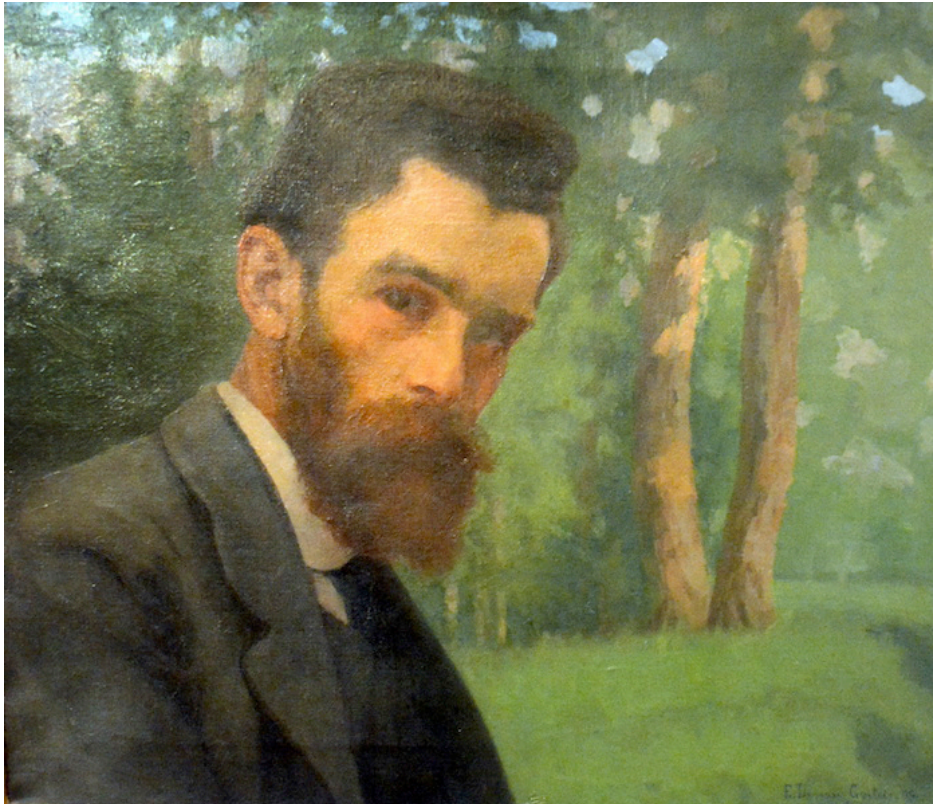


Bernardo Dessau

by *Marco Bencich*



Bernardo Dessau (1863-1949)

Abstract

This paper examines Bernardo Dessau's activities within the Zionist movement in the years between the end of the Nineteenth century and the first two decades of the Twentieth century. Dessau's important contribution is still little-known and under-explored even by the most recent historiographical studies on Zionism in Italy.

More specifically, this essay will investigate Dessau's intellectual and propagandistic commitment towards the realization of the Zionist ideal, his views on the main concepts and issues put forward by the Jewish movement of national rebirth and his responses and reactions to the major historical events which affected, both directly and indirectly, the Jewish community in Italy and

abroad in the period before the outbreak of the First World War.

In this research two different types of source have been scrutinized and evaluated: on the one hand, printed publications such as articles and pamphlets, and on the other, the private correspondence between Bernardo Dessau and Felice Ravenna, President of the Italian Zionist Federation, all of which is kept in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem.

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Premise

Bernardo Dessau is little-known within the Italian Zionist panorama, and his work is still little studied. With the exception of a couple of references in a few Italian articles, very little has been written about him.¹ Currently, the most relevant study is Franca Focacci’s essay on his scientific production as a physicist and on the collection donated by his heirs to the Department of Physics of the University of Perugia in the summer of 1950.²

The history of Zionism in Italy presents some odd traits, which in turn mirror

¹ The entry in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* on Dessau is wrong: “An active Zionist, he founded *Il Vessillo Israelitico*, the first Italian Zionist periodical” (see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 5, 604). In reality *Il Vessillo*, which was initially against Theodoro Herzl’s political program, was founded in Casale Monferrato by Flaminio Servi as a continuation of *L’Educatore Israelitico* (1853-1874). Some records regarding Dessau’s Zionist work can be found in: Alberto Cavaglioni, “Tendenze nazionali e albori sionistici,” in *Storia d’Italia. Annali 11, Gli ebrei in Italia. Vol. 2, Dall’emancipazione a oggi*, Corrado Vivanti ed., (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 1300; Nazario Sauro Onofri, *Ebrei e fascismo a Bologna*, (Bologna: Editrice Grafica Lavino, 1989), 55; Ariel Toaff, *Gli ebrei a Perugia*, (Perugia: Deputazione di storia patria per l’Umbria, 1975), 186; Laura Brazzo, *Angelo Sullam e il sionismo in Italia tra la crisi di fine secolo e la guerra di Libia*, (Roma: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 2007), 35, 71-2, 101.

² Franca Focacci, *Bernardo Dessau. Professore di Fisica a Perugia*, (Perugia: Deputazione di storia patria per l’Umbria, 2012).

the peculiarities of Italian Jewry, since the number of Jews in Italy was rather low, they were disseminated throughout the country and they were one of the most integrated communities in Europe. The advent of Zionism helped to radicalize the nexus between the two different souls – the “public”/Italian and the “private”/Jewish one – of Jewish identity in Italy in the aftermath of emancipation. While the vast majority of Italian Jews opted for the construction of a more private form of religious identity, in a constant attempt to reconcile and find a balance between their Jewishness and their national (Italian) identity, Zionism tried to strengthen the ties with the Diaspora by emphasizing the concept of a Jewish ethnic group and by encouraging the diffusion of Jewish culture.³

Italian Zionism is to be understood in the first place as a cultural movement which tried to find a solution to the Jewish question by helping the oppressed Jews of Eastern Europe, but which *also* participated in the effort to renew the moral, intellectual and physical conditions of Jewish people.⁴ Within this movement, Bernardo Dessau acted as a link between the then prevalent philanthropic version of Zionism, which supported a more simplified form of Jewish national rebirth, and a less widespread variety, which backed a more political and pragmatic nationalist vision of Zionism. As an intermediary, Dessau’s importance equals that of Felice Ravenna.⁵

³ On the impact of Zionism on the Jewish identity in Italy, see Mario Toscano, “Integrazione nazionale e identità ebraica. Francia, Germania, Italia,” in *Ebraismo*, David Bidussa ed., (Torino: Einaudi, 2008), 166; Mario Toscano, “L’uguaglianza senza diversità: stato, società e questione ebraica nell’Italia liberale,” in *Storia Contemporanea*, 25/5 (1994), 704; Barbara Armani, *Il confine invisibile. L’identità ebraica di Firenze 1840-1914*, (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2006), 46; Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti, “Fare gli ebrei italiani: modelli di genere e integrazione nazionale,” in *Famiglia e nazione nel lungo Ottocento italiano*, ed. Ilaria Porciani, (Roma: Viella, 2006), 222-3; Alberto Cavaglion, “Tendenze nazionali,” 1304; Simonetta Della Seta, “Identità religiosa e identità nazionale nell’ebraismo italiano del Novecento,” in *Italia Judaica. Gli ebrei nell’Italia unita (1870-1945). Atti del IV Convegno internazionale (Siena, 12-16 giugno 1989)*, (Roma: Ministero per i Beni culturali e ambientali, Ufficio centrale per i Beni archivistici, 1993), 263-72.

⁴ On the origins of Zionism in Italy, see David Bidussa, “Tra avanguardia e rivolta. Il sionismo in Italia nel primo quarto del Novecento,” in *Oltre il Ghetto. Momenti della cultura ebraica in Italia tra l’Unità e il fascismo*, eds. David Bidussa, Amos Luzzatto and Gadi Luzzatto Voghera (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1992), 155-279; Mario Toscano, *Ebraismo e antisemitismo in Italia. Dal 1848 alla guerra dei sei giorni*, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2003), 48-68; Tullia Catalan, “Società e sionismo a Trieste fra XIX e XX secolo,” in *Il mondo ebraico: gli ebrei tra Italia nord-orientale e Impero asburgico dal Medioevo all’Età contemporanea*, eds. Giacomo Todeschini and Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini (Pordenone: Studio Tesi, 1991), 459-479; Alberto Cavaglion, “Tendenze nazionali,” 1293-1320; Laura Brazzo, *Angelo Sullam*.

⁵ On Felice Ravenna, see Gabriella Falco Ravenna, “Leone Ravenna e Felice di Leone Ravenna,” in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 36/11 (1970): 407-15; Simonetta Della Seta, “Dalla tradizione a un

German by Birth, Italian by Adoption, a Zionist deep down

Dessau was born on the 13th of August 1863 in the German town of Offenbach am Main. His was a deeply devout family, his father Samuel was an Orthodox rabbi and a teacher in Jewish schools. The fifth of seven children, Bernardo initially attended a technical school but then got his leaving certificate from a grammar school where the teaching of classics was a major part of the syllabus. He studied at the Universities of Berlin and Strasburg and he graduated in physics in 1886. Three years later he moved to Italy to work as Professor Augusto Righi's⁶ assistant at the Department of Physics of the Universities of Padua and Bologna. In the years 1900-1903 he was also in charge of the Meteorological and Astronomic Observatory in Bologna.

In the history of Jewish migration in the Nineteenth century and in the first half of the Twentieth century, the role of Italy as a place both for transient Jews and for Jews who decided to settle there has still not been adequately considered, even if the stories of several high-status figures who came to settle in Italy are well-known. Dessau seems to be one of the many German Jews, studied by Klaus Voigt, who decided to emigrate to Italy not because they were attracted to Italian culture but because they wanted to avoid the constraints which, in Germany, prevented them from accessing jobs in the public administration and in universities.⁷

On 20th August 1901 the thirty-eight-year-old Bernardo married Emma Goitein⁸

mondo più moderno: un ebreo autentico in un'epoca di passaggio. Note per un profilo di Felice di Leone Ravenna," in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 53/3 (1987): LXXI-LXXVII. A strong friendship developed through the years between Dessau and Ravenna, a kind of *elective affinity*; see Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 2 August 1907, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁶ Augusto Righi (1850-1920) was one of the greatest experimental physicists of his time. More specifically, he studied electromagnetism and contributed to the invention of wireless telegraphy.

⁷ See Klaus Voigt, "Considerazioni sugli ebrei immigrati in Italia," in *Stato nazionale ed emancipazione ebraica*, eds. Francesca Sofia and Mario Toscano (Roma: Bonacci, 1992), 223-9.

⁸ Emma Dessau Goitein was the daughter of Rabbi Gabor Goitein – the last heir of a long dynasty of Hungarian rabbis – and was born in Karlsruhe on 20th September 1877. Her mother, who became a widow at a very young age, belonged to a deeply religious family who, nevertheless, was very open-minded and willing to accept the ideas of nineteenth-century German culture. So, in order to secure for her daughters a professionally and economically independent life, she decided that Emma and her sisters should become very well-educated young women. Emma was thus able to devote herself to her artistic vocation as a painter from very early on and became the first woman to attend the Nude Painting and Drawing Classes of the Perugia Art Academy. For more information on Emma Goitein and her artistic output as painter and xylographer, see Fanny Steindler Dessau, "Ricordo di Emma Dessau," in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 35/3 (1969):

in Karlsruhe. Their eldest daughter Fanny Steindler Dessau (1904-1984) thus remembers her parents' marriage:

The meeting with the tall and gentlemanly young professor of physics, with brown burning eyes and a thick brown beard, and the love that they felt for each other, different as they were yet so similar in the nobility and dignity of their feelings, convinced her, after a long inner debate, to accept his proposal and to follow him as a young bride to Bologna in the early years of the Twentieth century.⁹

Dessau first began to take an interest in Zionism during his stay in Bologna, where the intense propaganda of the members of the Italian Zionist Federation (FSI) had been highly successful, especially in the spring of 1903. Endowed with a profound Jewish religious culture which had made him aware of the fact that, notwithstanding his religious beliefs, his bond with the history and the traditions of the Jewish people was permanent, Dessau saw in Zionism the opportunity to help Western Jews to redeem themselves from their condition of moral servitude, through what Ravenna had defined as “the dignified assertion of the true Israelite spirit.”¹⁰ Besides, since Zionism advocated the right for a Jewish nation to come into existence, he found in it a salvific answer “for those who are not able or do not want to assimilate into their host countries and desire to reconstruct for themselves a national life in a territory of their own.”¹¹

Dessau's life changed radically in November 1904 when he became Professor of Experimental Physics at the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Perugia, where he moved with his family at the beginning of 1905. Fanny Dessau's description of the city is useful to understand what this move meant for the entire family: “Perugia was back then really and truly the “City of Silence,” lying among hills in the middle of high mountains and limitless horizons [...]. Rich with works of arts and ancient traditions, Perugia was a world apart, far

151-6; Rahel Wolff, “Pagine d'Arte. Emma Dessau Goitein,” in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 5/12 (1931): 623-6.

⁹ Steindler Dessau, “Ricordo di Emma Dessau,” 152.

¹⁰ See Felice Ravenna, “Il Sionismo in Italia,” in *L'Idea Sionista*, 2/6-7 (1902): 50. Donato Camerini, the Rabbi of Parma, was also of the idea that emancipation and equal individual rights had caused the decline of the Jewish religion (“freedom to believe – Camerini had written – has become licence to mis-believe, and freedom to practice one's rites has turned into aversion for them”); see Donato Camerini, “L'ora presente,” in *L'Idea Sionista*, 1/10-11 (1901): 80-2.

¹¹ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 16 May 1906, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 25 (Polemica Gabba), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

away from communication routes as well as from progress.”¹²

In 1912, Dessau was informed by Chaim Weizmann of the plan of the Action Committee to create a Hebrew University in Jerusalem and this is evidence of the high esteem Dessau was held in internationally. He was chosen as the contact person in Italy for preliminary explorations but was nonetheless unconvinced that that was the right moment for such a project, given the difficult political situation of the Ottoman Empire after the two Balkan Wars.¹³

This specific situation must have been very difficult for Dessau to look at, since, as Franca Focacci claims, he was hoping to find another teaching position away from Perugia, where “he was not happy at having to teach physics only for medical purposes.”¹⁴ Already back in 1910, two years before the foundation of the Technion in Haifa, Dessau had hoped for a move to Palestine. In May 1910 he had written to Ravenna: “I was told by a reliable source that I have a very good chance to make it, but at the moment nothing has been decided about the professors’ salaries nor about the time when the Institute will open.”¹⁵

Although he was an Italian citizen, during the First World War period he had to face serious difficulties because of his German origins: following the complaints of some of his students, he was suspended from his academic teaching and research.¹⁶ After the war years which he spent in dire straits in Florence, in 1920 he went back to Perugia with his family and recovered his position as Professor of physics.¹⁷

¹² Steindler Dessau, “Ricordo di Emma Dessau,” 152.

¹³ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 2 April 1913 and 27 May 1913, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. On the Balkan wars, see Egidio Ivetic, *Le guerre balcaniche*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006); Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913. Prelude to the First World War*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁴ See Franca Focacci, *Bernardo Dessau*, 25.

¹⁵ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 4 May 1910, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

¹⁶ On Dessau’s suspension from teaching, see Franca Focacci, *Bernardo Dessau*, 21-4. On Italian Jews and World War I, see Mario Mario Toscano, *Ebraismo e antisemitismo in Italia*, 110-22; Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti, *Fare gli ebrei italiani. Autorappresentazioni di una minoranza (1861-1918)*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), 223-44.

¹⁷ On the years of Dessau’s life during the deeply traumatic period of the fascist racial laws until his death, which happened on 17th November 1949, see Focacci, *Bernardo Dessau*, 24-37; Steindler Dessau, “Ricordo di Emma Dessau,” 154-6.

The Concept of “Zionism” in Dessau

The study and analysis of some of his writings and letters to Felice Ravenna allow us to comprehend what Zionism represented and what being a Zionist meant for Dessau. He defined Western Zionism as a “reflex movement” whose origins were to be found in a feeling of connectedness and empathy with the oppressed fellow Jews of Eastern Europe: therefore, in his opinion, a thorough comprehension of the soul of the Jewish people was an indispensable necessity. He asserted:

For us Western Jews, brought up with the children of the nations in which we live, imbued with modern ideas, it is hard to understand how common traditions, which are not religious, can still exist for people who lost their own country and independence a thousand years ago, [...]. Yet, among those people, the permanence of our national traditions was never discontinued. The wandering Jew [...] brought with him a wealth of traditions which allowed him to keep his own identity even among foreign people and in spite of external infiltrations. And this wandering Jew, so often depicted as degraded and ruined by deprivation, enjoys nowadays if not a full political life at least a full intellectual life; he also possesses his own language, which is the language spoken by his ancestors. Far from being a mere language of religious practice and religious literature, Hebrew is in fact studied and cultivated by those who see it in the first place as the primary expression of a national unity.¹⁸

In previous years, Dante Lattes, had already commented on the exceptional uniqueness of the Jewish people; the founding pillar of such uniqueness was “a community of interest, of traditions and of feelings.”¹⁹ Indeed, in Dessau’s vision, the *sine qua non* condition for being a Zionist resided in the awareness of the existence of such a community, in the perception of the strength deriving from a glorious past and in the possibility of experiencing one’s Judaism with pride and not as a burden. The duty of a Zionist was, as Lattes himself had put it,²⁰ to cultivate this “Jewish emotional fellowship” and to create it where it did not exist

¹⁸ Federazione Sionistica Italiana, “Comunicazioni Ufficiali – I. Atti del IV Convegno Sionistico Italiano (II federale) tenuto in Milano il 20-21 marzo 1904,” *L’Idea Sionista*, 4/3-4-5 (1904), 44.

¹⁹ See Dante Lattes, “La nazione ebraica,” in *Il Corriere Israelitico*, 39/7 (1900), 145-7.

²⁰ Lattes believed that Jews, who had to compensate for the lack of a common nation (the only place where a real community life would have been feasible), had the duty to raise and intensify as much as possible the national religious feeling through a guarded preservation of traditions. On this topic see Dante Lattes, “Lotte contemporanee,” in *Il Corriere Israelitico*, 41/12 (1903): 265-6; Dante Lattes, “Lotte contemporanee,” in *Il Corriere Israelitico*, 42/2 (1903): 25-6.

anymore: "Our hopes lie with the future generations, with the young and even with the very young [...]. Yet our propaganda should be directed both to the young and to the adult, and at the moment it seems to me that the only form of propaganda which can reach our adults is conferences."²¹

As for the inspiring principles of the Zionist organization, Dessau was of the opinion that when dealing with the harsh living conditions of the oppressed Jews of Eastern Europe any reference to feelings of compassion and any form of self-referential aid or charity were to be banned. Indeed, Dessau criticised the work of the most important Jewish charitable institutions, convinced as he was that their impromptu aid was a waste of precious energies: their aim was to relieve the living conditions of those who survived but not to provide them with a new accommodation in a safer and more hospitable location. Dessau wrote:

Only Zionism offers a truly fruitful and enduring way forward and aims at finding a permanent solution to the Jewish question. But for this high and noble goal to be attained, we need to keep focussing and working on it day in day out. We must not follow in the footsteps of those other institutions and must avoid adopting their methods.²²

He openly insisted on the necessity that all Zionists agree on the deep significance of the movement itself:

In my opinion, those who think they are or see themselves as Zionists simply because they are moved by philanthropic motivations are only deluding themselves. [...] Those who do not feel like Jews anymore, or those for whom this feeling does not reach beyond the narrow confines of their family, should step back and should not try to model our movement on their ideas.²³

Dessau gave voice to this anti-philanthropic interpretation of Zionism on the occasion of Theodor Herzl's visit to Italy (20-26 January 1904).²⁴ In Ferrara, Herzl was interviewed by the special correspondent of *L'Idea Sionista*²⁵ and was

²¹ Federazione Sionistica Italiana, "Comunicazioni Ufficiali – I. Atti del IV Convegno," 44-5.

²² "Il Sionismo nel momento attuale – I. Una lettera del Prof. Dessau," *L'Idea Sionista*, 4/1 (1904), 6.

²³ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 3 October 1905, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

²⁴ On Herzl's trip to Italy, see Toscano, *Ebraismo e antisemitismo in Italia*, 59-61; Fausto Coen, *Theodor Herzl. L'ultimo profeta di Israele e la nascita del sionismo*, (Genova: Marietti, 1997), 116-7.

²⁵ *L'Idea Sionista* was founded in Modena in January 1901 and was the first Zionist journal to be

asked to express an opinion on the direction that the Zionist propaganda had taken in Italy which did not want to subscribe to any ideal claims, but rather than follow any colonizing plan which adequately found a solution to save the Eastern European oppressed Jews. Herzl

strongly approved of our choice [...] and stated very clearly that Zionism must pursue the primary goal of defending the oppressed Jewish proletariat, even though he did not completely agree with our opinions concerning the difficulties in achieving our aspirations and ambitions in Palestine.²⁶

Dessau deeply disapproved of the assertions made by the leader of international Zionism and he did not hesitate from openly expressing his views even though he knew that the majority of Italian Zionists would disagree with him. He wrote:

it seems to me that Herzl has supported a purely philanthropic interpretation of Zionism, while I exclusively see its future in the national ideal. I do not mean by this that all the partisans of Zionism should be stirred by that national drive, but I do believe that every one of them should acknowledge its existence and its enormous and prime importance for the souls of those Russian Jews whom we want to redeem. And once this national feeling is acknowledged, even those who do not fully agree with it should, in my opinion, follow it as a guiding principle and act accordingly.²⁷

Dessau spoke out very clearly in favour of a political-nationalist concept of Zionism, in full agreement with Lattes' own interpretation of the movement: Zionism was the expression of the rebirth of a national Jewish consciousness and not simply a humanitarian organization. Lattes thus voiced what was for him unmistakable evidence: "Whether the Jews are a *people* or a *nation*, the consequences are the same: *they are entitled to a national and political existence of their own in their own historic land*. This is the only element which can

printed in Italy. The decision to publish the journal was taken also with the specific goal to support Zionist propaganda in Italy, since *L'Idea Sionista* was expected to function as a preparatory organ for the creation of FSI and for the summoning of its first National Convention. The promoters intended from the very beginning to appoint Carlo Conigliani as editor of the journal, a role which he kept till his death, on 6th of December 1901. His successor was Benvenuto Donati, who edited the journal for two years. The third and last editor was Carlo Levi.

²⁶ "Il Sionismo nel momento attuale – II. La nostra intervista col Dott. Herzl," in *L'Idea Sionista*, 4/1 (1904), 7.

²⁷ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 18 February 1904, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

distinguish Zionism from other Jewish philanthropic or colonizing organizations.”²⁸ In Dessau’s view, the “national bond” between the Italian Jews and other diaspora groups did not demand in any way that Italian Jews should choose between their Italian and their Jewish nationality, nor that they should leave their own country to go and colonize Palestine. Zionists were often accused of not taking into account their patriotic duties as Italian Jews in their attempt to establish a Jewish national consciousness, but Gino Arias, among others, reiterated that there existed no antagonism between the Jewish national idea and Italian patriotism. Nevertheless, should a conflict between the two arise, Arias was of the opinion that the first would have to yield to the second.²⁹

In Dessau’s view, the fact that some Jews might feel they were Italian should not lead them to deny those fellow Jews, who were deprived of the possibility of enjoying life in a welcoming country, the right to the political ambition to create their own state and homeland. Dessau asserted: “I want to say this: I am Italian, but I am also a Jew, and there are Jews who aspire to have a homeland of their own [...] This individual desire has nothing to do with the desire for a national home for the Jews.”³⁰

Alfonso Pacifici gave voice to a much more intransigent position. With his “integral Judaism” formula he intended to express a concept which saw Jewish nationalism as a preliminary step towards the final goal of a “return to Judaism in all its original, untranslatable wholeness.”³¹ Since the condition of enduring temporariness of the people of Israel would end, according to tradition, on the day of their return to their ancient homeland, Pacifici claimed that Jewish life should be fashioned in anticipation of this future circumstance and in the cultivation and rebirth of a Jewish soul in compliance with the most imperative motivations of its historical existence: “Only when ‘the whole of Israel’, in other words, all those who are capable of such an ideal, want the termination of exile, will exile come to an end.”³²

Dessau did not delude himself into thinking that Italian Jews could believe their bond with the rest of the Jewish people consisted of something more than a mere feeling of pity and compassion. He explained that the vast majority of Italian Jews denied the political and nationalist essence of the Zionist movement

²⁸ Dante Lattes, “Che cos’è il Sionismo per il Sionismo,” in *Il Corriere Israelitico*, 44/6 (1905), 169.

²⁹ See Gino Arias, “Una dichiarazione,” in *L’Idea Sionnista*, 5/8-9 (1905), 127.

³⁰ Federazione Sionnistica Italiana, “Atti del VI Convegno Sionnistico Italiano (quarto federale) tenuto in Venezia il 22-23 febbraio 1908 – I. Verbale delle adunanze,” in *L’Idea Sionnista*, 8/3-4-5 (1908), 45.

³¹ See Alfonso Pacifici, “La nostra patria,” in *La Settimana Israelitica*, January 16, 1914.

³² Alfonso Pacifici, “La nostra patria,” in *La Settimana Israelitica*, January 23, 1914.

because they were not in touch with the most vital and most important centres of Jewry and consequently they had not practiced any form of truly Jewish existence for a very long time. In a letter to Ravenna, he wrote:

I know only too well that there are Jews, here in Italy as elsewhere, for whom these bonds do not really exist anymore [...]. But even if the present generation bears no responsibility for this situation, a responsibility exists anyway, and it falls on those who had known our traditions and did not feel for them – for the past of their ancestors – enough fondness to take care of those very traditions and to pass on that affection in their children. This is why, in my opinion, it is now up to their children to try and compensate for their predecessors' mistakes and to remember their past instead of forgetting it for good.³³

The Zionist activity in the first decade of the Nineteenth Century

Dessau's debut as a Zionist took place in Bologna, where, on the 5th of April 1903, he became a member of the Promoting Committee, along with other four important personalities.³⁴ Two weeks later, on the 19th of April, Ernesto Coen called a meeting of the Committee, as Dessau and Coen himself intended suggesting a quick, uncomplicated and decisive method to make the establishment of a Zionist group in Bologna an official event. Their plan was to try and convince the Bologna Jews who were already members of other local Zionist associations to join their newly founded group.³⁵ During the meeting, Coen decided to appoint Dessau head of the Promoting Committee, motivating his choice with the following words: "Many were the reasons which made me adopt this solution; among them, my frequent trips away from Bologna and especially my belief that an invitation to join our association would be more easily accepted [...] if it did not come directly from me."³⁶

³³ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 3 October 1905, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

³⁴ See "Note Sparse – Movimento sionista in Italia. Gruppo sionista a Bologna," in *L'Idea Sionista*, 3/4-5 (1903), 49.

³⁵ In order to avoid offending the Presidents of the other Associations with this manoeuvre, Coen asked for Felice Ravenna's opinion before taking any step in this direction; see Ernesto Coen to Felice Ravenna, 17 April 1903, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 12 (Gruppo Bologna), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

³⁶ Ernesto Coen to Felice Ravenna, 21 April 1903, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 12 (Gruppo Bologna), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

The inaugural meeting of the *Circolo Sionista Bolognese* took place on 29th June 1903. Felice Ravenna was in the audience and, as President of FSI, he expressed his satisfaction at the results obtained by the Zionist propaganda in Bologna; part of his speech emphasised the importance of the constitution of associations which sought to re-energise Jewish consciousness. Ravenna also observed how the goal of Zionism was twofold, both moral and material:

“To be materially a Zionist, it is enough to contribute with one franc to the remarkable organization which has its heart in Vienna. Is it really possible to redeem an entire people with one franc? You are not taking part in a humanitarian mission by contributing with that almost insignificant coin to a world organization, but by giving your name, your strength and your intelligence to a redeeming enterprise, and also by strengthening that Jewish consciousness, which will make the miracle of our triumph possible.”³⁷

It is interesting to observe that this part of Ravenna’s speech was inspired by a request made by Dessau himself, who, in his invitation to Ravenna, wrote:

no-one could explain better than you the objective of these associations and the nature of the relationships between the Central Committee and the local bodies. [...] Please forgive me if I take the liberty of offering advice and making some suggestions, which are nothing but the fruit of my active contribution to propaganda work. There are some of us who do approve of the idea of doing enlightened charity to help our oppressed brothers, but who also think that the formation of an organization or of a local association is unnecessary. [...] There are others who, though they embrace Zionism at least to a certain degree, consider it mainly charity-oriented; but charity is really humiliating for those who receive it, since they may sense that the only interest they inspire in us is compassion and nothing else. We should try and explain to these partisans of Zionism that our fellow Jews in Russia or Rumania are not only able to receive material help from us, but also that, in return, they will make it possible for us to enjoy the treasures of a culture which they thoroughly possess and which is instead almost completely unknown to us.³⁸

Once the final outline of the Statute of the newly-born Bologna Association was approved, Dessau became one of the advisors to the Executive Board.³⁹ As a

³⁷ Handwritten notes, Undated, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 12 (Gruppo Bologna), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

³⁸ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 8 June 1903, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

³⁹ On the inauguration of the Bologna Association, see “Note Sparse – Il Sionismo in Italia. Bologna,” *L’Idea Sionista*, 3/6-7 (1903), 72-3.

representative of the Bologna Zionists, he took part in the fourth (Milan, 20-21 March 1904) and in the fifth (Rome, 7-8 August 1906) Italian Zionist Conference, and in the sixth (Basel, 23-28 August 1903) and seventh (Basel, 27 July – 2 August 1905) World Congresses. His presence at the Italian Conferences was especially valuable because he was officially asked to present his papers to the audience.

After the elections of the fourth Milan Conference, Dessau was appointed to two offices; first, he became a member of the Federal Council and he showed from the very beginning that he was taking his mission very seriously.⁴⁰ Secondly, he became a member of a Committee – whose formation had been strongly recommended by, among others, Angelo Sullam and Benvenuto Donati – which would be in charge of the analysis and, if necessary, of the revision of the Zionist program, specifying its gaps and omissions.⁴¹ The results would be presented at the ensuing Italian Conference, which was to be summoned within a year. The need for such a revision was felt mainly because there was a belief that this would help the Italian delegates to express their vote with one voice at the upcoming International Congress. In spite of the fact that the task of the *Commissione sul programma sionista* had been made superfluous by various events – in July 1904 Herzl had died and the Italian Conference had been postponed for so long that in the end it took place six months after that International Congress – an extremely brief final report was read by Dessau at the fifth Italian Zionist Conference: “we came to the conclusion that there was nothing to modify in the Basel program, and that therefore no change was necessary.”⁴²

Following the task assignments within the Zionist propaganda in Italy, Dessau was also put in charge of the FSI *Information Office*, a new body which aimed at keeping the public as up-to-date as possible with events concerning the Jewish world.⁴³ The articles, which were published regularly in *L'Idea Sionista*, are mainly about events concerning the Jews of Eastern Europe and can help us understand Dessau's own opinions about the violence perpetuated against his

⁴⁰ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 27 March 1904, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem; “Movimento Sionistico – Quarto convegno sionistico italiano,” in *Il Corriere Israelitico*, 42/11 (1904), 302.

⁴¹ The two expressions in the official document which caused more disagreement among the participants were “*Heimstätte*” and “*secured under public law*,” see on this topic Federazione Sionistica Italiana, “Comunicazioni Ufficiali – I. Atti del IV Convegno,” 42 and 47; “Movimento Sionistico – Quarto convegno,” 299-300.

⁴² Federazione Sionistica Italiana, “Atti del V Convegno Sionistico Italiano (terzo federale) tenuto in Roma il 7-8 gennaio 1906 – I. Verbale delle adunanze,” *L'Idea Sionista*, 6/1 (1906), 9.

⁴³ See Federazione Sionistica Italiana, “Comunicazioni Ufficiali – II. Cariche Federali,” in *L'Idea Sionista*, 4/3-4-5 (1904), 76.

fellow Jews in Russia and Romania. He thought that even the birth of more liberal regimes would not lead to a solution of the Jewish question. In his view, the hatred which fuelled pogroms could not be wiped out overnight, and even if the most violent phase of anti-Semitism came to an end, economic anti-Semitism would continue with the boycotting of Jewish goods and commercial activities.⁴⁴ The 1905 move to Perugia impacted on his Zionist endeavours: if on the one hand the Bologna Association began slowly but surely to decline,⁴⁵ on the other, another Association was founded. Dessau did not hesitate to strongly support the Zionist cause in Perugia too. In November 1905, he wrote to Ravenna:

I have been around quite a bit in the last few days and I have met many fellow Jews in Perugia; actually I think I have met them all. I am attaching [...] the rather sad fruit of my efforts, along with the list of benefactors and of their offerings [...]. By and large I was well-received (at least as far as their good intentions go, if not for the amount of their contributions) and I think I will take advantage of this situation to try and work in favour of the Zionist cause.⁴⁶

Dessau took the decisive steps towards the institution of a Zionist Group in Perugia at the end of 1905. He kept the President of the FSI constantly informed:

The operation has not ripened yet, but the people with whom I talked welcomed my proposal very warmly. Given the small number of Jews who live here, the Group will not be a very important one, but it is nevertheless a good idea to gather all our forces.⁴⁷

The first and constitutive meeting of the new association took place on 9th January 1906, as Dessau explained to Ravenna in a private letter:

I am happy to inform you that [...] the Gruppo Sionistico Perugino was founded at Mr Moisè Servadio's house, after I explained the aims and the means of Zionism, and after a short exchange of ideas; its Provisional Council is composed of Mr Vittorio Ascoli and Mr Policarpo Bemporad. There are about twenty members so far, but more will join

⁴⁴ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 21 June 1906, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁴⁵ On Dessau's important moral contribution to the life of the Bologna Zionist Association, see "Movimento Sionista – Circolo Sionistico Bolognese," in *L'Idea Sionista*, 5/3-4 (1905), 54; Nazario Sauro Onofri, *Ebrei e fascismo a Bologna*, 53-6.

⁴⁶ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 23 November 1905, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁴⁷ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 6 December 1905, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

very soon.⁴⁸

As a delegate of the Perugia Group, Dessau took part in the sixth Italian Zionist Conference (Venice 22-23 February 1908), during which he captured the members' attention with his talks on various institutions – financial and of other types – which operated in favour of Zionist colonization in Palestine, and on the possible involvement of new members through the support of those institutions. He made then a rather bizarre proposal; taking inspiration from the religious “Opera dei Rifiuti” institution, he talked about wrapping tinfoil for chocolate sweets: “all families should get their children to collect chocolate tinfoil, which, taken together, can represent a financial contribution albeit a very small one; but this gesture will in the first place get their children into the healthy habit of worrying about others and of helping those who suffer.”⁴⁹

At the end of the Conference, Dessau also took part in the debate about Jewish culture and the proposal that the FSI should directly manage the *Pro Cultura* Committees.⁵⁰ He commented on the parallel with the German situation and explained his opposition to this proposal. He explained that independent Jewish associations, noted for their commitment to Hebrew history and literature, had existed for many years, and had been founded so as to find a common ground for attack after the resurfacing of anti-Semitism in Germany. Dessau defined these societies, where Zionism had taken root late, as the link between Zionists and the vast majority of indifferent Jews. Making the *Pro Cultura* into a mere filiation of FSI would risk alienating the anti-Zionist members of the new movement:

Since there are some Zionists among their members, allowing the ‘Pro Cultura’ Committees to stay independent, true Zionism will spread and in the end we will succeed and will see all these cultural associations kept together by Zionism.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 12 January 1906, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. The news of the creation of the *Gruppo Sionistico Perugino* was also given by *Die Welt*, the official organ of the Zionist movement; see “Aus der Bewegung – Perugia,” in *Die Welt*, February 9, 1906, 17.

⁴⁹ Federazione Sionistica Italiana, “Atti del VI Convegno,” 49. Dessau also expressed a very positive opinion of the social and financial help granted by *Bezalel*, while he did not hesitate to criticize another important institution, openly blaming the International Zionist Organization for a serious mistake which had been made in the charter of the *Jewish Colonial Trust*.

⁵⁰ The *Pro Cultura* movement, which had the merit of leading Italian Jewry on really innovative paths, was born in mid-1907 in Florence and was connected to the activities of the disciples of the local Rabbinical School. Aldo Sorani, the leading figure, thought that making Italian Jews aware of how little they knew about Jewish culture was the key objective to pursue. On *Pro Cultura* see Toscano, *Ebraismo e antisemitismo in Italia*, 71-89.

⁵¹ Federazione Sionistica Italiana, “Atti del VI Convegno,” 52.

In spite of his commitment to the cause, along with his friend Felice Ravenna, as a representative of Italian Zionism abroad, Dessau began to show signs of dissatisfaction with his presence within the movement as early as the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. This was mainly due to the fact that he was under considerable psychological and physical strain and was suffering from depression, as he would time and again in the years to come; this limited his pro-Zionism activity considerably, so much so that on a specific occasion he was forced to cancel his participation to the International Congress even though he had been elected delegate.⁵²

In his attempts to recover from the stress and fatigue of his teaching, Dessau spent many summers in various locations in Engadina; in September 1909, he wrote disheartened to Ravenna: “not even the mountain air can improve the condition of my nervous system. We must resign ourselves to this.”⁵³ According to Dessau himself, paradoxically writing from the Kurhaus Waldpark of Meran-Obermais (Tirol), there was a marked improvement in his health in late 1912:

I can't complain about the state of my health, and in truth I do feel much better than I have felt in years. [...] being on leave until the end of the month, I thought it was a good idea to satisfy my family's requests and follow my doctor's advice, and they all think I should take advantage of this opportunity to try and get better or heal at least some of the illnesses from which I have been suffering for years.⁵⁴

His determination to continue his work for the Zionist cause impelled him to carry on with this activity for some years more; he took part in the ninth (Hamburg, 26-30 December 1909) and tenth (Basel, 9-15 August 1911) International Congresses. But in 1913 he came to the conclusion that it was better to leave space for the younger generation of Zionists, downplaying, and even over-downplaying, his own Zionist involvement:

I totally agree with you that somebody younger and more capable should take my place.

⁵² In another letter we read that Felice Ravenna was prone to suffering from the same type of illness; see Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 21 June 1906, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁵³ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 12 September 1909, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 12 (Gruppo Bologna), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. For further reference to his psycho-physical illness, see in Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, the letters sent by Dessau to Ravenna on 4th May 1910, 15th July 1910, 2nd August 1912, 19th October 1912 and 18th September 1914.

⁵⁴ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 10 December 1912, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

To tell you the truth, I have never been very useful our cause, except for my unyielding faith in the necessity and in the feasibility of the goals of Zionism. But the reasons for my inactivity are to be found, at least in part, in my isolation and in my lack of physical strength. I do not intend to abandon our movement, not at all; on the contrary [...] I will always remain faithful to it, not as one of its leaders but as a simple soldier. And I really and deeply wish, if fate allows me to spend a part of my life in a Jewish centre, that I might gain energy and stamina from the enlivening contact with my younger Zionists who share my faith.⁵⁵

Although his intentions were very clear, Dessau was appointed Federal Advisor for the fourth consecutive time by the seventh Italian Zionist Conference (Milan, 4th May 1913). He did not turn down the assignment, but he did describe himself, with disproportionately impolite words, as “an almost useless, if not harmful, element.”⁵⁶

The Uganda Scheme

The offer made by the British Colonial Secretary of a portion of British East Africa for the constitution, under the British Protectorate, of a self-administered Jewish colony was the most important issue debated during the sixth Zionist Congress at Basel.⁵⁷ In an attempt to re-establish some order in the Congress, it was decided to create the *Committee for the study of the East Africa expedition* to assist with a purely consultative vote the Greater Actions Committee in its examination of the British proposal. Dessau had the honour of being asked to collaborate with the commission, with eight other members (among them Otto Warburg, Chaim Weizmann e Alexander Marmorek).⁵⁸ From his privileged position as a participant at the Congress, Dessau described the presentation of

⁵⁵ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 24 March 1913, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁵⁶ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 27 May 1913, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁵⁷ The opposition was stiff: on the one hand there were the so called *Territorialists* – Herzl, Nordau and Syrkin among others – and on the other the *Palestinocentrists*, who included Ahad Ha'am and many other Jewish intellectuals from Eastern Europe. For both *Territorialist* Zionism and *Political-Palestinocentric* Zionism, the objective was the creation of a Jewish new homeland, but while *Territorialists* aimed at establishing a Jewish state anywhere, even in a territory which was not necessarily the Land of Israel, *Palestinocentrists* considered Palestine an inalienable choice.

⁵⁸ See “Il VI.° Congresso Sionista – I lavori del Congresso,” in *L'Idea Sionista*, 3/9-10 (1903), 112.

the British plan with these words:

There was nobody, among the 600 delegates, who did not feel moved by, and aware of, the historical importance of this moment: but while some of them saw in the English proposal an official recognition of Zionism by a superpower, a moment of light shining in the darkness which had so far engulfed the Jewish people, as well as an important step on the path towards a much longed-for freedom, for others this very same proposal represented a serious violation of the Basel program and an attempt to sacrifice to temporary needs the whole edifice of our imperishable ideals.

[...] Almost nobody paid any attention to the commission, nor did they wonder if the colonization of that specific African area was to be pursued or not.

For all the orators, the issue at stake was this: if a Zionist Congress had any right or obligation to follow a route which was not directly connected with our one and only goal of setting foot in Palestine or at least in its bordering territories, even if only to prepare a better future for our unhappy Russian brothers.⁵⁹

The opinions expressed by the Italian Zionist press on the Uganda vote were mostly denoted by appreciations of the firm position of the Russian delegation. In the 1903 September issue of *Il Corriere Israelitico*,⁶⁰ Dessau emphasized how the Russian delegates, in spite of having to address the desperate needs of their Russian fellow Jews, had declared that the return to *Eretz Israel* was the only way to redemption for the Jewish people.⁶¹ For Dessau, the behaviour of this minority, ready to sacrifice itself so as not to compromise a distant ideal, became especially relevant because it was opposed to the idea of Zionism which was spreading among public opinion and which considered it as nothing more than a

⁵⁹ "Il Sionismo nel momento attuale – I. Una lettera," 6.

⁶⁰ *Il Corriere Israelitico* published its first edition in 1862 in Trieste; the editor was Abram Vita Morpurgo. The Trieste journal kept a mainly cultural perspective until the end of the Nineteenth century, when it changed its overall approach; in 1896 it converted to Zionism and brought to its readers' attention the initial developments of the new Jewish movement of national rebirth. *Il Corriere Israelitico* had the merit of being the first Zionist publication in the Italian language. On the history of *Il Corriere Israelitico* in the period before the outbreak of the First World War, see Attilio Milano, "Un secolo di stampa periodica ebraica in Italia," *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel. Scritti in onore di Dante Lattes*, 12/7-8-9 (1938): 109-13; Massimo Oreste, "Abram Vita Morpurgo da Gorizia e l'esordio dell'esperienza giornalistica del 'Corriere Israelitico' di Trieste," *Cultura ebraica nel goriziano*, ed. Marco Grusovin, (Udine: Forum, 2007), 184-99; Bruno Di Porto, "Il Corriere Israelitico: uno sguardo d'insieme," *Materia giudaica. Rivista dell'Associazione Italiana per lo Studio del Giudaismo*, IX/1-2 (2004): 249-62; Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, "La formazione culturale di Dante Lattes," *Oltre il Ghetto. Momenti della cultura ebraica in Italia tra l'Unità e il fascismo*, eds. David Bidussa, Amos Luzzatto and Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1992), 17-69; Tullia Catalan, "Società e sionismo a Trieste," 470-1.

⁶¹ See Bernardo Dessau, "Dopo il voto sull'Africa," in *Il Corriere Israelitico*, 42/5 (1903): 113-4.

socio-economic movement and a mere consequence of the dismal living conditions of Eastern European Jews.⁶² Depriving Zionism of its true nature and reducing it to a simple economic battle was risky indeed, because, as he wrote in a letter to Ravenna,

any advance in the living conditions of our Russian brothers, or even a slight improvement in the Russian political situation, could lead us towards dangerous illusions and could weaken the stamina of our movement, which must not abdicate if and when equal rights are granted to Russian Jews.⁶³

The minority's behaviour would help to overcome the prejudice, which portrayed Jews as the typical representatives of utilitarian materialism, a feature which, according to Dessau, did not belong to the collective Jewish consciousness. This is part of the speech he gave at the fourth Italian Zionist Conference:

I do not mean to underestimate the importance of the economic factor, but I do firmly believe that such a great enterprise can only derive its strength from ideals. And to those who object by saying that such idealism no longer belongs to our time, I say that, if this is the case, then that very idealism must be reawaken, because without it our movement would be doomed. But luckily this is not our case. Indeed, this idealism was never extinguished among Jews even amid the most terrible of persecutions, and this is why I believe in the future of Zionism, since Zionism has always been capable of absorbing our oppressed brothers' latent energies.⁶⁴

As for the Uganda plan, Dessau did not think that the British Government's proposal would weaken the Zionist ideal, since he thought that the Jews emigrating to Africa would be the masses who were trying to reach the big cities of North America in search of better living conditions and not the Jews who considered Zion their ideal goal:

In those big cities, where the battle for life and survival takes place in a nation endowed with enormous assimilating potential, those emigrants will no doubt be lost to the Zionist cause; [...] we do hope that those Russian and Rumanian Jews who will decide to emigrate to that area of British East Africa, [...] where they will be able to live according to their customs and to speak their own language, [...] will not forget the Zionist ideal for which many of their less fortunate brothers will have to continue

⁶² See Federazione Sionnistica Italiana, "Comunicazioni Ufficiali – I. Atti del IV Convegno," 43.

⁶³ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 3 October 1905, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁶⁴ Federazione Sionnistica Italiana, "Comunicazioni Ufficiali – I. Atti del IV Convegno," 43-4.

fighting.⁶⁵

As for the possible diplomatic repercussions deriving from the British proposal, he saw positive consequences even in case of new negotiations with the Ottoman Empire for the concession of territory in Palestine. He asserted: "it would not be surprising if the Sultan, who refused a population disregarded by all nations from entering his own land, now allowed it in after seeing England welcoming it with open arms!"⁶⁶

A variety of opinions and positions developed in Italy on the planned Jewish colonization of East Africa. *L'Idea Sionista* stressed the great historical importance of the British offer, trusting that the sixth Congress would mark the beginning of a new phase for Zionism. It saw Herzl's policy as a fundamental step forward for the Zionist cause, because, in the constant struggle between the real and the ideal, a practical measure seemed finally to prevail:

We do indeed believe," stated *L'Idea*, "that one day the Zionist program formulated by the first Basel Congress will be realized and to this aim we will no doubt invest our modest time and energy. But since there is now an opportunity for a faster and safer solution to the Jewish question, we embrace it without hesitation, having only the good of the Jewish proletariat at heart."⁶⁷

As *L'Idea Sionista* was a highly respected journal, the President of the FSI felt obliged to respond. Ravenna could not accept the idea that the speech given at the Congress might be interpreted as a relinquishing of the classic Zionist ideal and a modification of the Basel program: "Today, as ever, Jerusalem is, for those of us who have a nation, the symbol of our social and moral renewal; but for all of the Eastern Jews, from the fiercest anti-africanist to the strongest new-colony enthusiast, Jerusalem is the real hoped-for destination, the dream which cannot die, which will never die!"⁶⁸ *L'Idea Sionista* agreed with Ravenna that none of the delegates who had voted in favour of the British proposal intended to explicitly distance themselves from the Basel program; but it also specified how the Zionist movement was at last pursuing "that *realpolitik* which up to then had existed only on paper. The colonization of the Holy Land no longer represents an objective which prevents the realization of our program; now the objective is once again that which has always been at the core of our program:

⁶⁵ Bernardo Dessau, "Dopo il voto," 114.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁷ D., "Il VI.° Congresso Sionista – Le nostre impressioni," *L'Idea Sionista*, 3/9-10 (1903), 114.

⁶⁸ Felice Ravenna, "Attorno al congresso di Basilea – Impressioni e critiche," *L'Idea Sionista*, 3/11 (1903), 126.

that is to save the Jewish proletariat.”⁶⁹

These words, published by the journal that gave voice to the feelings of the majority of Italian Zionists, show very clearly how in Italy it was the philanthropic element of Western Zionism which had prevailed. The commitment to the pure ideal of Zion was sacrificed in an attempt to find immediate help for the persecuted Jews of Eastern Europe.

During a conference on “Zionism after the sixth Basel Congress,” held at the Bologna Zionist Association on 27th December 1903, Dessau stated that the emergence of differing opinions about the implementation of the Zionist program was the natural consequence of the increased number of members. Far from seeing these divergences as the symptom of a crisis or even of a near dissolution of the movement, he viewed them as a sign of vitality: “each one of us works with his own strength and with his own intelligence towards the fulfilment of a shared common ideal. [...] the fire of the love we feel for our oppressed people burns in all of us, and we are all firmly determined to secure a better future for them.”⁷⁰

The resolutions adopted by the seventh International Congress led to the rejection of the Uganda plan and stated that the organization, by limiting the foundation of a *Heimstätte* to Palestine and to its adjacent lands, stood firmly by the fundamental principle of the Basel program.⁷¹ In this regard, Dessau wrote in the August issue of *Il Corriere Israelitico*:

today, when the conquest of our land is still a long way off, when we cannot even behold it from afar, as Moses did when he was about to die, it is only natural, or rather it was an imperative, that the majority of Zionists endeavoured to protect our program and to keep safe those precious ideals which have guided us so far.

I have no doubt that these were the principles which inspired many of those (myself included) who, after voting with the majority in the Sixth Congress, now chose to vote otherwise.⁷²

He also rejected the charge against the Congress majority of having betrayed the

⁶⁹ See the reply to Felice Ravenna’s article: “Attorno al congresso di Basilea – Impressioni e critiche,” *L’Idea Sionista*, 3/11 (1903): 126.

⁷⁰ “Il Sionismo nel momento attuale – I. Una lettera,” 4.

⁷¹ This is the moment when what Shemuel N. Eisenstadt called “the sanctification of political activity as an end to itself” weakened, to be later substituted by a pragmatic type of Zionism, which opted for more practical solutions such as the gradual acquisition of land and a faster form of colonization; see Shemuel N. Eisenstadt, *Civiltà ebraica. L’esperienza storica degli Ebrei in una prospettiva comparativa*, (Roma: Donzelli, 1996), 178.

⁷² Bernardo Dessau, “Il Congresso di Basilea. Impressioni e considerazioni,” in *Il Corriere Israelitico*, 44/4 (1905), 98-9.

interests of the Jewish people, but he was unsure as to the consequences of such resolutions. A few months later he wondered: "It remains now to be seen [...] if the abandonment of any action outside Palestine and its adjacent lands will turn out to be too high a price for the commitment to our original program and for the unity of the party."⁷³

The Controversy between Territorialists and Palestinocentrists

After the resolution of the Seventh International Congress, Italian Zionism went through a period of crisis, fuelled also by the on-going quarrel between *L'Idea Sionista* and *Il Corriere Israelitico*. Dessau blamed this controversy, which dominated the FSI's activity, for the slowing down of Zionist propaganda in Italy. He expected that the accommodating speeches which closed the fifth Conference in Rome would open a new phase for Italian Zionism, but this did not happen, as the movement progressively moved towards what Dessau saw as a sort of peaceful inertia. In June 1906 he wrote to Ravenna: "You say, it is true, that some things are not possible here, but if make an exception every time a more active form of commitment becomes necessary, then Italian Zionism will develop into a special case, and not a positive one, when compared to the situation in other countries."⁷⁴

The dissatisfaction with the resolution of the International Congress led many members to resign from the movement. Dessau spoke very clearly about this: "it is a duty of every Italian Zionist, and of every Zionist at large, to support and obey the decisions taken by the seventh Congress. Let us hope that those ill-judged, post 30th July resignations will be withdrawn."⁷⁵ But the aspirations of that part of Italian Zionism which saw the movement as inspired by a sentiment of "human fraternity" and not by political nationalism were disappointed by the resolutions of the Federal Council: the choice was not to openly oppose the World Zionist Organization. "As befitting disciplined soldiers" (Ravenna's words),⁷⁶ the FSI remained faithful to the tradition of following the interpretation of the Basel program given by the Congress, the most important official body of Zionism.

⁷³ Bernardo Dessau, "Lo svolgimento dell'attività sionistica in Italia durante l'ultimo biennio," *L'Idea Sionista*, 6/3 (1906), 41.

⁷⁴ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 18 June 1906, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁷⁵ Bernardo Dessau, "Lo svolgimento dell'attività sionistica in Italia," 42.

⁷⁶ See Circular of the FSI – protocol number 35/1905, 20 November 1905, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 51, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

Partly taking on board the exhortations of some important representatives of the movement – among them Carlo Levi and Amedeo Donati – who saw in the Basel resolution a possible obstacle to the development of Italian Zionism, the President of FSI gave an interview to *Il Giornale d'Italia*, in an attempt to clarify the situation. Dessau partly disagreed with its contents, as he explained to Ravenna during his summer holiday in Oberstaufen im Allgäu:

In truth I believe that in order to object to the charge against Zionists of being anti-patriotic, you depict Italian Zionism as a reflex movement, energized only by solidarity and without the concurrence of a Jewish national feeling. This clearly emerges from the distinction you make between those countries where 'Zionism takes the form of political nationalism' and those in which Zionism is only 'the expression of a due solidarity for our Eastern brothers'... Now, even if this belief is, unfortunately, held by the majority of Italian Zionists, it is not a true Zionism, nor does it correspond with what we recently voted in Basel.⁷⁷

Dessau adopted a very clear position in the Italian Zionist debate between Territorialist and Palestinocentrist positions and their possible coexistence. He was convinced that each Zionist had the right to sympathise with Israel Zangwill's cause, but peremptorily ruled out the possibility of taking active part in the *Jewish Territorial Organization*. At the fifth Italian Zionist Conference he said: "we must not forget that each single good Zionist's energy and actions must belong in the first place to our movement, which seeks primarily to find a stable and long-term solution for the Jewish problem."⁷⁸ He had initially supported Zangwill's association because he agreed with its aim to found an administratively autonomous settlement. When it became clear that this autonomy was not contemplated in the Galveston Plan for the colonization of Texas, Dessau gave voice to his disapproval in a letter which he wrote to Ravenna in January 1907: "In my opinion, Zangwill is sacrificing our highest long-term goals for present-day needs."⁷⁹

In a propaganda lecture given in Venice (14th April 1907) and released for promotional purposes,⁸⁰ [Fig. 3] Dessau was even more explicit about his belief that it was impossible to solve the Jewish question through emigration to

⁷⁷ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 13 August 1905, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁷⁸ Bernardo Dessau, "Lo svolgimento dell'attività sionistica in Italia," 42.

⁷⁹ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 24 January 1907, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁸⁰ See Circular of the FSI – protocol number 48/1907, 28 November 1907, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 53, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

America: “It is imperative [...] that Jews can call a part of the land on this planet their own, a place where they can take refuge without fear of being exploited or mistreated; it is also imperative that they can enjoy if not complete independence at least very significant local autonomy.”⁸¹ There is a passage in this pamphlet, which angered some important representatives of Italian Zionism who did not interpret the guiding principles of Zionism as Dessau did and possibly overestimated the import of his words. The incriminating passage reads: “In spite of appearances, it is not uncommon for backward civilizations and erroneous economic criteria to allow anti-Semitic groups to form in places where large groups of Jews gather among European populations.”⁸² In a letter to Ravenna, the then *L’Idea Sionista* editor Carlo Levi expressed his disagreement in strong terms:

even allowing for mitigating factors [...] the unacceptable statement that a co-existence of large Jewish groups among European populations is fatally impossible without anti-Semitic persecution, Dessau leads inevitably to the conclusion that Jews must emigrate to a land of their own and cannot live among other people. This is not only contrary to what I believe – which would not in itself count for much more than a personal objection – but it is also contrary to our newspaper’s policy and to current socio-scientific trends.⁸³

Benvenuto Donati, who openly sympathized with the Territorialist cause, reacted in a similar way:

The author legitimizes the movement, using, as a point of departure, the assumption that anti-Semitism is a universal phenomenon and the belief in a Jewish national unity which aspires to an autonomous existence in a homeland of its own. He also legitimizes the pro-Palestine position referring to specific international political conditions which would make the implementation of a Jewish settlement possible. I do believe this is not admissible, nor is it well-founded.⁸⁴

These passages help us to understand the wide variation in the perception of European political anti-Semitism in Italy between the end of the Nineteenth and the beginning of the Twentieth century. If on the one hand the Italian

⁸¹ Bernardo Dessau, *Il primo decennio del movimento sionista*, (Modena: Tip. G. Ferraguti e C., 1907), 15.

⁸² Ibid., 14.

⁸³ Carlo Levi to Felice Ravenna, 14 August 1907, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 38 (Prof. Carlo Levi, Modena), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁸⁴ Benvenuto Donati to Felice Ravenna, 7 August 1907, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 31 (Prof. Benvenuto Donati, Modena), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

population was affected only by sporadic episodes of anti-Semitism, which encouraged the belief that they living in a very particular historical moment, on the other there were those who understood from the very beginning how dangerous this new wave of intolerance would be if it reached Italy.⁸⁵

Dessau's Collaboration with *L'Idea Sionista*

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Dessau collaborated with *L'Idea Sionista*. In 1905 his wife Emma drew a colour front cover for it. Following a widespread disappointment with the position taken by the paper – edited at that time by Carlo Levi – in the debate between Territorialists and Palestinocentrists, he tried, along with Felice Ravenna and Angelo Sullam, to change its stance by forming a united and cohesive editorial staff that would function as board of directors.⁸⁶

If the monthly paper did not change, it would run a great risk of being disavowed by the most convinced section of Zionists, and this in turn would result in a loss of authority. Dessau thought that the small number of Committee members and the fact that they all shared the same idea on what Zionism meant were two essential conditions for the success of the project:

I can easily conceive of editing the journal with Sullam because, although we have very different ideas on many issues, and some of them quite important, we could easily agree on the line to follow; besides whoever of us edited the journal would unquestionably feel not only the duty but also the need to consult the other, if and when an uncertainty on what to do next emerged. But I do not even know some of the names that have been put forward. Nor do I really know why Prof. Levi wants to continue to be editor. I can only conclude that he wants to continue to advocate those very opinions that we feel no longer have anything to do with Zionism.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ On the specific situation of Italian Jewry at the beginning of the twentieth century, on its relative disinterest – if compared to other nations – for political anti-Semitism and on its understanding of European anti-Semitic phenomena, see Tullia Catalan, “Le reazioni dell’ebraismo italiano all’antisemitismo europeo (1880-1914),” *Les racines chrétiennes de l’antisémitisme politique (fin XIX^e-XX^e siècle)*, eds. Catherine Brice and Giovanni Miccoli, (Roma: École Française de Rome, 2003), 137-62.

⁸⁶ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 3 October 1905, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁸⁷ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 10 December 1905, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

Dessau blamed Amedeo Donati and Carlo Levi for the situation in which *L'Idea Sionista* found itself.⁸⁸ With the passing of time, and especially after it became clear that Sullam would not be able to cooperate with and financially support the journal, Dessau became convinced that the plan to reposition *L'Idea Sionista* had failed and that he could do little more other than effectively support the current editors.⁸⁹

After the attempts to renew the editorial line had come to nothing, the journal continued on its well-beaten track and opted to support a philanthropic version of Zionism, under the guidance of its most influential editors, Carlo Levi and the Donati brothers. This clearly emerges from some opinions expressed by Dessau on the territorialist sympathies of the journal. In September 1907 he wrote to Ravenna:

I do appreciate your kindness to the Donati brothers, but I do not think we should limit ourselves to mitigate the territorialist or humanitarian tendencies of the editors, nor to fight the bad influence that the journal is no doubt exercising in its present form.⁹⁰

Dessau even considered proposing at the next Italian Zionist Conference⁹¹ that *L'Idea Sionista* should not receive the official FSI press releases and that it should no longer be given any form of financial sponsorship. What he could not accept was its uncertain and wavering positions, which kept changing from issue to issue: "We need an official publication capable of forming and guiding public opinion."⁹² In spite of his efforts, Dessau could do little but watch helplessly as *L'Idea Sionista* gradually collapsed.⁹³

⁸⁸ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 8 July 1906, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁸⁹ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 8 November 1906, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁹⁰ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 8 September 1907, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁹¹ During the sixth Italian Zionist Conference (Venice, 22-23 February 1908) the line followed by the journal was the subject of a very heated debate, which had been somehow pre-announced before the Conference by the verbal brawl which took place between Edgardo Morpurgo and the editorial board.

⁹² Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 21 October 1907, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁹³ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 4 May 1910, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

War Conflicts, the Ottoman Empire and the Prospects of Zionism

The situation of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 1910s led Dessau to consider the opportunities that the political earthquake that had hit the territories of European Turkey might offer to Zionism. In his view, the period of serious internal crisis would make it necessary for the Turkish State to reach an “agreement among its different nationalities.”⁹⁴ He believed that the loss of the European territories – where the majority of the population was Christian and therefore not easy to integrate into the Ottoman Empire – did not represent a serious loss for Turkey and so he could postulate the rebirth of the Turkish State as resulting from a large Jewish immigration. In December 1912 he wrote to Ravenna:

The real resources of the Turkish State lie in Asia and they would be more than enough to give those countries a wonderful future, provided one finds somebody capable of awakening those energies and putting them to work. But who should be in charge of this mission? Certainly not the Young Turks, who are responsible for their country's dire situation and who have proved themselves incapable of real progress. Nor would it be possible to contemplate an intervention by European Christians, whom Muslims no doubt deeply hate, and will continue to hate for a long time. Who could then inculcate in the old empire those elements of Western culture without which any type of productive existence is impossible? Is it not logical and natural to think of the Jews, against whom Turks surely do not feel any racial antagonism and who already own European culture, and if they do not, they certainly are extremely suitable to absorb it? [...] We Jews should become for the Turks a vehicle towards progress and towards modern civilization, while that affinity existing between us and the oriental people would eliminate that antagonism which makes our existence unsustainable among the nations of Europe.⁹⁵

Dessau had no illusions about how hard it would be to convince the Turkish State's future ruling class about the benefits of collaborating with the Jews; and this, in the first place was because he believed that the World Zionist Organization lacked diplomats sufficiently skilled to attain such a goal. Given the situation, in his view it was of paramount importance that the Jews who were long settled in the Ottoman Empire kept to a “firmly Jewish-nationalist” stance. He wrote to Ravenna: “this is the most unclear issue for me, given that a part of

⁹⁴ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 21 April 1913, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁹⁵ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 10 December 1912, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

our fellow Jews in Turkey are also of that conviction (which, alas, is widespread in Italy too); they like to come across as patriots by denying any historical right for our race.”⁹⁶

At the outbreak of the First World War, during the Italian neutrality of 1914-1915, Dessau's pro-German declarations were indeed ardent, especially if one keeps in mind how cautious the initial reactions of Italian Zionism to international events had been. Aware of the atrocities of the conflict and reflecting on their possible implications for the Jewish question, in September 1914 Dessau was displeased to see that Italy was bracing itself for war – in an attempt to defend a neutrality which was under no threat at all – and to realize that in Italy the prevailing idea was to go to war against Austria. What especially troubled him was the fact that such a choice would indirectly help Russia. He believed that a possible Russian victory would worsen the conditions of those populations under Russian control; among them, of course, were the Jews, who had been searching for their own emancipation for such a long time. He wrote to Ravenna:

My heart sinks when I think about this terrible possibility. We should therefore get our act together and talk to friends and acquaintances, Jews and non-Jews, to show that Italy would be guilty of a crime against humanity and civilization if it renounced its neutrality and went to war against Austria and Germany. And, above all, we should become active in the newspapers. [...] I am sure that many of those who are now ready to go to war against Austria would change their mind once they realized the consequences of a Russian victory.⁹⁷

Dessau hoped Ravenna would agree with him on this issue in such a tragic historical moment, as he had always done in the past when the fate of the people of Israel was at stake. But this was not to be, as this time the President of FSI was not at all happy to read Dessau's words. Their disagreement was for Ravenna a painful episode, since for more than a decade he had appreciated and admired the well-balanced opinions of his good friend. His non-Italian origins had allowed Dessau to assess with great precision the differences between Italy's relationship with Jews and that of other countries: “I have wondered, and I am still wondering, who is wrong and who is right today” wrote Ravenna. Unlike Dessau, Ravenna was convinced that a Russian victory would not bring about the exacerbation which Dessau feared for two main reasons: first, it would not be easy to celebrate a victorious end to the conflict with more violence; and

⁹⁶ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 21 April 1913, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁹⁷ Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 9 September 1914, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

secondly, the presence of England – a country which had always honoured democracy and its highest principles – was not to be underestimated.⁹⁸

Dessau appreciated Ravenna's honesty, which he viewed as a sign of a friendship, but was sorry to see that their assessments of the causes of World War I and of the unhappy situation in which the Jewish population now found itself were very different. Where Dessau and Ravenna disagreed most was in the evaluation of possible British initiatives in favour of the Jews. Dessau was not very hopeful in this regard:

Britain declared war against Germany not because it was moved by a moral obligation to defend the violated neutrality of Belgium, but because it was jealous of Germany's growing economic power.

He nevertheless specified that his letter expressed no desire whatsoever to see Italy enter into war in alliance with its old allies and insisted that he wanted to draw Ravenna's attention to a very relevant issue which should push Italy to remain neutral.⁹⁹ It must be said that both Ravenna and Dessau, although with different and even contrary visions, were both convinced that Italy should remain neutral.

Conclusion

Although he was completely aware of the fact that the majority of Italian Jews had lost the perception of the existence of a Jewish nationality, Dessau fully recognized the political essence of the Zionist movement and was a convinced supporter of the fact that Zionism's final goal was national reconstitution. Of course he did not expect each single Zionist to make an explicit declaration of univocal belonging to the Jewish nation, he nevertheless hoped that the Jewish national ideal and Italian patriotism could enjoy the same type of dignity and degree of participation.

He was convinced that the abandonment of non-religious traditions was an illogic mistake and this also explains why his efforts and his commitment to intensify the bonds between Italian Jews and other diaspora groups through the reconfirmation of the idea of a Jewish ethnic group and the drive to take possession once again of Jewish traditions never weakened.

⁹⁸ See Felice Ravenna to Bernardo Dessau, 13 September 1914, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

⁹⁹ See Bernardo Dessau to Felice Ravenna, 18 September 1914, Felice Ravenna Papers (A353), file 29 (Prof. Bernardo Dessau), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

Dessau was always ready to refute wrong assumptions and prepared to discuss the main Zionist theories thanks to his deep and direct knowledge of German sources and to his contacts with celebrated Zionists such as Otto Warburg and Chaim Weizmann.

His disappointment with the positions adopted by *L'Idea Sionista*, a journal which, through the years, expressed clear philanthropic and territorialist tendencies, is evidence to the fact that he was an independent personality, removed from the ambiguities and uncertainties which were instead typical of the vast majority of Italian Zionists whenever they had to clearly define the meaning and substance of "Zionism."

Dessau advocated Zionism as a national movement of moral and cultural rebirth and his strong commitment to this cause makes him into one of the most important representatives in Italy of a renewed Jewish dynamism, along with Felice Ravenna, Gino Arias, Dante Lattes and Alfonso Pacifici.

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