What's in a Name? From People to Data and Back
Visual Essay

Laura Brazzo

> What's in a name? That which we call a
> rose by any other name would smell as
> sweet
> *W. Shakespeare*

The exhibition *What's in a Name?* took place in autumn 2018 at the Palazzo della Triennale in Milan. The exhibition, devoted to the census of the Jews of Milan in 1938,[1] was the result of the cooperation of three different institutions which played a specific role in the making of the exhibition. The Historical Archives of the Municipality of Milan provided the original documents, the Department of History at the University of Milan carried out the historical analysis and created the database of those interviewed, while the Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center Foundation (CDEC Foundation) provided complementary data and coordinated the entire exhibition project.[2]

The exhibition was organized on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Fascist Antisemitic Laws promulgated in November 1938. In fact, the racial census of August 1938 was the first formal act of discrimination and segregation of the Jews from the rest of the population before the Antisemitic Laws. It was anticipated by

---

1   On 22 August 1938, the Fascist regime carried out a census of Italian and foreign Jews living on Italian soil based on the Diplomatic Bulletin n. 18. It was the first census based not on religion but on »race«. Mussolini had insisted on it in order to quantify the real Jewish presence in the country.

2   The exhibition was curated by Laura Brazzo (CDEC Foundation), Emanuele Edallo (Università Statale di Milano), and Daniela Scala (CDEC Foundation).

the *Manifesto della Razza* in July.[3] For some, but not for all, the census sounded like a warning of the dark times to come.

The Antisemitic Laws promulgated in November 1938 were a truly heart-breaking moment for the Jews living in Italy at that time.[4] Jews were fully integrated into Italian society at the time and any antisemitic measure seemed incomprehensible, and for many of them happened out of the blue.

On the eve of the racial census, it was estimated that there were approximately 50,000 Jews in Italy.[5] In Milan they were between 6,000 (according to the Union of Italian Jewish Communities) and 10,000 (according to the Ministry of the Interior) out of a population of more than 1 million.[6]

The census of August 1938 registered 70,826 people in the Kingdom of Italy, of whom 58,412 were of »Jewish race« according to the Fascist definition used in the census, that is, people born of at least one Jewish or ex-Jewish parent.[7]

---

3   The document commonly known as »Manifesto della razza« or »Manifesto degli scienziati razzisti« is officially entitled »Il fascismo e i problemi della razza« (»Fascism and the Problems of Race)«. It is the »work of a ›group of Fascist scholars […]under the auspices of the Ministry of Popular Culture««, organized around ten points. As Michele Sarfatti notes, this »›Decalogue‹ dealt with racialism in its entirety and, in this guise, also the anti-Jewish aspect. It affirmed the existence of ›human races‹ and especially of ›a pure Italian race,‹ defined as being of ›Aryan origin‹ and belonging to an ›Aryan civilization.‹ It argued unequivocally that ›the concept of race is a purely biological concept‹ and it proclaimed that ›Jews do not belong to the Italian race‹ and that, consequently, there were to be no mixed marriages with them.« M. Sarfatti, The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006, p. 128.

4   For more details and considerations about the number of Jews living in Italy in the 1930s see Michele Sarfatti, Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronaca dell'elaborazione delle leggi del 1938, Torino, Zamorani editore, 2017, pp. 143–188.

5   »In the Diplomatic Bulletin n. 18, of August 5, 1938, the Fascist Ministry of the Interior announced a special census to be carried out on August 22, 1938, of all the Jews, both citizens and non-citizens, living in the Kingdom of Italy at that date. Through the racial census, Benito Mussolini wanted to have the actual number of Jewish people in Italy, viewed (and counted) as ›belonging to a race‹ and no longer to a religion. The criterion adopted was to survey anyone born to at least one Jewish parent (even if they were not religious, or had abjured their faith). According to estimates done at the time, between 55,000 and 70,000 Jews lived in the Kingdom of Italy.« (»August 22, 1938: The Census of the Jews in Milan«, in: Catalogue of the exhibition »…What's in a Name?«, ed. by L. Brazzo, E. Edallo and D. Scala, Milan 2018.

6   On the Jewish people living in Milano on the eve of the census as well as on figures of the racial census see Emanuele Edallo, The racial census of 22 August 1938: the first political persecutory act of anti-Semitic fascist policy in Italy. An overview and the Milan case study, in: Journal of Modern Jewish Studies, 2021, DOI:10.1080/14725886.2021.1872209

7   Sarfatti states that »58,412 persons in the realm born from at least one Jewish or ex-Jewish parent, of whom 48,032 were Italian and 10,380 were foreigners who had been in the country for at least six months. Among them, ›actual Jews'— those who were enrolled in a Community, or who at least had declared that they were Jews—numbered 46,656 (37,241 Italians

Regarding the city of Milan in particular, around 11,500 people were surveyed, of which 10,591[8] were considered »belonging to the Jewish race« (according to the Fascist definition mentioned above). Among these 10,591, 6,531 were Italian nationals, 3,818 were foreigners, and 242 declared no nationality.[9]

The more we worked on the exhibition, the clearer it became that we needed to convey some key concepts to the audience: first, the idea of the census as a count of thousands of people. Second, the idea of the census as a clear caesura—in the lives of individuals, in the society of the time, and also, from another perspective, in the history of our country. With these and other concepts in mind, we asked ourselves: how can we communicate them to the public? What kind of exhibition do we have to design in order to make these concepts immediately clear and comprehensible to a general audience, without forcing visitors to read complicated texts?

As historians and archivists, we considered a traditional documentary exhibition. But the documents at our disposal—the census sheets—are not exactly appealing to the public for several reasons: the sheets are oversized—each sheet is one metre long—they look identical except for the data, and they are handwritten, so they are not always easy to read.

We could have exhibited some samples of census sheets, accompanied by a detailed historical and explanatory apparatus to explain everything, but visitors do not always have the time and patience to read long texts, sometimes complicated, sometimes objectively boring. Moreover, this solution would have made it difficult to convey the dimensions of the census and to express the wound it inflicted on individual lives and on society as a whole.

We then considered a completely different solution: a digital exhibition, using the fully extracted data from the census sheets. It was the database of 10,591 records created by Emanuele Edallo in his research on the census, integrated with data on the impact of the antisemitic measures and with data coming from the Holocaust victims dataset. But while this solution had some advantages, there were also many downsides, given our aims. A major disadvantage of the digital solution was that such a digital display would only have allowed a limited number of records to be displayed on a digital screen, however large. It would not have been possible to get

---

and 9,415 foreigners). The remaining 11,756 broke down into various categories, the principal consisting of persons who had abandoned Judaism (approximately 2,600), and of a group of non-Jewish children who were the offspring of racially mixed marriages (a little more than 7,000).« M. Sarfatti, The Jews in Mussolini's Italy, 2006, p. 127.

8   In his more recent article, Emanuele Edallo provides updated data about the surveyed people in Milan, that is 10,596 people considered »belonging to the Jewish Race«. See Emanuele Edallo, The racial census of 22 August 1938, 2021, p. 16). In this article we refer to the data and figures used in the 2018 exhibition and in the exhibition catalogue.

9   August 22, 1938: The Census of the Jews in Milan, in: Catalogue of the exhibition »…What's in a Name?«, 2018.

a full picture of the scale of the census in terms of the number of people involved. In both cases, with either the traditional or the digital solution, we would not have been able to convey the idea of the scale and significance of the racial census.

So what was left? A list of names, the list of names from the database. At some point, a ›wall of names‹ combined with some samples of the census sheets seemed to be the right solution. Following this idea, we commissioned two architects to design a ›wall‹. Annalisa de Curtis and Guido Morpurgo designed a freestanding wall to be installed in the atrium of the Palazzo della Triennale, the venue that we as curators had identified as the most powerful and meaningful venue for our exhibition. The architects adopted many of our concepts and tried to convey them on the wall, especially the idea of rupture and *caesura*.

The wall was designed to make visiting the exhibition an emotional experience in itself. Indeed, the wall could have been enough on its own, thanks to its characteristics: covered with the names of the Jews who were surveyed and then persecuted simply because they were Jews, it seems to fall on the visitor, recalling the shocking effects of the fascist antisemitic measures; the wall stands in the middle of one of the most relevant and significant cultural places in Milan, inaugurated in 1936, at the height of the Fascist era.

But something was still missing: the individual subjects. Names are not individuals. The racial census of 28 August 1938 was a brutal but not fatal blow for the Jews: for the first time since emancipation, they were effectively discriminated against and treated differently from other Italians. Our aim was to convey the idea, the concept of a »wound,« a »rupture«, a turning point in the lives of the Jews living in Italy. The wall of names is reminiscent of a tombstone. And that was not what we wanted.

Finally, we had the right idea. At the time, I was completely fascinated by the work of Giorgia Lupi and her »Data Humanism«[10]. I contacted her and discussed the concepts we intended to present and communicate to the audience through our exhibition. She accepted the challenge of transforming our rich but aseptic dataset into a visual narrative—in other words, translating our list of names and data into ›data portraits‹ that could represent real individuals. Using colours and symbols, these portraits were able to provide information about each person, including their gender, age, origin, occupation, and even their fate—whether they survived or not.

Each of the 10,591 data portraits is based on information from the dataset of Jews surveyed in 1938 (and subsequent race verification procedures), as well as the dataset of victims of the Shoah in Italy. The merging of these different datasets and research projects has made it possible to present a single picture of the persecution of the Jews of Milan throughout the entire period of Jewish persecution—from 1938 to 1943, which includes the period of the racial census and the application of antisemitic laws. Furthermore, it covers the period from 1943 to 1945, during which Jews

---

10   http://giorgialupi.com/data-humanism-my-manifesto-for-a-new-data-wold

were arrested and deported to death camps, sought refuge in Switzerland, or went into hiding in Nazi-occupied Italy.[11]

The 5x20 metre steel wall, designed by the architects Morpurgo-de Curtis, was covered with a special fabric printed over with the sequence of the 10,591 data portraits created by Giorgia Lupi and the Accurat Studio in Milan. The result is a monumental and impressive *affresco* of all the people who were surveyed and subsequently persecuted both in their rights and in their lives.

Fig. 7: Census sheet, CDEC Foundation Archive.

---

11   Giorgia Lupi, Data Portrait, in: Catalogue of the Exhibition »...What's in a Name?«, 2018, 16.

Figure 8: Detail of the database created by Emanuele Edallo integrated with data from the CDEC's Database of the Victims of the Holocaust.

Figure 9: Examples of Data Portraits. Catalogue of the Exhibition »...What's in a Name?«, ed. by. L. Brazzo, E. Edallo, D. Scala, Milan 2018, p. 17.
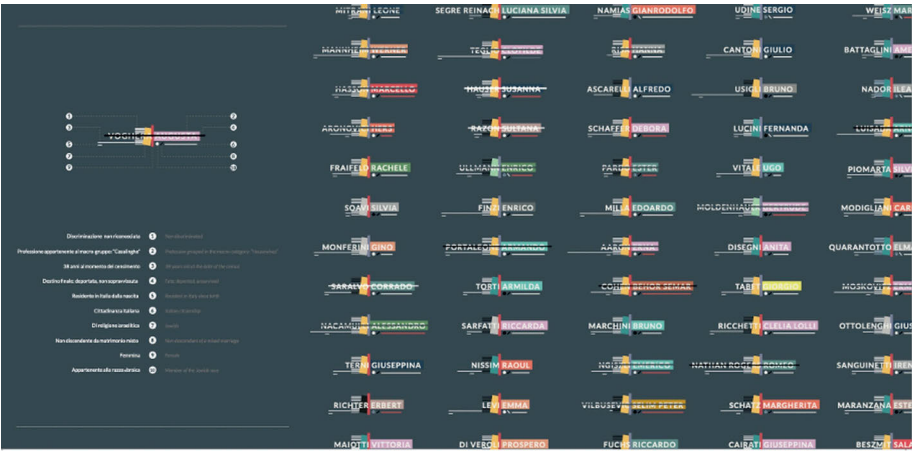

Figure 10: Legend of Data Portraits. Catalogue of the Exhibition »...What's in a Name?«, ed. by L. Brazzo, E. Edallo, D. Scala, 2018.

Figure 11: Views of the back of the wall in the exhibition »...What's in a Name?« at the Palazzo della Triennale, Milano 23 October – 18 November 2018.

Figure 12: View of the right side of the wall in the exhibition »...What's in a Name?« at the Palazzo della Triennale, Milano 23 October – 18 November 2018.

Figure 13: Detail of the wall with data portraits.