CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter introduces the case of G., a man interned in Collegno (near Turin) in 1928 because of his "homosexual tendencies". It illustrates the research methodology and then succinctly talks about the legal issues connected with research on sexuality in Italy, in terms of legislation on data protection and privacy legislation. It also gives an explanation of why the subject of the persecution of homosexuality during Mussolini's dictatorship has not been investigated until very recent times, highlighting the problematic aspects of memory of Fascism and of the Shoah in Italy.

Keywords Memory • Persecution of homosexuality • Fascism • Oral history • Micro-history

Starting from the case of G., a man with "homosexual tendencies" interned in the Collegno mental health hospital in 1928, this book investigates the pathologisation of homosexuality during the fascist regime. No systematic study exists on the possibility that Fascism used internment in an asylum as a tool of repression for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) people, as an alternative to confinement on an island, prison or home arrests. This research offers evidence that in some cases it did.

G.'s case gives the opportunity to explain how psychiatric theory came to consider homosexuality a mental health disease, within a eugenics

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theoretical framework, and how the pre-existing internment laws could be bent to implement repression of LGBT people under Mussolini's regime. Research in the Turin *Prefettura* and police archives shows to what extent public security forces and the local mental health institutions cooperated in the repression of homosexuality. Finally, this research addresses another crucial issue, that of the role played by families in the repressive action against homosexuals under Fascism, and how they sometimes cooperated with security forces and psychiatrists in ensuring that their unwanted and non-conforming relatives would be segregated in an asylum. The case of G. is a clear example of this and seems to point in the direction of a shared responsibility between families, police, asylums and local administrations in the exclusion of homosexuals from society through internment. This is a precious indication of how traditional family values, at the centre of Mussolini's rhetoric, were crumbling under the pressures of a regime that relied on spying among its citizens, thus fuelling suspicion, mistrust and fear.

This research highlights how the dictatorship operated in a subdued, undetectable way, bending pre-existing legislation so that it would be perceived as an element of continuity with the past. This guaranteed that its brutality was—and still is—difficult to prove.

The case of G. is exceptional: his 31-page autobiographical statement, part of his patient's file, is an unprecedented document in Italian LGBT history that testifies, ahead of its time, determination, courage and awareness of the socio-economic consequences of discrimination. It also lays bare strategies, stratagems, omissions and lies that were necessary to survive, when one was identified as a homosexual in fascist Italy.

Part I: Methodology

The Collegno mental health hospital archives and the original library are located in pavilion number 8 together with several ASL admin offices. They are in poor conditions, with many files kept in cardboard boxes on the floor and along the corridors. Because of the several changes of premises, many documents are now missing while others are rapidly deteriorating due to dust, damp, mishandling and inappropriate cardboard files. The archives contain all the Turin psychiatric institutions' files, namely the Turin, Collegno and Savonera hospitals that were already functioning in the 1920s. The documents of the Grugliasco, Villa Regina Margherita, Villa Azzurra and Villa Rosa asylums, also kept in the archives, are not

relevant to this research since they were inaugurated after 1931, the last year considered by this study, as explained later. Because the Turin, Collegno and Savonera documents are all mixed up, so that it is impossible to know which one refers to which hospital until one actually looks at each individual file, all admission files between given dates were consulted, in order to avoid omissions.

For the purpose of this research, all the admission files for the year 1922 were consulted; then all files for 1926, generally considered a turning point as the dictatorship started implementing its most fierce repression; finally, all admission files from when G. was interned, 22 November 1928, until the day he was sent to the Racconigi psychiatric hospital for further examination, 25 September 1930: in total, 4442 admission files. The chronological focus of this research, is the first part of the fascist regime (G. was released on 9 January 1931), showing how certain trends and practices started to consolidate at the beginning of the *Ventennio*, the 20 years Mussolini was in power.

Admission files contain all the documentation relating to the internment of a patient from a legal, administrative and bureaucratic point of view: official medical certificates, dismissals' approvals, families' correspondence, Tribunal authorisations and legal statements of witnesses who backed the referral of patients to the psychiatric system. When a patient was described as "amoral", "immoral", "obscene", "degenerate", "erotomaniac", "nymphomaniac", "moral imbecile", "affected by moral madness", or when sexuality was mentioned, further investigation took place into the respective, more detailed clinical (or medical) file, if available.

In order to contextualise the research, newspapers of roughly the same periods were analysed: namely, all issues of *La Stampa* and *La Gazzetta del Popolo*, the two main daily papers of the nearest town to Collegno, Turin, for the 22 November 1928, the day G. was interned, and the first trimesters of 1926 and 1929, together with *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, a current-affairs illustrated magazine, for the last trimester of 1928.

The Collegno asylum's library was consulted in order to have a sense of what literature was available to health professionals at the time of G.'s internment, Unfortunately, many medical journals' issues appear to be missing and it is impossible to ascertain whether they were once there and have been lost in subsequent years, or whether they had never been there. Consequently, this analysis is mostly based on what could actually be found and read on the premises, although other information might have been available for consultation to doctors and nurses in the 1928–1931

period. When famous psychiatric journals, that could not be found in the Collegno library, are quoted, but that are likely to have been read by medical professionals working there at the time, they are marked with the symbol * in the note. In the bibliography at the end of the relevant chapter, all the psychiatric journals that have been consulted are listed, specifying where they were found.

The main sources of primary documentation, other than the Collegno Archives, were the State Archives in Turin. Since all the police documents for the fascist period have "disappeared", which probably means that they were destroyed at the end of the regime, this research is based mainly on *Prefettura* documentation. The *Prefettura* is the Italian institution that represents the State at a local level, coordinates the police forces and is in charge of public order. It is therefore in dialogue both with the Ministry of the Interior and with the police.

This study draws on a qualitative methodological approach and, as specified in its title, is a micro-history type of historical research: its aim is to talk about the repression of homosexuality through psychiatry during Fascism starting from the case of G., a particular and unique one used to shed light on the wider picture.

Part II: Legal Issues

Anyone wanting to carry out this type of research in Italy is required to confirm in writing that she or he is aware of, and will follow, the directives contained in two Italian decrees, n. 281 of 1999, with its amendments published in *Gazzetta Ufficiale* on 5 April 2001, and n. 196 of 2003. These impose a number of restrictions in an attempt to reconcile the need to allow historical research, in a world that veers towards data open access, with privacy and data protection issues. The decrees state that no identification of individuals must be possible when writing about facts that have something to do with sexuality, even when 70 years have passed from the closure of the file in question. This is why several details are deliberately omitted, such as the number of patients' files in full, patients' names, their place of birth, address, area where they lived and other elements that can make them identifiable. Internationally, scholars have published books on homosexuality and on sexuality during Fascism and have indicated dates of imprisonment, initials, or sometimes even first names and file numbers of persecuted people,[1] while others have resorted to invented names, but have mentioned other data, such as dates, names of places and so forth.[2]

In fact, it is impossible to talk about historical facts without revealing any details: it would jeopardise the credibility of any research and yet, strictly speaking, dates and names of archives, for instance, could be seen as identification enablers. In stating that sexuality is still an untouchable, taboo subject, the Italian legislation reinforces an outdated mentality, rooted in prejudice, that imposes serious limitations to historical research in this and related fields. It is one of the main reasons why there is a gap in scholarships on the history of homosexuality in Italy.

Part III: Historiographical Issues

Nevertheless, this gap, of particular relevance in regard to the fascist period, cannot be ascribed to the above-mentioned reason only. Italian historiography, often written by left-wing historians in the first post-war decades, has focused on those who opposed the regime, emphasising their struggle against the dictatorship. Italian school books, films and popular songs offer endless stories of heroic gestures, contributing to the creation of an idea of a partisans' resistance of epic proportions. This led to the spreading of the false myth that the majority of Italians opposed the regime, resisted, fought against it and finally managed to overthrow a much-hated dictatorship imposed from above. In reality, only a very small minority courageously opposed Mussolini, at least until the beginning of World War II. Uncomfortable truths, such as the fact that the fascist regime was immensely popular among all social classes, that it had the backing of the vast majority of Italian intellectuals and university professors are generally overlooked or underplayed.[3] The Grand Narrative of a heroic popular resistance is what most Italians still identify with and the crucial issue of collective responsibility in the dictatorship remains a taboo to this day. Italy did not have the equivalent of the Nuremberg Trials, where a nation condemned its past, drew a line in the sand and admitted its terrible mistakes. In Italy, after two years of turmoil and civil war, between 1943 and 1945, and after the initial days of Liberation, things were generally left to settle on their own accord. Most Italians, whose majority had to some degree supported the regime, subsided into a grey area, their role in the gigantic mechanism of fascist repression was quickly swept under the carpet. Very few individuals were sacked from their jobs in the public administrations or in the Tribunals, for instance, institutions that had once strongly backed and implemented Mussolini's directives. Most people carried on, only changing the colour of their shirts, and sometimes not even

doing that, as the MSI, *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, a party of "nostalgics", was allowed to be represented in Parliament. Unlike Germany, in the immediate after-war years in Italy there was not a real culture of remembrance, but rather one of forgetfulness, because reconciliation happened through forgetting. As an example of this line of continuity with the past, it has been recently pointed out that honorary citizenship given to Mussolini by many Mayors in 1923 and 1924, has only been revoked in the last few years: remarkably, in Turin, which is the focus of this dissertation, this did not happen until 2014.[4]

Italy came out of the war defeated in more ways than one: although, technically, it had joined the Allies in 1943 and therefore it had won, it had done so by betraying its initial allies, Germany and Japan, thus gaining an international reputation of lack of coherence, if not of sheer opportunism. Besides, the internal fight that marked the 1943–1945 period, between supporters of the regime and its opponents, had opened deep wounds that were difficult to heal. If the war ended with the country on its knees, economically and morally speaking, the past had also very little by way of accounts of heroism to counterbalance the general feeling of desolation: this can help frame the post-war historians' efforts to give dignity to the Italian people, by reconstructing a glorious past that would cement feelings of national pride and cohesion.

Given these premises and the renowned homophobic feelings of the Italian Communist Party members (one apt example of this is Pier Paolo Pasolini's expulsion from the party for "moral and political indignity" in 1950), it is no surprise that gay and lesbian victims of the fascist regime received very little mention after the war and in subsequent decades by historians. In addition, the series of Christian Democratic Party (DC)-led coalition governments that ruled the country till the 1980s, did not foster any interest in gender, sexuality and homosexuality issues. So, while the Italian Jewish community efficiently organised an immediate collection of survivors' memories and diligently reconstructed the repression it had suffered, keeping its memory alive, the history of other minorities who were persecuted by the regime, such as Roma people, Jehovah's Witnesses, anarchists, pacifists, Protestants, gays and lesbians, remained untold.[5]

This can explain the Italian LGBT community's expectations when archival material of the fascist years finally became consultable, by law after 70 years, so that at the end of the 1980s/beginning of the 1990s the first years of the dictatorship could be studied. This initial research, led by Giovanni Dall'Orto,[6] made it possible to identify some of the survivors

and encouraged some oral history interview work throughout the 1990s.[7] However, by then, most survivors had already died, the few that agreed to be interviewed were at least in their eighties and their memories had often faded. Accounts remained fragmented and partial.

Moreover, what emerged from the archives and subsequent oral history interviews was disappointing for most in terms of content. Instead of the expected counter-balance to the "Grand Narrative of the Resistance", there was no trace of heroic gestures, of fierce and brave opposition to the regime. The older generation of homosexuals had lived in the closet and had believed in discretion, sometimes hiding behind a respectable marriage. Even the words *omosessuale* and *lesbica* were often out of their dictionary and most of them, if male, referred to themselves using pejorative and insulting nouns such as *frocio, ricchione, femminella, arruso*. The few who accepted to be interviewed often did so only if total anonymity was guaranteed while most of them declined to talk. Their existence seemed to have been permanently scarred by the constant fear, humiliation and isolation they had endured during the *Ventennio*. In short, they represented everything the new generations of Italian queers, born after the war, stood against. The end-of-the-century queer motto "positive images, positive role models" excluded these older generation people, perceived as supine victims who had continued living underground lives well after the dictatorship and had never taken part in any of the activists' initiatives or civil rights campaigns in subsequent years. In turn, older LGBT people did not recognise themselves in the new coming-out generation's values, they felt snubbed, misunderstood, negatively judged and withdrew. The generational gap, that had impaired chances of collecting first hand oral accounts, widened further.

As Irwin-Zarecka underlines,[8] in terms of memory of the Holocaust there has always been a strong link between Germany and the United Sates, specifically because of the great presence of Jewish people who had fled Nazism and lived in North America, which has helped create a common ground for remembrance. This also contributed to making the general public, in these two countries and elsewhere, aware of the LGBT victims of Nazism. In Italy this powerful external lever has been missing: little international interest has been placed on the fascist persecution of homosexuals until very recently. The fact that Italian LGBT people had not been sent to concentration camps reinforced the pre-existing stereotype of a bland regime, where the excesses of Nazism had been avoided and where persecution of minorities was suspected of being undocumented

because almost non-existent. Besides, LGBT people sentenced to *confino*, it was often argued, were only a few hundreds, and spending two or three years on a Mediterranean island looked more like a holiday than a tough punishment.[9]

Within this context, it is easy to understand why the need to commemorate LGBT victims of Fascism arrived in Italy much later compared to Germany. When it finally arrived, it was in the wake of the German-North American route and shaped itself on it. Unsurprisingly, the most systematic attempt to collect and preserve the memories of LGBT survivors of Fascism was launched and entirely sponsored by the US-based Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation between 1994 and 1999. The pink triangle became a powerful symbol in Italy too, although, strictly speaking, it had nothing to do with the persecution of Italian homosexuals as, to this day, there is no evidence of any Italian person being deported to a concentration camp because of his/her homosexuality. In fact, the only monument to homosexuals who were victims of the regime, in Bologna,[10] is in the shape of a pink triangle, which shifts the focus of the commemoration from an Italian to a more international and generic one.

Therefore, if what Irwin-Zarecka says is true, that "a collective memory – as a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past – is best located not in the mind of individuals, but in the resources they share",[11] this rings particularly true in Italy. The scarcity of monuments in remembrance of queer victims of Fascism and the evident lack of institutional support of historical studies in this area are evidence that a collective LGBT historical memory of Fascism still needs to solidify, while the small number of Italian universities that offer gender studies and the almost total absence of private foundations backing research in the field complete the picture.

Recently, historians and researchers have started to lift the veil of silence that has surrounded fascist repression and have patiently recomposed a puzzle of the many, minute repressive events that took place, digging out proof after proof of the regime's actions. Now that survivors have almost totally disappeared, the reconstruction of the fascist dictatorship's brutality only relies on archival evidence, which is the initial motivation of the present research.

Part IV: Terminology

When talking about homosexuality during Fascism and prior to it, this study uses terms that were common at the time, but are now unacceptable, such as "sexual invert", "pederast", "pervert", "degenerate" and so forth. They appear in inverted commas the first time, to indicate that they are dated expressions from which the author wishes to distance herself, but afterwards inverted commas are abandoned because they would be an obstacle to the reader. The same applies to words that belong to the psychiatry language of the time, such as "mentally deranged", "morally insane", "moral imbecile", "frenastenic", "psychic degenerate" and the like. Post-1960 words such as "LGBT", "coming out" or "gay" are used only when referring to the post-war period and issues. The terms homosexual and homosexuality were in use in the 1920s. The word "queer" is used when talking about the past because it is the equivalent of many Italian pejorative terms that would have been in use during the fascist regime.

All Italian original text was translated by the author and is available on request. Nouns, such as Fascism, Anti-fascism and Resistance or *Resistenza* have capital letters, while adjectives or absolute adjectives (adnouns) are not. All foreign terms are in italics, apart from the name of institutions, universities, associations and the like. When quoting book titles, all nouns start with a capital letter for titles in English while Italian titles have a capital letter only for the first noun, following the two different traditions. Newspapers sometimes published articles without mentioning the journalist, which is why, in the endnote, the author's name and surname are missing. When only the initial of the author's name is mentioned, it is because this is how she/he signed her/his writing and the first name could not be traced.

Notes

1. Among them: Benadusi, Lorenzo. 2005. *Il nemico dell'uomo nuovo. L'omosessualità nell'esperimento totalitario fascista*. Milano: Feltrinelli; Dunnage, Jonathan. 2016. Policemen and "Women of Ill Repute": A Study of Male Sexual Attitudes and Behaviour in Fascist Italy. *European History Quarterly* 46 (I): 72–91; Ebner, Michael. 2011. *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Ebner, Michael. 2004. The Persecution of Homosexual Men Under Fascism. In

Gender, Family and Sexuality. The Private Sphere in Italy 1860–1945, Wilson Perry, ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

2. Giartosio, Tommaso and Goretti, Gianfranco. 2006. *La città e l'Isola*. Roma: Donzelli.
3. De Felice, Renzo. 1995. *Rosso e Nero*. Milano: Baldini&Castoldi; Foot, John. 2009. *Divided Memory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Gordon, Robert S.C. 2013. *Scolpitelo nei cuori. L'Olocausto nella cultura italiana (1994–2010)*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri. I ed. 2012; Zunino, Pier Giorgio. 1991. *Interpretazione e memoria del fascismo. Gli anni del regime*. Bari: Laterza.
4. Berizzi, Paolo. 2017. Il Duce è uno di noi? I Comuni si dividono sulla cittadinanza. *Il Venerdì di Repubblica*, July 14: 35.
5. See note 3.
6. Dall'Orto, Giovanni. 1987. Ci furono femminelle che piangevano quando venimmo via dalle Tremiti! *Babilonia* October: 26–28; Dall'Orto, Giovanni. 1986. Credere, Obbedire, Non Battere. *Babilonia* May: 13–17; Dall'Orto, Giovanni. 1986. Per il bene della Razza al Confino il Pederasta. *Babilonia* April–May: 14–17; Dall'Orto Giovanni. 1987. La "Tolleranza Repressiva" dell'Omosessualità. *Quaderni di Critica Omosessuale* 3: 37–57.
7. Goretti, Gianfranco. 2002. Il periodo fascista e gli omosessuali: il confino di polizia and Un "pederasta" catanese al confino. In *Le ragioni di un silenzio*, Circolo Pink, ed. Verona: Ombre Corte; Romano, Gabriella. 2001. "L'Altro Ieri", Video, and 2003. "Ricordare", Video. These were preceded by Rossi Barilli, Gianni and Hutter, Paolo. 1983. "Novecento", Radio Popolare Milano, Radio Interviews.
8. Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona. 1994. *Frames of Remembrance. The Dynamics of Collective Memory*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction.
9. An opinion voiced by Silvio Berlusconi when Prime Minister, reported in 2003. Mussolini non ha mai ammazzato nessuno. *Il Corriere della Sera*, September 11.
10. There are some commemorative plaques in Italy: one is in San Domino delle Tremiti where a group of gay men was sent to *confino* in 1938, one in the Fossoli prison camp, near Trieste and one in Catania, where most of the Tremiti *confinati* came from. The latter is regularly vandalised and, at the time of writing, it has been removed.
11. Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona, op. cit., p. 4.

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