



ENGLISH

A FAMILY IN EXILE THE TRENTIN FAMILY AND EUROPEAN ANTI-FASCISM

This exhibition is promoted by the *Centro documentazione e ricerca Trentin*, together with *Iveser* and the *Associazione rEsistenze*, and showcases the value of the rich photographic collection that is part of the **Archivio di Franca Trentin**, donated by Franca Trentin to the *Associazione rEsistenze*, which is held at the *Casa della memoria e della storia di Venezia*, at Villa Hériot, Giudecca (Venice).

The particular aim of the exhibition is to examine the Trentin family's period of exile in France during the years of the fascist dictatorship (1926–43).

In 1926, Silvio Trentin – Franca's father – was a professor of public law at the University of Ca' Foscari in Venice. He was one of the very first Italian academics to oppose the growing fascist control of university life. Early in that year, Silvio decided to abandon not only his academic career, but also his country – the very country for which he had valiantly fought during the First World War – where now freedom was undermined.

Thus, the Trentin family entered early into the anti-fascist network abroad, among the exiles from various countries who chose France as their sanctuary. No longer only Italian but not yet fully French, the Trentins were developing the characteristics of a 'European family'.

The exile lasted 17 years, until the fall of Mussolini in 1943. As well as having to cope with the harshness of daily life as *émigrés*, the Trentins during all those years managed to become part of an exceptional network of relationships with the leading Italian anti-fascists in exile, with the cultural and political French world, as well as – in the second half of the 1930s – with the international volunteers who reached Spain to fight against Franco. That was a battle for freedom and democracy on a European dimension. Silvio Trentin's three children grew up in that climate and were deeply affected by it, and as adults after the Second World War they carried on the same struggle by other means.

Unfortunately, their father would not see the fall of Nazi-fascism against which he had dedicated much of his life. After participating in the French Resistance against the German occupation of his adopted country, Silvio Trentin at last was able to return to his native Veneto in September 1943, and died there in March 1944, but not before contributing to the establishment of a partisans' movement in that region. He suffered from a heart condition aggravated by his clandestine life and a brief period of incarceration for his anti-fascist activities. His two sons and daughter continued the partisan war.

1. A multifarious personality

Within the Trentin family there was something special: anti-fascism, freedom and critical (often dissenting) thought became for them a life-long commitment. It was a commitment which exacted a very high price: from the loss of Silvio's social standing to exile, his incarceration and his untimely death. Here we have a father, a mother and three children who contributed to the struggle for democracy in Italy and in Europe.

Silvio Trentin was born in San Donà di Piave (in the province of Venice) into a landowning family; he graduated brilliantly in law from the University of Pisa and became a professor of administrative law at the young age of 25. He volunteered in the Great War, distinguishing himself in aerial reconnaissance.

On 1 April 1916, Silvio married Giuseppina Nardari, known as Beppa, the daughter of the owner and director of the prestigious Nardari College in Treviso. In July 1917, Giorgio, their first child, was born.

With the return to civil life at the end of the war, a period of very intense public activity began for Silvio Trentin, as he became a leading figure in the redemption and reconstruction of the post-war eastern Veneto; the election as a Member of Parliament in 1919 was his highest political achievement. The whole family then moved to Venice where, at the end of that same year, Franca was born.

2. The decision to go into exile

At the advent of fascism, Silvio Trentin was fully integrated into the ruling class of Venice: he was a successful lawyer and jurist, a professor of public law at Ca' Foscari and a war hero; as an M.P. from 1919 to 1921 he represented a small political movement – Social Democracy – which was not too far from the social and ideological roots of fascism. But, from at least 1921, Silvio Trentin distanced himself from Mussolini and, after the coming to power of fascism in 1922, he openly denounced the anti-democratic nature of the new government and, thereby, made himself therefore the target of threats and retaliation.

When, at the end of 1925, new legislation required all state officials (including academics) to observe the fascist ideology, Silvio Trentin was one of the very few university professors who decided to leave their post – and to leave Italy.

In less than a month, he arranged the departure of his whole family for southern France. At the village of Pavie, about 45 miles west of Toulouse, Silvio purchased a farm, hoping for a short exile – which instead was to last more than 17 years.

3. 'The professor among the cows'

In France, Silvio Trentin rapidly built up a remarkable network of relations, both with other families of Italian exiles and with French intellectuals and politicians. He was immediately active in the League of the Rights of Man and in the Anti-fascist Grouping. In 1929, he joined the movement of *Giustizia e Libertà*, in which he subsequently became a leading representative, very close to Carlo Rosselli – the founder of the movement.

Throughout his exile, Silvio Trentin led a double life: the conditions of a refugee and the necessity to provide for a family forced him into occupations – as an agronomist, a workman, a librarian – very different from his previous public career, as well as from his professional and academic training. Yet, in his 'spare time', the ex-professor somehow managed to keep on with his tireless activity of study and political writing for the purpose, on the one hand, of continuing with his scientific thought and, on the other, of engaging in the political struggle, which was much appreciated within intellectual circles. At the end of 1926, Bruno Vittorio Libero – the 'child of the exile', the youngest child of Silvio and Beppa – was born in Pavie. Meanwhile, the farm set up by Silvio was about to collapse and the Trentins fell into the precarious situation typical of exiles and emigrants, and so the situation they faced as anti-fascist refugees was not unlike that faced by the large number of Italian economic migrants who arrived in those years to work in the under-populated regions of southern France.

In 1928, Silvio and his family moved to the nearby small town of Auch, the capital of Gascony, where the former landowner, lawyer, academic and M.P. of the Kingdom of Italy earned his living as an ordinary workman in a print-works, a 'forced proletarianisation' which led him more and more to the left: from a liberal-democratic stance to a socialist and revolutionary one.

4. The three little *macaroni*

'My parents took us into exile: my brother Giorgio (aged eight) and I (age five), and straight away we were called "*petits macaronis*".'

Giorgio, the eldest (1917), who had grown up in Venice until he had to leave, suffered more than the others from being uprooted and maintained a certain patriotic spirit. Franca was a model student who felt ashamed to be Italian and wanted to be called by the diminutive name *Francette* (i.e. ‘Little France’). Bruno, who was born in exile, regarded himself French in every respect.

In 1934, Silvio’s intransigent anti-fascism induced him to resign from the print-works in Auch and the Trentins moved to Toulouse where, with the financial support of relatives and friends, Silvio purchased the *Librairie du Languedoc*. This became a crucial place in the history of the family and in the children’s growing up: in the small shop a wooden spiral staircase went down to a basement, which became a secret and ‘conspiratorial’ location, a safe haven for clandestine foreign agents and anti-fascists.

5. ‘A family full of gaiety and rigour’

‘My father was a bookseller from 7.30 a.m. to 6 p.m.; at 6 p.m. he would close the shop and hide out in the basement to write and work until midnight, when he would come home.’ This is the memory Bruno had of his father’s life in Toulouse. But he also added that ‘we were not at all a sombre family; on the contrary, we were a family full of gaiety and at the same time with elements of ... rigour’. A ‘bourgeois’ rigour, a somewhat traditionalist attitude with an aristocratic trait – even when the economic conditions became harsh – which impressed the visitors. They appeared the opposite of the stereotypical Italian family of immigrants. But, then, Silvio was well-known and esteemed in the ‘good’ French society, while his family continued their association with the best *salons* of Toulouse – despite patched-up clothes and chilblained hands, as Franca loved to say.

At the heart of this family’s life was the very strong and unique bond between Silvio and Beppa. Throughout their lives, when they were not together, they would write to each other virtually every day. In public Silvio was the charismatic and intransigent man, but at home Beppa was the powerful one – the mainstay of the family.

Meanwhile, the bookshop became one of the most important centres of anti-fascism in southern France: Italian exiles such as Giorgio Amendola, Carlo Rosselli and Pietro Nenni, as well as French intellectuals such as André Malraux and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, called on the bookshop or visited the family. The former prime minister, Francesco Saverio Nitti, and Emilio Lussu were regular guests of the Trentins. When civil war broke out in nearby Spain, the presence in Toulouse of this family became strategically more important, and the bookshop was transformed into a veritable crossroads for intelligence across the Pyrenees. Silvio himself went to Barcelona several times during the Spanish civil war.

6. United to resist

The Spanish civil war also marked a turning point within the Trentin family: their relatively quiet life was disrupted by the transit of the anti-Francoist international volunteers. Giorgio, Franca and, above all, the still very young Bruno, suddenly switched their interest from the protagonists of adventure stories to those real heroes in the flesh, those rebels fighting for freedom. When, after Franco’s victory, the desolate surviving volunteers had to retreat and, together with many Spanish republican refugees, were interned by the French authorities in special camps, the whole Trentin family set about offering assistance. From among the Spanish refugees, Franca met her future husband, Horace Torrubia. The anti-fascism of the Trentins thus acquired an increasingly European dimension, while the rebellious spirit that Bruno had shown since his childhood now gravitated towards political aims and models.

In 1939, when war with Nazi Germany broke out, at 54 years of age Silvio, together with his son Giorgio (now 22), applied to enlist as volunteers in the French army; an application they made again a year later, when Italy also attacked France – which by then had been brought to her knees. There was obviously a sense of profound indignation for the ‘stab in the back’ their native country meted out to the country which had given them hospitality. But their applications were rejected and Silvio could only devote himself, together with his sons and daughter, to join forces with the undercover struggle against the Germans who had quickly occupied France.

In 1941, Silvio Trentin was among the founders of the movement *Libérer et Fédérer*, becoming a point of reference for the French Resistance fighters themselves. He also collaborated with the French and British secret services. As a confirmed supporter of a united front against the ‘anti-democracy’ which was threatening the whole of Europe, Silvio contributed to the organisation at Toulouse, in 1941, of a meeting among the main Italian anti-fascist parties in exile – which turned out to be a fundamental initial step towards the future political unity of Italian Resistance.

A little later, young Bruno established an anarchist group with some of his grammar-school mates – and was arrested after writing anti-German slogans on the walls of Toulouse. His sixteenth birthday was spent in jail.

7. In Italy, for Italy

When Mussolini was deposed in July 1943 – albeit to resume some sort of power later that year – Silvio Trentin thought that at last the time had arrived to return to Italy. When Badoglio’s government ‘opened’ the frontiers, Silvio, Beppa, Giorgio and Bruno could legally cross the border at Ventimiglia. Franca (the only member of the family who had acquired French nationality) remained in Toulouse.

In Treviso and San Donà Silvio received a triumphal welcome from his rejoicing fellow citizens, but only after a few days the climate changed. Following Italy’s surrender on 8 September, northern Italy was occupied by the Germans and Silvio was forced once again to go underground. He then set to work and organise the first Resistance movement in Veneto, together with Concetto Marchesi, Egidio Meneghetti (two leading intellectuals) and the anti-fascist group based at Padua University. Giorgio and Bruno were at their father’s side, but then on 19 November Silvio and Bruno were arrested by the fascists in Padua. Silvio’s heart condition, which had grown worse during the difficult years of exile, now became very serious, so he was transferred to a hospital, first in Treviso and then at Monastier, where he died on 12 March 1944.

During the last months of his life, from his hospital bed, Silvio Trentin managed to keep in touch with the Resistance fighters and even to write the draft of a federalist constitution for post-war Italy, taking as the model the one he had drawn up for France the year before. Silvio’s constant endeavour to combine social justice and individual freedom inevitably had a transnational sweep, and the ambitious aim of a European federation.

After their father’s death, Giorgio and Bruno kept up in his name their commitment to the Resistance struggle: Giorgio joined the partisan groups operating in the low Piave region, while Bruno teamed up with those located around Treviso – eventually to assume enormous risks and responsibilities (at eighteen years old) as one of the leaders of the urban-based partisans in Milan. There he had a major role in the liberation of the city.

Meanwhile, Franca was engaged in the anti-German Resistance in south-western France, together with her husband, Horace. She came to know of her father’s death only after several days, through the British radio broadcasting, and had to wait until the end of the war before embracing again the rest of her family. Franca continued to live in France until 1966 and became the embodiment of her father’s memory there. One of the boulevards in Toulouse is named after Silvio Trentin, and in a memorial stone on the front of his old bookshop he is remembered as the ‘initiateur de la lutte antifasciste et du mouvement clandestin de libération de l’Europe’.

When, in the autumn of 1949, Beppa and Giorgio returned to live in Venice after twenty-three years, they had two verses by Louis Aragon inscribed on the chimney of their house at San Giacomo dell’Orto: ‘Et s’il était à refaire / je referais ce chemin’ (And if it were necessary to do it again / I would do the journey again).