzzatto Voghera, *L'antisemitismo: Domande e risposte* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994); Luzzatto Voghera, *Antisemitismo* (Milan: Editrice Bibliografica, 1997); Luzzatto Voghera, *Antisemitismo a sinistra* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021).

Italy and Italian-controlled territories⁴ and Sarfatti's own studies on the implementation of Fascist antisemitism and the history of Jews under the regime⁵ filled a vacuum, becoming an essential reference point for further studies and contributing significantly to a new reckoning with the country's past. These contributions from scholars who operated within the CDEC started to be developed before the so-called myth of the good Italian came to be discussed and challenged in Italian public discourse and international historiography,⁶ paving the way for the consolidation of a different, less apologetic and more documented narrative.

Such developments matured as the country's political and cultural landscape was rapidly shifting, and with it, its relationship to the recent past.⁷ As Robert Gordon has shown, public discourse on the Shoah underwent a major shift between the immediate postwar decades—when selective remembering and Resistance-centered narratives prevailed—and the period beginning in the late eighties, when literary, cinematic, and civic forms of Holocaust remembrance expanded dramatically. The “memory boom” of the 1990s and early 2000s, which was consolidated with the institution of Holocaust Memorial Day in the year 2000, created unprecedented expectations for public engagement with the Shoah and placed institutions such as the CDEC at the center of a newly intensified memorial culture.⁸

Within that shifting memoryscape, as Holocaust memory gained unprecedented prominence at a national and international level, the CDEC's transformation from a modest documentation center into an authoritative national institution was both reactive and creative. Under Sarfatti's tenure as Director, the CDEC started professionalizing the management of its archival holdings, with the development of a rich online open access repository, the [Digital Library](#). The early adoption of Linked Open Data standards situated the institution at the forefront of current experimentation with modern technology for the preservation and fruition of archival sources. The CDEC's archives have continued to grow through the decades and today constitute one of the most important repositories for the study of modern and contemporary Italian Jewish history. Being first and foremost a

⁴ Liliana Picciotto, *Il libro della memoria. Gli ebrei deportati dall'Italia*, new ed. (Milan: Mursia, 2002) (originally published 1991). On the genesis of that research, see Liliana Picciotto Fargion, “La ricerca del Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea sugli ebrei deportati dall'Italia,” in *Storia e memoria della deportazione. Modelli di ricerca e di comunicazione in Italia e in Francia*, ed. P. Momigliano Levi (Florence: Giuntina, 1996), 60-72.

⁵ See note 2 above.

⁶ David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano* (Milan: Il saggiatore, 1993). On the genesis and function of this myth, see Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2013); Guri Schwarz, “On Myth Making and Nation Building: The Genesis of the ‘Myth of the Good Italian,’ 1943–1947,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 1 (2008): 111-143.

⁷ To be fully understood, this evolution must be interpreted in connection with the crisis of the political system and of the antifascist narrative that lay at its foundations. Marco Bresciani, “Fascism, Anti-Fascism and the Idea of the Nation: Italian Historiography and Public Debate since the 1980s,” *Contemporary European History* 30 (2021): 111-123; Guri Schwarz, “La memoria prima del giorno. La crisi del 1992-1993 e la genesi di un nuovo paradigma commemorativo”, in *Calendario civile e politiche della memoria in Italia. Dinamiche nazionali e transnazionali*, eds. Filippo Focardi and Guri Schwarz (Rome: Viella, 2026), pp. 73-102. Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005); Philip Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

⁸ On the seasons of Italian Holocaust memory: Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Filippo Focardi, *Nel cantiere della memoria. Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe* (Rome: Viella, 2020); Rebecca Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust: The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). On Holocaust Memorial day, see Guri Schwarz, “Il 27 gennaio e le aporie della memoria,” *Italia Contemporanea* 296 (2021): 100-123.

documentation center, the archives and the library are two core components of the institute. Their holdings include Jewish community archives, papers documenting the activities of various Jewish groups and organizations during and after the fascist period, personal archives, documentation on internment and deportation, an extensive photographic collection, and video testimonies by Holocaust survivors recorded in the 1990s by Liliana Picciotto and Marcello Pezzetti. The gathering of testimonies went hand in hand with the elaboration of new forms of dissemination. As Luzzatto Voghera points out, the documentary film *Memoria*, directed by Ruggero Gabbai (1997), which was largely influenced by Lanzmann's *Shoah* in terms of its modes and style of narration and framing, was a major accomplishment for the CDEC and a cornerstone of a renewed Italian public memory of the Holocaust. Parallel and complementary to the archives is the library, its large collection of rare Italian Jewish periodicals, a portion of which were recently digitized and [made accessible online](#), together with its collection that blends Judaica and antisemitic pamphlets and sources, possibly the richest single collection in the country, make it an invaluable point of reference not only for historians, but also for literary scholars, sociologists, and researchers in various fields.

In 2022, the institute moved to the site of the [Memoriale della Shoah](#) (Shoah Memorial) just beneath Milan's Central Station, where the trains carrying political and racial deportees left the city, awarding it renewed visibility, while at the same time raising new issues connected with its cohabitation with a separate institution, the Memoriale itself, devoted to memory and education and not to scholarship or documentary preservation. This complicated move, completed under Luzzatto Voghera's directorship, signaled both symbolic and practical changes. Symbolically, it embedded the CDEC within the very site from which many Jews (and non-Jews) were deported. Practically, it expanded public access to the archives, library, and educational services, and placed the institution in dialogue with the broader ecosystem of Italian Holocaust education. Since the establishment of the *Giorno della Memoria* (Holocaust Memorial Day) in 2000, demand for pedagogical resources has grown exponentially. The CDEC has responded by producing teaching materials grounded in archival evidence, training educators, participating in national educational programs, and collaborating with museums and memorials.

Another of the Center's traditional fields of activity has been its monitoring of antisemitism. In this respect, we see a similar trend, with a gradual transition from volunteer work to professionalization that began under Sarfatti's tenure and was further developed and enhanced by Luzzatto Voghera in a new political and cultural context. Today, the gathering of data on antisemitism is a central part of the CDEC's mission, having undergone a significant transformation over the last twenty-five years. The CDEC's [Osservatorio Antisemitismo](#) (Observatory on Antisemitism), created before most European countries had systematic monitoring mechanisms in place, has become the primary national body for collecting data on antisemitic incidents, and currently produces annual reports aimed at informing the country's institutions, largely based on the highly controversial IHRA working definition of antisemitism,

These developments intersect with evolving national and international policies. In 2020, the Italian government chose to adopt the aforementioned IHRA working definition of antisemitism and appointed its first national coordinator for the fight against antisemitism, the pedagogist Milena Santerini, confirming a sustained collaboration between state institutions and research centers like the CDEC with an increased level of engagement. Italy's government policies—as confirmed by the recent National Strategy against

Antisemitism in 2024-25—reflect a broader European trend toward integrating civil society data (notably that produced by the CDEC) into national frameworks. In this respect, the CDEC is today poised not merely as a national actor, but as an institution integrated in international networks involved in education about xenophobia and in analyzing current antisemitism. These are key aspects of the institute's activity today, as Luzzato Voghera emphasized in his interview, remarking on the relevance of the Center's integration into European international networks such as [Facing Facts](#) and the [European Network for Countering Antisemitism through Education](#), as well as CDEC inclusion, since a decade, with its own representative, in the Italian national delegation of the International National Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). In a comparative perspective, the CDEC's hybrid role—combining archival research, education, community engagement, and the monitoring of anti-Jewish sentiment—places it between the functions of the UK's Community Security Trust (CST) and France's Service de Protection de la Communauté Juive (SPCJ), but with a stronger research and historical-analytical mandate.

In between the lines of these interviews, we may gather insight not only regarding the evolution and activities of the Center, but more broadly regarding how different and yet intertwined fields, ranging from historical research on Jewish history and antisemitism to the present-day analysis of antisemitic trends and educational activities, have shifted and changed over the decades. For a long period, although it was not the sole proponent of initiatives and research, the CDEC was an essential actor in this field, since the Italian academic and cultural system proved to be largely uninterested. Since the early years of the twenty-first century, the situation has undergone a profound mutation. A new generation of scholars has gained a foothold in universities and research institutes, in Italy and abroad, providing new input and energy in the study of the history of the Jews in Italy and of the forms assumed by antisemitic cultures and practices in the country. This generational transition indirectly reshapes the CDEC's role by transforming the ecosystem in which it operates: from being the *de facto* center of scholarly expertise on the Shoah in Italy, it is now increasingly a collaborator, facilitator, and infrastructure provider within a more plural research environment that crosses national boundaries. Following the Board's advice to the current Director when he took office, as Luzzato Voghera reports in his interview, it reacted by investing in international and national collaborations, and also in new areas such as interreligious dialogue. It has become further integrated into transnational networks, such as the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI), maintaining and developing venues that allow for the sharing of knowledge—ranging from the Digital Library to this scholarly journal, conceived as a site of free and open discussion as well as an instrument to stimulate cross-border interaction and exchanges—but also to some degree progressively shifting its focus from historical research to Holocaust education and the examination of present-day antisemitism.

Ultimately, Sarfatti and Luzzato Voghera's reflections reveal a dynamic institution whose hybrid mission is at once historical and civic. In the past, its research work contributed to shape the historiography on Fascist antisemitism; its archival and bibliographical resources continue to constitute a key resource; its educational programs have accompanied the national institutionalization of Holocaust memory; its *Osservatorio Antisemitismo* (Antisemitism Observatory) has become a reference point for institutions as well as media discourse. As new challenges emerge and Italy confronts new forms of prejudice, intensified political polarization, and the gradual transition to a post-survivor memory culture, the CDEC stands as both a custodian of the past and an active participant, directly and sometimes militantly engaged, in present-day cultural struggles. Its recent stance in support of the IHRA working definition on antisemitism, as the Italian Parliament discusses

introducing new laws on the subject, place it squarely at the center of a heated debate that intersects politics, media discourse and scholarship.

In this respect, in closing these introductory remarks to the two interviews, I wonder how the current crisis, a crisis of politics and of memory, which took shape following the October 7 2023 massacres as well as the ensuing devastating and protracted Israeli military reaction, has altered the landscape in which institutions such as this operate. We may be facing a seismic shift in international relations that directly and dramatically implies the end of the long postwar era, a protracted season in which—despite several transformations—historic and symbolic references to the legacy of World War II and the Holocaust constituted an essential linchpin and key reference point. As this new horizon unfolds, traditional frameworks of meaning are eroded and new cultural wars are taking shape. Holocaust memory and varying uses of antisemitism are thus manipulated and have become more instrumental than ever to factionalism and political exploitation, both at a national and at an international level. It therefore seems urgent and essential to critically re-examine the current memory culture, its limits and blind spots, as well as to rediscuss definitions of antisemitism and their uses. It seems to me that a Jewish cultural institution such as the CDEC and, more broadly, scholars involved in these fields in various ways, need to publicly and decisively confront these problems in their full complexity. Business cannot continue as usual. For a cultural institution, having a clear cultural line, based on sound scientific principles is, obviously, paramount, and in the current context it is essential to reflect on the risks of being dragged into partisan politics.

Potentially, the CDEC's roots as a historical institute may allow it to identify instruments to tackle the current challenges, perhaps starting by historically framing the current crisis with its unique characteristics vis-à-vis previous moments of comparable tension that induced violent memory crises, such as the first Lebanon War (1982) and the first Intifada. It was also in connection to those tense seasons that a renewed effort to fight antisemitism and to educate, with a growing emphasis on the centrality of Holocaust memory, has developed. Clear connections exist between Middle Eastern conflicts, evolving public memory, and the representation of Jewish identity in the public sphere. Historicizing these phenomena may not provide immediate solutions or obvious escape routes, but it could offer a clearer grasp of the intricacies which characterize the contemporary scenario and of the multi-decade trajectory that has led us to this point.

Interview with Michele Sarfatti, former Director of the Cdec (June 15, 2025)

GURI SCHWARZ: When did you start working at the CDEC? Can you please describe the nature and organizational structure of the institution at the time of your arrival? You worked there for many years: How did the institution—and your role in it—evolve through time?

MICHELE SARFATTI: I began working at the CDEC in Milan in 1981. At the time, I was living in Florence and making trips to Switzerland (Geneva and Lausanne) to conduct research on the Association internationale des femmes—which was founded by Marie Goegg Pouchoulin shortly before the Franco-Prussian War—on behalf of Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, and also to gather information on Italian Jews who had sought refuge in Switzerland between 1943 and 1945 for a study I was doing on Gianfranco Sarfatti (my father's

brother, who accompanied his parents to Switzerland and later returned to Italy to join the Resistance in Valle d'Aosta). During these trips, I would often stop by the CDEC's archives and library to conduct research on Jews in the Resistance and during the Fascist period more broadly. At that time, I had neither a stable job nor a clear career prospect. I had a very strong interest in history, which perhaps first revealed itself in the enthusiasm with which I had read C. W. Ceram's *Gods, Graves, and Scholars: The Story of Archaeology* when I was a boy.⁹

Over the years, this interest shifted toward recent history, also driven by a desire to understand what it means to be Jewish in contemporary times. During the usual coffee break at one of these stops at the CDEC (which involved a collective pause of all activities, including for users), I was offered a position in the archives. The hours were short and the pay was low, as for everyone. I accepted and started a few weeks later.

At that time, fewer than ten people were working at the CDEC, motivated by a strong commitment to documenting and understanding the historical and present condition of Jews in Italy. The organizational structure was very light; Gigliola Colombo Lopez had recently been elected coordinator of activities (there was a bit of a kibbutz-like spirit at the CDEC, and that position was indeed elected). There was also a board of directors, chaired by Luisella Mortara Ottolenghi, who devoted considerable time and energy to managing the institute.

The CDEC was organized into activity sectors, which initially included the library, the archives (which also encompassed historical research), and antisemitism (in the sense of monitoring the phenomenon). I later understood that this structure made the CDEC different from the main institutes with which we compared ourselves (Yad Vashem, but especially the nearby—and namesake—Centre de documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris). The coexistence of historical documentation, contemporary records, books and journals on both the past and present vitality of Italian Jewry, and the study of contemporary prejudice meant (and still means) that the CDEC brings together topics and knowledge that in many other countries are developed in separate institutes. Moreover, this intertwining of different fields always has a positive effect on the work carried out in each area (of course, with care taken to avoid overlaps and confusion).

The following year, I applied (or perhaps was nominated) to become coordinator of activities, and the assembly of collaborators entrusted me with the role. In undertaking it, I always tried to respect the autonomy and, at times, the strong independence of the activity sectors as much as possible, insisting above all on the continuous qualitative improvement of the work carried out.

Two decades later, the entire institute had grown considerably, the collaborators had mostly transitioned from volunteers to employees, and relations with the wider society (including the organizations and companies supporting the CDEC) required greater bureaucracy and decision-making structures. All of this created the conditions for introducing the role of Director. I was the natural candidate for the new role, and my position was formally changed in 2002. This decision was also submitted to the assembly of collaborators, some of whom voted against the transformation. Upon becoming Director, I realized that my formal education had not provided me with any specific preparation for “leading” and that I would therefore have to learn, compare, and engage in

⁹ Ceram was the pseudonym used by the German journalist Kurt Wilhelm Marek. The book was originally published in German in 1949 by Rowohlt publishing house as *Götter, Gräber und Gelehrte*, and had an astounding international success, with subsequent translations in numerous languages. The Italian translation came out as *Civiltà sepolte: il romanzo dell'archeologia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1952).

dialogue. Assuming the new responsibilities was thus a progressive learning process. Nonetheless, the overarching goal remained quality: the strength of the CDEC resided (and still resides) solely in the expertise of its collaborators and the value of their work.

G.S. : *Through your work, you have become the foremost scholar on Fascist antisemitism. Could you tell us how you developed your interest in this field, and to what extent your research endeavors were connected to the Center's activities?*

M. S. : I joined the CDEC as an archivist, but my passion was historical research. For many years, my desk was opposite that of Liliana Picciotto, and I quickly became aware of her intensive work on identifying Jews deported from Italy and reconstructing their fates (work that later culminated in the volume *Il libro della memoria* [1991]).¹⁰ Thus, that thematic field was already being diligently and expertly cultivated.

After some time, reflecting also on requests from archive users, I realized that there was no comprehensive list of the Fascist anti-Jewish laws. Investigating why, I was struck by the fact that these laws had been studied in depth by only one historian, Renzo De Felice. On examining his book (*Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* [1961]),¹¹ I noticed that I was not convinced by some of his interpretations. Finally, I considered that the topic fell squarely within the CDEC's mission. The process of reflection is always more complex and intertwined than can be fully described, and naturally I was influenced by external stimuli; yet these were the key points.

From this arose, first, the publication of the complete corpus of anti-Jewish laws in the journal *La Rassegna mensile di Israel* in 1988 (on the fiftieth anniversary of their enactment); then the book *Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronaca dell'elaborazione delle leggi del 1938*, published by Zamorani in 1994; finally, a short essay on the history of Jews in Italy during the Fascist era for the work *Gli ebrei in Italia*, edited by Corrado Vivanti and published by Einaudi in 1997 in the *Storia d'Italia. Annali* series. This essay subsequently led to my book *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista. Vicende, identità, persecuzione*, published by Einaudi in 2000 and updated and translated multiple times.

I would like to highlight, in this trajectory, the inclusion of the word *contro* (against) in the title of the 1994 book: it was a small act positioning the work "against" a then-widespread narrative that attributed almost all responsibility for the persecution of Jews in Italy to Hitler. My research, on the other hand, demonstrated—through documentary evidence—that Mussolini himself devoted considerable effort and creativity to "thinking through" the Italian anti-Jewish laws. This was therefore not an a priori ideological judgment, or a "prejudice," but rather a reconstruction of the actions of a historical actor.

G. S. : *What do you feel were the CDEC's most relevant achievements during your tenure as director?*

M. S. : I cannot offer a detached assessment of my own commitment to the CDEC, which

¹⁰ See above, footnote n. 4.

¹¹ De Felice's book was first published in 1961, and later reprinted in various revised versions (1962; 1973; 1988; 1993). An English translation of the final version has appeared with the title *The Jews in Fascist Italy: A History* (New York: Enigma Books, 2001).

lasted until 2015. After all, it was a commitment of over thirty years—an important part of my active life. What I can do, however, is point out what I consider to be two significant achievements of the research carried out by the CDEC during that period, which had an important impact on Italian society. I wish to emphasize that these achievements were accomplished by a small private Jewish institute—the CDEC itself—and not by the official research system in Italy, which is centered on the universities and the National Research Council (CNR). For the sake of accuracy, I should also clarify that the merit for the first achievement obviously belongs entirely to those who conducted the research, without my direct involvement.

The first of these achievements is a brief table in Liliana Picciotto's book *Il libro della memoria*¹². The table condenses decades of research and indicates how many victims were arrested by Germans, Italians, or both between 1943 and 1945; in quantitative terms, it shows that Italians made a significant contribution to the arrests, and therefore to the deportation of people whom the Fascist government had classified as being "of Jewish race." In short, that small sequence of numbers attests to the existence of participation and shared responsibility.

The second achievement is the reconstruction of Mussolini's personal involvement in drafting the 1938 anti-Jewish laws, as I have already mentioned.

In both cases, the CDEC demonstrated that in Italy, there was genuine "Italian" engagement in conceiving and implementing antisemitic persecution. It thus made a significant contribution to fostering a knowledge of the national past that is closer to historical reality and less self-exonerating.

G. S. : *What, in your view, is the future of studies on the Shoah in Italy?*

M. S. : Observing what has happened in past decades, I believe that Holocaust studies in Italy do not have a very positive future. By this, I am not referring to research on individual victims or specific episodes of persecution, which will surely continue and yield new and useful knowledge. What I am pessimistic about is the research commitment to the general characteristics of the Holocaust in Italy, and to the place that the Holocaust occupies in Italian history. Such studies require substantial resources and large research infrastructures—that is, the direct engagement of universities or the National Research Council (CNR). Yet these are precisely the institutions that have never personally undertaken the reconstruction of the list of Jews killed or of the anti-Jewish laws enacted by the Fascist government. On the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of 1938 in 2018, some universities installed plaques bearing the names of expelled professors and students, and the rectors of all universities issued a collective letter of apology for those expulsions. However, they did not organize a dedicated research program.

After October 7, 2023, the situation became even more difficult: it seems to me that interest in the persecution of the Jews has, on average, declined, due to the controversies surrounding the events in Gaza, which have affected the very perception of the Holocaust. I write "seems" because this is a personal impression for which I cannot yet provide evidence, and which I hope will ultimately be contradicted by the facts.

The research I consider lacking concerns various aspects. First, a demographic and social analysis of the deportation victims, including their relation to the wider population of

¹² See above, footnote 4.

persecuted individuals. How did the presence of very young children or very elderly family members impact outcomes? How significant were the victims' educational level and social class? Were there differences between Italian and foreign victims? We also know very little about the relationship between economic impoverishment caused by the 1938 laws and the arrests of 1943 to 1944. It would also be necessary to investigate the link between survival and the existence of "Aryan" relatives. Numerous other topics could also be mentioned.

But even the last topic I listed highlights that Holocaust studies tend to be studies of Italian society as a whole. And here, in my view, lies the core issue. The fact is that a true commitment to studying the life and persecution of a minority within the national society requires, on the one hand, the preliminary abandonment of all majority biases, and on the other, the conviction that such a study allows for a deeper understanding of the majority itself. And yet this is precisely one of the obstacles facing Holocaust studies: the majority's limited interest in knowing itself and acknowledging its own dominance.

Still, I am a historian, not a futurologist, and these reflections are only suppositions. It is better to conclude that in Italy, the scientific activity of the CDEC continues to be necessary, regardless of whether the majority of the country's public opinion is aware of it.

Interview with Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, current Director of the Cdec (June 4, 2025)

G. S. : You were appointed to the role of scientific Director of the Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea in 2016. Can you please describe the nature and organizational structure of the institution at the time of your arrival?

GADI LUZZATTO VOGHERA: By the mid-2010s, the CDEC had entered a transitional phase. The Center had been established in 1955 on the initiative of the Jewish Youth Federation (FGEI), and over the decades, it had undergone successive stages of development, evolving from a volunteer-based organization into one increasingly characterized by professionalization. In the mid-1980s, this evolution prompted the board—which is always representative of the Italian Jewish communities—to create a foundation, thereby placing the institution among the most prominent Italian cultural centers, alongside the Gramsci, Einaudi, and Sturzo Foundations, among others.

Upon Michele Sarfatti's retirement, the board opted to launch a public selection process for the new scientific Director, rather than appointing someone from within the institution. This decision represented a significant act of institutional courage, recognizing generational renewal as one of the most pressing challenges facing the Foundation. The new Director was entrusted with a mission of clear discontinuity, focused on rationalizing resources, strengthening national and international collaborations, forging ties with research institutions and universities, and developing initiatives in the field of interreligious dialogue. Given the persistent uncertainty around reliable sources of funding that might allow for medium-term planning, the overarching idea was to enhance the Center's public visibility by actively communicating and disseminating the range of its research and archival work. When I accepted the role—created in the early 2000s to replace the former title of "secretary general"—the CDEC was housed on two floors of a building owned by the Jewish Community of Milan, located at Via Eupili 8, formerly home to the Jewish school. It

was subdivided into distinct departments: the archives and historical research formed a single unit; the library operated independently; the Observatory on Antisemitism worked from a separate room. There was also a photographic documentation department and a video archive. Around fifteen individuals worked in various capacities, in addition to several volunteers. Women made up most of the staff—a longstanding characteristic of the CDEC since the 1960s—and the average age of the workforce was relatively advanced.

G. S. : The CDEC is in many ways a hybrid institution, partly a documentation center dedicated to the conservation of archival materials and other resources, partly a place that promotes and actively engages in historical research, partly oriented toward educational activities, and finally also an institution dedicated to monitoring present-day antisemitism. How do these very diverse sectors of activity fit together, and what is or are—in your view—the area or areas on which the CDEC should invest the most in the future?

G. L. V. : I find the term “hybrid” quite fitting; it aptly captures the nature of the institution. Indeed, the CDEC performs multiple functions, each with considerable competence and professionalism. Today, and in fact throughout its history, the CDEC has never been an academic research center in a strict sense. In my view, its fundamental identity must be anchored in its name: first and foremost, we preserve archival documentation, books, journals, oral testimonies and video interviews, photographs and films, and music scores. We are a constantly expanding repository that chooses diverse avenues for making this material thoughtfully and effectively accessible to the public.

Before delving into our methods, I would emphasize how this hybrid character allows us to maintain continuous relationships with a variety of research centers and cultural institutions, often more specialized. We can, for instance, establish formal collaborations with many universities, cooperating in fields ranging from historical research to education and dissemination. We maintain structural partnerships with our sister institutions (“older sisters,” I would say) such as Yad Vashem in Jerusalem or the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris. We work with a music conservatory that has established doctoral fellowships based on documentation we preserve. We have agreements with the Italian President of the Council of Minister’s office and with law enforcement apparatus monitoring antisemitism. We offer consultancy services to writers, filmmakers, and journalists. All this is made possible by the hybrid nature of our institution, and of course, by the extensive expertise gained over 70 years of work.

Let me now turn to our operational approach. I would highlight the visionary quality of certain key decisions made in the recent past. Two moments come to mind. In the mid-1990s, the CDEC secured funding to collect video testimonies from Italian Jewish survivors of Nazi extermination camps. The project was led by Liliana Picciotto and Marcello Pezzetti and involved the collaboration of a young filmmaker, Ruggero Gabbai, who took up this unprecedented challenge. This resulted in an invaluable trove of images and high-quality footage, which was initially condensed into the documentary movie *Memoria* (1997).

The second decision was to make a decisive commitment to digitization and to embrace the challenges posed by emerging technologies. The creation of a modern data management system—the [Digital Library](#)—was accomplished innovative for its time. This was a unifying project, intended to structurally link the Center’s archival and bibliographical holdings through a single digital platform.

The CDEC’s forward-looking spirit is, in a sense, “genetic.” The institute was founded by a generation traumatized by the antisemitic persecutions of the 1930s and the devastation

of World War II. Their orientation was toward the future, and it is this imperative that we continue to honor today. We actively recruit young scholars and researchers, as well as civil service volunteers (through agreements with both the Italian and Austrian governments). We have established a department dedicated to education and training, convinced as we are that working with teachers and younger generations is essential to making our work meaningful. We constantly adapt our research methodologies on antisemitism to the evolving languages of the web and social media. Moreover, we pay close attention to communication, promoting a coherent and recognizable graphic identity for our public initiatives (conferences, digital exhibitions, newsletters, etc.). Lastly, the relocation of the CDEC's headquarters from Via Eupili to Milan's Central Station, within the Shoah Memorial complex, has allowed us to open our library and archives to broader and more convenient public access. We now offer forty-nine workstations, computers for visitors, and extended opening hours—including Sundays. This move has significantly increased the use of our collections and has enhanced the Foundation's visibility beyond the traditional framework of the Jewish community.

G. S. : What do you believe are the peculiarities of this institution? How does it compare to others operating within or outside of the country? What are its operating relationships with other academic and non-academic institutions inside and outside Italy?

G. L. V. : Shortly after I assumed my role at the CDEC, the institution entered an intense phase of international project development. We had just completed the demanding yet unique experience of the EHRI project ([European Holocaust Research Infrastructure](#)), developed under the Horizon program, in which the CDEC had participated since 2015. Collaborating with international partners is undoubtedly challenging, yet the CDEC has demonstrated its ability to position itself as a competent and credible institution. This international orientation had already emerged in 2010 with the launch of an English-language historical journal. The scientific committee, responding to the initiative of a new generation of Jewish studies scholars, supported the creation of this academic platform: as noted on the journal's website, "CDEC's Scientific Board supported the creation of a new historical journal, based in Italy but written in English, as a venue for intellectual discussion in the field of Jewish studies," as noted on the journal's website. [Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History](#) is now approaching its thirtieth issue and has become a recognized platform in the field.

Joining European projects meant—and continues to mean—pursuing a necessary dynamic: taking advantage of international funding to support ongoing initiatives; exposing our researchers to an international academic environment, which continuously enriches our work with new perspectives and approaches, while also reaffirming the CDEC's central role as a key reference point in Italy. These collaborations extend our network, creating initiatives with significant social and cultural impact. Consider our training seminars for teachers, often developed with European, American, and Israeli partners—initiatives that allow for methodological exchange and foster innovative teaching. Consider also our work in monitoring antisemitic hatred and in educational efforts to counter it—fields in which the CDEC has long been a part of consolidated networks, such as [Facing Facts](#) and [ENCATE](#), and it has represented Italy at the [IHRA](#) for over a decade. Finally, the EHRI project helped to establish a permanent European research infrastructure dedicated to Holocaust-related

archival documentation.

G. S. : For a long time, the CDEC has invested in digital resources. Its Digital Library is a prime example of how to operate in terms of archival conservation, making documents and various resources easily available for scholars. What do you envisage as the key drivers of digital investment from the CDEC in the near future?

G. L. V. : As previously mentioned, technological development is a central concern at the CDEC. The painstaking construction of the Digital Library has enabled us to transform what was once a largely two-dimensional paper archive into a complex, three-dimensional web of data connected to the individuals whose memory we preserve. The use of Linked Open Data (LOD) technology now allows searches performed through our online platform to connect the tens of thousands of individuals in our archives with a potentially expandable network of associations. This dynamic, constantly updated system enhances our work in the field of Digital Humanities.

We have, for instance, fundamentally changed how we conceptualize and present exhibitions. In recent years, we created an installation for the Triennale di Milano illustrating the 1938 Fascist “Census of Race,” using data from our Digital Library in a visually intuitive format that broke from traditional exhibition models. A similar approach was adopted in an installation on the deportation of Jews from the island of Rhodes displayed at Milan’s Shoah Memorial. Currently, our ever-expanding databases are enabling a new dissemination project using maps, documents, and narratives to trace the emigration (more accurately, expulsion) of Jews from Arab countries. The website for this project, [TRAME](#), has been recently launched.

G. S. : What do you believe to be the CDEC’s major accomplishments during your years as its director?

G. L. V. : Each leadership transition at the CDEC has ushered in periods of change and innovation, often in response to broader social and cultural transformations in Italy, Europe, and globally. The various scholars and administrators who served at the helm left their distinct marks and proposed different research and organizational strategies, always in keeping with the foundational mission of 1955. Roberto Bassi, Guido Valabrega, Eloisa Ravenna, and then Raffaele Jona, Luisella Ottolenghi with Liliana Picciotto, Michele Sarfatti and Marcello Pezzetti, and then Giorgio Sacerdoti with Raffaella Mortara and many of the institute’s advisors and collaborators decided on and subsequently oversaw these transformations.

The nine years of my directorship were shaped by several strategic priorities. First among them was the relocation of our headquarters to Milan’s Central Station, within the Shoah Memorial, and the opening—mentioned earlier—of a large public library. This move brought major operational changes, partly due to the Center’s new public visibility and central location. Today, it is easy to come and study in the archives and library from practically all over Italy in just a few hours, and this has led to a notable increase in the presence of researchers, and consequently a multiplication of publications created thanks to the consultation of our material. A second major development was the decision to provide open access to key periodicals and newspapers published by Italian Jewry from the mid-nineteenth century through the post-World War II period. These primary sources are

indispensable for the study of modern Jewish history and are now regularly consulted by a growing community of scholars.

The third innovation involved the still ongoing establishment of a structured department dedicated to education and training. Previously, CDEC staff occasionally offered school consultations and organized public lectures, but education was not a core priority. Over time, we realized that the demand for professional training and education services on topics such as the history of the Holocaust, antisemitism, interreligious dialogue, and issues related to discrimination and human rights was growing from the world of schools and associations. Collaborations at national and international levels have therefore developed, leading the CDEC to become one of the most recognized points of reference in this field today.

G. S. : In your view, how has the Middle Eastern conflict post-October 7 affected the CDEC?

G. L. V. : It is generally inadvisable to analyze the consequences of a crisis while it is still unfolding. Nevertheless, certain emerging dynamics are already evident. The department most directly affected has been the Observatory on Antisemitism, whose scientific rigor has made it a critical reference point for media, politics, and institutions alike. The increased psychological pressure and workload has paralleled the surge in antisemitic incidents, prompting changes—which are still underway—in our working practices.

This rise in antisemitic acts has also intensified concerns around the safety of our staff and our premises, which—like many Jewish sites—are now under constant police surveillance. At the same time, we are witnessing a significant shift in civil society, with some sectors demanding (and at times expecting) unequivocal political condemnation of Israeli government and military actions from institutions like ours. Such expectations often blur into the problematic conflation of Jewish identity with Israeli policy.

We have also observed similarly troubling trends in the educational sphere, where there is an obsessive and scandalous tendency to draw false equivalence between the events of the Middle East conflict and the memory of the Shoah. These dynamics inevitably affect our institutional work, though it is too soon to determine whether the events of October 7 and the ensuing conflict will have lasting impacts—and if so, of what nature—once the current crisis reaches its conclusion.