

HISTORY
of the
GRAND ORIENT
of
ITALY

edited by
EMANUELA LOCCI



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*Freemasonry is a school of liberty,
of atonement and brotherhood.*

*Ettore Ferrari
1912*

There is a human feeling called gratitude.

Mine is to Marco Novarino.

A master. My mentor.

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6. THE GRAND ORIENT OF ITALY IN EXILE

Emanuela Locci

The 1925 is evoked in the Italian Masonic entourage as the black year: that year the executive under Benito Mussolini promulgated the law on “Allocation of the activity by associations, institutions and their enlisting of civil servant and employees of bodies subject by law to the appointment of the State, the provinces and municipalities”,⁶³⁸ known as “the rule against Masonry.” Scanning carefully the text the name of Freemasonry is never mentioned, instead when the Chamber of Deputies discussed its articles, it appeared almost obvious it was conceived right against that institution.⁶³⁹ Not a few addresses are heartfelt against masonry to prompt catholicity, seen as a founding feature of Italian community. One of the few dissenting opinions was that of Antonio Gramsci who, on May 16, struck with sharp words the Chamber not to allow the law to get voted.⁶⁴⁰

With the approval on November 1925, Mussolini government plot was indeed accomplished: deleting Masonry from political and civil scene. It had been several years the Institution had being targeted by determined and heady attacks,⁶⁴¹ since its maturing a openly contrary winding against fascism, thought often yielding, if not in an fair agreement with the policies pursued by Fasci.

The situation collapsed after the failed attack on Mussolini's life by the MP Tito Zaniboni and the alleged accomplice General Luigi Capello, both masons. On November 22, 1925, a few before the law that would have ban Masonry for roughly 20 years, the Grand Master of G.O.I. Domizio Torrigiani issued the decree to state as dissolved Obediences ateliers.⁶⁴² Afterwards,

638 *Parliamentary Acts*, session of Saturday May 16, 1925.

639 Anna Maria Isastia, *Massoneria e fascismo*, Libreria Chiari, Firenze, 2003, p. 13.

640 *Discorso di Gramsci alla Camera*, May 16, 1925, p. 48.

641 Anna Maria Isastia, *Massoneria e fascismo*, op. cit., p.

642 “Rivista Massonica”. Year LVI. April 1926. NN. 1–2, pp. 18–19. It wasn't viable to detect the number, just the press release sent by G.O.I. to the Stefani agency, announcing the dissolution of Obedience.

a committee was set up within the Grand Orient of Italy in charge to aid Brethren —then an amount of 20,000—who had found themselves in strain. Since 1925, Italy wouldn't number any established masonic Obedience.⁶⁴³

Struggles are yet to come for Italian masons. GM Torrigiani is detained and sentenced to restriction in Lipari island for five years, since he is recognized guilty for “riots against the regime and the state.” The same doom of many initiates to Freemasonry.

Between 1926 and 1928, the state of Italian Masons is pretty severe, many are arrested due to their belonging, thought it hasn't been officially active since 1925 and Brethren are forced to meet in a nonritual manner. Already since 1926, countless members moved to an exile abroad, along with representatives of disbanded political parties and/or editors whose newspapers had suffered the same measure. Several found themselves working side by side in LIDU, an anti-fascist organization born in France acting from abroad to get rid of fascist regime. France was—together with Switzerland—one of the countries of election of Italian masonic and dissident exile. French authorities stand Italian exiles devised politically to continue their struggle; this hospitality was effective also on the Masonic level, many thus found hospitality in both ateliers of Grand Orient of France and Grand Lodge of France. The situation in France became actually entangled when some members of G.O.I. laying in French territory stated the need of a Scottish rite chapter; for this purpose, Ettore Ferrari—then expiring—sent a letter to Giuseppe Leti, with a decree attached to re-institute the Supreme Council, capable then to allow again the rise of Grand Orient in due course. Ferrari departs a few months later,⁶⁴⁴ marking with his death an era in the history of Italian Freemasonry and ushering a hard new one finding Freemasonry defeated by fascism while engaged in its erection outside Italy. An issue forthwith posing a legitimacy matter of a Grand Orient not drawing its lawfulness from a regularly convened Grand Lodge, or deriving powers from the GM in charge, who is its holder. Another flaw arose: could a Grand Orient of Italy be established in a territory—like France—where masonic organs already lived?

The territorial restriction topic came into play, whose nonobservance would have denied any recognition by the whole regular Masonic system.

643 Fulvio Conti, *Storia della massoneria italiana*, Il Mulino, Milano, 2003, p. 320.

644 Santi Fedele, *La massoneria italiana nell'esilio e nella clandestinità (1927-1939)*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2005, p. 43.

The condition, though peculiar in exile, was not a due reason to derogate. Despite the obstacles, in 1929, Giuseppe Leti resolved to rebuild G.O.I. in exile.

The decision was firm for several reasons: fascism was not expected to overturn in a short time and the awareness the long-lasting uncertainty would lead to the disintegration of the foreign lodges depended on the Institution, though not yet subdued to 1925 law outcomes, as this legislative provision could only be applied within national borders. Abroad ateliers lasted and got on acting autonomously, but underwent the merging pressures by other present Orientes—Tunisia case is distinctive—where French and Italian had been for decades. A key role in backing the Grand Orient of Italy played the Argentine lodges, recognizing in Alessandro Tedeschi a champion of Italian Freemasonry. The lodges concerned were “Labor et Lux” of Thessaloniki, “Rienzi” in Rome, “Ettore Ferrari” of London, and “Giovanni Amendola” of Paris. The initiative to found an Italian Obedience in exile was taken by Leti, who on January 12, 1930, declared formally re-established it. The Grand Master was not appointed out of respect for Torrigiani, still in confinement. The office was also left vacant, covered only in 1926 by Meoni—no longer in restraint but still under strict surveillance. Eugenio Chiesa is named Second Deputy Grand Master. Obedience headquarters is set in the practitioner seat of Francesco Galasso, in London. The summits are getting ready to receive the mandatory acknowledgments for the life of Obedience itself, while the issue discloses: at the AMI congress, the Italian delegate, Arturo Labriola, is not admitted in September 1930. The reason for this denial is essentially in the unfeasibility for the international Masonic body to recognize as an heir of the former G.O.I. this new Obedience, entering into the conflict of legitimacy already outlined, in 1929. The situation is promptly reviewed in Grand Orient gathering of October 1930, where diverse attitudes from AMI shown off; suspending for a while the plead on international endorsement, the main task is to disseminate worldwide the update of G.O.I. rebirth in exile with a circular letter sent in 1931 to all the world's Obediences. Meanwhile, Labriola is appointed Second Deputy Grand Master, replacing Chiesa, departed a few months earlier. Same 1931, the first return to the statement missive came—mostly opposing, i.e. they didn't recognize the Obedience; the only exceptions were the Spanish, inviting Italian Brothers to their international forums, Uruguay, and some other Obediences from South and Central America—where Italians found the Cuban support—, while for Asia a positive response came from the Grand Lodge of Philippines.

At the end of 1931, after the resignation of Labriola, Alessandro Tedeschi was elected as Second Deputy Grand Master, but a few months after his election he was “promoted” to Grand Mastery, with the proper powers repletion.

In April 1932, Torrigiani, now elderly and ill, after serving his sentence of confinement, returns home, but under strict surveillance. He died a few later, on August 31, 1932.⁶⁴⁵

Meantime, Obedience is debated amid financial affairs, new charter devices—tied to the arrangement of the organs of the G.O.I.—and questions related to rituals, with a particular regard to the sharp observance of the Rite to grant the continuity of initiatory tradition. More, during the Tedeschi mastery, the thorny issue of international recognition, with Tedeschi and Leti on different minds, resolute the first in claiming the descent from G.O.I. by Palazzo Giustiniani, more attentive to the diplomacy the second, persuaded of the need of international endorsement to survive. At the end, Leti approach prevails and the first steps are toward resuming deals with the AMI. From the very beginning, delivering the record required isn't viable, such as the dissolution decree of 1925, which did not include the lodges abroad. The other big deal was the principle of territoriality. Even if the arrangements were carried out with commitment, it is almost fair they are doomed to failure; in February 1934, the official response comes. A denial.⁶⁴⁶

Set aside the international issues, delicate asset matters scourge the Obedience, and the diatribe sets around its patrimony. Quite substantial in 1925, due to unfavorable investments, it had progressively thinner. Meoni had assumed its care in 1926, and since then the situation had progressively worsened, the reason—as well as erroneous speculations—on the dozens of subsidies Meoni delivered to destitute Brethren because of Fascism. This controversies continued even after Meoni passing, who had died in such desperate conditions to clear any doubt about his good imprint.⁶⁴⁷

This miserable situation continued throughout the '30s, lodges did not pay any fee, though the deeper reason lied in the evidence members, often exiles, lived in serious hardship. In spite of this, the Obedience engagement didn't stop: Tedeschi was confirmed Grand Master for the years

645 Santi Fedele, *La massoneria italiana*, op. cit., p. 91.

646 Ivi, p. 107.

647 Ivi, p. 126.

1935–1941, years when the condemnation of fascism in Italy is steady and wide, in particular for crimes committed in Ethiopia. In 1936, Tedeschi denounced the infamy of the use of gas on the population, weapon called “the shame of our century.”

Another compelling stance is that against the growing danger posed by Nazism for peace worldwide. For other nefarious historical events, G.O.I. is openly siding—at the outbreak of civil war in Spain, for instance, Italian Obedience condemns the coup leaders and declares its support for the legitimate republican government. In recent years, Freemasonry is indeed seriously endangered throughout Europe; not just in Italy is affected by the fascist attack, but the situation breeds elsewhere: Germany is affected by the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy bias, due to which the whole nine Grand Lodges in the wide German Masonic system are dissolved. In Portugal, Freemasonry was not officially forbidden, but the hatred was such as not to allow the regular activities of the Grand Lusitanian Orient. In Spain, the scenery was, if possible, even more dramatic after the military uprising of July 1936: Masonry was persecuted and systematically annihilated. From West to East, the frame keeps the same, even in Turkey, Masonry was not flourishing. In 1935, Atatürk government decreed the closure of all the bodies not under the governmental aegis. Freemasonry went into sleep until 1948, though the Supreme Council still operated, which even received state financial support. Notwithstanding, the idea of creating a supranational organization that served as a link amid all these persecutions was born among the exiled Italians. The accomplishment is hard, since the Masonic groups are scattered, as is the Italian community, and broadcasting is pretty arduous. Among thousands of tiring, Leti and Tedeschi succeeded in organizing, in June 1937, the Assembly of G.O.I.—the last organized in exile and extended to representatives of foreign Obediences. Really, the initiative did not have the deserved outcome, the attendance was of only 10 masons: a modest appointment. This upshot stresses the fragility of a small group of men who indeed tenaciously tried to keep alive the Masonic tradition throughout Europe. All is not lost, some ateliers located abroad, but under the auspices of G.O.I. persisted in their activities, in masonic traditions, and even in the struggle to fascism. While Italian Freemasonry efforts amid ado, winds of war blow off. In 1938, the Sudeten question was raised, setting a sudden matter of awareness to the Masons. What should have been their attitude in the case of an Italian call to arms? A refuse to war in an anti-fascist key is the response.

To the worrying scenery for the Italian communion is added the mournful news, June 1, 1939, of Giuseppe Leti passing. He, who had held the fortunes of Italian Freemasonry for over 10 years, was missing at a definitive moment. A few weeks later, the WWII broke out. The departure of Leti leaves all responsibility for the survival of G.O.I. on Tedeschi shoulders. Aware even his end was near, he calls new polls to give Obedience a new lease on life. Three days after convening the ballot the war began; given the unsteadiness, Tedeschi proposed David Augusto Albarin as Deputy Grand Master Added. Albarin was Worshipful of the “Cincinnati” lodge in Alexandria, Egypt. This location granted it safe at the time of 1925 law and again in that sad juncture.

Tedeschi dies on August 19, 1940, a few hours after his departure the German police showed up at his dwelling to arrest him. Notable was his widow behavior, who—in order to save any Masonic document from Nazi requisitions—decided to hide the files in her husband's grave. The archives were recovered 11 years later, even if not unscathed, and returned to G.O.I.

Albarin will labor till 1943 to provide the continuity of the Grand Orient of Italy in exile. After the end of WWII and the fall of fascism, the Institution is attempted to start again even to fulfill the huge sacrifices made not to succumb to the Fascist regime. To 1947 dates back the decree where Guido Lay, as new Grand Master, recognizes the struggle of the exiled masons within a wider recognition of the work done by the Italian Brethren who honored the Institution.

Thus closes the span of G.O.I. in exile, definitive players of this part of its history being Giuseppe Leti and Alessandro Tedeschi, who—by their own drive—managed G.O.I. not to be forever wrecked.