Collana Sapienza per tutti 7

For This I Lived

My life at Auschwitz-Birkenau and other exiles

Sami Modiano

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SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE
2022

As in previous editions, this volume is the result of a collaboration
with the Fondazione Museo della Shoah di Roma.
The author expresses special thanks to Bella Angel Resti and her family,
whose contributions have enabled the museum, synagogue and Jewish
cemetery of Rhodes to continue to bear witness to the history
and memory of an entire community

Sapienza Università Editrice
Piazzale Aldo Moro 5 – 00185 Roma

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ISBN 978-88-9377-198-6 (e-book)
ISBN 978-88-9377-197-9 (print)

Iscrizione Registro Operatori Comunicazione n. 11420

Finito di stampare nel mese di gennaio 2022 presso Sapienza Università Editrice

In copertina: elaborazione grafica di Silvio Coiante per Sapienza Università Editrice.

I dedicate these pages
to my wife Selma
who has supported me
with love all these years.
And to the memory
of the Jewish community
of Rhodes: for all of those
who are no longer there.

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Preface

Antonella Polimeni

Rector, Sapienza University, Rome

This book by Sami Modiano, which Sapienza University Press is delighted to publish in its new English version, takes us on a journey from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. It is in many respects a terrible journey, in which Modiano's biography intersects with the facts of "great history," in a juxtaposition of geographies, chronologies and pathways grounded in the point of view of a man who has experienced firsthand the twentieth century's greatest tragedy and has decided to devote his life to keeping alive the memory of what happened, above all by speaking to the young men and women of our time.

Starting from memories of a happy childhood on the island of Rhodes, the book describes the terrible experience of segregation first and deportation to Auschwitz later, and goes on to deal with the events of his maturity, when Modiano, unfailingly accompanied by his wife Selma, started the tireless and uninterrupted task of giving testimony. The book offers us insight into the character and emotions of an extraordinary man, thus helping us to revisit a piece of our history, as well as prompting us to reflect upon what was, and on how best to foster a culture of respect and solidarity today.

Sami Modiano was deported to Auschwitz in July 1944, when Rome had been liberated and the Allied forces had already begun the difficult transition towards winning the war.

Barely fourteen years old, he had already been subjected to expulsion from public schools after the promulgation of the 1938 racial laws, and was forced to undertake the horrific journey that over several weeks would take him from the Dodecanese to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in

the center of Europe. There he would spend five long months of imprisonment, deprivation and forced labor. He was to be the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust. Almost the entire Jewish community of Rhodes had been exterminated immediately upon arrival at Birkenau.

The memory of the months spent in the camp unfolds in a succession of deeply emotional scenes (for example, his last goodbye to his father and to his sister Lucia), anecdotes and tragic episodes. There is no lack of reflection and questions in which the mature man of today probes the meaning of his experience. But the book also accompanies us on Modiano's journey of rebirth after the end of the war, and through the hardships and events that led him from continental Europe back to Rhodes, then to Africa and finally to Rome. Equally important is the part of the book in which Modiano explains when and how he decided to tell his story, how he chose to keep the memory alive, and how it has now become a necessity, almost a mission, for him to be a witness to the Holocaust – to speak for those who can no longer do so, addressing especially the younger generations.

A journey, therefore, from past to present, which from the very beginning has crossed paths with our university in different ways – not only because in November 2013 Sapienza awarded Sami, the man who was prevented from continuing his studies as a child, with an honorary doctorate, but also because commitment to fostering knowledge of history and promoting reflection on the past (a commitment to which Modiano contributes in such a significant way) are fundamental elements of the teaching, research and service activities of our university. We are always eager to endorse the research and work promoted by our faculty in this regard (just to cite one of the latest: a project dedicated to Medicine and the Holocaust); and we participate in Italy's *Giorno della Memoria* (International Holocaust Remembrance Day) observances with conviction. Such commitments do not end within the space of a day or an event, however important. For this reason, in October 2021 we signed a framework agreement for research, training activities and cultural initiatives on the memory of the Holocaust, with the Shoah Museum Foundation, the Jewish Community of Rome, the Foundation Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation, the Union of Italian Jewish Communities and the Foundation for the National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah.

We do this not only to give due recognition to the victims of that time or to the surviving witnesses, but because knowledge and awareness are indispensable tools to promote a culture of solidarity and defense of human rights. One of the goals of our university's mission is, after all, to always seek to combine its identity as an institution rooted in the city of Rome with a growing international outlook The ability to hold these two dimensions together stems also from the attention we devote to the themes and issues with which this volume is concerned.

Rome, the city where Sapienza was born and has grown, directly experienced and suffered the tragedy of the Holocaust; Sami Modiano, after a thousand hardships, has chosen to stay and live here, and from here he is engaged in a work of untiring witness-bearing. It is therefore an honor to be able to publish his book in English as part of our commitment to remembering the Holocaust, in accordance with the principles of democracy and solidarity enshrined in our constitution, in a constant attempt to provide our students with the tools they need to become citizens who are fully aware of the complexities of contemporary society.

For This I Lived

1. The Island of Roses

I was born in Rhodes in 1930. It was called "the island of roses" because the air was infused with their fragrance. I am one of the fortunate few to have been born in this very beautiful place.

My father was named Giacobbe and was originally from Thessaloniki, Greece. He and my grandfather, Samuel, went to America in search of fortune, but after a few years he understood it was not going to work out. After repatriating, he did not return to his hometown but decided to venture to Rhodes to search for work and settle down.

There my grandfather opened a little store in the Ukimadu, also known as Piazza Bruciata, or Burned Plaza, so called in memory of a fire that engulfed it many years before. In that modest store, he sold souvenirs and small objects.

When he arrived in Rhodes, Grandfather Samuel was already elderly and had lost his wife some time ago. He led a simple and frugal life. His work in the store was mostly a pastime – keeping the merchandise in order and exchanging pleasantries with the clients.

He and my father were the last two branches of a family so spread around the world that it was impossible for me to reconstruct their different paths. In those days, it was easier to lose touch with others than to reconnect, and even the strongest family ties were tested by painful but unavoidable farewells. During the intervening years, I tried to restore the lost family ties but my research was not very successful; emigration, wars and persecutions suffered by my people have destroyed almost every trace. When someone is forced to abandon their homeland in search of a job, or because their liberty or life is in danger, it is difficult to think of those left behind. And that is exactly what happened to my father's family.

For example, my dad had a brother who, until a few years ago, I never heard anyone speak about. He emigrated to France, where he died; I was unable to find out anything else. The only certainty I knew is that dad had left some cousins in Thessaloniki. Their last name was Iacoel and, by pure chance, in the aftermath of the Second World War, I met one of them: Jack. I was in Athens and, by a strange twist of fate, I came across this highly intelligent man who, for me, represented the last living tie with my father, a tie that went back to Thessaloniki, my father's city of origin.

Yet sometimes the place where we are born does not reveal much about us. That is how it was for my father who did not find fortune in his birthplace and had to arrive in Rhodes, by way of America, to create a life for himself.

It was on this beautiful island that he found his small slice of happiness. There my father met my mother, Diana Franco, daughter of a large family. Her mother, Rica, bore twelve sons and daughters. At that time it was not unusual and was, unfortunately, rather frequent that many babies did not survive. The Franco family was not an exception; only seven children survived and one of them would become my mother.

From the union of my parents, my older sister, Lucia, was born in 1927. Three years later, in 1930, I came into the world: Samuele, better known as Sami.

Another branch of my father's family chose Rhodes to flourish. In fact, his sister Grazia lived on the island with her husband, Mois, who also had the same last name of Modiano. In those days, the marriage of cousins was rather common, and from their marriage four children were born: two boys, Saul and Samuele, and two daughters, Luise and Lucia.

Samuele was a very intelligent young man and, like me, had been given the name of our grandfather. At that time I was just a little boy, but I still have a very vivid memory of this young man. He served in the Italian army, becoming captain, and had been posted in Sicily for several years. When his military career was over, he decided to leave everything and return to Rhodes. The reason for his farewell to arms remained a mystery, or perhaps I was too small to understand. In fact, Samuele put aside his uniform and found a good position in a bank. He used to pass by and stop to visit us, arriving on his beautiful Bianchi bicycle and brightening our days by playing the accordion.

The history of my mother's family is also full of departures and farewells.

My maternal grandfather was named Jack. I never knew him because he died before I was born, but my mother often spoke of him and his resourcefulness. He imported wood and coal from Turkey, then ferried it on his *maùna*, a small barge without an engine. Thanks to that small barge, which was little more than a raft, he created a decent business that revolved around the ships that passed by Rhodes: he furnished them with food and coal, which at that time was the fuel most commonly used on large boats. With few means, a lot of hard work and much inventiveness, he established a business that allowed him to earn enough to maintain his family in a dignified manner. He owned a beautiful home in the Jewish quarter and, as long as he could, guaranteed a comfortable and serene life for his children; they attended the Italian school and, when they decided to leave the island in search of fortune, Jack ensured that their departure did not turn into a disastrous journey of hope. Thanks to his connections, he secured good seats on the ships and made sure his children arrived safely at their destination.

It might seem odd that the children of a good family like that of my maternal aunts and uncles would have the need to emigrate to find a job, but their situation was not so different from that of many of today's young people. Although my grandfather Jack was well-off, he certainly could not afford to support his children for life. In addition, Rhodes was too small a place to continually absorb new generations of workers; therefore, just as it happens today, many young people at that time, once they finished their studies, migrated to bigger and richer countries.

The great migration that affected the island began during the thirties, but the first waves were seen already at the beginning of the twenties. After all, even if Rhodes enjoyed a certain well-being, the risk of poverty was always just around the corner. Many left the island in hopes of finding a more promising future, and a large number of my mother's family chose this route. At the time of my birth, many of them had already emigrated. For example, Marie and Vittoria, two of my maternal aunts, had left for America before 1930, to Seattle and New York, respectively, while their oldest brother, Nissim, landed in Los Angeles. A totally different path was taken by Ruben, my mother's youngest brother. He left for the Belgian Congo, a destination rather unusual for that time.

Of these four aunts and uncles I knew practically nothing. They disappeared into the horizon before I was born. My family spoke about them from time to time, perhaps upon the arrival of a letter or photographs that showed their initial successes: a good marriage, a house with a yard,

a brand-new car. Their lives continued without ever crossing mine, and the memories that I have of them are similar to the many clouded memories that the emigrants of every generation leave behind.

I knew the other women of my mother's family much better. Her sisters Luna, who was married but childless, and Risula, who had several children: three sons, Samuele, Jack and Sadoc, and three daughters, Rachel, Matilde and Ricuccia. Ricuccia had a terrible fate, dying in Auschwitz months after her marriage and immediately after she had given birth. May God have pity on her soul.

But my grandmother Rica was my favorite. I was her pet grandchild and she showered me with the kind of attention that makes childhood an unforgettable dream.

The Jewish community of Rhodes, to which my family belonged, was rather large. At the beginning of the 1900s there were about five thousand members. It was a thriving community and, although there were differing levels of success, its members lived decently.

Since 1912, when the island came under the administrative control of an Italian governor, the situation of the local Jews had not changed much. Rhodes and the Dodecanese archipelago, a group of twelve Greek islands off the coast of Turkey, had become part of the Kingdom of Italy as a result of the Italo-Turkish war.

These were the first signs of the end of an era that had lasted for more than four hundred years, beginning in the 1500s with the arrival in Rhodes of a few Jewish families. They had been expelled from Spain and the Ottoman governor welcomed them to the island.

These first refugees settled in the city congregating in a quarter that would be rebaptized the Juderia. The Jews of Rhodes had full freedom of movement and, under the Turks, the Juderia never became a ghetto. Things continued like that for centuries, to the point that there was excellent rapport between the Turks and the Jews of the island and the coexistence was overall peaceful.

In the four hundred years of Ottoman domination and the forty years of Italian occupation, the Jews of Rhodes had always kept their traditions, including their language. In the Juderia the most spoken language was Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, quite similar to ancient Castilian. After almost half of a millennium, the language of those first families put in flight by Ferdinand II of Aragon was still part of our everyday speech.