



Remembering The Jews of Rhodes

Natasha Lardera (February 03, 2014)



The Longest Journey: the deportation of the Jews of Rhodes, by filmmaker Ruggero Gabbai and based on research conducted by Liliana Picciotto and Marcello Pezzetti, is a documentary that weaves together testimonies of three Jews who have survived Auschwitz - Stella Levi, Sami Modiano and Albert Israel. The film was presented at Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimo in collaboration with the Primo Levi Center as part of the program dedicated to the International Holocaust Remembrance Day

On July 23, 1944, the Nazis deported almost the entire Jewish population of the island of Rhodes, while the Italian authorities, who had been in charge of the island since 1912 to the Armistice of September 8, 1943, stood by.

This historical fact is the central theme of the deportation of the Jews of Rhodes, by filmmaker [Ruggero Gabbai](#) [2], which was presented at [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimo'](#) [3] as part of the program dedicated to the [International Holocaust Remembrance Day](#) [4].

Presented in collaboration with the [Primo Levi Center](#) [5] and based on research conducted by [Liliana Picciotto](#) [6] and [Marcello Pezzetti](#) [7], [The Longest Journey](#) [8] weaves together testimonies of three Jews who have survived Auschwitz - Stella Levi, Sami Modiano and Albert Israel.



"70 years ago the Jewish community of Rhodes came to an end and so did my life," Stella Levi told the crowd after the screening of the film, "What the documentary cannot tell is what I lost: my father's home, my roots... and since then I haven't found it. I feel estranged everywhere I go or I feel as a guest. What is most horrible is that I never found out the reason why. Why, right at the end of the war they came to pick up 1800 people, including the grandmother of a friend of mine who was 104 years old, for what? And 23 days for what? What kind of furious hatred could bring what we used to call civilized people, the Germans, who gave Western civilization so many great artists, to act that way. Why? Does any one of you have an answer?"

Stella Levi was 19 when she was deported. She had no idea what was going on and, just like the others, she did not do anything to prevent that from happening. "We did not know we were going to die."

"We were very isolated," she continued to explain, "The Italian and German newspapers were always giving us the news that the AXIS FORCES were winning the war. When we would listen to the BBC broadcasts we did hear that there were persecutions but all that sounded so far away - in Germany, in Poland, we never thought they would come to Rhodes. And indeed for almost 8 months the Germans did not touch us. They were in Rhodes from October 1943, when they took over, and they did not give us the impression that they would take us away or anything of that sort."

The Germans arrived a list of names prepared by the Italians who had had a census, "they would have had no way to identify the Jews."

Natalia Indrimi of Centro Primo Levi added that "This is a story that still needs a lot of research. The archives of the Italian police were thought to be lost but were recently found in the archives of the Greek police. The German commander who was responsible for the deportation in the whole of Greece was tried, however they really do not know what happened in Rhodes. The SS arrived after months that the Germans had taken military control of the island in fact there were very limited troops. The civilian administration remained in the hands of the Italians until the day of the deportation and the exact story of what happened in Rhodes is still an open field of study."

"All the other ethnic groups just stood by and watched," Stella Levi added, "what hurts me the most is that we were not under apparent threat but our world was destroyed and nobody did anything. The Greeks, for example, were a little more anti-semitic and they were against us because they wanted the island to themselves plus they knew the Jews were more pro-Italian than pro-Greeks. No private helped the Jews, only the Turkish Consul helped the Turkish citizens, but we were left to our destiny."

When the documentary was being shot curious passers by would ask what the topic was, and when told, many, especially those of an older generation that could possibly have lived through that historical moment, would just walk away in shame.

In the documentary Stella Levi tells the camera that she felt most betrayed by the Italians who did nothing to help out yet she defines herself an Italian. "Of course certain core feelings that I have are Jewish but everything that defined me comes from Italian culture... its beautiful literature, the music, the poetry... they gave me my sensitivity to what's beauty, to what is appreciation of good things, to elegance. This is what I am."

Stella, one of the 150 survivors, did not move back to Rhodes but moved to the US in 1947, today she receives a pension from Germany and one from Italy, but "it doesn't mean anything, doesn't fix anything. How can you repair a broken heart?"

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Links

- [1] <http://test.casaitaliananyu.org/files/thelongestmain1391458180jpg>
- [2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruggero_Gabbai
- [3] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/>
- [4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Holocaust_Remembrance_Day
- [5] <http://www.primolevicenter.org/Home.html>
- [6] <http://www.lilianapicciotto.it/>
- [7] http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcello_Pezzetti
- [8] <http://www.museodellashoah.it/2013/03/the-longest-journey-the-last-days-of-the-jewish-community-of-rhodes/>