

**The Italian-Jewish Writer Laura Orvieto (1876-1955)  
between Intellectual Independence and Social Exclusion**

by *Ruth Nattermann*



*Laura Orvieto (1876-1955)*

### **Abstract**

*The present article focuses on Laura Orvieto's intellectual development, asking about the chances, but also the barriers in the life of the sophisticated Italian-Jewish writer. Based on documents from the Orvieto archives in Florence, the Rosselli archives in Turin, as well as selected writings by Laura Orvieto, the contribution examines the protagonist's access to scholarship and learning in liberal, post-emancipated Italy, where Orvieto gained considerable success and public acclaim both as journalist and writer. At the same time, the article questions the free intellectual's "success story" by looking at the marginalization and eventual exclusion of the seemingly well-integrated Jewish woman from Italian society during Fascism.*

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### **Introduction**

"Work for its own sake" reads the title of an article on female labor, which Laura Orvieto published in 1911 in the Florentine periodical "Il Marzocco." The Italian-Jewish journalist and writer stated therein:

Working in order to do good to others. Why shouldn't from home, where the man already provides a sufficient contribution to the life of the family, the woman initiate a stream of diligence that furthers the female spirit and pride, and opens up a wider horizon to human personality?<sup>1</sup>

Laura Orvieto's statement did not only reflect her female self-understanding, but also her identity as a free intellectual personality. She belonged to a social stratum that did not need to work for survival. Nevertheless, she did not accept to be

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs El (Laura Orvieto), "Il lavoro e la donna," in *Il Marzocco*, 24 September 1911.

reduced to the contemporary role of an obeying wife and mother. Orvieto defined her identity to a considerable extent in terms of study and a commitment to writing, which was not primarily aiming at material reward. She became an independent writer and journalist with considerable success, until Fascism excluded her as well as her work from Italian society.

Outside her home country she has been hardly known, in liberal Italy however Laura Orvieto was a popular writer and a reputable personality in cultural life. Claudia Gori calls her an “intellectual of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,”<sup>2</sup> Monica Miniati describes Orvieto in her book on Jewish women in unified Italy as a “woman of great culture.”<sup>3</sup> Some of her literary works, especially “Storie della storia del mondo” (“Stories of World History”),<sup>4</sup> which re-narrate Greek mythology for children and young persons, have been read in Italian schools to this day.

Although there has been no comprehensive biography on Laura Orvieto, we dispose of a considerable amount of articles on particular aspects of her life and work.<sup>5</sup> In the last years, authors have also begun to deal with her pedagogical concepts and the significance of Jewish identity in her opus, which had been largely neglected or even denied for years.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Gori, “Laura Orvieto: un’intellettuale del Novecento,” in *Genesis* III/2 (2004): 183-203.

<sup>3</sup> Monica Miniati, *Le “emancipate.” Le donne ebraiche in Italia nel XIX e XX secolo*, (Rome: Viella, 2003), 180.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Orvieto, *Storie della storia del mondo. Greche e barbare*, (Florence: Bemporad, 1911).

<sup>5</sup> On Orvieto’s life and her *oeuvre* see in particular Carla Poesio, *Laura Orvieto* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1971); Caterina Del Vivo, “Laura Orvieto,” in *Profili di donne. Dai fondi dell’Archivio Contemporaneo del Gabinetto G.P. Vieusseux*, ed. Laura Melosi (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2001), 107-114; ID., “Costruirsi una storia: miti e realtà nell’autobiografia di Laura Orvieto,” in *Espacio. Tiempo y Educación* 1/1 (2014): 55-75; ID., “Educare narrando “Storie.” Miti classici, tradizione ebraica, echi del Novecento nella letteratura per ragazzi di Laura Orvieto,” in *Madri sociali. Percorsi di genere tra educazione, politica e filantropia*, ed. Antonella Cagnolati (Rome: Anicia, 2011), 153-182; ID., “Laura Orvieto,” in *Scrittrici italiane dell’Otto e Novecento. Le interviste impossibili*, eds. Hervé A. Cavallera and Walter Scancarollo, (Pisa: Bibliografia e informazione, 2013), 306 – 329; Marina Calloni, “(Auto)biografie di intellettuali ebraiche italiane: Amelia Rosselli, Laura Orvieto e Gina Lombroso,” in *Visioni in/sostenibili. Genere e intercultura*, eds. Clotilde Barbarulli and Liana Borghi (Cagliari: CUEC, 2003), 139-158. Recently, the “Antologia Vieusseux” dedicated a whole issue to the writer: “Laura Orvieto. La voglia di raccontare le ‘Storie del Mondo,’” in *Antologia Vieusseux* 18/53-54 (2012).

<sup>6</sup> On her pedagogical concepts see Gori, “Laura Orvieto;” ID., *Crisalidi. Emancipazioniste liberali in età giolittiana* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2003), 117-140. On the question of Jewish identity in Orvieto’s work see Caterina Del Vivo, “Altre ‘Storie del mondo’: Gli inediti di ispirazione ebraica nell’archivio di Laura Orvieto,” in *Una mente colorata. Studi in onore di Attilio Mauro Caproni per i suoi 65 anni, promossi, raccolti, ordinati da Piero Innocenti*, ed. Cristina Cavallaro (Rome: Vecchiarelli, 2007), 555-574. On Orvieto’s and contemporary Italian Jewesses’ commitment to the

The present article focuses deliberately on Orvieto's intellectual development, asking about the chances, but also the barriers in the life of this woman and Jewess. I will examine her access to scholarship and learning in liberal, post-emancipated Italy, where she gained considerable success and public acclaim as a journalist and writer.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, my article questions the free intellectual's "success story" by looking at the marginalization and eventual exclusion of the seemingly well-integrated Jewish woman from Italian society during Fascism.<sup>8</sup>

The article is based on documents from the Orvieto archives in Florence, the Rosselli archives in Turin, as well as selected writings by Laura. I will first look at Orvieto's patriotic family background and early education in Milan, secondly at her close involvement in the Florentine networks of learned Italian-Jewish men and women who furthered her interest in literature, pedagogics and the women's cause. I will then explain the forms she chose for mediating knowledge and the innovative potential of her opus, before I will focus in the last part on the restriction of Laura's intellectual independence during Fascism and her eventual exclusion from Italian society in 1938.

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Italian women's movement see Ruth Nattermann, "Weibliche Emanzipation und jüdische Identität im vereinten Italien. Jüdinnen in der frühen italienischen Frauenbewegung," in *150 Jahre Risorgimento – geeintes Italien?*, ed. Gabriele B. Clemens (Trier: Kliomedia, 2014): 127-145; 127-128.

<sup>7</sup> In spite of her fine education, especially with regard to literature, history, and languages, Laura Orvieto never went to an Italian university. She stayed for her whole life an independent writer and journalist, mainly out of her own choice, but also because of the barriers contemporary universities maintained towards women. On the carriers as well as barriers for women at Italian universities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Simonetta Polenghi, "'Missione naturale,' istruzione 'artificiale' ed emancipazione femminile. Le donne e l'università tra Otto e Novecento," in *L'altra metà della scuola. Educazione e lavoro delle donne tra Otto e Novecento*, eds. Simonetta Polenghi and Carla Ghizzoni (Turin: Edizione SEI, 2008), 283-318; Marino Raicich, "Liceo, università, professioni: un percorso difficile," in *L'educazione delle donne: scuole e modelli di vita femminile nell'Italia dell'Ottocento* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1989), ed. Simonetta Soldani, 147-181. On the phenomenon of independent scholarship among women, especially women historians, see Gianna Pomata, "Amateurs by Choice: Women and the Pursuit of Independent Scholarship in 20th Century Historical Writing," in *Centaurus* 55 (2013): 196-219.

<sup>8</sup> On the alleged "success story" of Italian Jewry see also Martin Baumeister, "Ebrei fortunati? Juden in Italien zwischen Risorgimento und Faschismus," in *Italien, Blicke. Neue Perspektiven der italienischen Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Petra Terhoeven, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 43-60.

### Between Italian-Jewish patriotism, female self-assertion and laicistic education

Laura Orvieto was born in 1876 in Milan, seventeen years after political emancipation was granted to the Jews in Lombardy. For the Jewish minority in the young Italian nation state, founded in 1861, it was a period characterized by several ongoing processes, concerning the implementation of the new rights into political reality, socio-cultural change and integration: They had to become “ebrei italiani.”<sup>9</sup> It is a well-known fact that Jews had played an important role in the political and social construction of the Italian nation. Nineteenth century patriotic sentiment and a strong sense of Italian consciousness were to remain outstanding characteristics of Italian Jewry until well into the Twentieth Century. Participation in religious life, on the other hand, was altering and began to diminish by the growing activity in Italian political and social life. The process of secularization resulted in individual life styles or even the rejection of religion and the abandonment of the community.<sup>10</sup> Among many people who chose one of these options, however, Jewish identities continued to exist. They were bound by ties of affinity and friendship, but most of all by closely intertwined family relationships. As Guri Schwarz and Barbara Armani have pointed out, even non-religious Jews maintained a distinct “identità familiare” [family identity] which stayed alive in their families, based on a common cultural memory and heritage.<sup>11</sup> The Cantoni and Orvieto families, who formed Laura’s cultural and social background, are important examples for the entanglement of Italian-Jewish families in post-emancipated Italy, where the profound sense of national belonging fused with a distinct, rather secular Jewish family identity. Laura’s parents, Maria and Achille Cantoni, were remote relatives. Her father, a Jewish banker and land owner, was originally from Mantua; he had moved as a young

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<sup>9</sup> Among the recent studies on Italian Jewry, especially in the period of emancipation, see Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti, *Fare gli ebrei italiani. Autorappresentazione di una minoranza (1861-1918)*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011); Elizabeth Schächter, *The Jews of Italy, 1848-1915. Between Tradition and Transformation* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010); *Acculturation and its discontents: the Italian Jewish experience between exclusion and inclusion*, ed. David N. Myers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); *Ebrei e nazione. Comportamenti e rappresentazioni nell’età dell’emancipazione*, special issue of *Storia e problemi contemporanei* n. 45, ed. Carlotta Ferrara degli Uberti (Bologna: CLUEB, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> On this argument see also Tullia Catalan, “Juden und Judentum in Italien von 1848 bis 1918,” in *Judentum und Antisemitismus im modernen Italien*, eds. Gudrun Jäger and Liana Novelli-Glaab, (Berlin: Trafo Verlag, 2007), 71-86; 72-73.

<sup>11</sup> See Barbara Armani and Guri Schwarz, “Premessa,” in *Ebrei borghesi. Identità familiare, solidarietà e affari nell’età dell’emancipazione*, *Quaderni storici* 14 (2003): 621-651; 627-632.

man to Milan. Achille was the cousin of the writer Alberto Cantoni (1841-1904), a reputable intellectual of his time, whose style also Luigi Pirandello appreciated.<sup>12</sup> A central feature of the numerous Cantoni family and their direct relatives, especially the Errera from Venice, was an active patriotism that reflected the loyalty of Italian Jewry to the project of the Risorgimento and its inherent promise of emancipation. As Laura emphasizes in her autobiography, Angiolo's grandmother Anna Errera came from a Venetian family of "ardent patriots."<sup>13</sup> Anna's father Abramo Errera had taken part in Daniele Manin's provisional government of the "Repubblica di San Marco," committed to free Venice from the Austrian rule and to achieve political and social equality for Jews. As to the Cantoni, Laura's father Achille as well as one of Angiolo Orvieto's uncles, the engineer Luigi Cantoni, had fought as young volunteers on Giuseppe Garibaldi's side in the Italian wars of independence.<sup>14</sup> The familial context represents a key to understand Laura's profound patriotism and Italian consciousness; in one of her curriculum vitae she defined herself as "italianissima."<sup>15</sup>

Achille Cantoni, who was thought of as an eccentric by his family, represented the first significant intellectual influence in Laura's life: In spite of his profession as a banker, that he took up only at the behest of his father-in-law, his real passion was directed towards the ancient world and the collection of antiquities. He became one of the major contemporary Italian experts on Islamic art and was in touch with eminent scholars such as the German art historian and curator Wilhelm Bode (1845-1929).<sup>16</sup>

Del Vivo assumes that besides a distinct interest in art and history, Achille transmitted to his daughter also a certain restlessness that became one of the

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<sup>12</sup> In her autobiographical text "Storia di Angiolo e Laura," Laura dedicated a chapter to her remote relative Alberto Cantoni; see Laura Orvieto, *Storia di Angiolo e Laura*, ed. Caterina Del Vivo, (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2001), 9-12. On Cantoni's ideological positions and his eventual interest in the Zionist movement, see Alberto Jori, *Identità ebraica e sionismo nello scrittore Alberto Cantoni (1841-1904)*, Firenze: Giuntina, 2004. Alberto Cantoni was an uncle of the Florentine poet Angiolo Orvieto's who became Laura's husband, himself a distant cousin of hers.

<sup>13</sup> Orvieto, *Storia di Angiolo e Laura*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 12. - On Luigi Cantoni see Caterina Del Vivo, "Illusioni e delusioni nelle lettere inedite di Luigi Cantoni," in *Nuova Antologia* 2172 (ottobre-dicembre 1989): 362-414.

<sup>15</sup> Gabinetto G.P. Vieusseux, Firenze, Archivio Contemporaneo "Alessandro Bonsanti" (in the following: ACGV), Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.1.2. Carte personali e biografiche: Curriculum vitae.

<sup>16</sup> On Achille Cantoni and his commitment to art collecting see Daniela Cecutti, "Achille Cantoni e il commercio di arte islamica nella Milano tardo ottocentesca," in *Antologia Vieusseux* 55 (gennaio-aprile 2013): 49-64; on Wilhelm von Bode's see in this context: Barbara Paul, "'Collecting is the noblest of all passions!': Wilhelm von Bode and the relationship between museums, art dealing, and private collecting," in *International Journal of Political Economy* 25/2 (1995): 9-32.

mainsprings for her accomplishments and smoldered for her whole life underneath the apparent middle-class calmness of her existence.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Laura described herself in the autobiographical piece *Storia di Angiolo e Laura* [Story of Angiolo and Laura] as a young “rebel” on search for her place in the world. She immersed herself into books by writers such as Charles Dickens and dreamed about alleviating the misery in London’s slums as a “rescuing angel.”<sup>18</sup> In the school for “young ladies” that she frequented in Milan, Laura did not find answers to her questions: she perceived the traditional middle-class education for girls as superficial, as she remarked later on in a curriculum vitae.<sup>19</sup>

However, it was the educated and progressive Scottish Puritan Lily Marshall (1867-1931), whom Laura’s parents employed as a private teacher for their talented adolescent daughter, that had a decisive influence on the future writer’s intellectual development.<sup>20</sup> Marshall inspired not only Laura’s passion for English literature but also her interest in the social conditions and necessities of women, for whose rights the feminist movement in the United Kingdom had already been standing up for some time.<sup>21</sup> In this context, Laura began to reflect upon her own role as woman and to question the contemporary codes of female conduct, as becomes evident in a letter the twenty-one-year old wrote in English to Marshall. Feeling unable to conform, the young woman expressed her ongoing inner struggle and the preoccupation not to please her parents:

“I have so much to tell you. I have been often bad, in this time. But I’ll try to the better. You know that my nature is very wicked sometimes? But very, you know. I should like to be [...] chided badly sometimes but with love. I like this more than coldness or indifference. Tell me, dear, where I am wrong. I am not proud of thinking that I am better than these girls, though they will make their parents more glad than I make mine? I can’t think I am like them ...”<sup>22</sup>

As a consequence, Laura refused wherever possible to comply to certain etiquettes and apparently avoided social events for young middle-class women

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<sup>17</sup> Del Vivo, “Laura Orvieto,” 107.

<sup>18</sup> Orvieto, *Storia di Angiolo e Laura*, 61.

<sup>19</sup> ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.1.2: Carte personali e biografiche: Curriculum vitae.

<sup>20</sup> Laura dedicated to her beloved Scottish teacher a chapter in her autobiography, see Orvieto, “Storia di Angiolo e Laura,” 66-67. On Marshall see also the commemorations “Lily E. Marshall, teacher and friend,” an address delivered by Rosita Levi Pisetzky, 26 November 1931, Milan, “Our Club” (1931); Angiolo Orvieto, *Lily E. Marshall nella vita e negli scritti*, (Milan: Our Club, 1931).

<sup>21</sup> On the early women’s emancipation movement in the United Kingdom see e.g. Elizabeth Crawford, *The women’s suffrage movement: A reference guide 1866-1928* (London: Routledge 2001).

<sup>22</sup> ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.2.1: Minute, lettere o copie di lettere di Laura Orvieto a amici e familiari; Laura Orvieto to Lily Marshall, August 19, 1897.

that she regarded as shallow. Amelia Rosselli, one of Orvieto's dearest friends, amused herself a few years later about the fact that her vivacious friend Laura had never gone to a ball: "What a funny little woman you are! You have never been to a ball? *Colossale!* I don't know how much time I have thought about this extraordinary thing. I instead could describe well the excitement of the first balls, as Signorina..."<sup>23</sup>

Besides the unconventional Lily Marshall, who surely furthered Laura's individuality and inspired her lifelong commitment to the women's cause, an important mentor of Laura's was the Italian-Jewish educationalist Rosa Errera (1864-1946), one of Angiolo Orvieto's Venetian cousins who lived in Milan. She taught the young woman Italian literature and supported at the same time her impulse for social commitment. Rosa as well as her sisters Emilia and Anna, all writers, shared a strong interest in pedagogics.<sup>24</sup> Partly in collaboration with another friend of Laura's, Lina Schwartz, as well as with her sister Rosa, Anna Errera wrote also texts for schools. Emilia, a teacher, literary critic and translator, confided to Angiolo that already as a girl she had dreamt to become a school teacher.<sup>25</sup> Laura, obviously inspired by the pedagogical commitment of the Errera sisters, began to teach as a volunteer under Rosa's direction in the newly-founded Milanese institution "Scuola e famiglia," which was frequented by children of blue-collar workers after their regular day of school. "In these days I have only worked and walked. I work for "Scuola e Famiglia" and I walk with my father," Laura stated in a letter to Lily Marshall.<sup>26</sup>

In the concrete dedication of many learned Italian-Jewish women to education, especially in terms of institutions for socially disadvantaged children and adolescents, one can clearly identify a certain continuity tracing back to Sara Levi Nathan's (1819-1882) activities in Rome: The companion of Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the major pioneers and icons of the Italian women's movement, had

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<sup>23</sup> ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 2.18.1-71, Carte aggiunte – "Lascito Asso," Amelia Rosselli to Laura Orvieto, July 18, s.d. (1905?). In another letter, Amelia described a young woman she had met during her holidays and reminded her of Laura: "... she has your cheerful joy ... it is ridiculous how much she resembles you. Even in the way she throws herself on the lawn, and when she bursts out laughing;" ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or.1.2059, Amelia Rosselli to Laura Orvieto, August 18, 1913.

<sup>24</sup> On the educated sisters Rosa, Emilia and Anna Errera see Achille Norsa, "Tre donne che hanno onorato l'Ebraismo italiano: le sorelle Errera," *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* XLI (1975): 42-55.

<sup>25</sup> ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 2.8, 12, No. 2, Emilia Errera to Angiolo Orvieto, s.d.

<sup>26</sup> See ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.1.2: Minute, lettere o copie di lettere di Laura Orvieto a amici e familiari; Laura Orvieto to Lily Marshall, August 19, 1897. On her work for Scuola e Famiglia see also ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.1.2., Carte personali e biografiche: Curriculum Vitae.



founded in 1873 a school for daughters of impoverished parents in the Roman borough of Trastevere.<sup>27</sup> The *Scuola Mazzini* resulted directly from Nathan's concept of a profound and laicist education, emphasizing Mazzini's *Doveri dell'uomo* (The Duties of Men) which she regarded as indispensable for social development and justice. Her school project took up the idea of the *Libera Scuola per i lavoratori* ("Free School for Blue-collar Workers") Giuseppe Mazzini had founded in 1841 in London. Sara Levi Nathan shared Mazzini's conviction that education and instruction represented the most important base for the intellectual as well as moral development of both individual and society. They formed in their view the precondition for building a nation on the principles of equality.<sup>28</sup> Sara Levi Nathan had also a decisive share in establishing the educational, secular impetus within the Italian women's emancipation discourse. In her *Scuola Mazzini* girls were taught instead of the Catechism moral principles based on the "Duties of Man." Her school became a visible sign for the new laicism that since the conquest of Rome in 1870 and the separation of state and church had been a firm component of the young Italian nation's self-understanding.<sup>29</sup> The importance of a decidedly laicistic education becomes similarly evident in Adele Della Vida Levi's (1822-1915) Fröbel-Kindergarden, the first of its kind in Italy, founded as early as 1869 in Venice.<sup>30</sup> Twenty-seven years later, her nieces Gina and Paola Lombroso created in turn the *Scuola e Famiglia* for needy primary school children in Turin, which became the concrete model for Rosa Errera's enterprise in Milan. Thus, also Laura Orvieto's closeness to *Scuola e Famiglia* must be viewed in this overall context and as another piece of evidence for the strong interest of a large group of Italian-Jewish activists in

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<sup>27</sup> On Sara Levi Nathan see Anna Maria Isastia, *Storia di una famiglia del Risorgimento. Sarina, Giuseppe, Ernesto Nathan*, (Turin: Università Popolare di Torino Editore, 2010); Chiara Valentini, "La banchiera della rivoluzione. Sara Levi Nathan," in *Donne del Risorgimento*, eds. Elena Doni et. al., (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), 137-156.

<sup>28</sup> On this argument see Isastia, *Storia di una famiglia del Risorgimento*, 7; Valentini, "La banchiera," 139; Nattermann, "Jüdinnen," 132.

<sup>29</sup> On the meaning and visibility of laicism in unified Italy see Oliver Janz, "Konflikt, Koexistenz und Symbiose. Nationale und religiöse Symbolik in Italien vom Risorgimento bis zum Faschismus," in *Nation und Religion in Europa. Mehrkonfessionelle Gesellschaften im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Dieter Langewiesche (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2004), 231-252, here 232f.

<sup>30</sup> See Nadia Maria Filippini, "'Come tenere pianticelle'. L'educazione della prima infanzia: asili di carità, giardinetti, asili per lattanti," in *La scoperta dell'infanzia. Cura, educazione e rappresentazione Venezia 1750-1930*, eds. Nadia Maria Filippini and Tiziana Plebani (Venice: Marsilio Editori), 91-111, here 96-97; Maria Teresa Segà, "Percorsi di emancipazione tra Otto e Novecento," in *Donne sulla scena pubblica. Società e politica in Veneto tra Sette e Ottocento*, ed. Nadia Maria Filippini (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2006), 185-217; 204.

pedagogical issues and a secular form of education, especially for the socially disadvantaged, within the concrete framework of institutions that can be traced back to Sara Levi Nathan and ultimately Mazzini.<sup>31</sup>

### **Intellectual Relationships and Women Networks. Laura's Beginnings as an Independent Writer and Activist in Belle Époque Florence**

It was without doubt the Italian-Jewish poet and philosopher Angiolo Orvieto (1869-1967) that smoothed definitely the way for Laura's development towards writer and journalist. In 1899, twenty-three-year-old Laura married her cousin Angiolo, who like herself descended from a family of bankers, and moved to his home town, Florence. Angiolo had studied philosophy there, and by the time of his marriage had already published several literary works.<sup>32</sup> Together with his brother Adolfo and a group of friends, he had founded in 1896 the periodical "Il Marzocco" as an autonomous forum for *litterati*, writers, and artists. Among its collaborators were well-known personalities such as Giovanni Pascoli, Gabriele D'Annunzio, and Luigi Pirandello.<sup>33</sup> Laura expressed the importance of the relationship to Angiolo for her journalistic and literary achievements later in one of her curriculum vitae as follows:

Laura Cantoni married the Florentine poet Angiolo Orvieto and began under his loving and intelligent guidance to write for the popular and influential periodical "Il Marzocco." At first [she did so] in the section of marginalia, which consisted of summaries from other journals, later [she wrote] her own articles.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> On the laicistic orientation of many contemporary Italian-Jewish activists and their educational projects see Nattermann, "Jüdinnen," 141ff.

<sup>32</sup> On Angiolo and his work see Arrigo Levast, "Angiolo Orvieto. Un ebreo fiorentino," in *Amicizia ebraico-cristiana*, XXVI/1-2 (1991): 60-70; Caterina Del Vivo, "L'approdo alle scritture: ispirazione e tradizione ebraica nella poesia di Angiolo Orvieto," in *La Rassegna della letteratura italiana* IX/2 (2002): 482-498; ID., "Nostalgie delle palme e dell'Arno': dicotomie inattese e proiezioni letterarie nelle opere di Angiolo e Laura Orvieto," in *Ebrei migranti: le voci della diaspora / Jewish migration: voices of the Diaspora*, eds. Raniero Speelman, Monica Jansen and Silvia Gaiga, (Utrecht, April 2012) <http://www.italianisticaultraiectina.org/publish/articles/000163/article.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> See *Il Marzocco. Carteggi e cronache fra Ottocento e avanguardie (1887-1913)*, Atti del seminario di studi, 12-14 dicembre 1983, ed. Caterina Del Vivo (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.1.2: Carte personali e biografiche: Curriculum vitae.

The emotional and intellectual support Laura found in her husband, as well as the couple's for contemporary standards rather unusually egalitarian and particularly close relationship was perceived also by their contemporaries. Amelia wrote to Laura shortly after their first meeting:

I have the feeling that we will become girlfriends, or rather friends: because you seem to me so entirely fused with your husband, in your soul are so many things of his [soul] vibrating, that actually I do not believe it is possible to be friends with you if he does not take part in this friendship as well.<sup>35</sup>

With the marriage to Angiolo, the transfer to Florence and the access to writing, Laura experienced a central moment in her identity formation as a woman as well as an independent writer. In *belle époque* Florence, she found a rich forum of cultural and social projects, ideas, and networks.<sup>36</sup> After the short period as Italy's capital city, the Florentine people were eager not to fall back into any form of provincialism. They continued to honour in particular the intellectual achievements: At university, historical as well as literary studies were flourishing thanks to illustrious lecturers such as Pasquale Villari, Guido Mazzoni and Ernesto Parodi. The publishing houses Le Monnier, Marbera, Paggi and Sansoni were specializing successfully in the reading behavior of the educated, affluent middleclass, especially classical culture, but also the contemporary novel and poetry. Moreover, Florence became a centre of literary periodicals: Besides the "Marzocco," Giovanni Papini's "Leonardo" and Prezzolini's "La Voce" were founded at the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1913 "Lacerba" was created as the organ of the popular group of literates associated with the Florentine coffee-house "Le Giubbe Rosse."<sup>37</sup>

A particular Florentine institution of that time supported the exchange between disciplined science and independent scholarship: The society "Leonardo da Vinci" saw herself as a forum for academics as well as culturally interested, educated people with no university background. Moreover, it was Florence where at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the public lecture in Italy was established as a

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<sup>35</sup> ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 2.18.1-71, Carte Aggiunte – "Lascito Asso," Amelia Rosselli to Laura Orvieto, September 10, 1904.

<sup>36</sup> On this argument see also Gori, "Laura Orvieto," 184.

<sup>37</sup> On the contemporary cultural role of Florence as well as the Florentine identity of its inhabitants see Laura Cerasi, "Florentinität. Wege einer Identitätsideologie an der Wende vom 19. zum 20. Jahrhundert," in *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 83 (2003): 363-394; 385-391. On the Florentine Avant-garde, its protagonists and discourses see Walter L. Adamson, *Avant-garde Florence. From modernism to fascism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

socio-cultural event. The encounter between literates and scientists with a wide audience, outside the university seminars, enjoyed great popularity and introduced also non-academics to the most recent scientific and literary works. In this way, Florence became a fertile ground not least for independent scholars, among them popular figures such as Aby Warburg (1866-1929) and Robert Davidsohn (1853-1937).<sup>38</sup>

Besides the cultural stimulation Laura Orvieto found inspiration in the lively exchange of political ideas. In spite or maybe precisely because of her own middle class upbringing, she became highly interested in the controversial social question and, in the context of the beginnings of the Italian women's emancipation movement, above all in the issue of women's rights. She used her articles in the "Marzocco" to bring uncomfortable topics such as female labour, gender relationships as well as the rights of women to education to public attention.<sup>39</sup>

However, not even Laura herself succeeded in overcoming completely the limitations of traditional gender roles: She published her progressive articles not under her own name but hid herself behind the pseudonym "Mrs EL," especially in order not to be identified as the author of these texts by her demanding and

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<sup>38</sup> An intellectual portrait of Florence at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with a particular focus on Aby Warburg, offers Bernd Roeck, *Florenz 1900. Die Suche nach Arkadien* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001); on the German-Jewish historian Robert Davidsohn, who lived in Florence from 1889 onwards and wrote a "History of Florence" (published between 1896 and 1927), see *Robert Davidsohn (1853–1937). Uno spirito libero tra cronaca e storia. I. Atti della giornata di studio, II. Gli scritti inediti, III. Catalogo della biblioteca*, eds. Wiebke Fastenrath Vinattieri and Martina Ingendaay, (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. her articles on female labor "Il lavoro e la donna," in *Il Marzocco*, 24 September 1911 on gender relationships based on equality and not on sentimentality "Libri per ragazzi," in *Il Marzocco*, 23 July, 1905; on the women's emancipation movement "La brutezza delle femministe," in *Il Marzocco*, 23 December, 1906, as well as "Le donne al Congresso di Roma," in *Il Marzocco*, 3 May 1908. On the beginnings and the early development of the women's emancipation movement in Italy see Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, *Alle origini del movimento femminile in Italia 1848-1892*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1963); Elisabeth Dickmann, *Die italienische Frauenbewegung im 19. Jahrhundert*, (Frankfurt: Domus Editoria Europea, 2002). In particular on the press of the Italian women's movement see Annarita Buttafuoco, *Cronache femminili. Temi e momenti della stampa emancipazionista in Italia dall'unità al fascismo*, (Siena: Università degli Studi di Siena, 1988); *Giornali di donne in Toscana. Un catalogo, molte storie (1770-1945)*, Bd I. (1770-1897), Bd. II (1900-1945), eds. Silvia Franchini, Monica Pacini, Simonetta Soldani (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2007); Tullia Catalan, "Percorsi di emancipazione delle donne italiane in età liberale," in *Gli italiani in guerra. Conflitti, identità, memorie dal Risorgimento ai nostri giorni. Vol. II: Le Tre Italie dalla presa di Roma alla Settimana Rossa (1870-1914)*, eds. Mario Isnenghi and Simon Levis Sullam, (Turin: Utet, 2009), 170-181. On gender historical aspects of Italian journalism see *Donne e giornalismo. Percorsi e presenze di una storia di genere*, eds. Silvia Franchini and Simonetta Soldani, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004).

rather conservative brother-in-law Adolfo. In one of her curriculum vitae, Laura stated that he was “not easily pleased” when it came to articles for the “Marzocco.”<sup>40</sup>

In spite of this one reservation, however, her journalistic activities opened up to Laura once and for all the possibility to break through the private sphere of her previous studies and to articulate her ideas in public. Angiolo Orvieto offered his wife not only access to the intellectual circle of the “Marzocco,” but also to representatives of “disciplined science,” the Florentine professoriate, among others his former teacher and professor for Hebrew at the “Istituto di Studi Superiori” in Florence, David Castelli (1836-1901). Laura included him later on under a different name in her unpublished novel “Leone Da Rimini.”<sup>41</sup> At the same time, Angiolo continued at Laura’s own wish her education in private, introducing her to philosophy, reading and discussing with her Italian as well as foreign literature. In October 1899, shortly after Laura had married Angiolo, the educationalist Lina Schwarz (1876-1947),<sup>42</sup> a dear friend of Laura’s, inquired eagerly: “When you are writing to me again, you will tell me many things about you two. Have you already begun studying together? What are you reading?”<sup>43</sup> And Laura replied immediately: “We have read three *canti* by Dante the other evening ... and yesterday a thought by Amiel.”<sup>44</sup>

Readings represented an important theme in Laura’s correspondence with her friends. Especially in the exchange with Amelia Rosselli and Lina Schwarz one can find frequent allusions to Italian, English, German and French writers and poets from various epochs. They offer an insight into the multi-lingual and

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<sup>40</sup> ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.1.2: Carte personali e biografiche: Curriculum vitae.

<sup>41</sup> Professor Pacifici in Laura’s unpublished novel “Leone Da Rimini” is obviously based on David Castelli; see Del Vivo, “Altre storie del mondo,” 572. On Castelli see Cristiana Facchini, *David Castelli. Ebraismo e scienze delle religioni tra Otto e Novecento*, (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> On Schwarz, who wrote children’s literature and introduced Rudolf Steiner’s theories in Italy, see *Donne del giornalismo italiano. Da Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel a Ilaria Alpi. Dizionario storico bio-bibliografico. Secoli XVIII-XX*, ed. Laura Pisano, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004), 339-340.

<sup>43</sup> ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.2.1.: Minute, lettere o copie di lettere di Laura Orvieto a amici e familiari: Lina Schwarz, Schwarz to Orvieto, October 23, 1899.

<sup>44</sup> ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or.5.2.1., Laura Orvieto to Lina Schwarz, November 2, 1899. On Laura’s readings and her choice of books see also Caterina Del Vivo, “Libri dietro i libri. Laura Orvieto, ‘Il Marzocco,’ la biblioteca di Leo e Lia, e le ‘Storie del mondo,’” in *Antologia Vieusseux* 57 (2013): 93-123.

diversified reading behavior of these women, their shared passion above all for English literature - Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Shelley, George Eliot - and even an interest in Indian philosophy and meditation, as becomes evident in Schwarz's recommendation of "Raja Yoga" to Laura.<sup>45</sup>

Orvieto's correspondence with her friends, however, does not only reveal cultural interests. They reflect most of all the closely intertwined networks of Jewish women she was involved in, and the social and cultural milieu she identified herself with. Lina Schwarz was very close to her, but especially significant was her profound friendship with the Venice-born writer Amelia Rosselli (1870-1954), who had moved to Florence together with her sons Aldo, Carlo and Nello in 1903.<sup>46</sup> Amelia, née Pincherle, had known Angiolo Orvieto since her childhood. As a young boy, Angiolo had frequently gone with his mother to her birthplace Venice in order to visit the Errera relatives, who were also close friends with the Pincherle.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Angiolo's cousins Emilia, Rosa, and Anna belonged also to Amelia's networks, which frequently overlapped with Laura's.<sup>48</sup> In Florence, Amelia and Laura - almost coeval women and mothers with a middle-class, educated and patriotic Jewish background - became soon dear friends. The playwright Rosselli, who had already published several works when she met Laura for the first time, certainly inspired the latter for beginning her own career as writer and journalist.<sup>49</sup> Besides Schwarz and the Errera, with

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<sup>45</sup> See Schwarz's letters to Laura Orvieto in ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.2.1: Minute, lettere o copie di lettere di Laura Orvieto a amici e familiari: Lina Schwarz, especially October 23, 1899; May 15, 1900; December 30, 1900; June 29, 1901. - About Raja Yoga, Schwarz wrote to Orvieto: "Read well Raja Yoga, consider him yourself; I think he should help you so well with the children. This idea of the absolute "I" ... is extraordinary;" ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.2.1: Schwarz to Orvieto, Pasqua (annotation: between April 10 and 16, 1911). - Also Amelia Rosselli wrote often about her readings to Laura, among others Dante, Tolstoi, and Colette; see especially her letters on May 22, 1905; July 18 (s. d., 1905?) in ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 2.18.1-71, Carte aggiunte - "Lascito Asso." The beginning of the First World War inspired her to read Berta von Suttner's "Lay Down your Arms" in Italian; see her letter to Laura on September 13, 1914, ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 1.2059, Nr. 105.

<sup>46</sup> On Amelia Rosselli see Dolara Vieri, Amelia Rosselli Pincherle, *Quaderni del Circolo Rosselli* 3 (2006); Giovanna Amato, "Una donna nella storia. Vita e letteratura di Amelia Pincherle Rosselli," in *Quaderni del Circolo Rosselli* 1 (2012); Amelia Rosselli, *Memorie*, ed. Marina Calloni, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> See his "Commemorazione di Amelia Rosselli," ACGV, Or.1.2059: Rosselli Amelia. Commemorazioni e stampa relativa.

<sup>48</sup> See the detailed register of the "Lettere di famigliari e conoscenti" (1881-1930), Archivio Rosselli Torino.

<sup>49</sup> In 1901 Amelia had published "Anima," her most famous theater play, as well as "Felicità

whom she shared the vivid interest in education, as well as Rosselli, who stimulated her literary and journalistic ambitions, Laura was in touch with many other contemporary Jewish women, among them the activists Bice Cammeo, Mary Nathan Puritz, and Ernestina Paper, who like herself and Rosselli committed themselves to the women's cause.<sup>50</sup> They did so mostly within secular institutions such as the Florentine section of the *Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane* (CNDI), [National Council of Italian Women] which was created in 1903 in association with the American Women's Council as well as the Lyceum, founded in 1908 in Florence, hereby showing their national solidarity and secular outlook.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, Laura and her friends maintained their close ties even within these organizations, where they continued to form a kind of Jewish "subgroup."<sup>52</sup> Besides their common origin and cultural heritage they shared a distinct interest in educational issues, which had a decisive influence on

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perduta" (1901) and "Gente oscura" (1903). Due to their closeness to the "Marzocco" circle, Laura as well as Amelia were also both well acquainted with the popular actress Eleonora Duse (1858-1924), Gabriele D'Annunzio's lover. The relationship between the two younger women and Duse, however, proved to be difficult; see in this context Laura's diary entries in ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or. 5.3.4.: *Appunti di diario e fascicolo di carte sciolte: "Incontri con Eleonora Duse."*

<sup>50</sup> The Florentine Bice Cammeo (1875-1961), an outstanding activist of the contemporary Italian women's movement, was highly active in various sectors of the social welfare as well as educational programs for women. On Cammeo see *Dizionario biografico delle donne lombarde*, ed. Rachele Farina, (Milan: Baldini&Castoldi, 1995) 250-251; Patrizia Guarnieri, "Tra Milano e Firenze: Bice Cammeo a Ersilia Majno per l'Unione Femminile," in *De Amicitia. Scritti dedicati a Arturo Colombo*, eds. Giovanna Angelini and Marina Tesoro, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2006), 504-515. Ernestina Paper, who had Russian origin, studied medicine at the universities in Pisa and Florence, and was the first woman to graduate in Liberal Italy in 1877; later on she opened a surgery especially for women and children in Florence. On Paper see Marino Raicich, "Liceo, università, professioni: un percorso difficile," ed. Simonetta Soldani, *L'educazione delle donne: scuole e modelli di vita femminile nell'Italia dell'Ottocento* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1989), 147-181; 150ff.; Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Mary Puritz, née Nathan, was the daughter of Sara Levi Nathan's son Ernesto, Rome's mayor from 1907 until 1913, and his wife Virginia Mieli. She was an active member of the Florentine section of the Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane.

<sup>51</sup> On the participation of Jewish women in the CNDI see Nattermann, "Jüdinnen," 143; Luisa Levi D'Ancona, *Italy. Modern. Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. URL: <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/italy-modern>. On the foundation of the Lyceum in Florence see Simona Maionchi, *Lyceum Club Internazionale di Firenze – Circolo culturale femminile*, unpublished manuscript, Archivio del Lyceum.

<sup>52</sup> The Italian situation shows here parallels to the activities of German Jewesses in the women's emancipation movement and its organizations; see Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class*, 125f.

Laura's writings.

### Mediating Knowledge by Telling Stories

Throughout her life, Laura Orvieto moved about freely between journalism, literature and scholarship, in accordance with her general need for independence and diversity. Her articles in the "Marzocco," but also in the press of the early Italian women's emancipation movement aimed at drawing public attention to feminist issues and to articulate her ideas regarding women's rights.<sup>53</sup> Her literary works on the other hand, which apart from few exceptions belong to children's and young people's literature, express a distinct interest in questions regarding pedagogy, which had already been supported by her early mentor Rosa Errera and increased further with Laura's own motherhood. In 1900 her son Leonfrancesco was born, three years later her daughter Annalia. In 1906, Laura wrote to Amelia Rosselli: "I think that a woman needs work even more than love. I myself feel this need at the highest level. Until now, I have not been able to do anything. The children have taken me away these four years, and I gave them to them consciously, with joy..."<sup>54</sup> Now Laura was determined to start working again. Educating the children as well as observing their development inspired her to write her first book *Leo and Lia* [Leo and Lia], published in 1909 by Bemporad in Florence.<sup>55</sup> Only two years later, Laura finished her most successful work, *The Stories of World History* [English title]. It was the period in which she concentrated deliberately on issues such as education and pedagogy. On the basis of appealing, easily understandable stories, Orvieto imparted to children and her parents pedagogical-didactical concepts, which were oriented towards the contemporary discourse, especially Maria Montessori's progressive theories.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See e.g. her article on female education, the transformation of gender roles as well as power relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children: "Come educerò le mie figlie," *Almanacco della donna italiana* I (1920): 116-125. On Laura's educational ethos as a journalist see Monica Pacini, "Il giornalismo di Laura Orvieto: educarsi/ educare," in *Antologia Vieusseux*, 53-54 (2012): 109-132.

<sup>54</sup> ACGV, Or. 5.2.1: Minute, lettere o copie di lettere di Laura Orvieto a amici e familiari; Laura Orvieto to an unidentified friend, 1906.

<sup>55</sup> Mrs El, *Leo e Lia: storia di due bimbi italiani con una governante inglese* (Florence: Bemporad, 1909).

<sup>56</sup> Among the numerous works on Montessori's life and work see Gerald Lee Gutek, *The Montessori Method: The Origins of an Educational Innovation*, (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 2004); Marjan Schwegmann, *Maria Montessori* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999); Grazia Honegger Fresco, *Maria Montessori, una storia attuale* (Rome - Naples: L'Ancora del



Laura's intense study of pedagogy reflected the distinct interest in instruction and education that can be observed in many Italian-Jewish women of her time. An explanation for this phenomenon lies certainly in the central role education and instruction assume within Judaism; in fact even after the erosion of the normative religious system, their significance stayed alive in a transformed, rather secular way.<sup>57</sup> Rosa Errera, Adele Della Vida Levi and Paola Lombroso became pioneers of the reformatory pedagogics in Italy whose theoretical concepts (especially the Montessori as well as the Froebel methods) they did not only develop in their writings:<sup>58</sup> Frequently they also implemented them in a practical way by founding respective schools and institutions, as we have seen above. In this way, the contemporary pedagogical discourse in Italy was inspired and developed to a considerable extent by learned women who were not affiliated to universities but often connected with each other on a personal level, such as Orvieto, Schwarz, Errera and the Lombroso sisters. In addition to that, an interaction emerged with academics like Maria Montessori, who in 1904 obtained the "libera docenza" at the University "La Sapienza" in Rome.<sup>59</sup>

Laura Orvieto was closely involved in these developments, although she did not write contributions to pedagogy in a scientific sense. She rather took up certain topics and ideas of contemporary educational theory and used them in an individual way for her literary works. It is surely no coincidence that the notion of freedom, central both to Montessori and to Froebel, gained a particular meaning in her writings. The narration *Leo e Lia* for example is based on the dialogue between mother and children and was inspired by the everyday life of the Orvieto family itself. Behind its seemingly naïve narrative structure, the story actually imparts innovative pedagogical findings: In accordance with

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Mediterraneo, 2007).

<sup>57</sup> On this argument see also Karen Hassan, "Colte, chiare, patriote, persino femministe. Amalia Guglielminetti, Laura Orvieto, Clelia Fano, Adele Levi," in *Donne ebreo*, eds. Hora Aboaf, Pupa Garibba, Maria I. Maciotti (Rome: Com Nuovi Tempi, 2001), 78-82; 81.

<sup>58</sup> On the psychology of children see e.g. Paolo Lombroso's writings "L'evoluzione delle idee nei bambini," in *Rivista di scienze biologiche* 1 (1899); "La psicologia dei bambini poveri," in *Nuova Antologia* 170 (1900); "Il senso della gioia nei bambini," in *Nuova Antologia* 192 (1903).

<sup>59</sup> Montessori participated also in several conferences of the international women's movement, among others the "Internationaler Kongress für Frauenwerke und Frauenbestrebungen" in Berlin in September 1896, where also questions regarding pedagogy and female education were extensively discussed; see *Der Internationale Kongress für Frauenwerke und Frauenbestrebungen. Eine Sammlung der auf dem Kongress gehaltenen Vorträge und Ansprachen*, ed. Rosalie Schoenflies, Lina Morgenstern e.a. (Berlin: Hermann Walther Verlag, 1897). On Montessori's "libera docenza" in Rome see Polenghi, "Missione naturale," 315.

Montessori's emphasis on supporting the child's independent thinking and action, Orvieto brought out the right of children to free learning, spontaneity, as well as the internalization of moral principles.<sup>60</sup> One of the talks between the mother, Laura, and the children, Leo and Lia, focuses on the relationships with other human beings. The respective dialogue shows a distinct sense for individual responsibility and morality:

... because all of us are servants, but more than others we have to follow ourselves. When something is good we must do it, even if it is uncomfortable; when something is bad, we must not do it, even if it seems pleasant to us. Don't you think so?<sup>61</sup>

It was Orvieto's merit to translate contemporary findings of pedagogy into children's everyday life, and to impart knowledge to young as well as older readers in an entertaining way. The innovative potential of her accomplishments as a writer lies therefore not least in the fact that she succeeded in leading the new pedagogical theories of her time out of the academic ivory tower, rendering them accessible and comprehensible to a wider public.

The didactical influence remained a constant factor in Laura Orvieto's literary work. It contributed decisively to her public presence, particularly when it comes to her most successful work, the already mentioned *Stories of World History*. Their first volume appeared in 1911 under the title "Storie della storia del mondo : greche e barbare" (Stories of Greece and the Barbarians) in Florence and were later translated in numerous languages.<sup>62</sup> In these stories, Orvieto's pedagogical interest joined her fascination for ancient history and Greek mythology, which gained great popularity at that time. Based on her intense studies of Homer, the authoress retold central episodes of the Iliad and the Odyssey for children. Orvieto's intention was to introduce her young readers to the Homeric tradition and to impart with the help of archetypal figures such as Paris and Helena, Achilles and Patroclus, Atreus and Thyestes a sense for human relationships and social behavior.<sup>63</sup>

The educational aim is clearly reflected in the commentary of the omniscient

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<sup>60</sup> On the pedagogical value of Orvieto's work see also Gori, "Laura Orvieto," 186.

<sup>61</sup> Laura Orvieto, "Leo e Lia," 106.

<sup>62</sup> Only the Italian first editions are cited in this article. There are numerous editions and reprinting of "Storie della storia del mondo" right up to the present day, as well as translations into French, English, German, Spanish, Slavic, Scandinavian languages etc.

<sup>63</sup> On the contemporary revival of classical culture, which influenced Orvieto's "Stories of Greece and the Barbarians" see Franco Cambi, "La classicità spiegata ai bambini in Storie della storia del mondo," in *Antologia Vieusseux* 53-54 (2012): 35-43.

story-teller and her children regarding certain parts of the plot. When Hera for example approaches Paris and tries to convince him that it matters most of all to “rule many people, to own many countries, and to be immensely rich,” the young boy Leo comments: “It seems to me that Hera does not tell the truth.” His attitude is supported both by his mother and his sister.<sup>64</sup> The lucidity, comprehensibility and originality with which the authoress in her “Stories of World History” reinterpreted difficult mythological and historical subject-matters for children, had a big public success. Literature as well as history teachers realized the potential of Orvieto’s work and began to use it for their lessons. To this day, “Stories of World History” have been read in Italian schools. Regarding Laura’s intellectual self-understanding, it was precisely the historically oriented as well as pedagogically inspired children’s and young people’s literature that complied with her need for independent, interdisciplinary work. The genre of children’s literature allowed her to position herself freely between pedagogy, history and literature, and to use as well as process her knowledge in an individual way. With the consolidation of the Fascist regime, however, the situation changed, which will be explained in the following.

### **Jewish Identity and the End of Independence during Fascism**

The role Jewish identity and inspiration played in Orvieto’s life and work has been neglected in relevant studies for a long time.<sup>65</sup> The frequent reference to her acculturated background, her secular education, as well as to the seemingly few connections to Jewish tradition in her writings are however based on a superficial examination. As we have seen, her curricula and her autobiographical work “Story of Angiolo and Laura” show a deep attachment to the Italian-Jewish milieu, both with regard to her marriage as well as to her involvement in Jewish women’s networks. A distinct characteristic in the self-understanding of Laura and her friends was the close connection between learning and social commitment that can be best explained with the influence of the religious Jewish principle of justice and the responsibility of every individual for the well-being of the community.<sup>66</sup> Laura Orvieto did not represent an exception in this case:

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<sup>64</sup> Orvieto, “Storia delle Storie del Mondo,” 27.

<sup>65</sup> See in this context Del Vivo, “Altre ‘Storie del Mondo,’” 556-557.

<sup>66</sup> On the significance of the religious principle of social justice (Hebrew: *Tzedakah*) for Jewish women’s socio-political commitment, see also Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class. Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany*, (Oxford - New York: Berghahn, 1991), 193-195; Miniati, “Le emancipate,” 251.

together with Amelia Rosselli and Bice Cammeo she belonged to the most prominent philanthropists in Florence. Interestingly, her social and cultural activities reflected also a certain closeness to the Jewish community of the Tuscan capital, especially when it came to the foundation of an institution for Jewish orphans, the “Pro Infanzia Israelitica,” in 1907.<sup>67</sup> In the early 1920s, probably as a reaction towards the political developments in Palestine, Orvieto took part with great interest in the meetings of the Zionists’ group in Florence. As she stated herself later on, her openness for the ideas of early Zionism differed considerably from her husband’s attitude whose interest in Judaism stayed mostly limited to the private sphere.<sup>68</sup> One can in any case record the fact that Laura’s examination of her own identity did not start only as a result of the racial laws in 1938.

Until far into the 1920s, Laura’s career appears as the success story of an independent writer, who in spite of her Jewish origin, without social limitations and barriers, was able to articulate freely her ideas. However, in her private statements Orvieto began to sound less optimistic. The political reality had outrun her ideal to serve a higher purpose. In November 1925, the year in which Mussolini assumed dictatorial powers, she wrote to Amelia Rosselli: “[Nowadays] I want to work only for my own pleasure. Not like [in the past] when I used to believe the things I wrote were important for the education of humanity!”<sup>69</sup>

Only a few years later, the authoress begun to face concrete problems regarding the publication of her work. At first, only a part of her writings was concerned. In fact, until the 1930s Orvieto’s “Stories of Greece and the Barbarians” continued to enjoy a considerable, not least commercial success, especially because of its extensive use in primary schools: Classical culture and myths had become increasingly popular due to the school reform the new minister of public instruction, Giovanni Gentile, initiated in 1923, and the subsequent revision of readings for primary schools by the respective ministerial commission.<sup>70</sup> The new edition of Orvieto’s “Leo and Lia,” on the other hand, encountered certain obstacles, which in 1909 had not appeared. On February 12, 1929, one day after the completion of the concordat between the Fascist state and the Catholic Church, the publishing house Bemporad asked the authoress in writing to carry

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<sup>67</sup> On her commitment to the “Pro infanzia” see in particular Lionella Viterbo, “Impegno sociale ed educativo nella comunità ebraica fiorentina,” in *Antologia Vieusseux* 53-54 (2012): 65-84.

<sup>68</sup> See Del Vivo, “Altre ‘Storie del Mondo,’” 565.

<sup>69</sup> Archivio Rosselli Torino, Laura Orvieto to Amelia Rosselli, 7 November 1925, M 2119.

<sup>70</sup> On this argument see Aldo Cecconi, “La fortuna editoriale delle Storie della storia del mondo. Greche e barbare,” in *Antologia Vieusseux* 53-54 (maggio-dicembre 2012): 75-84, here 81-83.

out a significant change in the book's second edition. In the letter, which has been handed down to us, one can read that Laura was supposed to delete a whole chapter of her work.<sup>71</sup> It carried the title: "Is the king a Jew?" The part in question represents a dialogue between the mother and her son Leo, who wants to know whether the Italian king is Jewish, just as his parents. With great self-confidence Laura Orvieto refused her publisher's request. As a result of this, she received a private letter by Enrico Bemporad, in which he insisted:

"...if you hold on to this chapter, no library of the primary schools in the whole [Italian] kingdom will want to acquire your book [...] This chapter shows to everybody that the protagonists are Israelites, which might please the protagonists themselves ... but is far from being commercial."<sup>72</sup>

When interpreting this statement one has to bear in mind that the relationship between Laura and her editor Enrico Bemporad (1868-1944), himself a Jew, was based on great esteem and confidence.<sup>73</sup> He surely did not object personally to the presence of Jewish protagonists in Orvieto's book, but rather acted here in his role as publisher who was preoccupied to lose readers, especially Italian teachers and pupils. Nevertheless, the chapter that had been the bone of contention remained in the book. Not without a certain irony Orvieto limited herself to change the title into "The King and Leo" ("Il Re e Leo"), and to write the noun "king" with a capital initial letter throughout the whole book (il "Re," instead of il "re").<sup>74</sup>

The episode is significant in so far as it reflects the overall political as well as cultural climate in Italy, which compared to 1909, the year of the book's first edition, had drastically changed. Non-catholic themes had become unpopular and unwanted. In December 1922, Giovanni Gentile had announced his intention of making the teaching of the Catholic religion "the principal foundation of the systems of public education and of the moral restoration of the Italian spirit in its entirety." As Michele Sarfatti points out, Jews were destined to suffer the consequences of the new policy in the religious and educational field to a greater degree than other non-Catholics, given their

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<sup>71</sup> Letter by "R. Bemporad & figlio editori" to Laura, Florence, 12 February 1929, ACGV, F.Or.5.1.9. The letter has been published by Caterina Del Vivo "Asterischi," in *Bollettino dell'Amicizia ebraico-cristiana* 3-4 (2003): 61-64; 62.

<sup>72</sup> Letter by Emilio Bemporad to Laura, Florence, 22 February 1929, ACGV, F.Or.5.1.9; see the edited version in Del Vivo, "Asterischi": 62-63.

<sup>73</sup> Cecconi, "La fortuna," 76.

<sup>74</sup> See Del Vivo, "Asterischi," 61.

considerable diversity and the fact that this ideological change constituted an incentive to the growth of prejudice and hostility against them. The concordat from February 1929, which had preceded Bemporad's request to Orvieto only by one day, confirmed Catholicism once again as the sole religion of the State and the "teaching of Christian doctrine in the form passed down by Catholic tradition" as the "foundation" of all public education.<sup>75</sup> The fact that Laura's work openly addressed the Jewish identity of its protagonists and included references to Jewish religion did not fit any longer into the ideological alignment of the Fascist state. The incident gives evidence for the imposed marginalization of Judaism from Italian culture, which was to intensify in the following years.

Laura Orvieto, however, did not distance herself after 1929 from Jewish themes. On the contrary, she even approached them more decidedly. Especially from the mid-1930s onwards, when the anti-Semitic course of the Fascist regime was harshening, she must have felt a particular need for a close examination of her identity and origins. This development manifests itself impressively in her autobiography "Story of Angiolo and Laura," which was to remain unpublished for decades.<sup>76</sup> In this work Laura dealt with her and Angiolo's Jewish ancestors and relatives, while at the same time emphasizing their Italian consciousness and national solidarity. It is surely no coincidence that the text was written between 1936 and 1939, when the rights of Jews in Italy had already been restricted to a considerable extent.<sup>77</sup> After Laura's opus had been taken out of circulation in 1938, the exclusion of the formerly successful and publicly present writer was completed. Even the Lyceum, according to its origins an apolitical and secular institution, dismissed in 1938 its Jewish members, and with them also Laura Orvieto.<sup>78</sup>

In the protagonist's retreat into the private sphere, which is also reflected in her turning towards her own history, one can see therefore both a consequence of the social and political marginalization, and the expression of a personal need for self-reflection. It was the beginning of a period when Orvieto focused on Jewish

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<sup>75</sup> See Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy. From Equality to Persecution*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press 2006), 44.

<sup>76</sup> On the history of Laura's autobiographical text see Caterina Del Vivo, "Introduzione," in: Orvieto, *Storia di Angiolo e Laura*, VII-XI; VII.

<sup>77</sup> On the discrimination, marginalization and persecution of Jews in Fascist Italy see Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy*; Enzo Collotti, *Il Fascismo e gli ebrei. Le leggi razziali in Italia* (Rome - Bari: Laterza, 2003).

<sup>78</sup> The author thanks Mirka Sandiford, Lyceum Club Internazionale di Firenze, for valuable information on the Lyceum's policy in 1938.

stories and characters in her writings: An especially relevant example is her unfinished and unpublished novel “Leone Da Rimini,” the story of a young Jewish Florentine lawyer, which includes numerous allusions to real situations and people in the Orvieto family life.<sup>79</sup> The violent exclusion of Jewish culture and identity from Italian society as well as the censorship of her oeuvre in reality led the authoress only closer towards her own roots. This counter reaction revealed once again Laura’s urge to independence and freedom that had characterized her existence as an independent writer for all her life.

Orvieto wrote the biggest part of her autobiography from 1939 onwards in Cortina D’Ampezzo, far away from her Florentine place of residence. In view of the racial laws that had been passed only a few months before, bitterness and a sense of isolation are clearly perceptible in her writing. Especially interesting in this context are her memories of the Great War: In face of Fascist anti-Semitism, she remembered the period of the “Grande Guerra” in spite of all its tragedy as an era of a strong national community, in which Jews and Non-Jews had supported in harmony the Italian cause:

“... at that time we believed in an unconditional battle for Italy’s independence, so that the enemy could have been expelled from Italian territory, from the alps, so that he would not have any longer commanded a people that was finally free, free in his own will, his own strength, his own sacrifice. This is what we believed at that time, this is what we desired, all of us united, we Italians, without racial discrimination and difference, in a common love and a common belief.”<sup>80</sup>

In Orvieto’s memory, the First World War assumed thus the nimbus of an era long ago, in which anti-Semitism among Italians had not existed.<sup>81</sup>

By working, Laura continued to create herself individual spaces of comfort and freedom. Even in the years of the “assault on Jewish lives,”<sup>82</sup> between 1943 and 1945, when Laura and Angiolo hid themselves in the Padre Massimo home for the elderly in Mugello, close to Florence, she found the inspiration to writing.

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<sup>79</sup> The individual chapters of this unfinished novel are preserved in the Orvieto archives; on “Leone Da Rimini” see Del Vivo, “Altre ‘Storie del Mondo,’” 568-573.

<sup>80</sup> Orvieto, *Storia di Angiolo e Laura*, 119.

<sup>81</sup> On the respective political context as well as the personal attitude and recollections involved in Orvieto’s autobiography see Ruth Nattermann, “Zwischen Pazifismus, Irredentismus und nationaler Euphorie. Italienische Jüdinnen und der Erste Weltkrieg,” in (*Deutschsprachig*)-*jüdische Publizistik zum Ersten Weltkrieg - mit Schwerpunkt Habsburgermonarchie*, eds. Petra Ernst and Eleonore Lappin-Eppel (Innsbruck – Wien - Bozen: Studienverlag, 2014) (in press).

<sup>82</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy*, 178.

The right of free speech remained a dominant theme in her work until the end of her life.

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The examination of Laura Orvieto's intellectual formation and accomplishments shows the chances, but also the barriers in the life of this independent Italian-Jewish writer in the period from liberalism to fascism. Compared to the majority of her female contemporaries, Laura was certainly privileged in so far as her parents as well as her husband provided the necessary material and cultural preconditions for her rather unconventional education and development. "Work for its own sake" became Orvieto's guiding principle. Her independence created spaces for a distinct social and cultural commitment, which represented an essential part of Laura's identity. In accordance with her general need for independence and diversity, she was able to move about freely between journalism, literature and pedagogy for a long time.

The anti-Semitic course of Fascist Italy changed Orvieto's success story as a free intellectual. With the passing of the Racial laws Laura had to face her definite exclusion not only as a writer but as a human being from Italian society.

Unlike many of their family members and friends, Laura and Angiolo survived the war. They belonged to a tiny group of Italian-Jewish scholars who after 1945 succeeded in continuing to a certain extent their work as writers and journalists. The overall situation, however, had painfully changed. The past could not be made undone. In the children's journal, *La settimana dei ragazzi* ("The Children's Week"), which Laura Orvieto founded immediately after the ending of the war in Florence, she tried to recover her energy.<sup>83</sup> In its first issue she wrote:

[...] since you were born, there had always been the rule that one was never allowed to say what he wanted, but what he was ordered to say [...] In this journal we are allowed to say everything we like, and we will in fact speak about everything [...] We will also speak about Chinese and Russian children, and about American and English ones, who sent their dads and big brothers to free us from a slavery that threatened to suffocate us [...].<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Amelia Rosselli wrote to Laura after reading the first three issues of the journal, which had been sent to her new home in Larchmont: "In these pages I have found again, with joy, this healthy optimism in face of all disturbing and wretched things in life, which has always been one of your most beautiful characteristics ... Even in the things that are not written directly by you, one feels the influence of your thought, of your moral attitude. *Brava, Laura...*;" ACGV, Fondo Orvieto, Or.1.2059, Amelia Rosselli to Laura Orvieto, June 4, 1945.

<sup>84</sup> Laura Orvieto, "Cari ragazzi," in *La settimana dei ragazzi*, April 1, 1945.



Thus Laura Orvieto, in her old age, still tried to impart to children the value of freedom for which she as a journalist and writer, woman and Jewess, had stood up for all her life.

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**Ruth Nattermann** is Lecturer at the Department for 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> European History at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich, and scientific coordinator of the international academic network “Gender-Nation-Emancipation. Women and Families in the ‘long’ Nineteenth Century in Italy and Germany,” funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*. In her current research project, she focuses on Jewish women in the early Italian women’s movement (1861-1922). Prior to her affiliation in Munich, Nattermann held post-doctoral positions and collaborated in international research projects at the German Historical Institute in Rome as well as at the Institute for Contemporary History in Hamburg.

Her research and publications focus on the history of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Germany and Italy, with a particular interest in Italian fascism, Italian-Jewish and German-Jewish history.

Among her publications: “Deutsch-jüdische Geschichtsschreibung nach der Shoah. Die Gründungs- und Frühgeschichte des Leo Baeck Institute” in *German-Jewish historiography after the Shoah. The foundation and early history of the Leo Baeck Institute*, Essen: Klartext 2004; “I diari e le agende di Luca Pietromarchi (1938-1940). Politica estera del fascismo e vita quotidiana di un diplomatico romano del ‘900” in *The diaries of Luca Pietromarchi (1938-1940). Fascist Foreign Policy and Everyday Life of Roman Diplomat in the 20th Century*, Ricerche dell’Istituto Storico Germanico di Roma, vol. 5, Rome: Viella 2009.

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