

The Blinderma case. Naturalisation, denaturalisation and anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy*

Enrica Asquer**

This article presents an analysis of a file concerning the racial assessment and contestation of a denaturalisation proceeding held in the Demorazza collection at the Central State Archive in Rome. The file relates to the naturalisation and subsequent denaturalisation of Giuseppe Blinderma, a 'stateless' individual of Jewish origin (first formerly Russian and then formerly Italian) in Fascist Italy. Focusing on Blinderma's actions and skills in shaping his public identity according to the authorities' criteria, the article aims to reconstruct Fascist denaturalisation policies and assess the relationship between the event triggered by the anti-Semitic denaturalisation measure and the previous naturalisation process. As with most cases of denaturalisation due to anti-Semitic legislation, the latter also occurred under the Fascist regime, but before the turning point of 1936–38. Adopting a bottom-up perspective, the article thus raises questions about the continuities and discontinuities represented by Fascism and, particularly, with regard to Fascist anti-Semitic policies on citizenship, revealing the interplay between 'race' and 'nativeness'.

Key words: race, citizenship, denaturalisation, Fascism

Introduction

In December 1938, the writer and translator Giuseppe (né Osip Abramovič) Blinderma, born in Odessa in 1882 and recognised as belonging to the 'Jewish race', had his Italian citizenship revoked. He had acquired it only a few years earlier, in September 1935. His case is part of the broader framework of denaturalisation proceedings that, from autumn 1938 onwards, affected a specific group of Italian citizens with two characteristics in common:

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** Università di Genova; enrica.asquer@gmail.com

belonging to the ‘Jewish race’ and having recently been naturalised. More precisely, Royal Decree No. 1381 of 7 September, which contained ‘Provisions against foreign Jews’, indicated the Fascist regime’s intention to revoke the granting of citizenship to ‘Jewish foreigners’ after 1 January 1919. The measure was subsequently incorporated into the ‘Provisions for the defence of the Italian race’ of 17 November (Royal Decree No. 1728, art. 23), and was applied based on the different and broader category of ‘Jew’ introduced by the same measures.¹

Only four years earlier, in September 1934, the prefect of Milan had deemed Bliderman’s meticulously crafted — and thoroughly vetted — biographical profile worthy of naturalisation: ‘Hence, given that the applicant’s interest in adopting the Italian citizenship coincides with the state’s interest in granting it, I express my opinion in favour of granting the application.’² At the time, Bliderman was an eclectic figure who had travelled widely and made numerous cultural and professional connections. In October 1905, he had left Kiev — where he had moved to study engineering — for Western Europe together with his recent bride, Fanny Rosenberg. His file never mentions why they decided to leave, but the revolution that shook the Tsarist Empire that same year is likely to have played a role. After a brief stay in Florence, the couple travelled to Zurich, where their only daughter — Erna — was born in 1907, and then visited Nancy and Paris in France. During the First World War, Bliderman returned to Italy as a specialised engineer for the Société Anonyme Westinghouse in Paris, where he lent his expertise in the testing of a special type of cannon based on a Belgian model, which was used by the Italian Army from 1917 onwards. He was in Rome when the Bolshevik Revolution broke out. He and his family had been staying for a few years, often visiting the capital’s small but lively community of Russian emigrants: aristo-

¹ Based on article 8, the definition of a Jew also included so-called ‘mixed’ people, namely children of one parent ‘of the Jewish race’ and one ‘Aryan’ parent, who fell into the following categories: the non-Jewish parent was of foreign nationality; the mother was Jewish and the father was of unknown origin; the person in question — despite being the child of parents of Italian nationality, of whom only one belonged to the Jewish race — practised the Jewish religion or was registered in an Israeli community, or had given ‘manifestations of Judaism in any other way’.

² Royal Prefecture of Milan to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Department Ia, Milan 17 September 1934, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter ACS), Ministero dell’Interno (hereafter MI), Direzione Generale per la Demografia e la Razza (hereafter Dgdr), Divisione Razza (hereafter Dr), Personal files, envelope 271, folder 19206 Dcitt, Cens., Bliderman Giuseppe fu Abramo. The document can be found in the naturalisation file (Ministry of the Interior, Department Ia Section IIIa, no. 13378, cittadinanza, Bliderman Giuseppe), which was included in the above-mentioned folder 19206. See also Archivio di Stato di Milano (hereafter Asmi), Prefettura, Gabinetto (II^o versamento), category 018-cittadinanza, envelope 42, folder 7978, 1939, Bliderman Ing. Giuseppe cittadinanza-Revoca: the file contains folder 17500, 1934, relating to the naturalisation application, with the relevant draft of the Prefect’s letter sent on 17 September 1934.

crats of the former Tsarist Empire, revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, but also artists and literary figures — all overwhelmed by the radical change of scenery their country of origin had suffered.³ By 1925, the Blindermans had settled in Milan.

In the lively context of Milan, Blinderman achieved a certain notoriety under the pseudonym Ossip Felyne. In addition to being employed at the Soviet trade delegation, he was known as a publisher and author of novels, short stories and plays, but above all as a translator from Russian.⁴ He translated works of famous authors such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky at a time when Slavic studies were emerging in Italy and the Russian novel was becoming increasingly popular among publishers. Towards the end of the 1920s, he was invited to direct the Volga series ('Volga' also being an acronym, in Italian, for 'original versions of books by great authors') for the Milanese publisher Corbaccio. The series' catalogue contained works by contemporary Russian, Soviet and emigrant authors, thus contributing to the vibrant culture of exile that, especially since the October 1917 revolution, had swept through some of the main European capitals, primarily Paris, Berlin and Prague.⁵ However, his mediation was also the result of a strong attachment to Italian language and culture. In 1930, for example, he founded the magazine *Teatro per tutti*, which popularised Italian comedy — an initiative that the regime praised highly.⁶ In his own literary activity, he had sought to gain recognition from Italian critics, achieving some success.

For all these reasons, Blinderman decided to apply for Italian citizenship in the summer of 1934, together with his wife and daughter (by then in her thirties), both of whom were active translators. He counted on remaining permanently in what he defined, in his application, as his 'chosen homeland', from which he could never have imagined being brutally rejected only a few years later. He was forced to fight an exhausting battle, involving a lot of paper-

³ Claudia Scandura, *L'emigrazione russa in Italia 1917-1940*, "Europa orientalis", 1995, n. 14, 2, pp. 341–366. For a comprehensive overview, see. Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad. A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.

⁴ See the biographical file edited by Giuseppina Giuliano and Sara Mazzucchelli for the website *Russi in Italia*, which is the result of an extensive survey on the Russian presence in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century conducted by an inter-university research group coordinated by the Slavist Antonella D'Amelia, www.russinitalia.it/detttaglio.php?id=150 (last accessed 13 November 2023). For an overview, see Sara Mazzucchelli, *La letteratura russa in Italia tra le due guerre: l'attività di traduttori e mediatori di cultura*, "Europa Orientalis", 2006, n. 25, pp. 37–60; Ead., *L'editoria milanese e le traduzioni dal russo*, in Antonella D'Amelia, Cristiano Diddi (eds.), *Archivio russo-italiano V: Russi in Italia*, Europa Orientalis-Dipartimento di Studi linguistici e letterari, Università di Salerno, 2009, pp. 279–290.

⁵ M. Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, cit.

⁶ "Teatro per tutti. Raccolta di commedie a cura di Osip Felyne", 1930–38, Bietti, Milan. The magazine published plays by popular authors of the time and news about their staging.

work and proof of identity,⁷ to be recognised as ‘not belonging to the Jewish race’ in order to regain citizenship for himself and his wife, who depended on his legal status. As for his daughter, she had been married to an Italian citizen since 1935 and her husband even had strong political and economic connections. Nevertheless, her Italian citizenship, which she had acquired independently, was revoked exactly one month after the wedding. This was despite the fact that the police headquarters and the prefecture had informed the central authorities that she was an Italian citizen by law, given her marriage to an Italian.⁸

Blinderman contested his denaturalisation as best as he could, and it is only thanks to the many years he spent negotiating his citizenship status with the Italian authorities that we have information about this case. In fact, only a very small part of the documents produced by the Citizenship Department, which in August 1939 assumed responsibility for citizenship matters within the General Directorate for Demography and Race (Direzione generale per la demografia e la razza, better known as the Demorazza),⁹ has survived. The rest may have been lost forever because of the extensive reorganising of the Demorazza collection following the fall of Fascism in July 1943.¹⁰ By contrast, the Blinderman file — which contains the original naturalisation file — is among the thousands of files concerning individuals that were saved and managed by another section of the Demorazza, the Race Department, which dealt mostly with ‘discrimination’ practices¹¹ and racial investigations, aimed at defining doubtful cases from the point of view of ‘racial’ identity. The file is relevant because it allows us to reconstruct the denaturalisation proceedings before and after the Demorazza was created, for which we would otherwise

⁷ I would like to express my gratitude to Alessandro Buono for our ongoing, long-term debate on these issues. See, in particular, *La manutenzione dell’identità. Il riconoscimento degli eredi legittimi nello stato di Milano e nella repubblica di Venezia (secoli XVII e XVIII)*, “Quaderni storici”, 2015, n. 1, pp. 231–266; «Tener persona». *Sur l’identité et l’identification dans les sociétés d’Ancien Régime*, “Annales HSS”, 2020, n. 1, pp. 75–111. Simona Cerutti has also been a great source of inspiration: *Étrangers. Étude d’une condition d’incertitude dans une société d’Ancien Régime*, Paris, Bayard, 2012.

⁸ Royal Police Headquarters of Milan to Hon. Royal Prefecture of Milan, 10 June 1939, and draft letter from the Royal Prefecture of Milan to the Demorazza, sent on 24 June 1939, in Asmi, Prefettura, Gab. (II), category 018-cittadinanza, envelope 42, folder 7095, 1939, Blinderman Erna Iris, Cittadinanza-revoca.

⁹ Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell’Italia fascista. Vicende, identità, persecuzione*, Turin, Einaudi, 2007, p. 180n. The transition took place on 21 August 1939.

¹⁰ Lucilla Garofalo, *La Demorazza: storia di un archivio*, “Italia contemporanea”, 2013, n. 272, pp. 374–401.

¹¹ For an analysis of these practices, with a focus on Milan, see Enrica Asquer, *Autobiografie di supplica. Alcune considerazioni sulle richieste di “discriminazione” degli ebrei milanesi, 1938–1943*, “Società e storia”, 2016, n. 151, pp. 97–135; *Scrivere alla Demorazza. Le domande di “discriminazione” delle donne di “razza ebraica” e il conflitto sulla cittadinanza nell’Italia del 1938*, “Italia contemporanea”, 2018, n. 287, pp. 213–242.

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have no systematic archival support. More importantly, it reflects Blinderma's strategy to regain his citizenship status, thus documenting his submission to a racial assessment in order to prove that he and his family did not belong to the Jewish race. Although others have also pursued this course of action,¹² not all files I have examined provide evidence of the same thoroughness or breadth. Clearly, not everyone had Blinderma's tenacity and social resources to resist and challenge the racial measures, at least until December 1941, when he last submitted a request to the Demorazza. After that, we lose track of Blinderma, although we know that he survived the Holocaust and died in 1950.

The exceptionality of Blinderma's case has produced a particularly rich and enlightening dossier. He was one of the first to challenge denaturalisation in 1938. As we will see, his procedural errors are very useful for interpretation today as they reveal the interplay between citizenship and race — a theme that has yet to be fully explored by historians. Another relevant point is that Blinderma's file contains his previous naturalisation documents. In fact, it was precisely the Blinderma case that prompted Mussolini, upon receiving an official query from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to explicitly state in February 1936 the 'non-desirability' of granting Italian citizenship to 'elements of the Jewish religion', especially if they came from Soviet Russia.

Through an in-depth analysis of the Blinderma file, this article thus aims to trace the naturalisation and denaturalisation of a 'stateless' individual of Jewish origin (first formerly Russian and then formerly Italian) in Fascist Italy,¹³ focusing on the actions and skills used to shape his public identity according to the authorities' criteria. In doing so, the article aims to assess the relationship between the event triggered by the anti-Semitic denaturalisation measure and the previous naturalisation process. As with most cases of denaturalisation due to anti-Semitic legislation, the latter also occurred under the Fascist regime, but before the turning point of 1936–38. Adopting a bottom-up perspective, the article thus raises questions about the continuities and discontinuities represented by Fascism and, particularly, with regard to Fascist anti-Semitic policies on citizenship, revealing the interplay between 'race' and 'nativeness'.

The analysis of the dossier will show how naturalisation, denaturalisation and the contestation of denaturalisation are all part of the same history: the controversial history of the negotiation of citizenship rights by those who, for

¹² Still others, on the other hand, tried to have their exceptional merits — mostly special services to the nation — recognised, in a similar way to discrimination applications. See, for example, the case of Alberto Grunstein, of which some traces can be found in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Affari diversi, envelope 21, folder 45.

¹³ As we will see, the term 'stateless' citizen is problematic because it is the result of bargaining by the very protagonists of the affair analysed in this article.

various and varying reasons over time, found themselves interacting dialectically with the institutions of the nation-state that managed the inclusion and exclusion of these rights. This history sheds light on the controversial relationship between the Jews and the Italian nation-state (but not only), as well as the broader historical dynamics of citizenship in twentieth-century Italy, within which it is necessary to identify both the continuities and the characteristics of the Fascist period. This subject has yet to be thoroughly explored in Italian historiography,¹⁴ which is only now beginning to pay more attention to the history of immigration and the interplay between minorities and citizenship, thanks to influences from the international context¹⁵ and the Italian public debate. The latter is now seemingly forced to overcome its long-standing perception of itself as a country of emigration only, an image that has so far obstructed the recognition of its deep historical roots of exclusion from citizenship and the persecution of minorities. In many ways, these issues lie at the heart of the nation-state.¹⁶

Finally, from a methodological point of view, the archival investigation of an individual case enables reflection on the concrete implementation of the anti-Semitic policies and, in doing so, highlights the *relationship* between individuals, families (acting despite *ad personam* decrees) and authoritarian institutions. This is based on the premise that no totalitarianism can remove the agency of social actors. If possible, this agency must be sought with even greater patience.

¹⁴ On the legal aspects of citizenship, see Luca Bussotti, *La cittadinanza degli italiani. Analisi storica e critica sociologica di una questione irrisolta*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2002; Luca Einaudi, *Le politiche dell'immigrazione in Italia dall'Unità ad oggi*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2007. Another useful study is the summary by Sabina Donati, *A Political History of National Citizenship and Identity in Italy, 1861-1950*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013.

¹⁵ I am referring, in particular, to citizenship studies. For a seminal publication in this area, see Engin F. Isin, Greg M. Nielsen, *Acts of Citizenship*, London, Zed Books, 2008.

¹⁶ Silvana Patriarca, Valeria Deplano, *Introduction. Nation, 'race' and racisms in twentieth-century Italy*, "Modern Italy", 2018, n. 4, pp. 349–353. In this context, important works have been written on the morphology of national discourse in the Risorgimento and in Italian nationalism, as well as on the related historical occurrences of racism in Italy: see, in particular, Alberto Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita*, Turin, Einaudi, 2006; Id., *Sublime madre nostra. La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2011; Silvana Patriarca, *Italianità. La costruzione del carattere nazionale*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2010; Ead., *Relazioni pericolose: "razza" e nazione nel Risorgimento*, in Adriano Roccucci (ed.), *La costruzione dello stato-nazione in Italia*, Rome, Viella, 2012, pp. 109–119; Gaia Giuliani, Cristina Lombardi Diop, *Bianco e nero. Storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani*, Florence, Le Monnier, 2013.

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Denaturalisation and anti-Semitism: the Italian case in the European context

As historical research on the persecution of Jews has amply pointed out,¹⁷ ‘Jewish foreigners’ fell victim to the earliest and fiercest persecutory measures implemented by the Italian Fascist regime. Alongside the 5 September decree on the purge of public schools, the decree issued on 7 September was the first explicitly anti-Semitic restrictive measure of Mussolini’s government. The timing was by no means coincidental. In line with the ‘qualitative’ logic that justified the government’s decision to adopt racist and anti-Semitic measures,¹⁸ citizens ‘of the Jewish race’ and of ‘foreign nationality’ were the perfect target, as they could be presented as the most alien element in the body of the nation — the first, therefore, to be hit.¹⁹

This meant that foreigners were instantly assimilated to those who had obtained Italian citizenship from January 1919 onwards, in the context of the geopolitical reorganisation following the First World War and the collapse of the multinational empires. In Europe and beyond, this reorganisation had produced both policies of denationalisation and the compulsory assimilation of minorities who had recently been included within the new borders of nation-states, as well as a conspicuous accentuation of — mostly forced — mobility as a result of the contradictory rearrangement produced by the Peace Treaties and the ethnicist radicalisation of policies on nationality and citizenship.²⁰ As Daniela Luigia Caglioti pointed out,²¹ precisely these two concepts — which are not immediately compatible — began to converge progressively from the First World War onwards, albeit in different contexts. At the same time, the friendship-enemy logic continued along borders between nationalities conceived as increasingly homogeneous internally. During the Great War, the restriction of civil liberties, denaturalisation and penalisation of the prop-

¹⁷ Klaus Voigt, *Il rifugio precario. Gli esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1993–96; Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell’Italia fascista*, pp. 186–191; Id., *La persecuzione degli ebrei stranieri in Italia*, in Michele Battini, Marie-Anne Matard Bonucci (eds.), *Antisemitismi a confronto. Francia e Italia. Ideologie, retoriche, politiche*, Pisa, Plus, 2010, pp. 167–177; for a promising work in progress, see Matteo Stefanori, *Le strade che portano a Roma. Ebrei stranieri nella capitale, 1933–1945*, “Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Biblioteken”, 2019, n. 1, pp. 387–427.

¹⁸ Michele Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronaca dell’elaborazione delle leggi del 1938*, Turin, Zamorani, 2017².

¹⁹ Alessandra Minerbi, *Il decreto legge del 7 settembre 1938 sugli ebrei stranieri*, “Rassegna mensile di Israel”, 2007, n. 2, pp. 169–186.

²⁰ Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees from the First World War Through the Cold War*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2002 (new edition); Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2013.

²¹ Daniela Luigia Caglioti, *Subjects, Citizens, and Aliens in a Time of Upheaval: Naturalizing and Denaturalizing in Europe during the First World War*, “The Journal of Modern History”, 2017, n. 3, pp. 495–530.

erty rights of ‘enemy aliens’ (and sometimes of foreigners more generally) were common practices in the belligerent countries, leaving a legacy that affected politics, culture and administrative practices in the subsequent period.²²

Furthermore, throughout Europe, the inter-war period was characterised by the emergence of a significant influx of exiles of Jewish religion or origin seeking refuge from countries where anti-Semitic policies and sentiment were intensifying. One such country was the German Reich (from 1933 onwards),²³ but it is also a well-known fact that Eastern European Jews — especially those living in the western part of the Tsarist Empire — had been subjected to waves of violent pogroms since the second half of the nineteenth century. In the first decades of the twentieth century, these complex events merged with the revolutionary dynamics that led to the end of the autocracy.²⁴ More generally, the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing civil war triggered a huge exodus of migrants (mostly to Europe) and an unprecedented refugee crisis in Russian history, which would have important international repercussions.²⁵

In various European contexts, these migrants — refugees and non-nationals who were increasingly seen as strangers to the nation’s biopolitical body — were struck by measures to revise and withdraw their citizenship, with increasing intensity during the 1930s. The case of Italian Fascism, which has received very little attention regarding its treatment of minorities after the First World War,²⁶ should be included in this transnational framework, and the

²² Ead., *Dealing with Enemy Aliens in WWI: Security versus Civil Liberties and Property Rights*, “Italian Journal of Public Law”, 2011, n. 2, pp. 180–194; Ead., *Why and How Italy Invented an Enemy Aliens Problem in the First World War*, “War in History”, 2014, n. 2, pp. 142–169. See also Ead., *War and Citizenship: Enemy Aliens and National Belonging from the French Revolution to the First World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2021.

²³ On the influx to Italy, see K. Voigt, *Il rifugio precario*, cit.

²⁴ Jonathan Dekel-Chen, David Gaunt, Natan M. Meir, Israel Bartal (eds.), *Anti-Jewish Violence. Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2010; on the 1905 revolution in Odessa, which may have had an impact on Blinderman’s life course, see Robert Weinberg, *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993.

²⁵ It is worth mentioning at least Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking. Refugees in Russia during World War I*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999; Catherine Gousset, *L'exil russe. La fabrique du réfugié apatride (1920-1939)*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2008.

²⁶ The following studies are a good starting point: Andrea Di Michele, *L’italianizzazione imperfetta. L’amministrazione pubblica dell’Alto Adige tra Italia liberale e fascismo*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, 2003; Marta Verginella, *Il confine degli altri. La questione giuliana e la memoria slovena*, Rome, Donzelli, 2008; Annamaria Vinci, *Sentinelle della patria. Il fascismo al confine orientale 1918-1941*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2011; Maura Hametz, *In the Name of Italy. Nation, Family and Patriotism in a Fascist Court*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2012; Roberta Pergher, *Mussolini’s Nation-Empire. Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy’s Borderlands, 1922-1943*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2018. For an in-depth review that revisits the theme of citizenship, see Giulia Albanese, *Italianità fascista. Il regime e la trasformazione dei confini della cittadinanza 1922-1938*, “Italia contemporanea”, 2019, n. 290, pp. 95–125. On the treatment of minorities under Fascism, it is worth considering the ongoing

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events of 1938 must be understood as part of a historical trajectory of progressive political radicalisation and the adoption of an ethnicist approach to citizenship. In Italy, the latter was already evident in the elaboration of policies towards minorities who had recently been incorporated into the national territory under the Peace Treaties, as well as in the country's colonial experience in East Africa.²⁷ As Roberta Pergher recalled,²⁸ it was in the context of tightening control measures and repressing political opposition — culminating in the so-called Leggi fascistissime (Fascist legislation that effectively turned the country into a dictatorship) — that the regime introduced 'changes and additions' to the general law on citizenship (No. 555 of 13 June 1912) in January 1926.²⁹ These changes enabled the withdrawal of citizenship and, in the worst-case scenario, the confiscation of property from expatriates abroad who were accused of behaving in a way that could 'disturb public order in the Kingdom' or damage 'the interests', the 'good name' or the 'prestige of Italy'. Pergher also observed that similar measures were applied in the same month to 'a particular class of enemies of the state': those who had recently obtained citizenship as a result of the annexations sanctioned by the Peace Treaties. In their case, a simple order by the prefect could determine the cause of 'political unworthiness' and thus provoke denaturalisation.³⁰

The fusion of this dynamic with the implementation of anti-Semitic legislation in Italy marks a further step, which also has a particular characteristic. As Claire Zalc's thorough study of the French case reveals,³¹ while the anti-Semitic nature of the law passed by the Vichy government in July 1940 — based on the German model³² and providing for the revision of all naturali-

research by Michele Sarfatti, who has highlighted the obstacles encountered by the Roma and Sinti communities in acquiring citizenship since the early post-war period. See Michele Sarfatti, *Per una storia della normativa antizigana nell'Italia fascista: i testi delle circolari*, "Documenti e commenti", n. 7, url: www.michelesarfatti.it/documenti-e-commenti/una-storia-della-normativa-antizigana-nellitalia-fascista-i-testi-delle-circolari (last accessed 13 November 2023).

²⁷ Barbara Sorgoni, *Le parole e i corpi. Antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interrazziali nella colonia Eritrea (1890-1941)*, Naples, Liguori, 1998; Olindo De Napoli, *La prova della razza. Cultura giuridica e razzismo negli anni Trenta*, Milan, Mondadori Education, 2009; Nicola Labanca, *Il razzismo istituzionale coloniale: genesi e relazioni con l'antisemitismo fascista*, in Marcello Flores et al. (eds.), *Storia della Shoah in Italia. Vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni*, vol. I, *Le premesse, le persecuzioni, lo sterminio*, Turin, Utet, 2010, pp. 192–219.

²⁸ R. Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation Empire*, cit., p. 182.

²⁹ Law no. 555 of 13 June 1912 on Italian citizenship (G.U. no. 153 of 30 June 1912); Law no. 108 of 31 January 1926, Modifications and additions to Law no. 555 of 13 June 1912 on citizenship (G.U. no. 28 of 4 February 1926).

³⁰ Royal Decree No. 16 of 10 January 1926, Revocation, in cases of political indignity, of the concession of Italian citizenship conferred on foreigners following a right of option (G.U. no. 11 of 15 January 1926).

³¹ Claire Zalc, *Dénaturalisés. Les retraites de nationalité sous Vichy*, Paris, Seuil, 2016.

³² The Law on the Revocation of Naturalizations and the Deprivation of German Citizenship of 14 July 1933 allowed for the revocation of all naturalisations granted between 9 November

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sations granted under the progressive law of 10 August 1927 — only became apparent in practice, xenophobia and anti-Semitism went hand in hand in Italy since autumn 1938.

It is difficult to establish the quantitative dimension of the process of reviewing the citizenship of Jews living in the Kingdom of Italy. The archival situation described above has posed a significant challenge to research in this area. The revocation decrees that we have access to, thanks to sources of the Department of Public Security,³³ usually only indicate the name of the file holder, which prevents us from calculating how many people, as members of the family of a denaturalised person, were deprived of their citizenship. Only the lists from Trieste are almost complete. They mention 207 people, corresponding to 82 revoked concessions, to which another list of 172 denaturalisations must be added, for which only the file holder is indicated. In total, then, at least 379 people were involved. The other decrees (usually cumulative and relating to ten individuals at a time) list 1,166 names corresponding to the file holders, so we could say that at least 1,545 people were affected by the measures, living primarily in the north-east, Trieste and the Carnaro Province (Fiume), and in the city of Milan. However, the actual number is approximate, also because some revocations were quickly cancelled or formally suspended for five years, while others were subject to interpretative disagreements between various authorities and the interested parties, meaning they could be revoked at a later date.

Losing one's citizenship had significant implications. The new stateless people were forced to leave the borders of the Kingdom of Italy, Libya and the Aegean possessions by 12 March 1939, like the rest of the 'Jewish foreigners', except for those who had married an Italian citizen or had reached the age of 65 by 1 October 1938. In an increasingly violent and anti-Semitic Europe, the expulsion foreshadowed a forced migration with far-reaching consequences.

Moreover, the conditions of foreign Jews worsened from the spring of 1940 onwards, when Italy entered the war. While some of them had managed to migrate, many others were prevented from doing so by bureaucratic obstacles.

1918 and 30 January 1933 that could be considered harmful to national interests. The 26 July 1933 circular that implemented the law specified that assessments could be based on a national or racial criterion. The so-called *Ostjuden*, in particular, were the designated target. Michael G. Esch, *Utilité, degré de civilisation, valeur biologique. Le désirable accroissement de la population allemande (1870-1914)*, in Philippe Rygiel (ed.), *Le bon grain et l'ivraie. La sélection des migrants en Occident, 1880-1939*, Genève, Aux lieux d'être, 2006², pp. 37–76 (I am citing the version available on HAL open science, halshs-01285064). See also Martin Dean, *The Development and Implementation on Nazi Denaturalization and Confiscation Policy up to the Eleventh Decree to the Reich Citizenship Law*, "Holocaust Genocide Studies", 2002, n. 2, pp. 217–242; for another see, see for example Joshua Starr, *Jewish Citizenship in Rumania (1878-1940)*, "Jewish Social Studies", 1941, n. 1, 1941, pp. 57–80.

³³ ACS, MI, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (hereafter Dgps), Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati (hereafter Dagr), category A16, Stranieri ed ebrei stranieri, envelope 7.

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Those who remained in the Kingdom without authorisation risked administrative internment in camps run by the regime or in small communes, which were mainly located in the centre and south of the peninsula. However, it remains extremely difficult to quantify the number of ex-Italian stateless persons affected by this situation.³⁴

But what steps did denaturalised individuals take before leaving, going into hiding or being interned? How exactly did denaturalisation work? As we have seen, it is difficult to answer these questions given the current archival situation, which forces us to rely mostly on individual cases. However, we can make a virtue of necessity by focusing on the practical implementation of racial measures and on the resulting dynamic and conflictual relationship between rulers and ruled.

The actions taken by the victims to challenge the racial measures are an important starting point. In the archival collection of the Race Department, we can find traces of measures to repeal the revocation of citizenship and evidence of contestation practices. Examining the database compiled by Lucilla Garofalo,³⁵ an archivist at the Central State Archive, we can identify approximately seventy dossiers categorised as 'ES' ('Ebrei Stranieri', foreign Jews). They contain applications for 'permanence in the Kingdom' submitted to the Demorazza by foreign or denaturalised Jews who requested an exemption from the measure of forced expulsion, including Giuseppe Blinderma.³⁶ When we analyse the authority's motivations, as recorded in the successful cases, we immediately see that some applicants avoided deportation precisely because the decision to withdraw their citizenship was revoked, probably as a result of a challenge by the individual concerned. Moreover, as in Blinderma's case, such objections also left traces in the racial assessment files, which were again handled by the Race Department. Starting from the names in the revocation

³⁴ A useful tool for obtaining even only a rough estimate is the database developed by Anna Pizzuti, *Foreign Jews interned in Italy*, available at www.annapizzuti.it/database/scaricadb.php (last accessed 13 November 2023). A search of the database using the nationality criterion 'stateless ex-Italian' (male and female) reveals a total of 198 internees: 149 men and 49 women. However, it cannot be excluded that the denaturalised persons were simply classified as 'stateless'. Furthermore, it must be considered that some may have regained, or perhaps silently retained, their original citizenship. I thank Michele Sarfatti for these observations.

³⁵ The database relates to the personal files held in the Race Department, which can effectively be consulted in the archive or whose information can be derived indirectly from other dossiers. It is possible to view the card describing the dossier and its holder, or the biographical records about the individuals involved. Regarding the first case, there are 4,241 racial assessment files (classified as Dcitt); 6,231 discrimination files (1,797 for exceptional merit and 4,434 ordinary files, respectively); five files of applications to retain employment and three to retain teaching; 70 applications for permanence in the Kingdom (classified as ES); 488 applications for mixed marriages (classified as MEIS, MIE, MIES, MIS).

³⁶ The application was unsuccessful, and the archival reference refers to the racial investigation file, ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, Personal files, envelope 271, folder 19206 Dcitt, Blinderma Giuseppe.

decrees, of which we have records, it is therefore possible to examine the racial assessment files on a case-by-case basis, rereading them also in the light of the connection between the racial question and citizenship.

Equally important is research at the local level, as this allows us to overcome the archival challenges associated with studying this issue, especially with regard to the documentation of the Ministry of the Interior. Drawing on research I have been conducting for some years on the case of Milan, I will here focus on the sources contained in the archive of the prefecture of Milan. Examining the personal files produced locally shows that the procedures for granting and revoking citizenship were closely connected, with the local prefectures playing a leading role in both cases, as they were responsible for managing the individual files while interacting with central authorities. This is confirmed by the fact that, as in the French case,³⁷ the files for revoking citizenship at the prefecture of Milan are the same files used for granting citizenship, to which the staff then added the documents relating to denaturalisation. In other words, traces of this process should not only be sought among the 'Jewish files'.

An analysis of the local context and an in-depth examination of the entire Blinderman file clarify another key aspect of denaturalisation proceedings that has not yet been explored. Until at least the end of August 1939, the revocation process was handled not by the Demorazza but by the Ministry of the Interior's Department Ia Section IIIa. The latter had been autonomous with respect to the ministry's general management until 1927, when it was incorporated into the newly created Personnel Office.³⁸ My analysis of the correspondence between the periphery and the centre reveals that, until the summer of 1939, the prefectures seem to have contacted Department Ia Section IIIa directly in cases of revocation, given its authority over citizenship matters.

Moreover, between 1938 and 1939, this department issued directives concerning foreign Jews and, in particular, requests to prefectures to integrate the information available based on 'the records in its possession' in order to ascertain the 'Jewish race' of foreigners who had been granted citizenship after January 1919. For example, on 25 November 1938, Department Ia Section IIIa sent the prefect of Milan a list of 152 names of 'foreigners who were granted our citizenship and for whom it was not possible to establish, based on the records of this ministry, the race to which they belonged'.³⁹ The relative correspondence shows that the prefecture's intervention, with relative 'opportune enquiries'

³⁷ C. Zalc, *Dénaturalisés*, cit.

³⁸ Although Garofalo confirms that citizenship revocations were implemented by the Citizenship Department, she points out that the Demorazza took over citizenship competences in 1939. L. Garofalo, *La Demorazza*, cit.

³⁹ Ministry of the Interior, Personnel Office, Department Ia Section III, to HE the Prefect of Milan, Rome 25 November 1938, in Asmi, Prefettura, Gabinetto, Problema razzista, binder 2, folder 14, subfolder 2.

ordered ‘urgently’, was required ‘only’ for the names on the list. According to a telegram from April 1939, ‘for the other concessionaires race [is] ascertained from attached naturalisation application documents’.⁴⁰ Hence, the Milanese case shows that the documents on which the attribution of race — an act resulting in the revocation of citizenship — was based were, above all, previous naturalisation applications. These were supplemented by the information provided by the interested parties themselves when they were subjected to the racist census of August 1938 and the compulsory self-declarations following the entry into force of the ‘Provisions for the defence of the Italian race’ in November.

In the first phase, then, the initiative of the revocation process was in the hands of Department Ia Section IIIa. Unfortunately, the relevant archival collections, which I was directed to by this research, were transferred to the Central State Archive in 2015. I have only been able to consult a small part of these collections relating to the early 1920s, as they were still being inventoried at the time of writing this article. However, certain clues emerged both in the few remaining documents of the Citizenship Department and in the personal files of the Race Department, including that of Blinderman. These confirm the involvement, between 1939 and 1940, of the Demorazza’s internal department in the management of the citizenship issue.

The Blinderman file: naturalisation (1934–36)

Out of 662 grants of Italian citizenship registered in the province of Milan between 1919 and 1939,⁴¹ a total of 142 were revoked by decrees based on the ‘Provisions for the defence of the Italian race’.⁴² These include the case of Giuseppe Blinderman, born to Abramo Blinderman and Paolina Halperine. The revocation, which also implied the denaturalisation of Blinderman’s wife, is dated 15 December 1938. Like the others, it is signed by Victor Emmanuel III and countersigned by Mussolini, who is listed as the proponent in his capacity as prime minister, Secretary of State and interior minister.⁴³

As in most cases, it was a cumulative decree, declaring the revocation of the Italian citizenship of a set of listed individuals (usually ten⁴⁴) based on an

⁴⁰ Telegram from the Personnel Office to the Prefect of Milan, 10 April 1939, *ivi*.

⁴¹ Royal Prefecture of Milan to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Personnel Office, 5 April 1939, in Asmi, Prefettura, Gabinetto, Problema Razzista, binder 2, folder 14, subfolder 2. Citizenships acquired by right and those obtained by exercising the right of option are excluded from the calculation. Six hundred thirty-nine grants were registered in Milan.

⁴² I have taken the number from the original copies of the decrees, in ACS, MI, Dgps, Dagr, category A16, Stranieri ed ebrei stranieri, envelope 7.

⁴³ *Ivi*. An extract of the decree can be found in Asmi, Prefettura, Gab (II), envelope 42, folder Blinderman.

⁴⁴ Other than Blinderman, these included: Flescher Gioacchino (Royal Decree 10.2.1938), born in Buczacz and resident in Rome; Galenbert Samuele (Royal Decree 13.6.1935), born 1902, died 1940.

explicit motivation: ‘Considered that the persons listed below belong to the Jewish race, in view of article 23 of Royal Decree 17 November 1938 — A. XVII no. 1728 [...] the Italian citizenship granted to the following people is declared to all effects revoked.’ This formula is immediately followed by the indication of the general legislative references on the basis of which the concession was made, first and foremost article 4 of the organic law on citizenship (13 June 1912, no. 555) and the relative changes of December 1934,⁴⁵ but also specific changes concerning the new provinces annexed following the First World War.⁴⁶ The name and personal data of each denaturalised individual are accompanied by the details of the decree granting citizenship. In Bliderman’s case, this was the decree of 26 September 1935, registered at the Court of Accounts on the following 21 October. For the other individuals listed, the concessions date between 1935 and 1938; they were therefore governed by the same Royal Decree of 1 December 1934. As in many other cases, we find that concessions revoked at the same time were made with the same articles of law ‘in mind’, while there do not seem to be any other justifying factors (e.g. place of residence or birth) that could explain why the affected individuals were gathered in the same decree.

The revocation of Bliderman’s naturalisation was registered at the Corte dei Conti, the Court of Accounts, three months later, on 17 March 1939. In July, he was informed by the municipal messenger who, as was customary, delivered a copy of the decree to his address on behalf of the mayor of Milan. This was standard procedure, and all records are kept in the municipal citizenship

in Rhodes and resident in Trieste; Philipp Gustavo (Royal Decree 4.6.1936), born in Cologne and resident in Rome; Sadoch Saul (Royal Decree 18.5.1936), born in Constantinople and resident in Trieste; Campos Gabriele Gino (Royal Decree 7.3.1935), born in Alexandria and resident in Milan; Frank Marino (Royal Decree 9.8.1935), born in Munich and resident in Milan; Dana Salomone (Royal Decree 31.10.1935), born in Constantinople and resident in Milan; Papo Giuseppe (7.3.1935), born in Tartar Pasardjik and resident in Trieste; Mosseri Salomone (Royal Decree 6.4.1936), born in Izmir and residing in Milan.

⁴⁵ According to article 4 of the Law of 13 June 1912, naturalisation could be granted by royal decree subject to the favourable opinion of the Council of State and under the following conditions 1) to a foreigner who has rendered three years’ service to the Italian State, including abroad; 2) to a foreigner who has lived in the Kingdom for at least five years; 3) to a foreigner who has lived in the Kingdom for three years and has rendered notable services to Italy or has married an Italian citizen; 4) after one year of residency, to a person who could have become an Italian citizen by law if they had not failed to make an explicit declaration in due time. Royal Decree No. 1997 of 1 December 1934, which contained changes to Law no. 555 of 13 June 1912 on Italian nationality (G.U. no. 297 of 19 December 1934), converted by Law no. 517 of 4 April 1935 (G.U. no. 107 of 7 May 1935), intervened on article 4, reducing the compulsory time limits provided for in points 3 and 4 (from three years to two and from one year to six months, respectively) and weakening the role of the Council of State, which became merely an object of consultation. Article 6 on the granting of citizenship for ‘services of exceptional importance’ was also repealed.

⁴⁶ Royal Decree No. 43 of 29 January 1922, regarding norms concerning the acquisition of Italian citizenship in the new provinces (G.U. no. 35 of 11 February 1922).

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and population registers. As mentioned, the Personnel Office of the Ministry of the Interior, which incorporated the existing Department Ia Section IIIa, was behind the disgraceful decision. In June 1939, it transmitted the news of Blinderman's revoked citizenship to the periphery (i.e. the prefect), enclosing a copy of the decree.⁴⁷

Interestingly, the documents testifying to the above-mentioned procedural steps are contained, in an interrupted sequence, in a record created by the prefecture of Milan in the summer of 1934. This is indeed Blinderman's naturalisation file, lodged with the prefecture and re-examined when his citizenship was revoked. The subject line reads 'Giuseppe Blinderman citizenship'; underneath, in visibly different ink, it says 'Revocation'. The original protocol number, which corresponds to the date on which the file was created, is followed by the number of the revocation file and the year: 1939. A closer look reveals that the four folders relating to the category 'citizenship' in the prefecture of Milan's archives for the year 1939 contain mostly naturalisation files on people declared 'of Jewish race', created in the inter-war period and revoked in the aftermath of the 'Provisions for the defence of the Italian race'.

The file and, in particular, the information reported by the local authorities allows us to trace the migratory and professional path that had led Blinderman to formally request Italian citizenship in July 1934. The process was by no means straightforward. In fact, as I have mentioned, the Blinderman file marks a turning point in the Ministry of the Interior's practice of granting citizenship to 'Jewish' foreigners, especially those from the Soviet Union.

From the very first letter to the ministry, dated 5 July 1934,⁴⁸ Blinderman demonstrates extreme formal competence in formulating his requests and, more generally, interacting with institutions. His self-narration begins with his arrival in Italy: 'I came to Italy in May 1915, sent by the Société Anonyme Westinghouse in Paris, in my capacity as Engineer, to carry out a military test at the Westinghouse Company in Vado Ligure.' The reasons for his subsequent stays in the Kingdom — related to his collaboration in national defence efforts — are duly underlined and documented by the letters from the Ministry of Arms and Munitions attached to the application.

In addition to his commendable activity as an engineer, Blinderman boasted his career as a writer. He thus mentions having published 'several books (novels, novellas, comedies) that were very favourably received by the press' in Italy, while some of his comedies had been 'successfully performed by the greatest Italian artists'. He places particular emphasis on the initiative that he had devoted himself to since 1930: the editorial management of *Teatro*

⁴⁷ Ministry of the Interior, Personnel Office, to HE the Prefect of Milan, Rome 9 June 1939 in Asmi, Prefettura, Gab. (II), envelope 42, folder Blinderman.

⁴⁸ Giuseppe Blinderman to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Milan 5 July 1934, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, Personal files, envelope 271, folder 19206, Blinderman Giuseppe.

per tutti, which he had founded ‘with the precise aim of making it a propaganda organ for promoting Italian drama’. As proof, he cites the percentage of Italian plays published in the magazine (out of an unspecified total): ‘71% in 1930; 84% in 1931; 86% in 1932; 95% in 1933 and 100% in 1934.’ Blidnerman proudly points out that his activities were perfectly aligned with the regime’s directives and had been recognised by the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND), a Fascist leisure organisation. This is demonstrated by a 1933 circular enclosed with the file, in which the OND praises the magazine as a ‘guide for the renewal of the repertoire’ in accordance with the regime’s provisions. The decision to publish many of his works in Italian and join the Fascist writers’ union of Lombardy further reinforces his image of perfect political compliance.

Next, there was the issue of loyalty to the host country and relations with the previous homeland, which are essential for any naturalisation application. The primary objective of a citizenship application is to address the implicit concerns about potential disloyalty and opportunism towards the host nation, which was particularly relevant in the context of Fascist Italy. Thus, Blidnerman emphasises that he has lived in Italy continuously for more than 17 years and, in the meantime, has lost all his possessions in his homeland following the Russian Revolution: ‘The Russian Revolution, which broke out while I was in Italy, took away all my possessions.’ Interestingly, he does not explicitly mention his loss of citizenship, nor does he define himself as ‘stateless’, as the prefect of Milan did in his report of the following September.⁴⁹ He only declares that he had ‘regained Russian citizenship’ in 1926, after Fascist Italy recognised the Soviet government, but that he had renounced it in a declaration to the police headquarters in Milan, written on 27 June 1934 and attached to his application. In the document, Blidnerman indeed clarifies that he has no other citizenship.⁵⁰ Whoever examined the file at the ministry marked the acquisition and subsequent renunciation of Soviet citizenship in red, and the matter was further investigated in the following months. The definition of ‘stateless’ used by the prefect is marked in the same way. This was clearly a critical issue.

In fact, from a strictly legal point of view, if Blidnerman implicitly — and understandably — places the new ‘Soviet’ citizenship in continuity with the ‘Russian’ one by presenting his act as the ‘resumption’ of his previous status,⁵¹

⁴⁹ Royal Prefecture of Milan to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Department Ia, Milan 17 September 1934. Ivi.

⁵⁰ The declaration is handwritten and stamped by the Aliens Office of the police headquarters in Milan. After the personal details, Blidnerman ‘hereby declares that he renounces his citizenship of the U.S.S.R. and has no other citizenship’.

⁵¹ George Ginsburgs, *The Soviet Union and the Problem of Refugees and Displaced Persons 1917-1956*, “The American Journal of International Law”, 1957, n. 2, pp. 325–361. In the immediate post-war period and before the birth of the Soviet Union, Soviet citizenship was superimposed on the pre-existing citizenship as a result of the agreements and treaties between

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it becomes more difficult for him to replace a formal certificate of release from the original citizenship with a simple self-declaration. At the time, the former document was required by the Italian authorities for naturalisation purposes.⁵² The general law of 1912 was indeed structured to reject dual nationality.

Moreover, in terms of argumentative coherence, the issue of reacquiring original citizenship was delicate as it potentially contradicted the image that Blinderman aimed to project: that of an individual who had chosen to reside in Italy 17 years earlier. After a linear process of progressive integration, he had now reached the final act of requesting Italian citizenship.

His appeal ends as follows:

Now, as I ask for the honour of Italian citizenship for which I have long yearned and to which, I hope, to have earned the right, I am seeking affirmation by law of what has already existed for years, namely my devotion and love for Italy, my chosen Homeland, to which I also intend to devote all my future activity.

With observance and faith, Giuseppe Blinderman.

This extract clearly shows that the application for naturalisation seems to be an integral part of what I have elsewhere called an ‘act of bonding’, through which those who aspire to citizenship demonstrate their commitment to the national community to which they ask for — and claim — membership.⁵³ The weaving of this bond, which often continues with other appeals to the authorities related to the claiming of acquired but never definitive rights, is essentially based on the search in the individual’s biographical and migratory trajectory for a genealogical root of the attachment to the new, chosen homeland. This choice is decisive and can certainly be considered proof of will, but it must somehow be ‘naturalised’, that is, projected into an objectifying past, to avoid appearing uncontemplated and opportunistic. Legal naturalisation thus appears to be the outcome of a process and the confirmation of a reality that, as Blinderman states, ‘already exists’. In other words, it is based on a kind of naturalisation

the socialist republics. This meant that it was applied to those who had the previous status of Russian ‘subjects’. Hence, before the decree on the great denaturalisation of 15 December 1921, Russian exiles who were outside the country were only de facto stateless, because they were formally citizens but unable or unwilling to enjoy the protection of their original state.

⁵² According to Royal Decree No. 949 of 2 August 1912, Regulations for the implementation of Law No. 555 of 13 June 1912 on Italian citizenship (G.U. no. 213 of 9 September 1912), the compulsory documents were the birth certificate, the certificate of family status and the penal certificate of the country of origin. It was ‘the faculty of the Ministry to request other documents on a case-by-case basis’. According to a ‘list of documents’, preprinted and manually completed by the person examining Blinderman’s file at Department Ia Section IIIa, the documents that were required (and in this case crossed out) include: the certificate of release; the certificate stating that the applicant did not request to keep his original nationality, even if he acquired a foreign one; and certificates of the loss of nationality.

⁵³ Enrica Asquer, *Rivendicare l'appartenenza. Suppliche e domande di deroga allo Statut des Juifs nella Francia di Vichy*, “Quaderni storici”, 2019, n. 1, pp. 225–258.

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of the bond, which must be perceived as pre-existing and solid, albeit disinterested, to the point of simulating the certainty and objectivity of nativeness, even when this is not the case. In Italy, nativeness was defined as descent from an Italian father, while naturalisation by royal decree — according to the 1912 law — was based on continuous residence and service to the state.

However, we must also consider the discretionary granting of citizenship. This is how the prefect of Milan asked the police headquarters and the Carabinieri to start investigating the person who had applied for citizenship in a letter dated 1934:

I ask Your Esteemed Authority to communicate to me Bliderman's full personal details [handwritten on a prefilled typewritten sheet] and to obtain rigorous and meticulous information on his previous conduct during his stay in the Kingdom and on his family, making sure, by those means that you deem most suitable, of the *feelings of Italianness* that he claims to profess and of his *devotion to the Regime*.

In particular, I would like to know the *reasons* why the applicant aspires to obtain our citizenship, *the profession* exercised, *the religion* professed [handwritten addition], information about his residences since the age of 16, both abroad and in Italy, with an indication of the dates, addresses and relative occupations he has had, whether he has subscribed to the *Dollaro* and the *Littorio* or, if so, to what extent, not forgetting also to indicate whether he owns *property in the Kingdom* or is possibly interested in *industrial or commercial companies*, whether or not subject to a union.⁵⁴

This is followed by the aforementioned clause regarding the necessary concordance between the applicant's interest in requesting citizenship and the state's interest in granting it. The letter concludes that positive assessments must be motivated and every useful element to express a judgement must be obtained, 'bearing in mind that citizenship can be granted to those who feel genuinely inclined out of a *sincere commitment* to our country and not to those who ask for it out of *opportunism or convenience*'.

Various elements need to be verified. The reference to devotion to the Fascist regime clearly signals the political radicalisation of citizenship imposed by Fascism, while the reference to religion — added manually on an existing form — announces the shift towards racial policies. I will return to this important aspect, but for now, let us focus on the dualism between sincere feelings of Italianness and opportunism, or convenience. This was indeed the crux of the matter. It was commonly accepted that requests for citizenship could be driven by material interests and opportunistic reasons. But the pretence of the demand for citizenship had to respond to the ideological claim to distinguish contingent interests from enduring passions in the relationship between the individual and

⁵⁴ Asmi, draft letter by the Prefect of Milan to the Hon. Police Commissioner and the Hon. Commander of the Internal Division of the Royal Carabinieri, copied and sent from Milan on 11 July 1934, subject Bliderman Giuseppe (O. Felyne), citizenship, in Asmi, Prefettura, Gab. (II), envelope 42, folder Bliderman (italics mine). The other Prefecture files indicate the use of the same preprinted form.

the nation-state, as well as to mobilise a feeling of national ‘love’ that was pure and solid, and thus proven by a coherent biographical trajectory.

In fact, the authorities evaluate and verify this feeling based on Blinderma’s ‘previous conduct’, that is, his and his family’s actions and decisions, which the prefect asks the police and the Carabinieri to investigate. Assessing what falls within the ideological framework of ‘sincere’ attachment is obviously a complex operation, marked by a wide margin of discretion as well as a good deal of contradiction between general principles and the interpretation of local contexts. A more in-depth analysis of the policies for granting citizenship under Fascism is beyond the scope of this article, but an examination of the naturalisation practices managed by the prefecture of Milan between the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, which were revoked between 1938 and 1939, shows that the applicant’s economic profile — and therefore implicitly their economic ‘interest’ in becoming an Italian citizen — was mostly assessed positively by local authorities if it was good or very good. Conversely, greater perplexity emerged in cases of modest economic circumstances or situations of non-self-sufficiency. Some more attention was paid to the question of property ownership in the Kingdom if the applicant had previously been affected by the measures restricting the property rights of foreigners during the First World War. Again, a more detailed analysis would be required to understand how the nationalist dynamic of stigmatising the economic penetration of foreigners combines with the visible interest in acquiring economically sound citizens. Here, it is sufficient to note that an application for naturalisation reflected the applicant’s conscious attempt to come to terms with both the ‘sensitive’ elements that could jeopardise access to the community of rights and the fact that the meaning of these issues changed over time.

In this regard, it is important to emphasise that when Blinderma applied for citizenship, the requirement of sincere feelings towards the adopted homeland was not a treatment reserved solely for Jews, who were stereotyped as disloyal to the nation based on their supposed transnational ethnic origin. ‘Sincere’ Italianness was an ideological construction of the naturalisation process, which had a nineteenth-century structure (later formalised in the 1912 law, which remained in force for a long time), to which new elements and insistences introduced by Fascism were gradually added. These requirements became increasingly harmful to Jews in the second half of the 1930s, as the regime’s anti-Semitic policies gained ground. In fact, although Blinderma does not mention his religion or Jewish origins in his application, this information emerges in the reports by the local authorities,⁵⁵ probably after they made a

⁵⁵ Territorial Legion of the Royal Carabinieri of Milan, Internal Division of Milan to Royal Prefecture of Milan, 6 August 1934; Royal Police Headquarters of Milan to Hon. Royal Prefecture of Milan, 8 September 1934, both in Asmi, Prefettura, Gab. (II), envelope 42, folder Blinderma. Both refer to an ‘Israelite religion’.

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specific request to him — a sign that things were changing. However, when he was forced to contest the revocation of his citizenship only a few years later, beginning in 1939, the religious issue was the first thing he mentioned, speaking of a baptism in an evangelical ceremony in Paris in 1912.

Returning to the naturalisation file, as I have mentioned, one of the first aspects to be clarified was Blinderman's connection to the Soviet Union. The central authorities pointed out that the release of citizenship was not valid because Blinderman's sworn statement at the police headquarters was insufficient, especially as it emerged that he had applied for and obtained Soviet citizenship in 1926. In other words, he was not stateless, but a citizen of a state recognised by the Italian government. The prefect strongly supported Blinderman in this matter and emphasised that he was an 'excellent element in every respect',⁵⁶ claiming that Blinderman's reasons for not producing the official release document were legitimate: the Soviet Union did not grant such documents to people wishing to renounce their citizenship. Furthermore, the applicant produced sworn statements made before a notary public by friends whom he called to testify about the situation in Russia and, several times, about the veracity of his statements. Blinderman frequently used the technique of providing testimonies to compensate for the absence of supporting evidence required by the authorities, both in his naturalisation application and in his subsequent appeal against denaturalisation. Moreover, the witnesses revealed his networks in Italy. The first to be called was Rinaldo Küfferle, another translator and an important figure in the Milanese publishing world, who had turned his attention to Russian literary production.

Incomplete and inconsistent supporting documents weren't the only problem. Department Ia Section IIIa insisted on receiving an explanation as to why Blinderman had again applied for Russian citizenship in 1926. Confronted with this evidently non-linear path, Blinderman explained that he had lost his Russian citizenship 'automatically' because of the Bolshevik Revolution,⁵⁷ as had all citizens who were abroad at the time and did not return immediately. He was referring to the policy of mass denaturalisation that, starting with the decree issued on 15 December 1921 by the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, was extended to all the republics of the Soviet Union, widely affecting emigrants who had not immediately reacted to the 'call' from their country of origin.⁵⁸ However, Blinderman points out that he had never

⁵⁶ Royal Prefecture of Milan to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Department Ia, 5 November 1934, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, envelope 271, folder 19206, Blinderman. This document, as well as those mentioned below, can be found in the naturalisation file that was later included in the racial assessment file of 1939–41.

⁵⁷ Giuseppe Blinderman to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Milan 25 October 1934. Ivi.

⁵⁸ G. Ginsburgs, *The Soviet Union* cit., p. 329. The decree, issued by the highest bodies of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, provided for the revocation of Soviet citizenship for various categories of individuals: those who had lived abroad continuously for a period of

been a ‘refugee’; the loss of citizenship was the result of a kind of automatism. When he subsequently applied for Soviet citizenship, he acted consistently with the international behaviour of the Italian state, his host country, which since 1924 had recognised the Soviet government, proposing to ‘establish [with it] close trade relations’.⁵⁹ Thus, ‘I believed I was doing the right thing by reapplying for Russian citizenship in order to be somehow useful in the literary and cultural exchange, and also in the hope that I would one day be able to recover my lost property.’ Property is mentioned here as a legitimate reason for regaining one’s original citizenship, but in a way that minimises the extent of choice involved in this decision, with emphasis being put on its inevitability. In fact, Blinderman points out an important issue concerning the Soviet Union: ‘[B]y asking for Soviet citizenship, I did not opt for a foreign citizenship or a political party, but I simply asked to regain the citizenship of my country of origin.’ However, he immediately clarifies that by re-establishing contacts, ‘I immediately felt my irreparable detachment from the citizens of present-day Russia, because a long stay in Italy and the Fascist Revolution could not fail to leave deep traces in my spirit and way of thinking’.

Since Russia had become ‘a world now completely foreign to me’, the Russian passport that Blinderman had formally regained was not intended for return — hence further proof that there was no deep-seated desire to return to his homeland. In his letter accompanying the above-mentioned document, the prefect emphasised this aspect and asked for the application to be granted ‘as he had by now nothing in common with the Russian mentality and education’.⁶⁰ This is what led Blinderman to ideologically sever this piece of identity in order to become an Italian citizen for all intents and purposes, which happened less than a year later, in September 1935, thanks to the intervention of the Undersecretary of Justice, Cesare Tumedei. The latter also relied on the fact that Blinderman had, in the meantime, become ‘a relative of His Excellency Mayer’.⁶¹ In fact, in March 1935, Erna Blinderman had married the engineer Gandolfi, Marcella

five years and had not applied for passports or identification documents from the Soviet authorities by 1 June 1922; those who had left Russia after 7 November 1917 without the Soviet authorities’ permission; those who had fought against the Bolsheviks or participated in counter-revolutionary activities; and those who had had the right to opt for Soviet citizenship and had not done so. See also Eric Lohr, *Russian Citizenship. From Empire to Soviet Union*, Cambridge (MA) and London, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 145–151.

⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, the resumption of regular diplomatic relations between the two countries was sanctioned by the Trade and Navigation Treaty between Italy and the USSR, signed in Rome on 7 February 1924 (Royal Decree No. 342 of 14 March 1924), Execution of the Trade and Navigation Treaty and Customs Convention with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (G.U. no. 68 of 20 March 1924).

⁶⁰ Royal Prefecture of Milan to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Department Ia, Milan 5 November 1934, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, envelope 271, folder 19206 (folder 13378, naturalisation).

⁶¹ Cesare Tumedei to His Excellency, Hon. Lawyer Guido Guidi Buffarini, Undersecretary of the Interior, Rome 23 July 1935-A/XIII. Ivi.

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Mayer's son and a nephew of the influential senator Teodoro Mayer, founder of *Il Piccolo* in Trieste and the president of the investment lender, Istituto Mobiliare Italiano (IMI).⁶² Tumedei, for his part, had been vice-president of IMI at Mayer's request, which suggests that he was probably one of the most important people in the network of influences that Bliderman could count on.

There was one last stumbling block, which had initially been avoided but ultimately prevented a positive outcome. As indicated in a summary of the case prepared for the Ministry of the Interior by Department Ia Section IIIa, the preliminary investigation of the Bliderman file had been positively concluded in the summer of 1935. The Department of Public Security had given its consent, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was responsible for activating — through the network of consulates — investigations in the places affected by the candidate's migratory path towards citizenship, had referred to the opinion of the Ministry of the Interior. No information that could be used to argue against naturalisation had come from Paris, Nice, Kiev (where Bliderman had studied), Nancy and Zurich. The only problem was Odessa. The Italian consul in the city was Carlo Barduzzi, a former *federale* in Trento and Trieste, who distinguished himself a few years later for his fervent anti-Semitism and, in particular, for his contribution to the implementation of the initial stages of censorship against writers of Jewish origin within the Anti-Communist Study Centre (April 1937).⁶³ Barduzzi had expressed a negative opinion on accepting the application, not because of information gathered on the case, but because of his more general opposition to the granting 'of Italian citizenship to Russian Jews'.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Bliderman's file went ahead, as the ministry decided to momentarily postpone the specific case, taking the file to the Council of State for examination and opinion, which became only advisory after 1934. As a last resort, the ministry also accepted a declaration by Bliderman in which he acknowledged that, by obtaining citizenship without renouncing his Russian citizenship, he relinquished his right to invoke the intervention of the Kingdom of Italy's diplomatic and consular authorities in his defence on Soviet territory.⁶⁵

⁶² His case is described in an article on Jewish entrepreneurs in early twentieth-century Italy: Ilaria Pavan, "Ebrei" in affari tra realtà e pregiudizio. *Paradigmi storiografici e percorsi di ricerca dall'Unità alle leggi razziali*, "Quaderni storici", 2003, n. 3, pp. 777–821.

⁶³ From May 1937 to early 1938, Barduzzi directed the 'literature section' of the Anti-Communist Study Centre. Although this was a private association, it was financed by the Ministry of the Interior to strengthen the fight against the Comintern. Barduzzi was the author of the first *Bibliografia ebraica e giudaica in lingua italiana*, Rome, Cremonese, 1939. From January 1939 onwards, he worked in the editorial office of *La difesa della razza*. See Giorgio Fabre, *L'elenco. Censura fascista, editoria e autori ebrei*, Turin, Zamorani, 1998.

⁶⁴ Telespresso form from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Private Affairs Service, Office 1, to the Royal Ministry of the Interior, Personnel Office, Rome 6 July 1935, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, envelope 271, folder 19206 (folder 13378, naturalisation). At the time and until June 1936, the ministry was directed ad interim by Mussolini himself.

⁶⁵ The declaration, made before a notary public on 6 September 1935, was sent by the Royal Prefecture of Milan to the Personnel Office, Department Ia, 11 September 1935. Ivi.

However, the issue raised by the consul of Odessa marked a turning point. On hearing the news of Blinderma's naturalisation, Barduzzi again opposed himself — as reported in a telespresso form from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs — to the measures against 'elements of the Israelite confession, especially if they come from Russia, since that government uses them almost exclusively for its subversive propaganda abroad'.⁶⁶ Since 'a large proportion of citizenship applications refer to Jews, especially from Eastern Europe', the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested a formal opinion from the Ministry of the Interior, which forwarded the question to the Department of Public Security. The latter replied on 20 February 1936: 'We hereby inform you that His Excellency the Head of Government, having seen the above letter, has expressed the view that it is not appropriate — in principle — to grant Italian citizenship to members of the Jewish religion who have immigrated to Italy, particularly if they come from Russia'.⁶⁷ It was emphatically underlined that the Head of Government himself (i.e. Mussolini) had expressed his opinion, indicating what should be the future Italian policy, and therefore the practice of the Ministry of the Interior. The final letter of reply to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the latter 'will henceforth adhere, by and large, to the principle of not granting Italian citizenship to members of the Jewish religion, immigrants to Italy, particularly if they come from Russia'.⁶⁸ The Blinderma case therefore marks a turning point, after which the processes of acquiring Italian citizenship became racialised and anti-Semitic.⁶⁹

Between race and citizenship: denaturalisation and contestation (1938–41)

It didn't take long before Blinderma responded to the risk of losing his citizenship, job prospects and social status. His first letter to the Demorazza dates back to 26 February 1939.⁷⁰ This was undoubtedly a premature move.

⁶⁶ Telespresso form from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Private Affairs Department, Office 1, to the Ministry of the Interior, Personnel Office, Department Ia Section 3, date not visible, but registered on 29 January 1936, signed by Under-Secretary of State Fulvio Suvich. Ivi.

⁶⁷ Classified letter from the Ministry of the Interior, Dgps, to the Personnel Office (Department Ia Section III), Rome 20 February 1936. Ivi. The document seems to be signed by Carmine Senise, director of the Dagr of the Dgps.

⁶⁸ Classified letter from the Ministry of the Interior, Department Ia Section III, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome 28 February 1936, Subject: Blinderma Giuseppe and others - naturalisation. Ivi.

⁶⁹ This turning point had already been identified by Klaus Voigt, *Il rifugio precario*, vol. I, p. 41 and Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista*, p. 116. What had not been explored in depth was how the personal case and the conflict that arose over it led to the Massima, which can also be found in ACS, MI, Dgps, Dagr, Massime, C6, envelope 22, folder 4. Further study of the papers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would be necessary.

⁷⁰ Giuseppe Blinderma to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Dgdr, Milan 26 February 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, envelope 271, folder 19206 Dcitt.

Although the revocation decree had formally been issued, it had not yet been registered with the Court of Accounts, as was customary, nor had Blinderman been informed. However, he had undoubtedly taken note of the discriminatory policy towards Jews of foreign nationality announced with the decree of September 1938, and his social network gave him access to relevant information. Hence, he moved well in advance of the inexorable implementation of the bureaucratic mechanism.

In the letter, Blinderman asked the ministry to examine his 'exceptional case' and to 'exempt' him and his wife 'from being considered as belonging to the Jewish race, preserving our Italian citizenship'. His words emphasise the close connection between racial persecution and denaturalisation, a link that is also evident in his defence strategy, which subordinates the request for a racial assessment to the primary objective of preserving citizenship status for himself and his spouse. The tense dialectic he maintains with the institutions, from this moment until at least December 1941, is played out precisely at the intersection between citizenship and race. While Blinderman tends to see the connection between the two dimensions, the Demorazza resists this interpretation, trying to discipline the applicant and urging him to separate the two issues. For the institution, the racial assessment and the challenge to the revocation of citizenship are two separate files, the competence of which lies with two different sections of the administration. But let us take it one step at a time.

The letter reveals Blinderman's argumentative strategy, which essentially hinges on the application for naturalisation and is meant to reaffirm his devotion to the nation and the regime. He thus mentions his military merits, which are closely linked to his arrival in Italy, and refers to his literary activity and recognitions, including an important encouragement prize he received in April 1938 from the Reale Accademia d'Italia, founded by Mussolini and emblematic of his policy of fascistising Italian culture.⁷¹ He also underlines the contextuality between obtaining citizenship and being admitted into the ranks of the National Fascist Party in 1935. But Blinderman adds new elements, which reflect the changed situation in 1938–39. Without giving much explanation or supportive documents, he notes that his mother was Orthodox and that his father — 'of the Jewish race' — 'did not profess the Jewish religion' and left him free to make his own choices. He therefore decided to be baptised with an evangelical rite in 1912, in the Church of the Ascension in Paris. In addition, 'to further strengthen the spiritual ties with our adopted homeland', he and his wife — who had only been married in a civil ceremony — remarried with a Catholic rite in the San Simpliciano church in Milan in March 1938. The letter is accompanied by certificates for both ceremonies.⁷²

⁷¹ Gabriele Turi, *Le Accademie nell'Italia fascista*, "Belfagor", 1999, n. 4, pp. 403–424 and Id., *Sorvegliare e premiare. L'Accademia d'Italia 1926-1944*, Rome, Viella, 2016.

⁷² There is no certificate attached for the first wedding, which seems to have taken place in Odessa.

Blinderman also provides a detail that has become important at this stage: 'I consider it my duty to declare that I do not possess any real estate, nor any business, nor any capital of any kind. I lost all my possessions in the Bolshevik Revolution and live only from my modest work.' What he had called the 'Russian' Revolution in his application for naturalisation here becomes 'Bolshevik', while the loss of his possessions is presented as evidence that Blinderman has no significant material and financial interests in the adopted homeland, and that he lives in an economically discrete and autonomous condition. At this point, avoiding the stereotype of the Jewish elite dedicated to amassing wealth and assets has clearly become a priority.

The hybrid nature of the application is reflected in the authorities' uncertainty in dealing with it. It was the prefect of Milan who first received and registered Blinderman's application, before sending it to the Demorazza in April 1939.⁷³ The prefect wrote 'Foreign Jews' in the subject line, but he then called Blinderman an 'Italian citizen' (his citizenship had not yet been formally revoked). The Demorazza formally opened the case and classified it under ES, treating it as an application for 'permanence in the Kingdom'. This type of file was also managed by the Race Department, which was internal to the Demorazza, and it implied the granting of a derogation from the obligation to leave the Kingdom, which was imposed — as I have mentioned — on those foreign or denaturalised Jews who had been residing in Italy since 1 January 1919. We do not know if there is any connection with the fact that, in his February letter, Blinderman referred to another previous application, which he claims to have made after the 'Provisions for the defence of the Italian race' entered into force. In that application, he had argued that he and his family had the right to remain because he had lived in Italy since 1915. The application is not included in the file, but the form completed by the ministry offices confirms that article 24 was not applied to Blinderman; he was, therefore, not expelled.

However, the form also indicates that he requested to 'keep his citizenship'. The situation is clearly more complicated. Of the various entries on the form, only two have been completed: the first, concerning the family situation, indicates his wife's status as a 'foreign Jew' and the presence of only one daughter; the second indicates that the prefect's opinion is favourable. In fact, without worrying too much about protocol, Prefect Giuseppe Marzano had communicated to the Demorazza his *nulla osta* for preserving citizenship, considering the 'Jewish foreigner' of 'regular moral, civil and political conduct', in Italy since 1915 'without interruption', of 'evangelical religion' and with a daughter married to an 'Aryan'.⁷⁴

⁷³ Royal Prefecture of Milan, Department of Public Security, to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Dgdr, Section III and for information to the Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Dgps, Dagr, 24 April 1939, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, Personal files, envelope 271, folder 19206 Dcitt (the document can be found in folder ES 13774, which is included in folder 19206 Dcitt.).

⁷⁴ Ibidem.

Months passed with no reply from the Demorazza. Finally, in October 1939, the Race Department replied to the prefect of Milan's letter of several months earlier.⁷⁵ The subject of the communication was 'Blinderman Giuseppe racial assessment', and it requested that, 'in relation to the petition tending to obtain the declaration of non-belonging to the Jewish race', Blinderman be urged to produce the birth and baptism certificates of his mother and maternal ancestors, 'duly legalised'. There was no mention of the citizenship issue. For the writing authorities, the procedure had become a racial assessment, and more appropriate documents were needed.

What had happened in the meantime? As we will see, in June 1939, Department Ia Section IIIa of the Ministry of the Interior informed the prefecture of Milan of the revocation of Blinderman's naturalisation. In the file on the granting of citizenship, we find the following phrase behind the title page: 'Sent extract to the Prefect re[revocation] RD 15.12.38, 9.6.39 XVII.' Since Blinderman was no longer an Italian citizen, his request to 'keep' his citizenship had become an application against its revocation. The Demorazza's ES file contains several annotations and erasures on the first page, which may help to understand what had happened. It is likely that, as a result of the type of application formulated by Blinderman, the file — along with the documents of the original naturalisation file, re-examined for the occasion — passed from the Race Department to the Citizenship Department, given that the latter had acquired competence in citizenship matters from the end of August 1939.⁷⁶ Another transfer took place in the autumn of 1939, as can be deduced from both the erasures and a small sheet inside the file that reads 'passed to the Race D.Citt. 23.X.39'. Indeed, at the end of October, the entire dossier relating to Blinderman's citizenship was sent back to the Race Department and became a racial assessment file, bearing the initials 'Dcitt'. Another, undated draft reports on the communication between the two departments: 'This office is informed that in the appeal lodged by the Jew Blindermann [sic] Giuseppe against the declaration of revocation of his Italian citizenship, the person concerned also asks to be considered as not belonging to the Jewish race.' Blinderman's undisciplined strategy had caused confusion, and now everything had to be put back in order. From that point on, everything revolved around race.

Blinderman reacted quickly. In December, he sent a letter to the Demorazza in which he stressed the importance of the link between the declaration of non-racial affiliation and the reacquisition of his citizenship.⁷⁷ Unable to enclose his

⁷⁵ Dgdr, Race I, to HE the Prefect of Milan, Rome 31 October 1939. Ivi.

⁷⁶ As the Department Ia Section IIIa archival collection cannot yet be consulted, it is difficult to understand the details of the handover phase between the two departments.

⁷⁷ Giuseppe Blinderman, aka Ossip Felyne, to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Milan 30 December 1939. Ivi.

mother's baptism certificate, he called four members of his Roman network to testify, 'all of them Russian or of Russian Aryan origin'. They included Nicola Alexeieff, a 'translator' known for his involvement in the Russian art theatre La Falena, which in the 1920s was based in the tea room and restaurant La Taverna Russa in Rome, and Leonardo Kociemski, a writer, literary critic and translator from Polish and Russian. They confirmed that his mother 'came from an Aryan Orthodox Christian family', and they even added that Paolina Halperine and the lawyer Abramo Blinderma had divorced owing to 'religious disagreements, as the husband was not of the Aryan race' and the mother had, instead, given her son 'the principles of the Christian religion'.⁷⁸ The 'Aryan race' thus becomes a retroactive element, to be traced back through family history.

A few months later, in February 1940, the authorities turned their attention to another matter: the fact that Blinderma and his family had been registered with the Jewish community in Milan in the list of 1938. The Demorazza wrote to the local authorities to request verification of this information and confirmation of whether Blinderma's daughter had been baptised. In other words, their Catholic faith had to be proven. Blinderma reported to the prefecture that he had formally deregistered from the community on 20 September 1938, about two weeks after the decree revoking the naturalisations of foreign Jews was issued. More silence followed.

However, 'a serious event' occurred in the summer of 1940, after Italy entered the war and the climate of xenophobia and hostility towards Jews intensified, particularly towards those recognised as foreign nationals.⁷⁹ Blinderma and his wife were arrested and detained for eight days because they had been mistaken — according to the writer's interpretation — for 'German Jews'. From 15 June onwards, there had been an order to round up all 'foreign Jews belonging to states with racial policies', as they were considered 'undesirable elements, imbued with hatred towards totalitarian regimes'.⁸⁰ Stateless people were also included in this category.

Blinderma described what happened immediately after his release on 28 June 1940, in a heartfelt appeal to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Galeazzo Ciano.⁸¹ Blinderma addressed the 'artist' Ciano, the man who had signed

⁷⁸ Elena Ritard Ricord, Sofia Alexeieff, Nicola Alexeieff, Leonardo Kociemski, Sworn statement before Notary Public Enrico Masi, Rome 26 December 1939. Ivi.

⁷⁹ Giuseppe Blinderma, aka Ossip Felyne, to HE Count Galeazzo Ciano di Cortellazzo, Forte dei Marmi, 28 June 1940. Ivi.

⁸⁰ Telegram from the Head of Police to the Prefects of the Kingdom and the Police Commissioner of Rome, 15 June 1940, in ACS, Massime M4, Mobilitazione civile, envelope 99.

⁸¹ The release of the couple could be explained as a consequence of the subsequent telegram from the Ministry of the Interior, dated 22 June 1940, which specified that the provisions of the circular of 15 June were not applicable to Jews authorised to reside in the peninsula because they had been living in the Kingdom before 1 January 1919, 'even if they have become stateless'. In ACS, MI, Dgps, Dagr, A 16, envelope 8.

some of the best reviews of his works *Il Bivio* (The crossroads), *Per la porta* (Through the door) and *La tramontana* (The north wind). Blinderman uses a decidedly more emotional tone than in his letters to the Demorazza.⁸² He mentions the difficult health conditions of himself and his wife, both aged 57, and explicitly mentions ‘the physical and moral suffering’ inflicted on them during the days of captivity. He describes the full sequence of events that led to him and his wife losing their citizenship and becoming stateless, despite the great recognition he had earned. He ends his letter with the following ‘SOS’ message:

Your authoritative interest, which I hope you will grant me; combined with my above-mentioned merits, could have my application to be recognised as an Aryan and to regain Italian citizenship resolved as soon as possible and favourably. I could thus resume my occupations and be preserved, together with my wife, from the potential danger of being arrested again as foreign Jews. If such misfortune were to repeat itself, my wife and I would not resist.

Once again, citizenship is a crucial factor. Ciano’s order to forward his plea to the Demorazza is ineffectual, meaning that Blinderman has to start from scratch. In January 1941, he submits a new appeal. This time, he writes the following on the folder that accompanied the packet of documents: ‘Petition for racial assessment by Engineer Giuseppe Blinderman.’ In the accompanying letter, he refers to the previous petition of February 1939:

At the time, the undersigned was insufficiently informed of the criteria for the application of the law and believed that he was mainly highlighting his merits and proof of his sincere and profound attachment to the new, Italian Homeland. However, having become more familiar with the provisions of the law and the practice of this Honourable General Directorate, especially in relation to their application to persons of foreign nationality, the undersigned now deems it appropriate — for the purposes of the invoked application of article 8, last paragraph, and article 26 of Royal Decree No. 1728 of 17 November 1938-XVII — to send the following additional documents.⁸³

Blinderman thus refined his self-defence strategy by presenting himself and his wife as children of racially mixed marriages who had severed all ties with the Jewish religion and community. According to article 8 of the Royal Decree of 17 November 1938, children of Italian parents, at least one of whom was Jewish, could be declared ‘not belonging to the Jewish race’ if they had not shown any affiliation with the Jewish religion or community by October 1938.

⁸² I have written elsewhere on the overlap between personal pleas and formal petitions: Enrica Asquer, *Entre déférence et revendications des droits. Suppliques et demandes de dérogation à la législation antisémite dans l’Italie fasciste et la France de Vichy*, in Enrica Asquer, Lucia Ceci (eds.), *Scrivere alle autorità. Suppliche, petizioni, appelli, richieste di deroga in età contemporanea*, Rome, Viella, Rome, pp. 71–112.

⁸³ Giuseppe Blinderman, aka Ossip Felyne, to HE the Minister of the Interior, Rome (Dgdr), Milan 14 January 1941, in ACS, Dgdr, Dr, envelope 271, folder 19206 Dcitt.

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However, Blinderman's and his wife's parents were foreigners, and this formed an obstacle, as 'mixed' people with even only one foreign parent were considered Jews. For this reason, Blinderman stresses the fact that both his parents have the *same* foreign nationality (Russian) and suggests that his case be examined in the same way as cases involving children born to people of a different race but who were both Italian (i.e. with a homogeneous nationality). In his appeal of January 1941, the applicant again calls on witnesses to confirm the Russian nationality and citizenship of both his parents. The same strategy is adopted by Fanny, who, perhaps as a last resort, sends her own dossier to the Demorazza.⁸⁴

This strategy was not pulled out of thin air. It was a solution suggested by other cases, of which Blinderman was clearly aware, as the reference to the Demorazza's 'practice' seems to suggest. In fact, other files indicate that, after an initial phase of strict application of the law, in some cases of interest, the Demorazza — perhaps subject to external pressure — had begun to interpret the situation of children of parents of a different race but equal nationality, albeit foreign, in a similar way to the children of mixed Italian couples. Take the case of Manfredo Adler, resident in Tripoli and born in Milan in 1919 to Leonardo and Adele Poppy. In December 1938, Manfredo had initially been declared a member of the Jewish race, as the son of parents of foreign nationality, one of whom — his father, Leonardo Adler — was of Jewish origins, although a fervent Catholic.⁸⁵ Following the introduction of the racial laws, Leonardo became stateless, despite having been an Italian citizen since 1937. After a long dispute and as a result of multiple external pressures,⁸⁶ Manfredo had been recognised as not belonging to the Jewish race in February 1940. He was defined 'mixed non-Jewish', because he was 'born of parents who were both foreigners of equal nationality, one of whom was Jewish, [and] baptised

⁸⁴ Rosenberg Fanny Felia in Blinderman, *Istanza per accertamento razziale*, Milan 14 December 1941 (addressed to Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Dgdr), in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, envelope 271, folder 27742, included in folder 19206 Dcitt, Blinderman Giuseppe.

⁸⁵ ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, Personla files, envelope 48, folder 3910 Dcitt., Adler Manfredo di Leonardo, Adler dott. Ing. Leonardo fu Roberto, Poppy Adele fu Edmondo, Adler Silvia di Leonardo e di Poppy Adele, Adler Francesco, Tripoli.

⁸⁶ In particular, a dispute arose between the Ministry of War and the Libyan government (Political Affairs Department) over Manfredo's application to train as an army officer. Despite the Ministry's objections, the Libyan government strongly supported the possibility of declaring Manfredo as not belonging to the Jewish race. For example, in a letter to the Conscription Office dated 27 August 1939, the Director of Political Affairs Campani stated that Adler, 'being the son of parents of a different race, should not be considered a member of the Jewish race if, on 1 October 1938, he professed a religion other than the Jewish one', freely interpreting article 8, last paragraph, of the Royal Decree of 17 November 1938. Strong pressure also came from the Catholic Church, especially from the Apostolic Vicariate of Tripolitania, which was headed by Monsignor Vittorino Facchinetti. The latter was asked to certify Manfredo's 'excellent religious life' and, even more so, that of his father Leonardo, president of the diocesan men's council of the local section of Azione Cattolica since March 1938.

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at birth'.⁸⁷ Hence, in exceptional cases, the parents' foreign nationality did not worsen the racial position of 'mixed' people, provided that the parents had the same nationality.

The Blindermans tried this course of action. Over the following months, the ball kept bouncing back and forth between them and the authorities, who repeatedly requested further documentation. In March 1941, Giuseppe and Fanny jointly submitted a 'supplementary appeal', for which they again had to mobilise the Orthodox Church in Rome and a network of witnesses to certify that Giuseppe's mother and Fanny's father, Giacomo Rosenberg, had belonged to the Orthodox religion since birth. Already in the autumn of 1940, Fanny had even obtained recognition of her father's 'Aryan race' thanks to the ruling of a court in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, to which she had applied, calling her mother — who lived there — to testify. Since the Protectorate was under the Third Reich's control, Italy recognised its racial classifications.⁸⁸ Moreover, when asked to explain the contradiction between the request for a declaration of non-belonging to the Jewish race and the previous declarations made to the municipal authorities for the August 1938 census and in November of that year, the couple cited their 'ignorance' at the time regarding 'the actual scope' of the laws. In addition, they argued that they were unable to 'collect the evidentiary documentation of their racial situation', fearing the 'serious penalties imposed by law' on those who had made false declarations.⁸⁹

In November 1941,⁹⁰ Blinderman finally sent the 'decisive proof' of his racial status: the 'authentic' certificate of his mother's baptism. He ended the letter by expressing the hope that the longed-awaited outcome would be positive for all: '[T]hrough the production of these [...] documents, the undersigned hopes that by now his position will be in every respect definitively and certainly clarified; and that, placed in connection with the evidentiary investigations concerning his wife and only daughter, my entire family may finally obtain the sought-after recognition.' The dossier had gradually become a family affair.

The following 9 December, Blinderman allegedly sent a further — and perhaps final — packet of documents to the Demorazza. It contained 14 attachments 'reflecting himself, his wife, his daughter and the latter's family'. These were essentially birth and baptism records relating to Erna's family: her three

⁸⁷ Ivi. This is the opinion of the advisory commission provided for in article 26 of the Royal Decree of 17 November 1938, expressed during a meeting on 25 February 1940.

⁸⁸ Ruling of the Iglau District Court, Section II, 29 November 1940. The document, along with its sworn translation, is attached to Fanny's 'Racial assessment application', 14 January 1941, in ACS, MI, Dgdr, Dr, envelope 271, folder 27742 Dcitt, included in folder 19206.

⁸⁹ Giuseppe Blinderman (aka Ossip Felyne), and Fanny Felia Rosenberg wife of Blinderman (aka Lia Neanova), to HE the Minister of the Interior, Milan 25 March 1941.

⁹⁰ Engineer Giuseppe Blinderman (aka Ossip Felyne) to the Ministry of the Interior, Dgdr, Milan 14 November 1941.

children, Franco, Giorgio and Silvana, and her husband, the engineer Gandolfi. Under the scrutiny of the authorities, even Gandolfi had at some point been labelled as having a mixed background.⁹¹ This was the last documented act in Giuseppe Blinderma's racial assessment file, which, like so many others handled by Demorazza, remained unanswered.

The seven petitions (and their attachments) sent to the authorities over a period of almost three years reflect Blinderma's progressive, albeit never complete, adaptation to the authorities' invitation that he make his goal of retaining and regaining his lost citizenship less explicit and focus instead on his racial identity. The effects can be seen in the different self-representations and types of documents that Blinderma used to support his case. Initially emphasising his loyalty to the chosen homeland, in his naturalisation application of a few years earlier, he moved to an increasingly competent demonstration of his racial identity. Unlike the naturalisation application, the petitions reveal that religion — his own and that of his ancestors and offspring (including his grandchildren) — is a fundamental element of the process, particularly with regard to profession or conversion to Christianity. As the building block of the nation, or a 'community of descent' in Alberto Banti's words,⁹² the family also takes on new significance, but always with an underlying ambivalence between the blood relations and choice. Decisive proof comes in the form of baptism certificates of ancestors and descendants (as confirmation of the parents' choices), as well as certificates of abandonment of any form of connection with the Jewish community.

Conclusion

Constructing and reconstructing one's identity, adding and destroying pieces of it, accentuating or diminishing heritages and ties: this is the continuous operation that Giuseppe Blinderma engages in throughout his seven-year relationship with the Ministry of the Interior, as documented in his racial assessment dossier, into which his naturalisation file has converged. This continuous process of requalification, as well as the commitment, the physical effort and the stress that goes with it, brings together naturalisation, the revocation of citizenship and the contestation of denaturalisation in a single affair. What is at stake remains the same: establishing and maintaining a vital link with the national community that grants individuals their rights. For those entering it from the outside, the acquisition of citizenship is not permanent but remains fragile, exposed to the fluctuations of historical contingency. This unique

⁹¹ Giuseppe Blinderma (aka Ossip Felyne) to the Hon. Ministry of the Interior, Dgdr, Milan 9 December 1941.

⁹² A. Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento*, cit.

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thread reveals the discontinuities and changes in pace that result from the shift in admission criteria and the dual, relational definition of citizen and foreigner. The incident I have examined takes place entirely in the 1930s, shedding light on the radicalisation and further twist that Italian citizenship undergoes in this decade. Blinderman's naturalisation file from 1934 to 1936 marks the end of a phase. Although citizenship was granted to foreigners by royal decree, as happened during the Liberal period, it was indeed a discretionary procedure in which the authorities had considerable freedom of action. However, certain aspects, such as religion and race — which became a real legal category — were not considered, or at least not as much as happened later. On the other hand, the relationship with one's original nationality had to be categorically severed beforehand, and fluidity was not permitted. Political allegiance was already an important factor.

The last act of Blinderman's naturalisation practice demonstrates that, in the second half of the 1930s, citizenship rights could no longer be obtained if the applicant was of both foreign nationality and Jewish race. As a result of the 'Provisions for the defence of the Italian race', by 1938, Blinderman found himself with a rigid identity and a close connection with Jewishness. We do not know, and may never know, what his real relationship with this identity was.

We do perhaps have one clue. Blinderman started writing novels and prose stories even before he came to Italy. He began to make headlines around 1910, when he published a short story entitled *Prokljatie* (Curse) in a Russian literary magazine.⁹³ Four years later, a book with the same title came out,⁹⁴ but it was seized and the author and publisher were both prosecuted. It is the story of a pogrom, which hits a city struck by riots and demonstrations, taking a Jewish couple and their two children by surprise. One of the siblings is a demonstrator who finds himself caught up in a brawl when the pogrom starts. The other is a girl who barricades herself in her house with her parents and fiancé. The son never returns, while the daughter is raped by three men who break into the house. The pain and humiliation push the couple to leave the country, migrating to Switzerland, where the girl falls in love with a young Russian Jew whom she marries after revealing the violence she had suffered. However, like a curse, the latter does not stop haunting her, and she dies giving birth to the child conceived through the rape.

Blinderman never again spoke of pogroms in his writings. Throughout his life, he repeatedly changed residence and profession, and as he navigated different worlds, he sought to adapt to various contexts, perhaps choosing

⁹³ *Prokljatie*, in "Novyj žurnal dlja vsech", 1910, n. 23, pp. 19–44. See Laura Pellegrini's MA thesis, *Ossip Felyne in Italia. Analisi della prosa e del teatro di Osip Abramovič Blinderman nella prima metà del Novecento italiano*, University of Pisa, 2016–17, pp. 57–62.

⁹⁴ Later translated into Italian. Ossip Felyne, *Maledizione, novelle*, P. Maglione & C. Strini, Rome, 1923.

assimilation in the religious sphere. In terms of nationality, he wanted to build a bridge between cultures through language and writing, focusing on a literary practice marked by intimist and meditative interconnections, which seemed to combine the motifs of great Russian literature with European stylistic suggestions. Such poetics probably allowed him to avoid significant censorship in Italy, at least until the regime's most overtly anti-Semitic turn. In fact, after the recognition and prizes, he not only lost his citizenship, but his name appeared on the list of 'authors whose works are not welcome in Italy', officially drawn up in 1942.⁹⁵ Hence, despite all his efforts, the anti-Semitic curse returned to haunt Blinderman in a horrible twist of fate. He would have to fight it once more.

Translated by Andrea Hajek

⁹⁵ The document is reproduced in G. Fabre, *L'elenco*, cit., p. 474.
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