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Memorie della

Guido Horn d'Arturo

The Jewish roots of an Italian astronomer

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Abstract. The Jewish Museum of Bologna's decision to dedicate an exhibition to an astronomer is obviously related to his personal story, to the fact he was Jew and for this reason he had been ousted from his teaching role in Bologna University and isolated from the so-called Aryan society. The word "Jew" is in fact something quite vague: Judaism cannot easily be defined and is not monolithic.

1. Introduction

Guido Horn's precious correspondence deserves some observations: they are the only copies of the letters he sent to various recipients, regarding the most diverse themes and issues, spanning from 1912 to 1939. His letters (7,000 pieces approximately) are stored in chronological order: this means it was necessary to read each letter to reconstruct the events that originated them. It could have been an ordeal, if it were not that Horn was an excellent writer. He can well be defined as a humanist of his own time: his interests ranged from literature to drama, from visual arts to cinema, from philology to sports; he was able to switch his writing register from ironic to dramatic, always maintaining his lucidity as a scientist who analyzes, formulates hypotheses, tests his theories, then draws his conclusions from the results he had obtained.

2. The correspondence of Guido Horn d'Arturo

When we started our research on his correspondence (then stored in the Astronomy Library of Bologna University), a main goal of ours was to search for evidence of Horn's bond with Jewish culture.

We knew that he was born in a Jewish family in Trieste and that he was a Jew in all respects, since his mother was a Jew. We knew that his father, Arturo (whence the Italian surname "d'Arturo") was a lecturer in the local Talmud School and member of the *Maschil El Dal* (1: "Blessed is the man who cares for the poor - Psalm" 41,2) mutual aid confraternity. We also knew that his father passed away when Guido was just a few years old, then he was brought up by his maternal grandfather, Sabato Raffaele Melli from Ferrara, chief Rabbi of Trieste's Jewish Community from 1870 to 1907. We therefore were expecting to find an orthodox Jew, someone who strictly respected the percepts that regulated Jews' everyday life.

In fact, what emerged from the correspondence was completely different. The references to his Jewish roots are just a few: one dating to the "Kippur day" 5672[1] from the Creation"; in

[1] As can be found in the letter. Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, is the most important penitential

a letter to his mother, the mention to Aman's ears with whipped cream they ate for *Purim*[2], the mention to the week of *Sciavuod*[3]in the calendar, the congratulations on the celebration of a wedding according to the Jewish ritual in his family, the request to put a small stone on the grave of a friend's mother, etc. Guido Horn was registered in Bologna Jewish Community - he complained about the taxes he had to pay for - but there is no evidence he attended the temple on a regular basis or that he observed the *shabbat*, since he travelled and worked on Saturdays, too; and he did not seem to strictly keep to the feeding rules of the *Casherut.*

The Jewish tuition he had received should be enhanced, though. Rav Melli himself personally managed a private Jewish junior school where a daily extra hour of Jewish religion was added to the usual syllabus[4]. Some aspects of his grandfather's tuition can be clearly traced in a letter written by Horn when he was visiting a family of his relatives in Lugo di Romagna, the Forlì, in a period he was rejected by his acquaintances. One Sunday evening in 1939 he visited the temple with the Forlì, and for a couple of hours he could soak himself again in the same religious environment he was brought up in when he lived in Trieste, which he still had clear memories of. He described that visit in a letter to his niece Lidia dated 2 November, 1939: his report on the one hand is almost didactic, just as if Lidia, unlike her uncle, was no longer accustomed with Jewish ritual objects; on the other one, his enthusiasm in the description and his pleasure in knowledge still lingered despite the persecution and his forced estrangement from his studies in astronomy:

(...) Last Sunday I spent a very interesting day in Lugo together with that Forlì family I have been talking to you about. We visited the temple, and I could get in touch again with the religious objects that I had been brought up with: your father, too, would have had fun by touching some decorations for the sefer called rimonim: they are slipped onto the upper part (sic) of the rods around which the Pentateuch is unfolded; in addition, there were the silver crown and other beautiful religious furnishings. I browsed through many dusty old books typed in Hebrew and some rare books that date back to the 16th century, printed in Sabbioneta. That temple is similar to the cathedral in Assisi: the major temple has been built upon the old minor one, the former being built in the late 16th century and the latter being built in the 18th century; the lower temple, despite it is visible above ground, resembles the catacombs; women would attend services in a separate place behind a metal grill. The archives disclosed some documents that referred to events not much different from the present ones that I will report to you as soon as we meet. Now only three or four families are still there, but a century ago there were 518 people in the community; there was also a cemetery where the Forlì ancestors, too, are buried: the most ancient tombstone of the family dates back to 1450; another old tombstone (of a certain Pesachim's) dates back to 1250! Writing the names of people buried in the Jewish cemetery was forbidden during the 18th century; then, only a progressive number was allowed to replace the names (...)[5]

recurrence in the Jewish calendar, the opportunity to expiate one's sins and to reconcile with the persons who have been wronged or from whom one was wronged. The following activities are prohibited: eating, drinking, washing, putting on makeup, wearing leather shoes and having sexual intercourse. The total fasting duty starts just before sunset and ends after the day after's sunset, when the first stars appear.

2 Aman's ears are a traditional dessert for the Purim ("the fortunes"), a holiday celebrating the Biblical story of Ester, the beautiful Jewish queen and wife of king Ahasuerus: with the help of her uncle Mordhekaj, she foiled the plots hatched by the treacherous Aman who wanted to exterminate the Jewish people. The reversal of fortunes of the characters take place, and the consequent feast is for some aspects similar to Carnival for the use of disguise, of yelling and of extravagance.

3 As can be found in the letter. *Shavuot*, "weeks", is a Jewish holiday that falls exactly seven weeks after *Pesach.*

4 Cfr. Silva Bon, *La comunità ebraica di Trieste (1781-1914). Politica, societ e cultura*, LINT, Trieste 2000, p. 167 s.

5 Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna (from now on Unibo), Historical Archives

An important aspect of Horn's private life that conflicts with the Jewish precepts is his bachelorhood. Getting married and giving birth to at least one boy and one girl are provided for by Jewish regulations, especially for men. Horn was openly unconcerned about these recommendations, and kept developing love relationships; he would comment on marriage as follows:

I, too, say together with the poet and you "carpe diem[6]", and with the Italian poet: "La mia favola breve è già compiuta / my short fable is already finished",[7] and I am not planning for a married life, which would become my tombstone.[8]

Also, in a more melancholic tone:

(...) when I see someone suffering for me, I'll become even more sorrowful, so I try to be alone when I feel bad; this certainly is one of the causes that have kept me from start a family (...)[9]

In addition:

A bachelor's life is the most barren one, though it apparently seems so bright[10].

As for the lack of children, it is worth mentioning the almost prophetic words - with reference to Hitler, to Mussolini and to the historical events that occurred during his life - he addressed to fellow worshiper Anita Levi in a letter dated 24 May, 1935, just a few months before the promulgation of the Nuremberg laws:

In the universal chaos of our times, not having children is a fortune: cold comfort, but not so insignificant.[11]

Guido and his siblings decided for an unorthodox type of burial for their mother: Vittoria Melli, after her sudden death, was buried in a recess instead of in the ground as traditionally provided for in the Torah (*"thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return"*). In addition, her corpse will be reburied to another place. Judaism normally does not accept corpse exhumation, with the exception of reburials to Israel or to family graves, or in case the actual burial does not guarantee enough protection or decorum, or in case it is clearly stated that the type of burial chosen is a temporary one. However, all of these situations must be approved by the Rabbi in charge [12]. As for Vittoria Melli, her present burial place in the Verano cemetery in Rome is next to her relatives' graves; in addition, since her death was sudden, the former burial place had been intended as temporary, as it is described in Guido's correspondence, too. What is still missing is the request to the Rabbi for his approval: it may have been done but not enclosed to the documentation.

Guido described his mother's exhumation in a beautiful passage that clearly shows how deep his love for his mother was. He used to call her "la sua donnettina" (his little lady) in the numerous, loving letters he wrote to her:

The double coffin had remained perfectly locked, so that we could stay next to it all day long and get it zinc-coated without being affected by any exhalation. One can say death had exceptionally respected that purity distinctive of her persona, thus I felt soaked in it just like I felt when my Mum and I were sweetly living together. We have stolen one day to the eternity of death. She now lies down in the new twin burial plot where I will take my place beside her when my time comes.[13]

Another meaningful reference to his roots, though veiled by a subtle irony, can be found in a letter dated 31 October, 1925, he wrote to his friend Henri Bedarida on the eve of his travel to Trans-Juba:

of the Department of Astronomy, *Guido Horn d'Arturo Collection*

6 Horace, *Odes*, 1,11,8.

7 The Italian poet mentioned may be Francesco Petrarca, sonnet CCXVI, one of Guido Horn d'Arturo's favourite poets; however, that verse has been mentioned by many other poets.

8 Unibo Historical Archives of the Department of Astronomy, *Guido Horn d'Arturo Collection*

9 ivi

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12 Cfr. Sara Pacifici and Miriam Mieli, *Regole ebraiche di lutto. Appunti di un corso del Seminario D. Almagia*, Rome, Carucci DAC, 1980 p. 33 s. (Jewish mourning rules. Drafts from the Almagia D Seminar)

13 Unibo, Historical Archives of the Department of Astronomy, *Guido Horn d'Arturo Collection*

I got "Les Nouvelles littraires", then read the editorial "Le livre d'une race", which I suppose it was the one intended for me, because I could not find any so deeply related to me. As far as the chosen people is concerned, I am leaving to Trans-Juba to observe a solar eclipse: it will be my chance to cross the Red Sea with my feet perfectly dry (by ferry boat), and to see Mount Sinai and the places that were the cradle for my ancestors[14].

On the one hand, Horn needed to maintain a non-religious approach to research:

(...) We unfortunately must consider what we see through our mortal eyes and give a human interpretation of what we see; the idea of God, a spiritual need, cannot be offended by the scientists' work; we'd better to close our mind's eye when we investigate with our physiological eye, and we'd better close the latter when we want to open the former [15]

As a man of culture, on the other hand, curious towards phenomena yet ready to consider the tension towards the transcendent and the philosophical thought, he openly displayed an interest for the religions. He certainly had a deep knowledge of Christianity, which he appreciated the traditional worship aspects of, as one can find in the following letter to an unknown recipient:

This is the real Christmas night just as it has been depicted in the nativity pictures; the sky serene, the Moon so bright, the solemn silence around the cradle of the Redeemer; I am in the same majestic silence in the Specola (the Observatory tower), and from this ancient building I wish you and your family a Merry Christmas[16] .

Horn's words testify about the fact that he lived in a society that was mostly Christian, thus involuntarily exposed to the expressions distinctive of this religion; yet in Horn correspondence one surprising verse, drawn from Eucharistic litanies, strikes for its peculiarity:

Fig. 1. Synagogue of Trieste. *(photo by Paolo Longo, Flickr)*

Fig. 2. A youthful portrait of Guido Horn. *(private collection of the Horn family)*

"*Verbum caro factum, habitans in nobis, miserere nostrum!"*[17]

How did Horn got to know it? Perhaps from his beloved classical music?[18]

If on the one hand he was fascinated by Christianity - at least as a cultural movement and a school of thought, on the other one the same cannot be said for the other monotheistic religion, Islam, whose sacred text, the Koran, he considers as follows:

In these last few days I have been reading the Koran, a work lacking in poesy, especially when compared to the new and above

[14] ivi, Reviewer, Italian studies scholar, Henri Bedarida was lecturer in Bologna University.

[15] ivi

[16] ivi

[17] ivi

[18] For instance, from Mozart's Eucharistic Litanies KV125 in B flat major, and KV243 in E flat major.

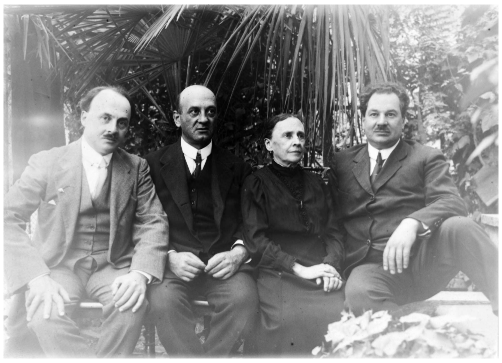

Fig. 3. Guido with the brothers Arrigo and Mario and with his mother Vittoria Melli. *(private collection of the Horn family)*

all to the old Testament; so full of hatred towards the enemies, so full of worship towards the material pleasures of this life and of the life after death. It seems to hear someone thirsty promising to the worshippers a holiday for the future life in gardens amidst rivers of flowing water, a recurrent image that constituted the utmost of beatitude to Arabic people. I can't believe that a book like this alone could have converted to Islam from idolatry hundreds of people, all of them worshippers, without the support of preaches or of a proper clergy! It is just an imitation of the Pentateuch and of the Gospel, yet it has had a higher number of converts in less time. How many forms of insanity in the World[19].

The picture resulting from the sum of these apparently contradictory clues is the one of an integrated Jew just like many others in Italy and in Trieste at the turn of the century. The rights Napoleon granted to Jews, the birth of national consciousness calling each individual to be loyal to one's homeland, the hidden but expanding antisemitism that in spite of the law precluded Jews from entering certain circles and from pursuing certain careers, enhance the tendency to get away from tradition and to blend in the rest of society. In some cases that led to abjuration, while in some other cases to a sort of separation between the observation of religious percepts in private and a secular attitude in public life. Trieste was an Austrian city when Horn was born: it was therefore a crossroads for different ethnicities and cultures[20]: this is also testified, for instance, by the high number of mixed marriages, we even found in Guido Horn's correspondence. In the following passage, he tries to help a friend of his (formerly a priest who decided to give up his ecclesiastical career) find a suitable wife:

So you must know I did not forget to carry out all procedures I promised you in order to find in Trieste a woman worthy to become your wife, endowed with all requirements to be your lifelong partner and your soulmate. Now a friend of mine based in Trieste told me he has found the right bride for you: she's a virgin,

Fig. 4. Trieste, road of the Jewish Schools. *(from Trivelli-Benussi, Trieste itineraries. Italo Svevo, Trieste 2006)*

[19] Unibo, Historical Archives of the Department of Astronomy, *Guido Horn d'Arturo Collection*

[20] Cfr. Silva Bon, *La Comunità ebraica*, p.221 s.

Jew, good looking, slightly shortsighted, good housewife, thirty years, 50.000 (fifty thousand) crowns income, conspicuous family. Her family has already been informed about your past and present, asked for your portrait (both as physical image and moral status), and a picture of you. I'd made a trip to Trieste if I were you. I'll introduce you to my friend and he'll commit himself to organize the meeting with this lady. Trieste is an advanced city, where things happen naturally. My friend will be happy to meet you and introduce you to his family and to other friends[21].

Guido Horn displays himself as an integrated Jew; however, he will be a victim of anti-semitic persecution owing to laws relying on racist principles that were deemed based on scientific assumptions; such situations was common amongst many central European intellectuals of his time and well known from Walter Benjamin to Marc Bloch, etc., but it's one thing to read in on a book, but quite another to imagine it all as it was going on.

Horn's words thus become even more interesting and touching when it comes to the period of his purge. In his letter of February 1, 1939, he informs an unknown Engineer that he had just been replaced as director of *Coelum* (the Astronomy journal): he complains about the impossibility to proceed with experiments with the dowelled mirror, then he describes the absurd marginalization of Jews in Italian society with clear words and compelling argumentation:

(...) Now who will fund the enterprise [of building the dowelled mirror]*? In this persecution I could do nothing but contact some fellow worshippers; unfortunately I know just some; moreover, no one is well off enough; let me stress that while the government assumes Jews are all connected by some mysterious bonds and conspire against the State, they actually hardly know each other and if they do, it is by chance, and the only condition they pursue - at least in Italy - is to merge with the population from which they already cannot be singled out, neither by their look nor by their language nor by their costumes; they do love this country just like everybody else who was born here does, as we could infer from many examples both in peace and in war time. Please forgive this outburst of mine. I'm just a desperate man who cannot resign himself to his destiny. Yours sincerely*[22].

Again, in a letter dated 27 February, 1939, to a lady he had been in a long relationship with, in a resentful, almost angry tone:

My dearest Olga[23]*, after reading your letter of the 21st, I am pleased to know that you're fine and have great expectations for your future. I'll immediately order your book, then I'll tell you about it in a separate letter.*

Let me now tell you something you'll perhaps find unpleasant, but I think you'll better learn about it from me than from someone else: I'm Jew, and as a Jew I'm going to lose my job.

I am surprised you didn't mention this topic in your last letter, since it's likely French newspapers must have published about it, and you should have read my name.

Anyway, I'm not talking about it anymore: I don't feel sorry about my fate because I know there are so many people outside Italy whose conditions are even worse than mine. I'm relieved, in a sense, because such bad news will help clarify some sad moments in our unforgettable relationship. Now you can understand why I always refused to decide about our wedding despite I'm so in love with you, and despite you could have dreamt about it. The same happened in Berlin, when you proposed to go living together in such a natural way; it's just there has always been that threat of superstition. I can't forget you said the most horrible things about Jews just while we were together. I wasn't surprised though, because I know that was a consequence of your education and the type of cultural environment of your family; but I knew hatred was so deep inside your feelings that the revelation of truth would have made

21 Unibo, Historical Archives of the Department of Astronomy, *Guido Horn d'Arturo Collection*

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23 The lady mentioned here is perhaps Russian counterrevolutionary refugee Olga Listowskaja (1877-1951), authoress of *V te dni*, "In those days", published in Berlin in 1920. I am grateful to Andrea Soglia, librarian and historian, for his research on this topic.

you cry. I didn't want to lose you. And I'm sure a person as reasonable and human as you will be grateful I have remained silent after all. Our love has not been easy but has been lasting for 31 years, so it would be a pity if it was ruined by a medieval prejudice. I just don't imagine how happy I am since I finally feel free to express myself for the first time.

Please confirm you received this letter. Soon I'll be writing another, longer letter.

Yours, always the same.

P.S. My address is correct. The right word is "Professeur" with one F; one F is enough [24]

From another letter addressed to Olga, in a more benevolent and sad tone, on March 15, 1939:

(...) I knew you wouldn't have replied otherwise now, of course. You would have shot me for thirty years after this unpleasant event. But now that you have seen this horrible persecution, hold my hand just you have always been doing, and let me be your Guido again. You can't imagine how happy I am reading your letter! Yes, now you have seen who I am, defending in some occasion my fellow worshippers you hated so much. Once you said: "If I knew you're one of them, you wouldn't see me anymore". That has always disheartened me, because I didn't want to lose you. However, that was not the right thing, because nothing can confuse my origin, that was so concealed that you considered it more as a nature's result than a human work. Neither dirt, nor our nose's shape as they say, nor anything else. Do you know why you liked me so much, and why you still cannot forget me after thirty years? It's because you found the new and the unknown in me. You got to know people from different countries and you have never shown any interest about someone's race, and you have always been unprepared for new experiences.

I represented a new world to you. The epiphany of the Bible and the spirit of our prophets were talking in me. Jesus' blood runs in my veins, and this is not without reason. My words to you were the compelling sound of redemption. Though our psychological attraction was strong, the spiritual attraction I exerted on you was even stronger. And one can tell by the endless number of letters that you wrote in such difficult situation.

I remember that when you talked about the massacre in Kishinev[25]*, it was clear that your hatred was so deeply entrenched in you that the best thing I could do was to keep quiet, in order not to delude myself. You say: I want you by my side! But you would have discovered the truth, and the dream would have vanished. Our doom would be to be together only for a few moments and in places far from my hometown. For this reason I would have come to Palermo, while you were in Sicily, but you reached me in Catania (...)*[26]

Today Guido Horn d'Arturo comes back to the city where he worked as a researcher, and that was the set for his liaison, thanks to the dedication of the ASTRI Telescope in Serra La Nave, built on the basis of a technique he invented and developed. This is a scientific recognition and a sort of partial moral compensation to the man and to the Jew we got a picture of through his correspondence. It is easy to say "Jew", "purge", "persecution", even "extermination": these are technical words, exact but sterile, hiding complex and painful situations that letters like these in fact reveal in their whole enormity.

[24] Unibo, Historical Archives of the Department of Astronomy, *Guido Horn d'Arturo Collection*

[25] Also known as Chisinau is the capital city of Moldova. Formerly under the governorship of Bessarabia, it was the setting for two deadly pogroms against Jews, the former in 1903, the latter in 1905. Horn was probably referring to these pogroms in his letter to Olga; however, he could not foresee that after the termination of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1941, the city - formerly occupied by the Russian army - would have been reconquered by Romanian troops (allied with Germany), and the whole population (approximately 10,000 people) would have been exterminated on site.

[26] Unibo, Historical Archives of the Department of Astronomy, *Guido Horn d'Arturo Collection*