

**David Levi.
A Child of the Nineteenth Century**

by *Alessandro Grazi*

Abstract

The present paper examines the main biographical traits of the Italian author, politician and Risorgimento activist David Levi (1816-1898). Early in life, Levi abandoned the traditional religious spheres of Judaism but always remained attached to his Jewish heritage, as emerges from his oeuvre. Levi's relevance derives from his constant effort to amalgamate Italian and Jewish identities in a context of increasing secularity. An analysis of his figure and activities, therefore enables us to investigate some crucial issues at the center of current historiographical debate, such as the nineteenth-century Jewish transition from a traditional to a modern identity, the discussion around the concepts of "assimilation" and "integration," orientalist researches and the study of religions in nineteenth-century Italy, and the important role of Freemasonry and Saintsimonism in Levi's secularization modes. In fact, their concept of "Religion of Humanity" helped him to create a synthesis between Enlightenment's aspirations to universalism and Risorgimento's cosmopolitan nationalism.

- David Levi
- David Levi's oeuvre
- Final remarks on David Levi

David Levi

David Levi is a rather intriguing Jewish figure of the Italian *Ottocento*, a "child of the century," as he liked to define himself.¹ His relevance and fame reached a

¹ Quotation from an extract of David Levi's Autobiography typed in 1938 by Emanuele Artom

European dimension around the *fin de siècle*, when essays on his life and oeuvre appeared in English and German, and several intellectuals praised his writings.² At the top of his fame, he earned the title of “Poet and Patriot,” which efficiently summarized the two central aspects of his life: his literary writings and his active role in the Risorgimento. The Italian author and politician, however, was almost entirely forgotten by scholarship for the entire twentieth century, besides some sporadic analyses of his socialist ideas and brief descriptions of his literary activity.³ Only in recent years, academics have started to re-discover and acknowledge Levi’s great importance not only for modern Jewish history and literature but also for the history of Italy’s unification and its subsequent years. These studies investigate some of the most interesting aspects of his multi-faceted life, such as his affiliation with Freemasonry and *Giovine Italia*, his active role in the *Risorgimento* national movement, his special relation with Christianity and Christological themes, his adherence to Saintsimonism, and his interest for the history of religions and orientalism.⁴ Nevertheless, all these interesting researches

and conserved in the Emanuele Artom Library of Turin’s Jewish community.

² Helen Zimmern, “David Levi, Poet and Patriot,” in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 9/3 (1897): 363-402; Samuel Hirsch Margulies, *Dichter und Patriot. Eine Studie über das Leben und die Werke D. Levis* (Trier: Sigmund Mayer, 1896) and Giulio Vindice, *La vita e le opere di David Levi* (Florence: G. Barbera, 1889).

³ Luigi Bulferetti, *Socialismo risorgimentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975) 81-103; Leo Neppi Modona, “17 lettere di S. H. Margulies a David Levi,” in *La Rassegna Mensile d’Israel* 28/II (1962): 62-75; Delio Cantimori, *Utopisti e riformatori Italiani* (Florence: Industria Tipografica Fiorentina, 1943); Sabato Morais, *Italian Hebrew Literature* (New York: Hermon Press, 1926).

⁴ Alessandro Grazi, “In Quest of a (Jewish) Identity: David Levi’s Il Mistero delle Tre Melarancie,” in *Zutot – Perspectives on Jewish Culture* 9 (2012): 97-110; Alessandro Grazi, “A Jewish Construction of a Catholic Hero: David Levi’s A Pio IX,” in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, 6/ 1 (2011), <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1909>; Francesca Sofia, “Il vangelo eterno svelato: David Levi e la massoneria,” in *Massoneria e Unità d’Italia – La Libera Muratoria e la costruzione della nazione*, eds. Fulvio Conti and Marco Novarino (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), 203-222; Francesca Sofia, “Gli Ebrei risorgimentali fra tradizione biblica, libera muratoria e nazione,” in *La Massoneria, Storia d’Italia – Annali 21*, ed. Gian Mario Cazzaniga (Turin: Einaudi, 2007) 244-265; Francesca Sofia, “La laicizzazione dell’immagine dell’ebreo errante,” in *Stato nazionale ed emancipazione ebraica. Atti del Convegno “Stato nazionale, società civile e minoranze religiose: l’emancipazione degli ebrei in Francia, Germania e Italia tra rigenerazione morale e intolleranza”* (Roma 23-25 Ottobre 1991) eds. Francesca Sofia and Mario Toscano (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1992); Fulvio Conti, “David Levi,” in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 64 (2005); Augusto Comba, “Giuseppe David Levi profeta del Risorgimento,” in *Isacco Artom e gli Ebrei Italiani dai Risorgimenti al fascismo*, ed. Aldo Alessandro Mola (Foggia: Bastogi, 2002) 109-116; Aldo Alessandro Mola, *Storia della Massoneria italiana dall’Unità alla Repubblica* (Milan: Bompiani, 1976); Alberto Cavaglion, “Gli Ebrei italiani e il Risorgimento: la lezione di David Levi,” in *La Bibbia, la coccarda e il tricolore. I*

deal with a particular aspect of his life or with a specific perspective of his *Weltanschauung*, leaving the reader full of questions concerning a wider biographical context of Levi's endeavours. This essay wishes to fill this gap by presenting the salient traits of David Levi's life, contextualizing them in wider Italian and European frames and presenting some key historiographical questions this author allows us to address. The importance of Levi, indeed, lies in the fact that an analysis of his figure and activities enables us to investigate some crucial issues, at the center of current historiographical debate, not only concerning the more confined field of (Italian) Jewish studies, but also more general research areas, such as modern history, history of religions and the *Risorgimento*.

In the first place, we have the opportunity to examine a type of modern secular Jew, which has insofar received insufficient scholarly attention, especially within the Italian domain: one that relinquished the religious and traditional spheres of Judaism, yet remained strongly attached to his Jewish identity. Hitherto, the predominant view has been to consider only two possible outcomes for the Jewish encounter with modernity: either from within tradition and religion, or, alternatively, full assimilation in the hosting society with a total rejection of Jewish identity. Levi shows that there has been an alternative synchronous approach, which, in spite of its secular path, entailed a strong attachment to both Jewish *and* Italian identity. Levi's successful amalgamation of the Italian and the Jew through a secularization process is not unique in nineteenth-century Europe, but research on this re-defined type of Jewish identity is still at an initial phase and has not yet developed suitable tools to verify (and define) the existence of common European or Italian patterns followed by secular Jewish intellectuals. In the Italian context, which is unfortunately still quite marginal within current historiography on Jewish modernity, research has mainly focused on rabbinic milieus,⁵ with only few studies on secular Jewish individuals.

valdesi fra due emancipazioni (1798-1848) ed. Gian Paolo Romagnani, (Turin: Claudiana, 2001), 369-374; Bruno Di Porto, *Gli Ebrei di Pisa (secoli IX-XX). Atti del convegno internazionale, Pisa, 3-4 Ottobre 1994* (Ospedaletto, Pisa: Pacini, 1998).

⁵ Very important, in this respect, are the studies on Jewish culture in rabbinical milieus in nineteenth-century Italy carried out by Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, in his cornerstone works Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, *Il prezzo dell'uguaglianza. Il dibattito sull'emancipazione degli ebrei in Italia (1781-1848)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1998) and Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, "Aspetti della cultura ebraica in Italia nel secolo XIX," in *Storia d'Italia. Annali. Volume 22, Gli Ebrei in Italia*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi 1997), 1215-1244; Maddalena Del Bianco's researches on Padua's Rabbinical College, the most important Jewish cultural center in nineteenth-century Italy and a precursor of modern rabbinical education in Europe, with her Maddalena Del Bianco Cotrozzi, *Il*

Furthermore, this study wishes to contribute to the discussion around the concepts of “assimilation” and “integration.” Generally connected to analyses of secularization processes, the debate on assimilation has been biased by two opposing viewpoints. Its orthodox and Zionist detractors, on one side, gave it a negative connotation, as a total abandonment of one’s Jewish identity, while, on the other, its defenders emphasized its positive aspects. Current historiography, on the contrary, is trying to get rid of this bias, by simply pointing out the necessity of problematizing this phenomenon and investigating all of its numerous nuances and facets, in order to better grasp its complexity. David Levi’s biography will help us understand one of these numerous facets. Also the concept of integration to a certain extent suffers of historiographical misrepresentation, in particular within the Italian domain. The precursors and pioneers of the field of Italian Jewish history tended to describe the Italian Jews’ integration process in the hosting society after civil emancipation as swift and smooth, leading, in their view, to a seamless assimilation of Judaism within Italy’s cultural life.⁶ This idea is present, for instance, in scholars like Attilio Milano,⁷ Cecil Roth,⁸ and Arnaldo Momigliano.⁹ In recent years, a new historiographical stream has developed, which applied a more systematic analysis of documentary and literary sources. Thus, scholars like Alberto Cavaglione,¹⁰ Francesca Sofia, Mario Toscano,¹¹ David Bidussa,¹² or even more recently Cristiana Facchini,¹³

Collegio Rabbinico di Padova. Un’istituzione religiosa dell’Ebraismo sulla via dell’emancipazione (Florence: Olschki, 1995); Renzo De Felice’s and Alessandro Guetta’s studies on Leghorn’s kabbalist Rabbi Elia Benamozegh in Renzo De Felice, “Elia Benamozegh,” in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (1966), 169-170 and Alessandro Guetta, *Philosophie et cabbale. Essai sur la pensée d’Elie Benamozegh* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998); and finally Asher Salah’s work on Mantua’s rabbi Marco Mortara in Asher Salah, *L’epistolario di Marco Mortara (1815-1894). Un rabbino italiano tra riforma e ortodossia* (Florence: Giuntina, 2012).

⁶ A thorough discussion on the different historiographical streams on Italian Judaism can be found in Cristiana Facchini, *David Castelli. Ebraismo e scienze delle religioni tra Otto e Novecento* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2005), 32-33.

⁷ Attilio Milano, *Storia degli Ebrei in Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1963).

⁸ Cecil Roth, *The History of the Jews of Italy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946).

⁹ Arnaldo Momigliano, *Pagine ebraiche* (Turin: Einaudi, 1987).

¹⁰ Cavaglione, “Gli Ebrei italiani e il Risorgimento,” 369-374.

¹¹ *Stato nazionale ed emancipazione ebraica. Atti del Convegno “Stato nazionale, società civile e minoranze religiose: l’emancipazione degli ebrei in Francia, Germania e Italia tra rigenerazione morale e intolleranza” (Roma 23-25 Ottobre 1991)*, eds. Francesca Sofia and Mario Toscano (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1992).

¹² David Bidussa, “Gli ebrei in Italia in età moderno-contemporanea. Considerazioni per una

Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti,¹⁴ and Elizabeth Schächter¹⁵ pointed out how the first generation of historians on Italian Judaism drew on misconceptions that were sometimes created by nineteenth-century Italian Jewish intellectuals, with the purpose of molding a grand narrative around the relation between Italian Judaism and nationalism. These myths and misconceptions endured almost up to the present day. The second side of the coin of the debate on Italian Jewish integration concerns its quality and extent in the pre-emancipation period. According to another old misconception, the Italian Jews have been happily integrated in surrounding society at all times. Recent studies are challenging this second myth as well, showing how an investigation of the Italian Jews' integration cannot be applied in a monolithic way to all Jewries of the peninsula, but it is important to distinguish between the strongly diverging geo-political contexts of pre-unification Italy and the different origins and cultural orientations of Italian Jewish communities, and to unravel individual peculiarities. This recent emphasis on the Italian Jewish communities' substantial fragmentation even led to problematizing the very term Italian Jewry.¹⁶ At the same time, also the idea that the Italian Jews' integration process started only with the achievement of full civil rights does not describe this phenomenon appropriately. The term integration does not exclusively apply to the Jews' modernization process in the nineteenth century.¹⁷

storia ancora da scrivere,” in *Bailamme* 15-16 (1994): 50-69.

¹³ She elaborated on the concepts of Italian Jewish integration and assimilation and on the related historiographical issues in several essays and articles, but mainly on the aforementioned work Facchini, *David Castelli*, 17-35.

¹⁴ Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti, *Fare gli ebrei italiani. Autorappresentazioni di una minoranza (1861-1918)*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011).

¹⁵ Elizabeth Schächter, *The Jews of Italy 1848-1915. Between Tradition and Transformation* (London - Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2011).

¹⁶ In the 1800s Padua, Livorno and Turin were the three main demographic centers of Italian Judaism, having each a characterizing approach to Judaism and modernity. For instance, compared to the most studied milieu of Padua's rabbinical college, Turin and Piedmont have even been defined as “the other side of the world” by Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, “Aspetti della cultura ebraica in Italia nel secolo XIX,” in *Storia d'Italia. Annali. Vol. 22: Gli Ebrei in Italia*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi, 1997) 1216. There is, however, increasing awareness of the necessity of a regional approach to the study of Italian Jewries: Ulrich Wyrwa, *Juden in der Toskana und in Preussen im Vergleich. Aufklärung und Emanzipation in Florenz, Livorno, Berlin und Königsberg i. Pr.*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) or my own doctoral dissertation Alessandro Grazi, *Patria ed Affetti. Jewish Identity and Risorgimento Nationalism in the Oeuvres of Samuel Luzzatto, Isaac Reggio, and David Levi*, PhD Dissertation defended at the University of Groningen, 08 November 2012.

¹⁷ Facchini, *David Castelli*, 25.

In recent years, the path for the exploration of secular Jewish figures in modern Italy has been opened by Cristiana Facchini's pioneering studies on David Castelli, a Livorno-born Jewish scholar, who followed a secular trajectory.¹⁸ An exploration of Levi's life and oeuvre aims at adding a piece of the puzzle to this line of research. Clearly, this enables also reflections on the concept of Jewish identity, which is integral part of the debate around the distinction between religious/traditional and secular approaches to modernity.

A further input provided by Levi's biography and cultural engagement concerns orientalist researches and the study of religions in nineteenth-century Italy, from a Jewish perspective. David Levi was not a professional "orientalist" and scholar of religions, as he never pursued an academic career. Nevertheless, he deeply engaged himself in this type of researches and devoted a good part of his writings to them, as a way to investigate his Jewish heritage, as we will see. Just like in many other respects of his life, Levi followed nineteenth-century cultural trends in this case too. The study of oriental cultures and religions was fashionable among intellectuals in the 1800s, but from an Italian Jewish perspective is still an understudied phenomenon.

Finally, we will investigate the important role of Freemasonry, *Giovine Italia* and Saintsimonism in David Levi's secularization process. These secret societies and the utopian socialist doctrine occupied a large and important part of his life, from his youth until his death. They did not only constitute a mere biographical aspect of his existence, but also had a strong impact on his mind-set and literary activity. There is no doubt that their concept of "Religion of Humanity" helped Levi create a synthesis between Enlightenment's aspirations to universalism and Risorgimento's cosmopolitan nationalism. We will address the question: which role did they play in his secular synthesis of Jewish and Italian?

Levi's biography has to be reconstructed crossing data from different documentary and literary sources. The author did leave us a private diary and an autobiography but, at the present state of research, they are both still unpublished.¹⁹ Luckily, he included parts of his autobiography in two of his published books: *Vita di pensiero: ricordi e liriche* (Life of Thought: memories and lyrics) and *Ausonia, vita d'azione (dal 1848 al 1870)* (Ausonia, Life of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The autograph manuscripts of his autobiography and private diary are conserved at the Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento, in Turin, in the private archive of David Levi. Parts of his autobiography were typed in 1938 by Emanuele Artom (1915-1944), a member of an important Jewish family in Turin, and are now conserved in the Emanuele Artom Library of Turin's Jewish community.

Action).²⁰ Besides these texts, anecdotes and facts about his life are scattered around his writings and have to be properly extrapolated and contextualized by researchers. In addition to this biographical information, I recently had the opportunity to carry out thorough research in David Levi's private archive, conserved at the National Museum of the Risorgimento in Turin. Thus, I recovered a large number of documents and unpublished texts, which allowed me to reconstruct his biography in more detail.

Levi himself liked to refer to his life as divided in two parts, as suggested by the two aforementioned works: "a life of thought," that is, the first part of his life, which was mainly devoted to his studies, the development of his political and philosophical ideas, and in which he started writing some of his literary works; and "a life of action," the time in which Levi "laid down the pen to seize the sword,"²¹ in order to play an active role in the Risorgimento national movement and Italy's political life across the unification period. I would actually divide Levi's life in three parts: 1) the phase of his socio-philosophical education (life of thought); 2) his active participation in the Risorgimento and in Italy's political life (life of action); 3) his retired life after his last resignation from the Italian Parliament in 1880 until his death in 1898 (life of thought again). This is of course only a schematic subdivision in line with Levi's original conception, which helps to create a logical pattern of his endeavors. The various aspects of his life actually intertwined in a much more fluid way than this. His writing activity, for instance, took place in all three phases, although it was certainly more intense in the first and especially the last period. The present biography will mostly focus on the first two phases of Levi's life, as they are crucial for his formation and the development of his entire *Weltanschauung*. Methodologically, it will rely on both literary and archival/documentary sources, in accordance with current historiographical approaches.²²

David Levi was born in Chieri, Piedmont, at that time part of the Kingdom of Sardinia, on November 6, 1816. In the past, there has been uncertainty concerning his date of birth. Emanuele Artom maintained that he was born on

²⁰ David Levi, *Vita di pensiero – Ricordi e liriche* (Milan: Battezzati, 1875); and David Levi, *Ausonia. Vita d'azione (1848-1870)*, (Turin: Loescher, 1882).

²¹ Morais, *Italian Hebrew Literature*, 187.

²² The integration of fictional and documentary sources is methodologically conceptualized in *The Risorgimento Revisited. Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Italy*, eds. Silvana Patriarca and Lucy Riall, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2-7 but has been already applied in the last decade but several historians, such as the renowned Risorgimento historian Mario Banti in several of his works.

November 9, 1816.²³ Other sources indicated even a different year, 1820²⁴ or 1821.²⁵ We can exclude the years 1820 and 1821, since they would be in contrast with the dates of his school enrollment and of his graduation from university. Once established 1816 as the year of his birth, November 6 (as maintained by the author himself in his memoirs) seems to be a more plausible date of birth than November 9. In fact, in the past it happened relatively often that newborn babies were registered in local archives a few days after their birth, and the registration day was recorded as the date of birth. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that the author reports a wrong date of his own birth.

David was a member of the Levis, an important and wealthy family, part of Piedmont's emerging middle class, which would become one of the pillars of the Italian bourgeoisie. David Levi Senior, his grandfather, was a successful business man, who combined an elevated education with a keen interest in politics. His good economic condition assured him and his family privileges that were denied to most Jews in Piedmont and in the rest of the Italian peninsula. They owned land and houses, in spite of the prohibition, and ran successful companies. During the so-called "first emancipation" (Piedmont's Napoleonic era), David Levi senior served as a mayor of Chieri and was Piedmont's Jewish representative at the Sanhedrin in Paris, the famous institution established by Napoleon.²⁶ The pivotal role played by the Levi family in their hometown, situated in the area of Turin, the leading political and economic center of the Risorgimento, favored their inclusion in high society circles, which encompassed Jewish and non-Jewish families, such as the Pellicos, the Artoms and the Cavours. David Levi's grandfather was a key figure in his life, as he was David's main contributor to his Jewish and secular education.

David's grandfather had four children. Each one of them inherited one of the

²³ Civil register of Chieri's Jews conserved in the archives of Turin's Jewish community, as reported by Emanuele Artom's unpublished biography of Levi, conserved in Biblioteca Emanuele Artom of Turin's Jewish community, p. 2.

²⁴ Telesforo Sarti, *I rappresentanti del Piemonte e d'Italia nelle tredici legislature del Regno* (Rome: Paolini, 1880).

²⁵ Angelo De Gubernatis, *Dizionario biografico degli scrittori contemporanei* (Florence, 1879); Leone Carpi, *Il Risorgimento Italiano: Biografie Storico-Politiche d'Illustri Italiani Contemporanei*, (Milan, 1884), 331; Ersilio Michel, *Dizionario del Risorgimento nazionale* (Milan: Vallardi, 1933) and Guido Mazzoni, *L'Ottocento* (Milan: Vallardi, 1934), 1345.

²⁶ See the Italian edition of the documents related to the institution of the Sanhedrin: Raccolta degli atti dell'assemblea degli Israeliti di Francia e del Regno d'Italia convocata a Parigi con decreto di S.M.I. e R. del 30 maggio 1806. Pubblicata dal sig. Diogene Tama e seguita dai processi verbali e decisioni del Gran Sinedrio tomo 1.-2.

four different activities their family owned. One was chosen to run a cotton textile factory (which was the Levis' original economic activity), another a silk factory, the third possessed a bank (founded by David Levi senior) and the fourth received land. The wealthy condition of his family allowed young David to be raised in a highly educated and acculturated milieu. In this stimulating environment, he grew curious and desirous of knowledge and culture. His early education was taken care of by private tutors but was also fostered within his family. He was taught not only the traditional Jewish subjects, but also general secular culture, as was habitual among acculturated and highly integrated Italian Jewish families. Levi refers that during his childhood he was considered to be rather temperamental and rebellious. His family was forced to change his private tutor several times and nicknamed him *piccolo demone* [Little Demon].²⁷ This impulsive nature seems to have characterized also his adult life, especially his times as a university student.

The socio-economic condition of the Levis offers the opportunity for a first reflection on the theme of integration. In the first place, it suggests that we approach this theme in a much more nuanced and precise way. The "Italian Jews" cannot be taken as a whole homogeneous block, but fundamental distinctions have to be made concerning the geo-political region where they lived, but also as regards their socio-economic situation. In other words, if for an average Piedmont's Jewish family the traditional scheme "first emancipation" → positive condition, Restoration → regression to a negative condition, 1848 → definitive acquisition of civil rights, could work, for a family with a privileged socio-economic condition, like the Levis, this scheme is not entirely accurate. It is true that the "first emancipation" gave them the chance to start activities they were previously forbidden to carry out, which in turn allowed David's grandfather to reach top levels in society. At the same time, the Jews' legal regression starting in 1815 (corresponding to David's childhood and youth) did not necessarily have a catastrophic impact on the Levis, who, on the ground of economic utility for the Kingdom of Sardinia, were by and large allowed to keep their properties and run their businesses. This leads to a second consideration, that the process of integration, if not legal at least cultural and economic, is a lot more fluid and less schematized than initially thought and is not exclusively linked to the emancipation period.

In order to understand and correctly contextualize Levi's choices as a teenager first and then as an adult in relation to Judaism, it is fundamental to elaborate on

²⁷ Reported by Zimmern, "David Levi, Poet and Patriot," 364. The author, however, does not provide the source of this piece of information.

the religious environment in which he grew up. The Levis were an observant Jewish family, whose strong traditions combined the centuries-old Jewish ones and the local customs of Piedmont's middle class. They celebrated all the Jewish festivities with large family reunions and opened their spacious house to the local Jewish community as a meeting place for the Sabbath rituals.

In 1830 Levi enrolled in the Jewish College of Vercelli, called the "Foà Institute."²⁸ This was an exclusively Jewish institution, which, like other Italian Jewish institutions of the time, imparted also a secular education on all subjects. Therefore, next to the traditional Jewish curriculum and the study of the Hebrew language, David also acquired a deep knowledge in Italian history and literature. Many important Italian Jewish personalities were educated in this school, such as the orientalist Salvatore De Benedetti (Novara 1818 – Pisa 1891) and the politician Isacco Artom (Asti 1829 – Rome 1900). Here Levi learned to love Italian history and literature as much as he admired his Jewish descent and showed a special inclination for writing and poetry. It is clear that both family and education fostered a high sense of Italian patriotism in David and instilled a great enthusiasm in him not only for the Jewish side of his identity but equally for his patriotic Italian side.

In addition to his grandfather, a further influential person in Levi's formative years was one of his mentors, Giuseppe Vitalevi.²⁹ Professor Vitalevi was a fervent Italian patriot and a follower and admirer of Giuseppe Mazzini. Vitalevi possessed a private library, where David Levi spent long hours reading texts related to Italian history, literature and nationalism. Most importantly, it was in Vitalevi's collection that Levi became acquainted with the writings of Giordano Bruno, who had a deep impact in his life and thought.

Already as a young boy, Levi had ambivalent feelings as regards his Jewish identity. On the one hand, he certainly felt the pride and synchronous rage of being part of an oppressed minority, which at that time was still denied equal rights. This feeling is strongly detectable in his writings and was present in spite of his family's privileged socio-economic condition. As a matter of fact, Levi maintains that this feeling of oppression was not so much due to their legal or economic situation, but to the anti-Semitic attitude of a part of the population, of which he was a victim on several occasions in his life. Next to this pride, however, Levi started to develop a feeling of inadequacy towards the traditional

²⁸ This institute was founded in 1829, as stated in Rossella Bottini Treves, "Nascita di un'istituzione culturale vercellese: il Collegio Foa," in *Bollettino storico vercellese* 3/1 (1994): 99-104, therefore shortly before David Levi's enrollment.

²⁹ On Giuseppe Vitalevi see Mario Battistini, *Esuli italiani in Belgio* (Florence: Brunetti, 1968).

and religious spheres of Judaism, which made him feel restricted. This led him to abandon religion, tradition, and the community still as a young boy. Levi's childhood and early youth already clarify how Enlightenment's, Jewish and patriotic Italian sentiments could simultaneously intertwine in his mind and heart at such an early stage.

In the early 1830s, his desire to leave the strict boundaries of the Jewish community, his wish to pursue academic studies (which were interdicted to Jews in Piedmont at the time) but also episodes of anti-Semitism, formed a powerful combination of contrasting factors, which convinced David to leave Chieri. He suddenly and secretly ran away from his family, heading to the Duchy of Parma, where Jews were admitted into university. After attending a few courses in Parma, he moved to the University of Pisa, in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, one of the few States in pre-unification Italy where Jews could enroll in universities. His stay in Pisa became a fundamental step in his life. In the Tuscan city, he had the chance to meet Giuseppe Montanelli (Fucecchio 1813 – 1862), who had a great influence on Levi's socio-political views. Montanelli introduced Levi to the utopian socialist ideas of Henri de Saint-Simon³⁰ (Paris 1760 – 1825), initiator of the philosophical doctrine of Saintsimonism. The saintsimonian theories would influence the rest of Levi's life and form a large segment of his *Weltanschauung*. In Montanelli's cultural milieu, he also met other influential intellectuals, such as Giovan Pietro Vieusseux³¹ (Oneglia 1769 – Florence 1863), Giovan Battista Niccolini³² (Bagni di San Giuliano 1782 – Florence 1861) and Luigi De Cambray-Digny³³ (Florence 1778 – 1843). His life as a young student was thus characterized by revolutionary impulses and innovative cultural experiences.³⁴ The Italian author narrates that in Pisa he devoured countless books on other religions, as a consequence of his doubts and reflections on Judaism, and lay the foundations for his vast familiarity with oriental cultures and religions.

³⁰ Claude Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon, often referred to as Henri de Saint-Simon (17 October 1760 – 19 May 1825) was a French early socialist theorist whose thought influenced the foundations of various nineteenth-century philosophies.

³¹ Italian editor, who founded a literary circle and a number of literary journals.

³² Italian writer of historical dramas.

³³ Italian architect.

³⁴ Comba, "Giuseppe David Levi profeta del Risorgimento," 110.



Fig. 1 Certificate of David Levi's admission to obtain his university degree in Civil Law, at the University of Pisa, June 5, 1838. Folder 31.3.15 of David Levi's private archive, at the National Museum of Risorgimento, Turin.

Reconstructing exact dates in David Levi's life, just like in the aforementioned case of his birth, is not an easy task. For example, he claims he arrived in Pisa for his studies around 1840, but other sources report he reached the Tuscan city in 1836 and graduated in 1840. The same discrepancy is found concerning other important episodes. The reason for this disagreement among the different sources is partly due to the scarcity of documents in our possession and partly to the fact that Levi wrote his memoirs at an old age. At that point in his life, he reconstructed certain details of his biography in an approximate way. At any rate, archival research revealed that in June 1838 Levi was admitted to the final exam of the Doctorate in Civil Law at the University of Pisa (Fig. 1). In addition, we know that in 1837 he was initiated to Freemasonry and *Giovine Italia* in Livorno, as we will see later. These documentary elements make 1836 a rather likely date of his arrival in Pisa and categorically exclude 1840.

Even though he was already close to obtaining his Law Degree in Pisa, as we have seen, Levi graduated in 1840 from the University of Siena. Why did he leave Pisa when he was so close to his target and completed his studies in Siena? The reason for this seemingly irrational choice is narrated by Levi himself in an excerpt of his autobiography reported by Emanuele Artom, who tells of an

episode of anti-Semitism that sparked his violent reaction, for which he was arrested and forced to flee back to Chieri.³⁵ He then returned to Tuscany, in order to complete his studies and obtain a Law Degree, but this time in Siena, as Pisa might have been a dangerous place for the Italian poet.

The Tuscan period turned out to be crucial in David Levi's formation not only thanks to the aforementioned enrollment in saintsimonian circles and achievement of a university degree, but also due to his affiliation with Freemasonry and *Giovine Italia*. As we learn from his notes,³⁶ he was affiliated to both societies in 1837 in Livorno. He maintains that, at the time, in Livorno the two associations were closely connected and basically managed by the same people,³⁷ following an opinion which was quite diffused among Italian Jewish Freemasons.³⁸

His life within secret societies and saintsimonian circles did not only represent an important biographical element, but had also a major impact on his philosophical and cultural views, which permeated his entire literary oeuvre and political activity. For this reason, it is opportune to elaborate further on the significance they had in Levi's life.

In this analysis, we are fortunately not operating in a scholarly vacuum, although thorough investigations on the relation between Freemasonry, Saintsimonism and nineteenth-century Judaism are still insufficient. The inclusion of Jews in Masonic lodges in modern Europe has been examined by Jacob Katz's pioneering work *Jews and Freemasons in Europe, 1723-1939*.³⁹ This study, however, mainly deals with German Jews and only briefly describes the situations of other European Jewries. It provides a socio-historical investigation of the Jews'

³⁵ Emanuele Artom's unpublished biography of Levi conserved in Biblioteca Emanuele Artom of Turin's Jewish community, p. 25.

³⁶ Levi actually wrote a pamphlet, called *La Carboneria*, which was never published, where he talks extensively of Italian secret societies and of his own experience within them. This pamphlet is conserved in David Levi's private archive, folder 30.6.14 (2) at the Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento, Turin.

³⁷ This would be a rather interesting element for the study of the history of Freemasonry. Up to recent times, it was widespread opinion that Italian Freemasonry basically did not exist in the Restoration period, until the opening of the Italian national lodge in 1859 (in which Levi played a role). Recent studies report sources that witness the existence of some lodges, which should have played an important role in plotting in favor of Italy's unification. Levi's unpublished pamphlet constitutes a further important testimony in favor of this argument.

³⁸ Sofia, "Gli Ebrei risorgimentali fra tradizione biblica, libera muratoria e nazione," 247.

³⁹ Jacob Katz, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe 1723-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

progressive inclusion in different Masonic lodges but does not elaborate on the profound meaning of their belonging to these societies. Other studies on the Jews' participation in Freemasonry have followed Katz's investigations, but also these researches paint a socio-historical picture.⁴⁰ To our advantage, some interesting researches on the Jews' affiliation with Freemasonry and other secret societies focus exactly on the Italian case.⁴¹ In recent years, the scholar Francesca Sofia has carried out a punctual examination of this phenomenon, proposing some illuminating analyses on the common thread between Freemasonry, Saintsimonism and Judaism in nineteenth-century Italy.⁴² This is a suitable point of departure for the current discussion. The roles of Freemasonry and Saintsimonism in David Levi's life, in fact, should follow a parallel investigation path, since, as we will see, the former can be considered as a tool for the divulgation of the Enlightenment values proposed by the latter.

In the first place, we should not forget that the first reason why a number of Italian Jews sought initiation in Freemasonry in the first half of the nineteenth century was their desire for inclusion in wider non-Jewish society, which was still largely precluded (in different terms) in the pre-unification Italian states. This took place on two levels: 1. "Here and now," in the sense of immediate participation within a Masonic lodge, that accepted members from all backgrounds; 2. with a future perspective, since Freemasonry and *Giovine Italia* were considered by several Italian Jews as the best means to achieve Italy's unification and consequent legal emancipation of the Jews. This was the case also for David Levi.⁴³ Unlike other European contexts, for Italian Jews, Freemasonry

⁴⁰ See for instance Luc Nefontaine and Jean-Philippe Schreiber, *Judaïsme et franc-maçonnerie. Histoire d'une fraternité* (Paris: Michel 2000); Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, "Brothers or Strangers? Jews and Freemasons in Nineteenth-century Germany," in *German History*, 18/2 (2000): 143-161 and Daniel Beresniak, *Juifs et Franc-Maçons* (Paris : Bibliophane 1989).

⁴¹ Aldo Alessandro Mola, "Ebraismo Italiano e Massoneria," in *La Rassegna Mensile d'Israel*, XLVII (1981): 120-127. More recently the scholar Tullia Catalan has offered one of the deepest examinations of the subject in Tullia Catalan, "Italian Jews and the 1848-49 Revolutions: Patriotism and Multiple Identities," in *The Risorgimento Revisited. Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Italy*, eds. Silvana Patriarca and Lucy Riall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2012).

⁴² The aforementioned Sofia, "Gli Ebrei risorgimentali fra tradizione biblica, libera muratoria e nazione," 247 but also Francesca Sofia, "Il vangelo eterno svelato: David Levi e la massoneria," in *Massoneria e Unità d'Italia. La Libera Muratoria e la costruzione della nazione*, eds. Fulvio Conti and Marco Novarino (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011) 203-222, which deals precisely with the case of David Levi.

⁴³ As he narrates in his *La Carboneria*, David Levi's private archive folder 30.6.14 (2) at the Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento, Turin.

worked as a proper “entrance ticket” for civil society.⁴⁴ Many Jews, according to Levi, were members of Freemasonry and *Giovine Italia* at that time in Livorno:⁴⁵

(...) mi recavo spesso da Pisa a Livorno, ove specialmente fra gli Israeliti erano numerosi gli adepti della Giovine Italia e della Massoneria.

[(...) I was often going from Pisa to Livorno, where, especially among the Israelites, there were many adherents of Giovine Italia and Freemasonry]

If certainly sense of inclusion in society and the perspective of future legal equality attracted a number of Italian Jews to Freemasonry, these cannot be considered the only reasons of their affiliation. This, otherwise, would not explain the fact that after the achievement of full civic emancipation the number of Jewish freemasons rapidly increased.⁴⁶ Apart from the socio-political aspects, what did it mean for David Levi his affiliation with Freemasonry and *Giovine Italia* and his attending saintsimonian circles? Did he attribute these societies a higher religious significance?

The Italian patriot definitely used a religious jargon in his narrations about all these societies. In his account on Saintsimonism, Levi describes its followers as “apostles,” its meeting place and organization as a “church,” its leaders as “priests,” the philosophy itself as a “creed,” and the new adepts of this doctrine embraced it through a “conversion.”⁴⁷ Also in his account on his affiliation with *Giovine Italia*, Levi borrowed Mazzini’s religious language, using the expressions “God and the People.”⁴⁸ Finally, Freemasonry’s religious connotation is self-evident not just in Levi’s words, but its entire structure and organization rotates around the temple, specific rites, rituals, and so on.

This strong religious connotation, therefore, is the first step in our search for Freemasonry’s and Saintsimonism’s role in Levi’s (secular) synthesis between Judaism and Italian nationalism. A further important feature they have in

⁴⁴ Expression used in Sofia, “Gli Ebrei risorgimentali fra tradizione biblica, libera muratoria e nazione,” 247.

⁴⁵ In La Carboneria, David Levi’s private archive folder 30.6.14 (2) at the Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento, Turin. However, this is also confirmed by other sources. See Roberto G. Salvadori, *Gli ebrei toscani nell’età della Restaurazione (1814-1848)*, (Florence: Centro Editoriale Toscano, 1993).

⁴⁶ Sofia, “Gli Ebrei risorgimentali fra tradizione biblica, libera muratoria e nazione,” 247.

⁴⁷ David Levi, “Prima fase del socialismo in Italia: il Sansimonismo”, in *Nuova Antologia* LXIX/1 (1897): 7.

⁴⁸ “Dio e Popolo” in the Italian original in La Carboneria, David Levi’s private archive folder 30.6.14 (2) at the Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento, Turin.

common is their universalistic approach, rooted in Enlightenment's ideals, aiming at the moral improvement of the individual and of society as a whole, and merging in a future universalistic "religion of humanity," in which moral and social values would have the priority over dogmas and faith. These elements convinced past scholarship of the great similarities between the values of Freemasonry and those proposed by Reform Judaism, which had a comparable universalistic approach.⁴⁹ Nefontaine and Schreiber even pointed out that almost all reformed rabbis in Germany and the United States were Freemasons.⁵⁰ If it is true that in Italy Reform Judaism did not take deep roots as a movement, universalism, primacy of moral values over dogmas, and particular attention to social issues, were common elements in the variegated regional approaches of Italian orthodoxy. Levi, therefore, could recognize in Freemasonry and Saintsimonism some of the foundations that constituted his socio-educational background and wittingly drew a straight line between these values and what he considered original prophetic Judaism, mediated by the Enlightenment.⁵¹ Thus, Enlightenment values were the connecting element among Freemasonry, Saintsimonism and Judaism and helped Levi's synthesis of his aspirations to universalism and *Risorgimento's* cosmopolitan nationalism. In the writer's view, however, the Enlightenment's ideals did not penetrate Judaism just as much as they penetrated Freemasonry and Saintsimonism. On the contrary, these values already pre-existed within original prophetic Judaism, which then becomes the actual precursor of the Enlightenment, but were partly lost throughout the historical developments of his forefathers' religion.⁵² His duty, through the tools of Freemasonry and Saintsimonism, was to recuperate these values and promote them until the institution of a "religion of humanity," based exactly on these ideals. This way, Levi emphatically lays claim to his Jewish identity and finds the proper place for Judaism within the world's history.

In 1840 after his graduation, Levi returned to Piedmont but did not feel at ease in his home region, which would grant the Jews full civil rights only eight years later. Taking advantage of his family's prosperous condition, the Italian poet decided to further his studies abroad and headed to France, which was one of

⁴⁹ This was noticed by Jacob Katz, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe 1723-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1970) chapter VIII; Michael A. Meyer, *Response to modernity. A history of the Reform movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁵⁰ Nefontaine and Schreiber, *Judaïsme et franc-maçonnerie*, 153.

⁵¹ This connection is explicitly drawn by Levi in his *Ahasvero nell'isola del diavolo: Versi, preceduti da uno studio sull'ebraismo e la rivoluzione francese*, (Turin: R. Streglio, 1898) particularly in its introduction.

⁵² See *Ibid.*, Introduction.

Europe's most thriving intellectual centers of the time and was ideal for Levi's foreign experience, as French was a well-known language among Piedmont's educated middle-class, due to the region's traditional French cultural orientation. No less than Pisa, Paris played a key role in Levi's education, both thanks to the illustrious intellectuals he met at the university and to the other Italian exiles he befriended. Paris's impact on his continuing cultural formation and on his enthusiasm for the *Risorgimento* values was outstanding. The Italian author decided to attend several lectures at the prestigious *Collège de France*, due to his interest in social and political subjects. He followed courses of renowned scholars like Pierre Paul Royer-Collard (Sompuis 1763 – Chateaufieux in the Berry 1845), French statesman and philosopher), Pellegrino Rossi⁵³ (Carrara 1787 – Rome 1848), Edgar Quinet (Bourg-en-Bresse 1803 – Versailles 1875), French historian and intellectual, and Jules Michelet⁵⁴ (Paris 1798 – 1874). These philosophers enriched David Levi's socio-political ideas, reinforcing his socialist thought, based on Enlightenment's universalistic views, and his Saintsimonism. Levi himself, however, refers how his socialism was even more strongly nourished by his acquaintance with the Parisian lower classes than by the great teachers he had at the university. At any event, historians like Quinet and Michelet would constitute, together with the writer Joseph Salvador, Levi's main inspiration for his writings on Jewish and Christian history, on the relation between Judaism and Christianity, and for his views on the theme of the historical Jesus.⁵⁵

It is by now clear how, if we want to find a common thread in the development of Levi's views, this has to be traced back to Enlightenment values. It is in fact possible to draw an almost direct line in the author's life connecting events and experiences having Enlightened ideals as a common denominator: his childhood and youth education, his stay in Pisa and encounter with saintsimonian circles and secret societies, his Parisian intellectual experience, his protagonist role as a *Risorgimento* patriot, and his political activity within the Historical Left. This almost straight cultural line prompted his literary activity, the best witness of his world view. The Enlightenment is the catalyst of all of his philosophical conceptions and the mediator between his universalist/cosmopolitan ideas, promoted by Saintsimonism and Freemasonry, and the nationalist feelings of a

⁵³ Italian economist and law expert, who had an important role in France's "July Monarchy" and was Minister of Justice, in the Vatican Government of Pius IX.

⁵⁴ French historian of Huguenot traditions. Levi's meeting with these important characters are also reported by Comba, "Giuseppe David Levi profeta del Risorgimento," III.

⁵⁵ A full-fledged analysis of David Levi's writings on these themes is still missing. A brief overview on some of his writings related to Christianity and Christological themes can be found in Grazi, "A Jewish Construction of a Catholic Hero: David Levi's A Pio IX."

Risorgimento patriot. Which enlightenment?

Parallel to his cultural education, David did not neglect his active political involvement and engaged in assiduous meetings with Italian patriots in exile, some of which were important collaborators of Mazzini.⁵⁶ By the mid-1840s, Levi could well be considered a prominent member of the *Risorgimento* elite of conspirators. During his Parisian experience (1841-1843), Levi was even nominated spokesman of the Italian exiles' community. The relevance he acquired granted him the opportunity to even meet Giuseppe Mazzini in a couple of occasions and to take part in the organization of a rather important, albeit unsuccessful, mission, that of the Bandiera brothers.⁵⁷

Concluded his stay in Paris, Levi headed back to Italy. After a brief return to his native Piedmont, Levi decided to move to Venice. Venice constituted a further important phase in the poet's life, not so much for his formation, as rather for the possibility of dedicating time to his writings and for additional important encounters. Among them, the most illustrious was the Catholic writer, intellectual, and patriot Niccolò Tommaseo, with whom he engaged in most interesting discussions on Jewish emancipation and the relation between Judaism and Christianity.⁵⁸

After a new short parenthesis in Paris, David Levi definitively settled in Italy in the second half of the 1840s. In his life, 1846 was a key year not only for his temporary return to Italy but also for the election of Pope Pius IX, who was initially thought to be of liberal views by the Italian patriots. Theirs and the Jews' hopes, including Levi's, were that a liberal Pope would favor Italy's unification by accepting a decrease, if not a complete demise, of his temporal power, thus preparing the annexation of Rome and the Papal State to the future Italian country.⁵⁹ The apparently positive attitude the Pontiff had during the first two years of his reign was sufficient to spur a number of authors to write poems praising the Pope. David Levi was among them, as his *A Pio IX* [To Pious IX] attests.⁶⁰ *A Pio IX* was published in 1848 within an anthology of poems,

⁵⁶ Comba, "Giuseppe David Levi profeta del Risorgimento," III.

⁵⁷ Attilio Bandiera (Split 1818 – Vallone di Rovito 1844) and Emilio Bandiera (Venice 1819 – Vallone di Rovito 1844) attempted to organize an expedition in order to free southern Italy. They sailed from Corfù, Greece, headed to Calabria, but their enterprise failed, they were captured and shot together as martyrs in Vallone di Rovito, Calabria, in 1844.

⁵⁸ These discussions continued also after Levi left Paris. These letters are conserved in his private archive at Turin's National Museum of Risorgimento.

⁵⁹ Frank John Coppa, "Pio Nono and the Jews: From 'Reform' to 'Reaction': 1846-1878," in *The Catholic Historical Review* 89/4 (2003): 671-695.

⁶⁰ Concerning David Levi's poem for Pope Pius IX refer to my article Grazi, "A Jewish

collected by the author himself, called *Patria ed affetti. Canti storici e liriche*⁶¹ [Homeland and affections. Historical poems and lyrics]. This poem is highly relevant, as it does not only demonstrate some Jews' desire to praise the newly elected Pope, but from a historical perspective also illustrates how their objectives in the 1840s coincided with those of other liberals and patriots. On a more specific viewpoint, this poem's most striking feature is perhaps Levi's use, along with the more secular symbolism of the Enlightenment, of Catholic and Christological symbolism, which is a rather impressive feature, as it comes from a Jewish author.⁶² Just like other Italian patriots, we can assume Levi was bitterly disappointed, when in 1848 Pius IX had a radical change of attitude and turned out to be just as conservative as previous popes and to not wish any kind of weakening, let alone relinquishment, of his temporal power. However, Levi did not leave any literary trace of this specific disappointment, nor rejected, to my knowledge, his poem dedicated to the Pontiff. Towards the end of the century, instead, his disillusionment with the *Risorgimento* in general and the lack of application of its values clearly emerges in his oeuvre as well. This is particularly evident in his only comedy, *Il Mistero delle Tre Melarancie*, about which we will discuss further. This type of disillusionment was a common feature among European intellectuals around the turn of the nineteenth-century.⁶³

It is not by chance that 1848, besides being a fundamental year for Europe's national movements, was also the year of David Levi's official political debut. In March, he gave a successful speech to King Carlo Alberto, in order to uphold the cause of Piedmont's religious minorities, which wanted to obtain full civil rights. He met the king as spokesman of Piedmont's Jewry and, not long after his speech, both the Waldensian and the Jewish communities obtained full civil equality within the Kingdom of Sardinia.⁶⁴ This speech had great echo and helped him obtaining publicity and fame, which would favor his future election as one of the first Jewish members of the Parliaments of the Kingdom of Sardinia first and of Italy right after the unification (1861). He was elected as a militant of the Historical Left.

Construction of a Catholic Hero: David Levi's A Pio IX."

⁶¹ David Levi, *Patria ed affetti. Canti storici e liriche* (Turin: Zecchi & Bona, 1848). *Patria ed affetti* was chosen as the title of this dissertation.

⁶² For a detailed analysis and more precise contextualization of this poem see Grazi, "A Jewish Construction of a Catholic Hero: David Levi's A Pio IX."

⁶³ Facchini, *David Castelli*, 17.

⁶⁴ Comba, "Giuseppe David Levi profeta del Risorgimento," 112.

In the 1850s, Levi extended the domain of his divulgation of *Risorgimento* ideals and started cooperating with other liberal and socialist intellectuals. Among them were Felice Govean (Racconigi 1819 – Turin 1898), founder of a journal called *Gazzetta del Popolo* [The People's Gazette] and Ausonio Franchi (Pegli 1821 – Genoa 1895), an ex-Catholic priest and founder of the journal *La ragione* [The reason]. These journals had the goal of promoting Enlightenment values, as it is already clear by their titles. *La Gazzetta del Popolo* and *La Ragione* supported a socialist/reformist orientation within the republican political line, thus positioning themselves in an area of the republican spectrum, which was rather distant from the more strongly liberal views of Giuseppe Mazzini. Arguably, David Levi's cooperation with these socio-political periodicals with a deeper socialist orientation might indicate his progressive departure from Mazzini's more liberal positions. The Italian historian of the *Risorgimento* Luigi Bulferetti (1915-1992) described David Levi as a *socialista risorgimentale* [*Risorgimento* socialist], a type of socialist that conjugated liberal and socialist views, therefore taking a stance that distanced itself from both the ultra-liberal positions and the radical Marxist socialism and communism.⁶⁵ This sort of socialism was synthesized by the utopian views of Saint-Simonism. The same Bulferetti, however, followed an older interpretation of Levi's political views, that of Delio Cantimori, an Italian historian and politician, who argued that Levi was a saintsimonian only in the first part of his life, while in the second half he shifted towards a more accentuated "Masonic liberalism."⁶⁶ On the contrary, I am convinced that throughout his life the Italian poet had quite consistent socio-political ideas, rooted in the Enlightenment and mediated by Saintsimonism and Freemasonry, as I tried to demonstrate in a recent article.⁶⁷

The 1850s saw also an intensification of David Levi's activity within Freemasonry, or at least we possess more documental sources concerning his role within this secret society during the years immediately preceding and following Italy's unification. In particular, we know of his frequent attempts to change its political orientation towards a more socialist direction. The secret nature of Freemasonry in those years makes it difficult for historians to reconstruct Levi's activity within it with precision. Certainly, his hierarchical position and importance within the association rose to a rather high level, that of *Gran Segretario* [Great Secretary], one of Freemasonry's highest offices. The evidence of this is an extremely relevant speech the Italian author gave in 1861, on the

⁶⁵ Luigi Bulferetti, *Socialismo risorgimentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975) 81-103.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82, where he accepts a view exposed in Cantimori, *Utopisti e riformatori*, 9-52.

⁶⁷ Grazi, "In Quest of a (Jewish) Identity: David Levi's Il Mistero delle Tre Melarancie," 97-110.

occasion of the official opening of *Grande Oriente Italiano* [Italian Grand Orient] in Turin,⁶⁸ Italy's first National Lodge.⁶⁹ This is a second important oration after the aforementioned one before King Carlo Alberto in 1848. In this speech, he offered an excursus about the history of Italian Freemasonry and the intellectual origins of its ideas and tried once again to influence its political orientation. The last 30 years of the poet's life were characterized by two elections and two resignations from the Italian Parliament and by an intensification of his writing activity. In fact, during these years he completed or wrote most of his works: in particular his *Memoirs*, *Il Profeta*, his *Opus Magnum* (which he had started during his Venice stay), and the comedy *Il Mistero delle Tre Melarancie*,⁷⁰ which I discovered in his private archive, conserved in the National Museum of the Risorgimento in Turin.⁷¹ Levi died in Turin on October 27, 1898, thus fully remaining a child of the Nineteenth century.

David Levi's oeuvre

A biography of David Levi cannot leave out a brief analysis of his literary activity and oeuvre, as his works constitute not only a relevant part of his life but also an important source about it and an efficient insight into his thought.

The main genre in Levi's literary corpus consists of what he himself calls "historical dramas."⁷² Historical drama was a common genre within the context of nineteenth-century Italian and European literature. It combined the

⁶⁸ This speech had been printed with the name *Programma massonico adottato dalla Massoneria Italiana risocstituita*, presentato al G.O.I. nella seduta della V.L. 5861 dal Gran Segretario David Levi, Turin, 1861, and is entirely reported and discussed in Marco Novarino and Giuseppe M. Vatri, *Uomini e logge nella Torino capitale. Dalla fondazione della loggia "Ausonia" alla rinascita del Grande Oriente Italiano (1859-1862)* (Turin: L'Età dell'Acquario, 2009) 321-328.

⁶⁹ Fulvio Conti, "La rinascita della massoneria dalla loggia Ausonia al Grande Oriente d'Italia," in *Massoneria e Unità d'Italia. La Libera Muratoria e la costruzione della nazione*, eds. Fulvio Conti and Marco Novarino (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011) 111-144.

⁷⁰ On this text see my article Grazi, "In Quest of a (Jewish) Identity: David Levi's *Il Mistero delle Tre Melarancie*," 97-110.

⁷¹ Folder 31.4-12 of David Levi's private archive, at the National Museum of Risorgimento, Turin.

⁷² Historical dramas are Levi's main genre not much in quantitative but rather in qualitative terms. In fact, we count only 3 historical dramas out of a corpus of 24 books. However, in terms of impact, representativeness of his views and mere literary quality, historical dramas can certainly be considered Levi's main genre.

description of the “historical truth,” a fashionable approach in the European Ottocento, with romantic elements, such as feelings, passions and moral values. If history’s centrality permeated Europe’s philosophical and literary approaches of the time, historical drama was a specific characteristic of Italian Romanticism, which promoted this form of drama in opposition to the classical one. The main features of this kind of drama were its nationalist spirit and the constant reference to current events through the reconstruction of the past. Historical drama differentiated itself from its classical counterpart in its lack of consideration of the classical drama’s main characteristics (Aristotelian unity of time and place) and was inspired by Shakespeare, Schiller and Goethe. This genre was often utilized by those authors who wanted to deal with patriotic and nationalist themes. In Italy, the best known realizations of this consisted of Alessandro Manzoni’s *Il Conte di Carmagnola* (1820) and *Adelchi* (1822) and Silvio Pellico’s *Francesca da Rimini* (1815). Another relevant Italian writer of historical dramas was Giovan Battista Niccolini with his *Arnaldo da Brescia* (1843). David Levi was directly inspired by these works and openly placed himself within this Italian cultural stream.⁷³ In Levi’s view, however, the Italian poet Vittorio Alfieri and the German Friedrich Schiller were the real “initiators of the national theater,”⁷⁴ although modern critics define Alfieri as an author of classical drama.

Why did David Levi choose the form of historical drama as his favorite writing genre? The answer, I believe, cannot be found in a mere stylistic choice but in the nature of the message he wanted to convey. He wished to awaken the Italian consciences and instill in his readers (or theater viewers) enthusiasm for the *Risorgimento* through the exemplary use of history and its passions. For Levi, the role of a writer was to represent history to his contemporaries and to *riprodurla in tutta la sua realtà*⁷⁵ [reproduce it in all its reality]. This idea of the historian’s role was also prominent among *Wissenschaft des Judentums*’ scholars, who followed the principles of Historicism and Leopold von Ranke’s idea to describe history *wie es eigentlich gewesen* [as it actually was].⁷⁶ The dramatic

⁷³ They are quoted in David Levi, *Emma Liona o I martiri di Napoli, dramma storico in cinque atti e otto quadri*, (Turin: Tip. G. Benedetto e Comp., 1852) iv.

⁷⁴ Quotation from *Ibid.*, pp. iii-iv.

⁷⁵ Quotation from *Ibid.*, iv.

⁷⁶ On Jewish historiography and usages of Historicism see Ulrich Wyrwa, *Judentum und Historismus. Zur Entstehung der jüdischen Geschichtswissenschaft in Europa*, (Frankfurt – New York: Campus Verlag, 2003). Within this volume see in particular Jacques Ehrenfreund, “Erinnerungspolitik und historisches Gedächtnis: Zur Entstehung einer deutsch-jüdischen Wissenschaft im Kaiserreich (1870-1914),” and for the Italian case Gadi Luzzatto-Voghera, “Die

poet, however, had to go well beyond the work of both the historian and the novelist. He had to combine the fictional and the historical, the material and event-related side of history with a representation of its deeper spiritual and passionate side. The dramatic poet saw in history the full manifestation of the national spirit and of every aspect related to it.⁷⁷ Thus, historical drama was exactly the ideal genre for David Levi, as it allowed him to discuss current issues under the guise of fiction. *Il Profeta*⁷⁸ and Giordano Bruno⁷⁹ have been considered the climax of his production.⁸⁰ His third historical drama is the aforementioned *Emma Lione*.⁸¹ In nineteenth-century Italy, the genre of the “historical drama” was closely related to the contents and themes of the Opera.⁸² Both theatrical genres promoted romantic and nationalist feelings and, albeit with different poetic and artistic forms, aimed to inflame the audience with enthusiasm for the *Risorgimento*. The content similarities, for instance, between *Il Profeta* and Giuseppe Verdi’s famous opera *Nabucco* are striking.⁸³ In good nineteenth-century fashion,⁸⁴ Levi wrote also three biographies. One was dedicated to his philosophical hero, Giordano Bruno,⁸⁵ coupling with the

Jüdische Geschichtsschreibung in Italien im 19. Jahrhundert.”

⁷⁷ Levi, *Emma Lione*, iii-iv.

⁷⁸ This was published in two editions. The first David Levi, *Il profeta o la passione di un popolo: dramma*, (Turin: Società Tipografica Editrice, 1866) and later David Levi, *Il profeta o la passione di un popolo: dramma, Vol. I Oriente – Vol. II Occidente*, (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice, 1884).

⁷⁹ Also published in two editions: David Levi, *Giordano Bruno o le Lotte del pensiero: Dramma in cinque atti*, (Rome: E. Perino, 1889) and David Levi, *Giordano Bruno o le Lotte del pensiero: Dramma in cinque atti*, (Rome: E. Perino, 1891).

⁸⁰ Morais, *Italian Hebrew Literature*, 187; Helen Zimmern, “David Levi, Poet and Patriot,” 363-402; Margulies, *Dichter und Patriot*, and Vindice, *La vita e le opere di David Levi*.

⁸¹ This drama was also published in two different editions: David Levi, *Emma Lione o I martiri di Napoli: dramma storico in cinque atti e otto quadri*, (Turin: Tip. G. Benedetto e C., 1852) and David Levi, *Emma Lione o I martiri di Napoli: dramma storico in cinque atti e otto quadri*, (Naples: S. De Angelis, 1878).

⁸² On the importance of Opera in nineteenth-century Italian and European nationalisms see Carlotta Sorba, “Between cosmopolitanism and nationhood: Italian opera in the early nineteenth century,” in *Modern Italy*, 19/1 (2014): 53-67 and Krisztina Lajosi, *Opera and Nineteenth-Century Nation-Building*, (Leiden: Brill 2011).

⁸³ *Nabucco* premiered in Milan in 1842. This enables us to assume it was a possible model for Levi’s *Il Profeta*, although the author never mentions any form of inspiration from Verdi’s opera.

⁸⁴ On the writing of biographies in nineteenth-century Italy see Maria Pia Casalena, *Biografie. La scrittura delle vite in Italia tra politica, società e cultura (1796-1915)* (Milan: Mondadori 2012).

⁸⁵ David Levi, *Giordano Bruno o La religione del pensiero: l’uomo, l’apostolo e il martire* (Turin: Carlo Triverio, 1887).

aforementioned historical drama on the same philosopher. Levi's biographies too, just like his historical dramas, did not only wish to tell the story of a particular individual, but aimed to deliver a higher message. Two other biographies had the same didactical intentions and were dedicated to Antonio Gallenga⁸⁶ and Michelangelo.⁸⁷ This last work was rather successful and had a strong impact particularly in France, where it received public recognition by the Ministry of Education and sold thousands of copies.

His treatises were mostly dedicated to the study of religions (including Judaism and Christianity) but also to other more general themes connected to orientalism. In 1884 he published *Il semitismo nella civiltà dei popoli* [Semitism in the peoples' civilization] about the concept of Semitic cultures and languages in their historical development, which contained large parts of the introduction to *Il Profeta*. His second orientalist monograph was published in Pitigliano in 1895 with the title *Il simbolismo nell'antico Egitto e l'idea ebraica* [Ancient Egypt's symbolism and the Jewish idea]. As we have seen, Levi's passion for oriental cultures and the history of religions blossomed during his stay in Pisa. It actually started as the author's attempt to investigate his own Jewish roots and to scan other religions, which could fill the empty spaces left by his relinquished Judaism. Levi was not a professional researcher; he never held a university chair or published on these themes with rigorous academic methodology. Nevertheless, his passion led him to accumulate substantial knowledge on religions and oriental cultures, and to write several essays and books, which could suitably take part in contemporary scientific debates on these subjects. Levi's orientalist and religious studies well fit within nineteenth-century European and Italian trends. A historiographical issue, here, is the lack of full-fledged researches on this phenomenon in Italy. Italian Orientalist studies in general in the second half of the 1800s, not necessarily carried out by Jewish scholars, mainly focused on Judaism and biblical exegesis, but also included the history of religions. Actually, little is known on these researches from a Jewish perspective, except for the works on Jewish history published in particular by rabbinical scholars from Padua's milieu, Shadal in primis. With the notable exception of Facchini's examination of David Castelli⁸⁸ and sporadic studies on the illustrious

⁸⁶ Gallenga (Parma 1810 - Llandogo 1895) was a contemporary of Levi's and had a similar life experience. He too was from a Piedmontese family, and was a patriot, an exile, a politician, member of the Italian Parliament and a writer. Gallenga's biography appeared within the volume, *Il Risorgimento Italiano. Biografie storico-politiche d'illustri italiani contemporanei*, Vol. 3, ed. Leone Carpi (Milan: Vallardi, 1887).

⁸⁷ David Levi, *La mente di Michelangelo*, (Milan: G. Bringola di G. Ottino e C, 1883).

⁸⁸ The aforementioned Facchini, *David Castelli*.

philologist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli,⁸⁹ we know little about secular Jewish scholars, who held chairs in oriental studies, Jewish and Christian history, Hebrew language, and biblical studies. It is true, however, that in Italy the debate on the Bible and religions was a lot less vibrant than in other European countries, where, according to Levi Della Vida,⁹⁰ these discussions were favored by the *vis polemica* among different Christian confessions. Thus, Levi can also contribute to the reconstruction of the development of orientalist studies in Italy. He did not embark in writing a comprehensive history of the Jews. His largest work on Jewish history is perhaps the introduction to *Il Profeta*. Nevertheless, he scattered many of his works with analyses of Jewish history, not much with the purpose of reconstructing its chronological order of events, but rather to investigate its deep meaning within general history and to single out the original values of prophetic Judaism, which would serve the generation of a future “Religion of Humanity.” In other words, he once again placed himself within an existing contemporary trend of secular scholars,⁹¹ who, inspired by Enlightenment ideals, wished to “rewrite the history of religions (...) with the intention of regenerating them in the direction of a future religion, that aspired to find the purity of their origins and to de-ritualize their institutional historical elements.”⁹² Here again, we can see the centrality of Saintsimonism in Levi’s views.

Levi wrote also five political texts: *La convenzione e il voto del 19 Ottobre* [The convention and vote of October 19] and *La convenzione e il voto del 19 Novembre* [The convention and vote of November 19] were published in 1864 and were simply the commented description of two discussions of the Italian Parliament. If these two are interesting to understand his political position on a contingent matter, his other political works offered a more global view of his political ideas. *Questione romana: unità cattolica e l’unità moderna* [Roman question: catholic unity and modern unity], published in Turin in 1860 under the pseudonym of Julius, dealt with the abolition of the Catholic Church’s temporal power. It is interesting to notice how still in 1860, on the eve of Italy’s

⁸⁹ Felice Israel, “Graziadio Isaia Ascoli. Gli studi ebraici in Italia e il suo rapporto con Isacco Samuele Reggio,” in *Materia Giudaica* 15-16 (2010-2011): 229-249 and Maria Elisabetta Loricchio, “Graziadio Isaia Ascoli. Materiali per una biografia intellettuale,” in *Ha-Tikva-La Speranza* (1991): 77-86.

⁹⁰ Giorgio Levi Della Vida, *Fantasmî ritrovati* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1966), 66.

⁹¹ For instance, Ernest Renan and Joseph Salvador, who were themselves saintsimonians and important sources for David Levi.

⁹² Quotation from Facchini, *David Castelli*, 30. The English translation from the Italian original is mine.

unification and consequent emancipation for all Italian Jews, Levi decided to publish a book on such a delicate topic under a pseudonym. Just a few years later, however, after Italy's unification and Rome's annexation to the Kingdom, Levi could openly argue against the political power of the Catholic Church in Italy in his *Lo Stato in Italia: nuovo programma* [The State in Italy: new program], published in Rome in 1878. The most important treatise to understand Levi's philosophical-political views in relation to Saintsimonism is *Prima fase del socialismo in Italia: il Sansimonismo* [First phase of Italian socialism: Saintsimonism], also due to the fact that it is one of Levi's last works. In this long essay, he made a full-fledged analysis of Saint-Simonism's philosophical foundations and narrated its historical origins in France first and its later Italian developments. His adherence to Saintsimonism frequently brought Levi to reflect on women's role in society. These reflections led him to two publications. The first was also his very first literary work and was titled *La donna* [The Woman], published in Turin in 1838, when he was only 22. The second was a much later publication (Turin, 1880) called *Il femminile eterno: Cantico dei Cantici* [The eternal feminine: Song of Songs].

In line with Italian Jewish literary tradition, Levi wrote also numerous poems. Poetry was actually his most distinctive (and maybe favorite) form of literary expression. Most of his poems were scattered around different books, sometimes even mixed with prose. For example, his autobiographies alternate prose and poetry. Some were published in literary journals, while others are still unpublished and exist only as manuscripts. Nevertheless, some of them were collected by the author himself as anthologies. These were generally organized around a theme, mostly related to patriotism and Risorgimento. Thus, as early as 1848 he published *Patria ed affetti: canti storici e liriche* [Hearth and Homeland: historical songs and poems]; in 1859 *Maritrio e redenzione: canti patrii* [Martyrdom and redemption: patriotic poems]; in 1860 *Novara e Magenta: cantica* [Novara and Magenta: poem] and finally, in 1891, he literally published his *Ultimo Canto* [Last poem].

Last but not least, Levi's only comedy: the aforementioned *Il Mistero delle Tre Melarancie*.⁹³ This is an unpublished text contained in an autographic manuscript I have found in David Levi's private archive, at the National Museum of Risorgimento in Turin.⁹⁴ This text is rather relevant, since, in a

⁹³ On David Levi's only comedy see my article Grazi, "In Quest of a (Jewish) Identity: David Levi's *Il Mistero delle Tre Melarancie*," 97-110.

⁹⁴ Folder 31.4-12 of David Levi's private archive, at the National Museum of Risorgimento, Turin, 5

comic key, it represents a sort of final *manifesto* of Levi's thought, particularly concerning his stance on Judaism, Italian identity, and the history of religions. It is important and intriguing for three reasons: 1. it is an unpublished work of Levi, which is still unknown by scholars, as it is not mentioned in any of the secondary sources; 2. it provides a global insight on Levi's entire *Weltanschauung*, encompassing virtually all the themes he dealt with in his oeuvre; 3. it was written in the last years of David Levi's life, providing further evidence of his views' great consistency throughout his existence.

Final remarks on David Levi

As his biography clearly shows, David Levi was a rather interesting Jewish intellectual in nineteenth-century Italy, and offers us the opportunity to discuss several relevant historiographical issues. His constant effort to amalgamate the two main sides of his personality, the Jew and the Italian, and the evident tension within this dualism are his greatest legacy. His originality, however, lies in his alternative approach to modernity: he relinquished the religious and traditional spheres of Judaism but, at the same time, kept a strong attachment to his Jewish heritage. This is particularly relevant as Levi reinterpreted his Jewish identity in a secular key, finding a synthesis which was neither religious nor national, in a word a new modern interpretation of Jewish identity. Catalysts of Levi's secularization modes were certainly Saintsimonism and Freemasonry, his two main affiliations that would accompany the Italian author throughout his entire life and form the core of his socialist and universalistic philosophical ideas. Their concept of "Religion of Humanity" helped Levi create a synthesis between Enlightenment's aspirations to universalism and *Risorgimento's* cosmopolitan nationalism. Further considerations cajoled by an examination of Levi's life and oeuvre concern the concepts of Jewish integration and assimilation in modern society. Finally, his literary works, particularly his historical dramas, are the greatest source for our understanding of this unique character. A large part of his literary corpus, including some of his historical dramas, focuses on the history of religions (preeminently Judaism and Christianity) and on orientalist themes, offering a contribution to scholarship on Italian "orientalism" in the 1800s, which is still an understudied subject, in spite of its many charming facets. The vast quantity of unstudied material, both published and unpublished, promises new intriguing perspectives, not only on his life and oeuvre, but also on modern Italian and European Jewry more in general.

Alessandro Grazi is a researcher of modern Jewish history and literature at the Justus Liebig University of Giessen. He holds a PhD in Arts (University of Groningen, 2012), with a dissertation titled “*Patria ed Affetti. Jewish Identity and Risorgimento Nationalism in the Oeuvres of Samuel Luzzatto, Isaac Reggio and David Levi*”. He completed a Research Master in Literary Studies (University of Amsterdam 2007) and a Master in Archaeology, with specialization in Hebrew Codicology and Paleography (University of Bologna, 2004). He is co-editor of the forthcoming volume *Believers in the Nation - European religious minorities in the age of nationalism (1815-1914)*, in “Groningen Studies in Cultural Change,” Peeters, Leuven.

How to quote this article:

Alessandro Grazi, “David Levi. A Child of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Portrait of Italian Jewish Life (1800s-1930s)*, eds. Tullia Catalan, Cristiana Facchini, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC*, n. 8, November 2015