
The Pontecorvo Family

Pontecorvo (FR)

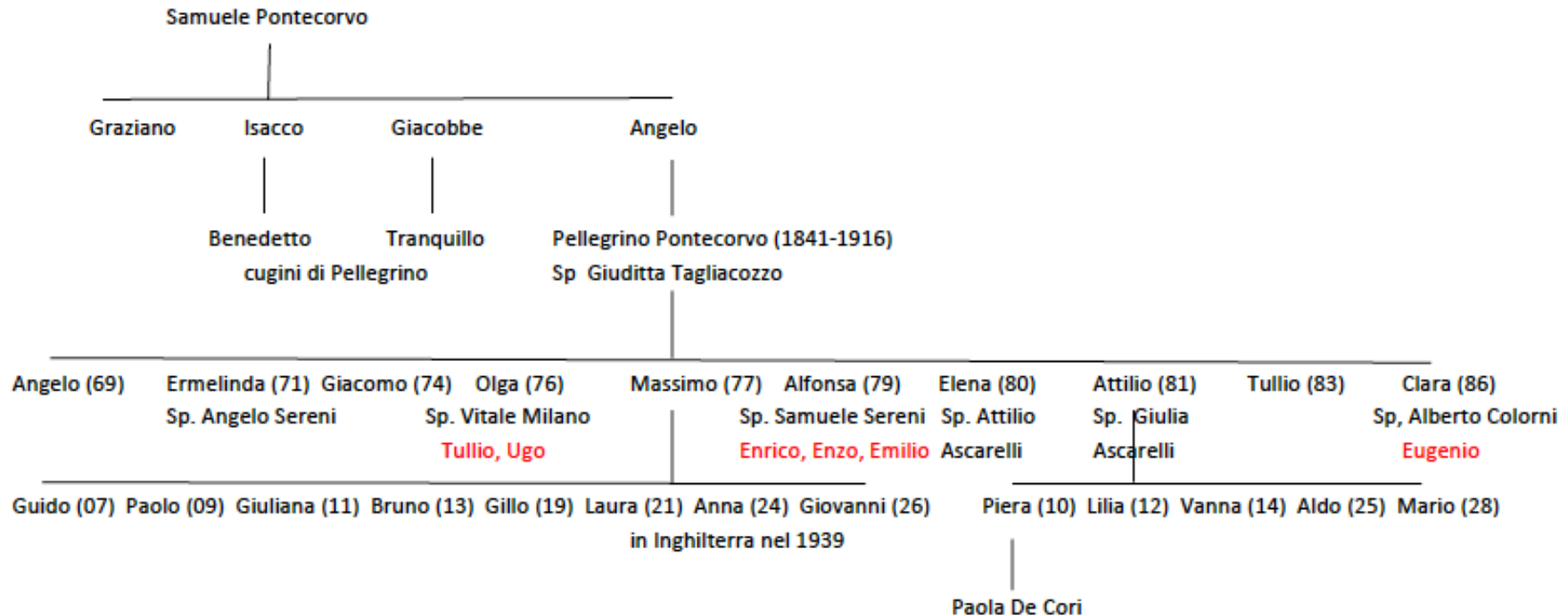


October 13, 2015

Paolo Rossi

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A Family Tree



The Pontecorvos in the XIX century

- Samuel Pontecorvo (1760-1834) had a small tailor shop in the Jewish ghetto in Rome.
- His four sons, Graziano, Isaac, Jacob and Angelo started a flourishing business and before 1860 they were running two retail stores and a wholesale warehouse
- Pellegrino Pontecorvo, son of Angelo, was born in Rome on August 21, 1841, the first of six children. He was committed to study, and loved reading and painting, but because of economic difficulties he was forced to devote himself to the family business.
- On September 20, 1870 Rome was united to the Italian state and the ghetto was abolished. Pellegrino became an Italian citizen and started travelling through Europe to improve his business and to learn the new technologies in the field of weaving and production of fabrics.

The first Pontecorvo company in Pisa

- After 1870 many Roman Jews moved to Tuscany because of a longer tradition of religious tolerance (especially in Leghorn and Pisa) which favored also economic enterprise.
- Many Jewish families moved to Pisa, some of them coming from Rome, and some were already engaged in the production and trade of fabrics.
- The company “Samuel Pontecorvo” was established in Pisa in June 1882, after taking over the textile factory located in Via San Lorenzo 42, and the Pontecorvos purchased also some land and buildings in the same area.

Pellegrino Pontecorvo



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Pellegrino moves to Pisa

- In 1887 Pellegrino moved with his family to Pisa, where three of his six sisters were already living.
- On March 29, 1889 the new company “Pellegrino Pontecorvo” was established, marking the separation from the company in Rome and from Pellegrino’s cousins. Part of the capital came from Achille Agostini and part from the Sereni family.
- The new company acquired all assets previously belonging to the “Samuel Pontecorvo”. Next to the old buildings a new one-floor block was built in order to have a place for mechanical weaving (beginning of mechanization in Pisa)
- The company quickly became one of the most important and leading textile companies in Europe: it came to have 220 mechanical looms and 200 hand looms.

Growing business

- In 1904 Pontecorvo bought by Nissim some land and buildings between Via S. Marta and Via S. Bibbiana while Nissim acquired some shares in the Pontecorvo company.
- A large factory was later built in 1912 in the area “La Fontina”, not too far from downtown Pisa.
- Around 1910 the factories were engaged in textile manufactures of raw cotton and their dyeing; they used steam engines and electrical systems.
- In 1915 the company had about 2,000 employees, 1,250 looms, 3000 rotating spindles, two complete plants for dyeing and finishing.
- During the First World War the crisis was tackled by working intensively for military supplies.

A new generation (1)

- Pellegrino died in Rome on October 23, 1916.
- He had married Giuditta Tagliacozzo (1849-1921) and they gave birth to ten sons and daughters:
- Angelo (1869-1931),
- Ermelinda (1871-1957),
- Giacomo (1874-1940),
- Olga (1876-1944),
- Massimo (1877-1958),
- Alfonsa (1879-1961),
- Elena (1880-1972),
- Attilio (1881-1962),
- Tullio (1883-1890),
- Clara (1886-1937).

A new generation (2)

- There were numerous weddings between the children of Pellegrino and members of important Jewish families of Pisa, including Sereni (Ermelinda married Angelo Giuseppe Sereni and Alfonsa married his brother Samuele Isacco) and Ascarelli (Attilio married Giulia Ascarelli and Elena married Giulia's brother Attilio). Clara, the youngest daughter, married Alberto Colorni, belonging to a Jewish family from Mantua.
- However Massimo (actually Davide Gino Massimo) did not marry a Jewish girl: his wife Maria Esmeralda Maroni (1884-1975), the daughter of a famous doctor, was born in Milan, and her family had contacts with the Waldensian community.

Brothers and sisters

- Guido (1907-1999)
- Paolo (1909-
- Giuliana (1911-
- Bruno (1913-1993)
- Gillo (1919-2006)
- Laura (1921-
- Anna (1924-
- Giovanni (1926-

Family life

- Massimo and Maria had eight sons and daughters. They lived in a large villa in Via Bonanno, near to the Leaning Tower. The villa was later sold and demolished.
- All records of the Pontecorvo family life are quite positive: Maria is remembered as a fine lady, loving music and reading, sweet but severe. The Pontecorvo brothers had strong links among them, not conditioned by age difference.
- It was Guido, the oldest son, who introduced Enrico Fermi in his parents' house, and later on suggested that Bruno might go to Rome to study physics with Fermi.
- Bruno had a strict relationship with Gillo, which was strengthened when they lived together in France between 1938 and 1940.

Industrial decline

- After Pellegrino's death the company Pellegrino passed to his sons Angelo and Giacomo until 1930. The decline began in the postwar period when the crisis of the cotton industry became global.
- However despite the ravages of fire and the slowness in the realization of credits the company remained in production.
- In 1930 Massimo and his brother Attilio, continued their father's and brothers' business.
- In the early thirties, due to the crisis of 1929, the situation worsened also in Italy, together with the first signs of the racial laws which would lead to the confiscation of property to Jewish families.
- In 1937, Max was forced to liquidate the company. The factory, "La Fontina" was sold in June to Manufactures Valdarno and on Sept. 16, 1937 the plant in Via San Lorenzo was bought by Gaetano Marzotto.
- The old building was demolished to make way for a new plant, at the time one of Europe's most modern in its field.

The new factory

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkpGbbdC-BU>



Persecution and war

- The Pontecorvos did not feel to be Jews: the males had not been circumcised for three generations and they did not practice the cult. However the racial laws (1938) applied also to them.
- As a consequence many members of the family left Italy. Anna, Laura and Giovanni (the youngest son) moved to England, where Guido was already living and working, Bruno and Gillo were in Paris, Paolo went to the United States and Giuliana settled in Switzerland.
- Some of their relatives were victims of the Nazi: among them Enzo Chaim Sereni, grandson of Alfonsa, Olga, who died in Auschwitz, her sons Tullio and Ugo Milano, who were killed at the Fosse Ardeatine.
- Massimo and Maria did not want to leave Italy and moved to Milan, but in September 1943 they narrowly escaped mopping and killing while fleeing towards Switzerland. They came back to Italy only after the end of the war.

Famous cousins

- Emilio Sereni (1907-1977), son of Alfonsa, was a prolific writer, a renowned historian of farming, a partisan during WW2 and a politician affiliated to the Communist Party.
- Enzo Chaim Sereni (1905-1944), son of Alfonsa, was a writer, a founder of the kibbutz Givat Brenner, supporter of pacific coexistence between Jews and Arabs, a partisan in WW2, killed in Dachau
- Eugenio Colorni (1909-1944), son of Clara, was a philosopher and an antifascist politician, and was one of the promoters of the european federalist movement, killed in Rome by the fascists a few days before Rome's liberation.

E. Sereni and E. Colorni



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