

A Case of Racial Discrimination: Azeglio Bemporad, astronomer poet



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The stories from our archives do not only speak of scientific progress, tools and data, but also of the events of the astronomers as men, and the intertwining of their work and private, political and social life. In the case of Azeglio Bemporad, who worked at Catania Astrophysical Observatory until 1938, year of purge against Jews in Italy, the painful history of Fascism enters fully our scientific institutions, changing the life of a person who had never dealt with politics.



Fig. 1 - Azeglio Bemporad, Annibale Riccò and others, Catania, November 1908. (Photo courtesy of Serafino Cerulli-Irelli, descendant of Vincenzo Cerulli.)

Azeglio Bemporad, born in Siena on March 19th 1875, attended the Liceo Classico Forteguerra in Pistoia, and the humanities remained a true love for him, in spite of his great passion for science. He got a degree in mathematics from the Scuola Normale in Pisa in 1898, then – after a period of further study at the Observatories in Heidelberg and Potsdam, he returned to Italy, where in 1904 he was appointed assistant astronomer in Catania. (Fig.1)

Annibale Riccò (1844-1919) entrusted him with managing the Celestial Photography Calculation Office for the purpose of producing an Astro-photographic Catalogue because the Catania Observatory was one of the participants in the ambitious international “La Carte du Ciel” project.

In 1912 Bemporad won a public competition and was director of the Specola in Capodimonte, Naples, (Fig. 2) and from there he continued to contribute intensively and passionately to the catalogue, publishing 33 of the 64 volumes which constitute the full work.

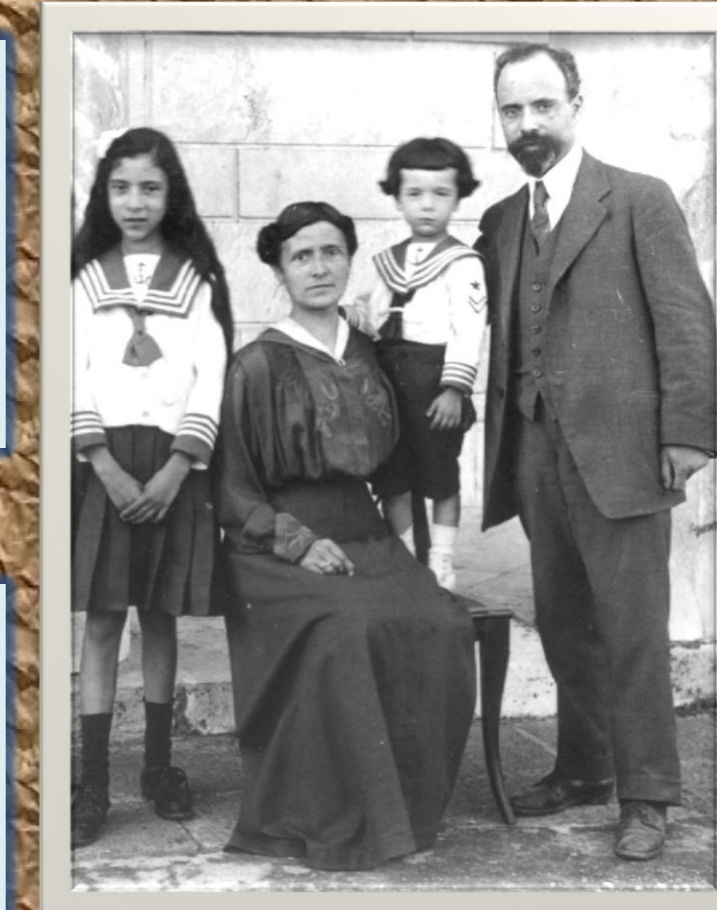
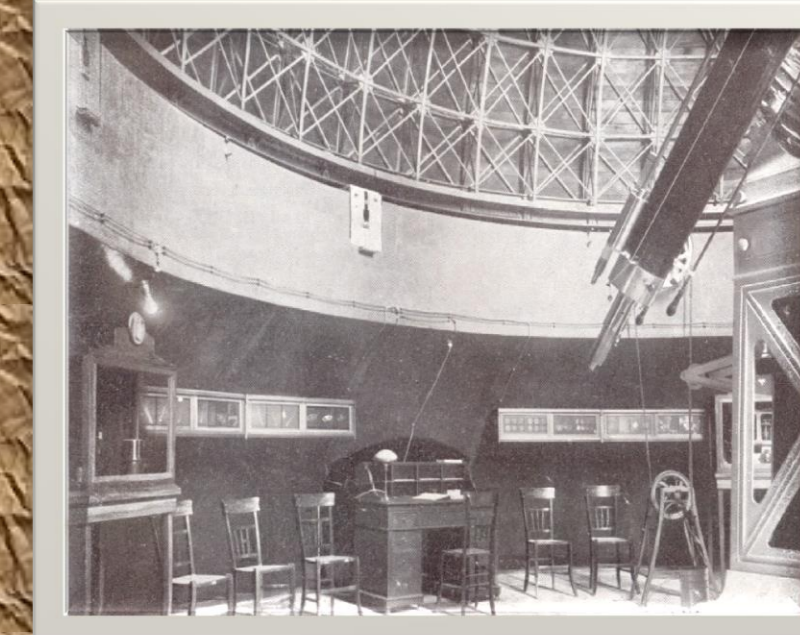


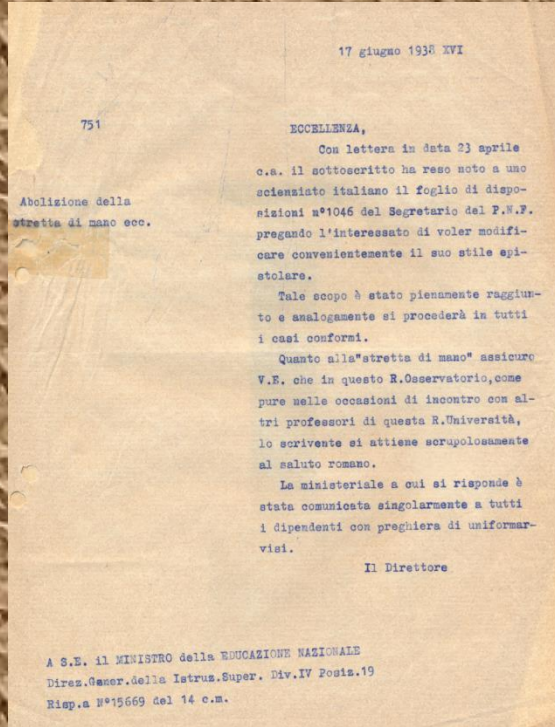
Fig. 2 - Azeglio Bemporad and his family in Naples, 1917. (Photo courtesy of Serafino Cerulli-Irelli, descendant of Vincenzo Cerulli.)

In 1933 he returned to Catania as Director of the Observatory. During those years Bemporad, tireless even after days of intensive scientific work, held for the “comitive dopolavoristiche” [workers’ clubs] who spent their “Fascist Saturdays” visiting the Observatory, a series of learned conferences where science, poetry and literature were closely intertwined. His poetic vein, associated with a simple and amiable presentation, made these moments extremely pleasant for the attending public. (Fig. 3)

Fig. 3 - The diorama at Catania Astrophysical Observatory where Bemporad held his conferences on science, poetry and literature.



This lasted until 1938, the painful year when racial laws were passed and, as a consequence, due to his Jewish origins, he was discharged from his post. In 1938/XVI, as the anti-Jewish laws were being passed in Fascist Italy, a few persecutory norms – some of them quite serious – were introduced through administrative provisions. As a matter of fact, the official correspondence from the Ministry for National Education during the year is characterized by a series of “circular letters”, “directives” and “recommendations”. Almost all of the notices from the Ministry regarded the regulations stipulated by “His Excellency the Party Secretary”. Azeglio Bemporad answered promptly and guaranteed compliance with these regulations, as we can read in the draft letter dated June 17th, 1938 index no. 751, regarding: “Abolition of the handshake etc.”, addressed to “His Excellency the Minister for National Education”, in which he wrote: **“Your Excellency, with the letter dated 23 April of this year, the undersigned informed an Italian scientist about provision sheet no. 1046 from the Secretary of the National Fascist Party, asking the person concerned to adopt a more convenient style of letter writing. This purpose has been fully achieved and, by the same token, this procedure will be followed in all similar cases. As for the handshake, Your Excellency can rest assured that at this R. Observatory, as well as on all occasions involving meetings with other professors in this R. University, the undersigned always uses the Roman salute. The Ministerial notice to which this is a reply has been individually notified to all staff, asking them to comply therewith. The Director”** (see doc.1)



Doc. 1

Particular mention should also be made of Circular Letter no. 12336 dated August 9th 1938/XVI, from Cabinet of Minister of National Education, Giuseppe Bottai (1895-1959) (see doc.2), which read as follows:

**From: MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION – CABINET
Rome, August 9th 1938/XVI No. 12336
TO ALL SUBORDINATE AUTHORITIES
SUBJECT: Census of staff of Jewish race. –**

I hereby send a congruous number of forms for the census of staff of Jewish race, informing that the forms themselves will have to be distributed to all of those who hold any position (permanent or non-permanent) at the subordinate offices, institutes and schools – even if private – included, for Universities and high schools, guest lecturers (even if not currently teaching), inviting to be filled out and signed, under the personal responsibility of the applicant.

The forms, divided according to staff categories, will have to be returned to the General Directorate in charge at this Ministry as soon as possible, and, in any case, not later than the end of September.

The forms will have to include an attached summary issued by the authority in charge indicating:

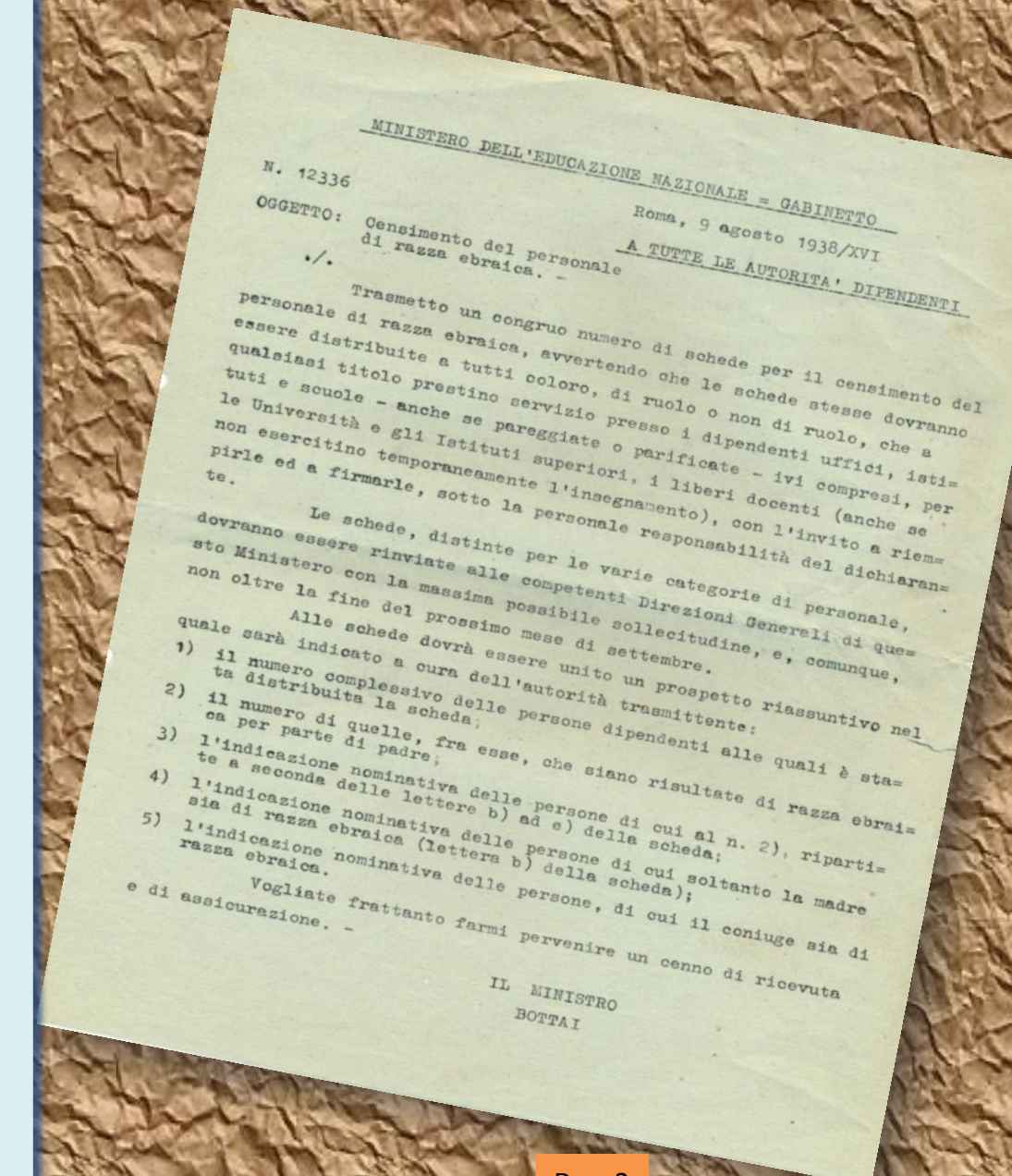
- 1) the total number of employed people who received the form;**
- 2) the number of those, among them, of Jewish race on their father's side;**
- 3) the names of the people indicated in 2), divided according to letters b) and e) on the form;**
- 4) the names of the people whose mother only is of Jewish race (letter b) on the form);**
- 5) the names of the people whose spouse is of Jewish race.**

In the meantime, please acknowledge receipt and confirm acceptance.

THE MINISTER BOTTAI

This letter was followed by the State Telegram dated August 16th, signed by Bottai, which read as follows:

“This is to inform you that any authorisation granted to date to lecturers and assistants of non-Italian race to participate in any capacity in Conferences or similar events abroad is hereby repealed. Please make sure that this is done and inform me by telegram. Also please observe carefully any provision already passed by virtue of which anyone wishing to participate in conferences and other events with international relevance, even if in a private capacity, shall not in any case do so unless explicit ministerial authorization has been granted”; carbon copy sent to “The Director of the R. Osservatorio Astronomico in Catania”, to which, on the 19th of August, the following reply was sent: **“No authorisation granted. Ensure compliance with provisions. The Director Bemporad**



Doc. 2

In December 1938/XVI, Azeglio Bemporad, after having been forced to abide by all the provisions passed by the Government with regard to Jews, had to abandon his work, studies and ambitions as astronomer, handing everything over to Luigi Taffara (1881-1966), as Director-in-charge. Also the proposal which he had submitted to the ministry for completing work on the Astro-photographic Catalogue, completing its volumes totally free of charge, was rejected, and the assignment was transferred to Giuseppe Alessandro Favaro through the following letter:

**From: MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION
Rome, February 11th 1939/XVII No. 845
SUBJECT: Catania Astrophysical Observatory Delivery made by Prof. Bemporad Azeglio to dr. Luigi Taffara**

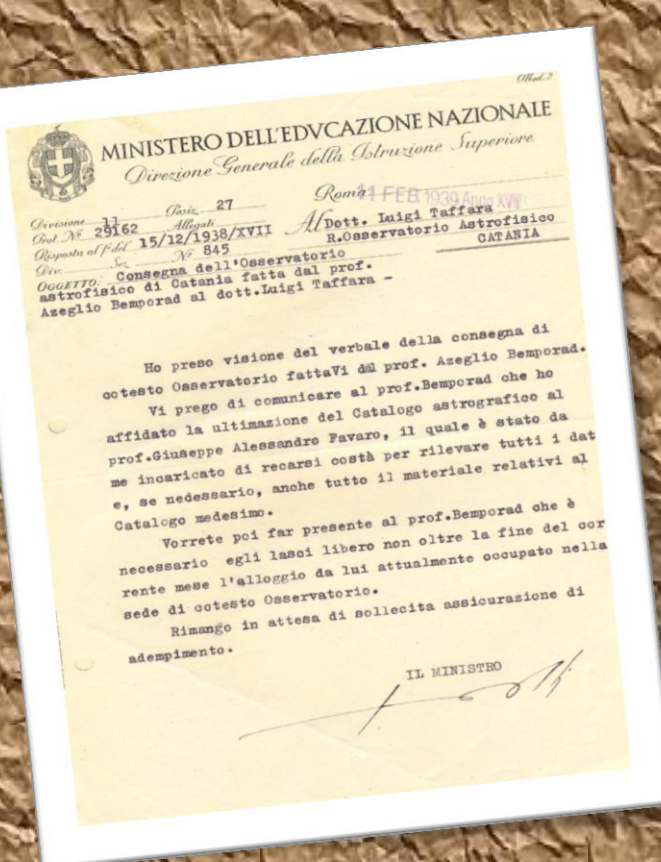
I have read the Observatory delivery report by prof. Azeglio Bemporad. Please communicate to Prof. Bemporad that I entrusted the completion of the astrographic catalogue to prof. Giuseppe Alessandro Favaro, who was appointed by me to go there and detect all the data, and if necessary, all the material related to the catalogue. Then you will want to communicate to prof. Bemporad that no later than the end of the current month he must leave the accommodation currently occupied by him in the Observatory. I look forward to an assurance of performance. (see doc. 3)

It was a tremendous blow to see the work on the Catalogue taken away from him, to which he had devoted such passionate and constant effort throughout his lifetime and for which he had received recognition at international level. Indeed, during the International Astronomical Union Congress in Paris in 1935, he had been officially praised for making so much progress as regards the calculation and publishing work of the volumes in the Catania area, compared to other observatories.

In the early months of 1939, he was forced to leave his quarters at the Observatory where he lived with his family. Other painful events followed this adversity: he moved to Adrano, at the foot of Mount Etna, and in 1943 his wife Annita Cingoli (1873-1943) died of a serious illness; then his house was burnt down by a fire caused by bombing during an air raid, which he miraculously escaped as did his son Guido and daughter Bice.

At last, on the 28th of December 1943, the allied forces invaded the island; he was reinstated in his capacity as Director, but he was no longer able to conduct any scientific work due to ill health. He died in Catania on the 11th of February, 1945.

In our view, the most fitting words to remember him by are those of Salvatore Taffara (1908-1984): **“As a true scientist's and poet's soul, he treated everybody well; beyond political ideas, religious beliefs or social attitudes, he considered everyone as a fellow human being, always with a sweet smile of infinite kindness on his lips”.**



Doc. 3