

Emma Coen Pirani

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Her name was passed on to the Emergency Committee for the Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars by Paolo Contini, a jurist from Ferrara who had emigrated to New York. In the list that he gave to Miss Drury's office in March 1939, there were only a few names: his brother Roberto; the Calabresi sisters, who were cousins of his from Ferrara; Franco Modigliani; and Emma, whom Paolo was related to on his mother's side of the family. The office opened a personal file for each of these people, even for Emma Coen Pirani. 29 years old, Emma had been fired from the university she worked for as a librarian. She was the only person in that list who did not emigrate, even though she would have liked to.

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[Cecilia Calabresi](#)
[Renata Calabresi](#)
[Roberto Coen Pirani](#)

Father and daughter

She was born in Pisa on March 28th 1910, to Renato Coen Pirani and Nella Vitali. Her father, born in Pisa in 1883, was a doctor based in Bologna where he had become a senior lecturer in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Bologna University in 1913, as well as Head of Gynaecology at the Villa Rosa clinic. Emma enrolled at the Facoltà di Lettere of the Università di Bologna, where she graduated on November 30th, 1931; her history of art thesis investigated «The allegories in 14th-century Tuscan painting»¹. Before graduating, she had already been employed, from 1st September 1933, as an adjunct librarian at the Università di Bologna library. She kept her job until the 1938 racial laws were passed, when the Ministero dell'Educazione Nazionale, in line with ministerial decree number 3778 promulgated on February 13th 1939, declared the termination of her service, with subsequent indemnity, recorded by the Corte dei Conti on July

¹ ASUBo, *Sezione studenti*, f. 2148 <<https://archivistorico.unibo.it>> (accessed on January 10th 2019).

5th of the same year². Her father, like 17 other senior lecturers at the university, was notified of his «*decadenza dall'abilitazione alla libera docenza*» (thereby depriving him of his right to work as a university lecturer) on June 12th 1939, with retroactive effect dating back to 14th December of the previous year³.

To leave or not to leave

Although Emma wanted to leave Italy and was on the Emergency Committee of New York's list, she did not emigrate, unlike her cousins: the chemist Roberto Coen Pirani, who was also Pisan, set off for New York with his wife and children, while his brother Mario emigrated to Brazil. Her cousins' parents and her own, however, chose to stay and she did not wish to abandon them. Thus, they stayed in Italy. In 1942 she taught for a while at a Bolognese school in Via dei Gombruti, where «revision groups for various subjects»⁴ were organised for Jewish children who had been forced to leave school.

They hid in the countryside of the regions of Emilia and Veneto, using forged papers which they had obtained thanks to Vittorio Zanzi (1896-1985), the interim town administrator of Cotignola's town council, an administrative district near Ravenna, where about 40 Jews were granted shelter and help. It is believed that Emma's father masqueraded as a peddler, travelling around the countryside selling needles and pieces of fabric. Later they moved to Venice, where Emma dared visit the Biblioteca Querini Stampalia (one of the main Venetian libraries), right under the fascists' noses, using her forged ID, according to which she was a housewife born in Naples named Petrucci⁵. They

2 Ministero dell'Educazione Nazionale, *Annuario 1939*, Rome, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1939: the data can also be found in Annalisa Capristo and Giorgio Fabre's *Il Registro. La cacciata degli ebrei dallo Stato italiano nei protocolli della corte dei conti, 1938-1943*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018 p. 228.

3 Renato Coen Pirani, born on June 11th 1883 in Pisa, was forced to retire from his job as senior lecturer, as were around forty other lecturers at Bologna University, eleven of whom were professors with full tenure and three honorary professors; see <<https://www.storiaememoriadibologna.it>> (accessed on January 12th 2019).

4 Nazario Sauro Onofri, *Ebrei e fascismo a Bologna*, Crespellano, Grafica editrice, 1989, p. 170.

5 Written testimony of Leo C. Pirani to the a., February 26th 2019.

managed to go unnoticed, even after the arrest in May 1944 of Vittorio Zanzi who, together with his wife Serafina, would go on to be recognised as «Righteous Among the Nations» by Yad Vashem⁶. Unfortunately, her cousin, 38-year-old Liana Coen Pirani, was arrested in Florence in February 1944 and was deported to Auschwitz, where she met her death. Her paternal uncle, Corrado Coen Pirani, also fell victim to the Holocaust; arrested in May 1944 near Bergamo, during a failed attempt to escape with his family to refuge in Switzerland, he was deported, never to return⁷.

The will to reintegrate

Reintegration was far less problematic for those who survived without fleeing abroad. The fact that the post-regime *rettore* (Rector) of the Università di Bologna nominated by the CLN, was an antifascist, ex-partisan legal scholar, and was one of the many people who had lost his post because he was Jewish and had consequently left Italy, was a crucial factor. As soon as he took up his new role, first as *prorettore* (deputy Vice Rector) on 5th May 1945, then as *rettore* a month later, Edoardo Volterra (1904-1984) called back all those lecturers who had been banished from their posts in 1938⁸.

Emma's father was reemployed on June 7th 1945, as was she, the same year, by the Bologna university library. That year she was also nominated director of libraries for Romagna. In 1949 she left Bologna to become director of the Biblioteca Estense and head of the Soprintendenza overseeing Emilia's libraries.

It was a very productive period on a scientific and professional level. Shortly

⁶ See Michele Bassi, *Cotignola, un approdo di salvezza per gli ebrei (1943-1945)*, Faenza, Litografica Faenza, 1985, and <<http://resistenzamappe.it>> (accessed on February 27th 2019).

⁷ CDEC *Digital Library*, entries «Coen Pirani, Liana» (1906-1945) <<http://digital-library.cdec.it>> (accessed January 12th 2019) and «Coen Pirani, Corrado Gustavo» (1885-1944) <<http://digital-library.cdec.it>> (accessed April 10th 2019).

⁸ See the recent publication *Edoardo Volterra. La vita come dovere, lo studio come passione*, a feature film documentary directed by Andreina Di Brino and Marco Visalberghi, 2018.

after her arrival she organised a historical-bibliographic exhibition of the *Rerum Italicarum scriptores*, and in 1951 she published one of her most famous works, which saw many later updated and extended editions: *Manuale del bibliotecario. Corso di preparazione per il personale delle biblioteche popolari e scolastiche*⁹. She left Emilia-Romagna in 1955, when she was made director of the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense in Milan, where she worked until 1971. She ended her career as a central inspector for the Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, where she worked from 1971 until 1973.

At the same time, she cultivated a strong interest in the activity of the Associazione Italiana Biblioteche and had been a member since at least 1934. She took part in the reestablishment of the AIB in 1946 and was an advocate for the formation of the Bologna branch of the association, of which she became the first president in 1949. She also supervised the Modena branch from 1949 until 1955, when she left the city. She was on the Board of Directors 1951-1954 as president of the Emilian branch. After moving to Milan she sat on the Regional committee of the Lombard branch. At the 1960 Chianciano assembly she was elected to the interim executive committee, where she held office until 1961¹⁰.

Emma died in Milan on 30th March 1999.

Major publications

- *Mostra storico-bibliografica dei Rerum Italicarum scriptores presso la Biblioteca estense, scritta e ordinata da Emma Coen Pirani*, Modena, Società tipografica modenese, 1950.
- *Manuale del bibliotecario: corso di preparazione per il personale delle biblioteche popolari e scolastiche*, Modena, Società tipografica modenese,

⁹ Emma Coen Pirani, *Manuale del bibliotecario: corso di preparazione per il personale delle biblioteche popolari e scolastiche*, Modena, Società tipografica Modenese, 1951.

¹⁰ In preparation Coen Pirani, *Emma*, in *Dizionario bio-bibliografico dei bibliotecari italiani del XX secolo, ad vocem*, <<http://www.aib.it>> (accessed on March 29th 2019).

1951.

- *Biblioteche d'Università negli Stati Uniti D'America*, Rome, Fratelli Palombi, 1952.
- *Contributo di eruditi veneti alla pubblicazione dei Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, Florence, Leo S. Olschki, 1952.
- *La miniatura Bolognese nella illustrazione del testo del «Decretum Gratiani»*, Bologna, La Mercanzia, 1952.
- *Aspetti della miniatura emiliana: dalle origini a tutto il sec. 14*, Rome, F.lli Palombi, 1955.
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- *Meraviglie di Milano*, Milan, Tip. U. Allegretti, 1959.
- *La miniatura gotica*, Milan, Fabbri, 1966.
- *Morte e resurrezione di Milano: nell'ottavo Centenario del giuramento di Pontida, 1167-1967*, Milan, Tip. U. Allegretti, 1967.
- *Gothic Illuminated Manuscripts*, Feltham, Hamlyn, 1970.
- *Di un esemplare completo della cinquecentesca «Mauritius Hibernicus, lectura... super Ysagogis Porphyrii...»*, Rome, Nuova tecnica grafica, 1976.

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editrice, 1989.

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