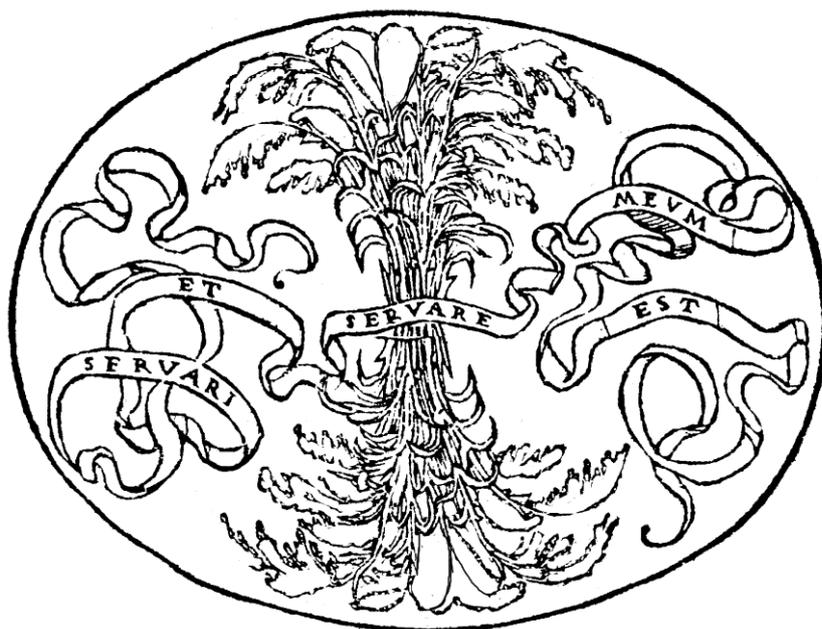


STUDI  
DI  
**MEMOFONTE**

*Rivista on-line semestrale*

Numero 22/2019



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ISSN 2038-0488

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**«THE CHAIR WITH THE GREEN BACK AND YELLOW FLOWERS».  
FURNITURE AND OTHER PROPERTY BELONGING TO JEWISH FAMILIES IN  
TRIESTE DURING SECOND WORLD WAR: THE FRIGESSI AFFAIR**

Dopo la guerra  
l'anima triste  
le membra dolenti  
ritorniamo a Trieste  
adolescenti  
[...]  
Inviati in missione  
(familiare)  
adolescenti per cercare  
nella città morente  
palazzi all'alba

ancora coperti da borchie verdi  
mobili, armadi e sedie, specchi,  
tavoli, poltrone e libri  
la residenza dei vivi

Nulla era più sacro  
degli arredi di casa  
ove si esprimeva la vita  
degli esili inconsapevoli  
[...]  
Figli diciottenni,  
scampati alla morte,  
dietro alle porte  
a occhieggiare  
nelle altrui dimore  
le memorie

Si chiedeva con voce  
sommessa: avete la sedia  
con lo schienale verde  
e i fiori gialli  
e rosa?<sup>1</sup>

This poem, *Missione a Trieste (Mission to Trieste)*, comes from the poetry collection *Un cielo senza porte (A sky without doors)*, written by Adolfo Frigessi and published in 2002. After the war, a group of Jewish teenagers went back to Trieste to look for some pieces of furniture that had belonged to their families, searching for their identity. They peeped into the doors of the

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I'm grateful to Anna Millo for her kind suggestions, and to the Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà (RAS) archive in Trieste and the Intesa San Paolo archive in Milan for their helpfulness.

<sup>1</sup> FRIGESSI 2002, pp. 11-12: «After the war / the sad soul / the painful limbs / we go back to Trieste / teenagers / [...] Sent on a (familiar) mission / teenagers to look for / in the dying city / palaces at dawn / still covered by green studs / furniture, wardrobes and chairs, mirrors, / tables, armchairs and books / the dwelling of the living / Nothing was more sacred / than home furnishings / where the life of unconscious exiles / was expressed / [...] Eighteen years old children, / escaped death, / behind the doors / to peep / in other people's homes / the memories / We asked in a soft voice: / do you have the chair / with the green back / and the yellow and pink flowers?» [translation by the article's author].

buildings, trying to recognize those objects that had been theirs, and asking the occupants for some information.

Cerco solo i mobili!  
Ma egli non li conosce,  
lui che dorme nel letto  
della nostra governante  
che di notte leggeva la Bibbia e Schopenauer<sup>2</sup>

The poem recalls the story of the author's family, forced to leave Trieste in September 1943, as the region became a province of the German *Operational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral*, under the High Commissioner Friedrich Rainer<sup>3</sup>.

The author was Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma's son, the President of the insurance company RAS – Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà, until 1938. Born in Trieste in 1881, Arnaldo Frigessi belonged to a prestigious Jewish family with deep Hungarian roots, the Frigessy von Racz-Almási<sup>4</sup>. A businessman of great talent and an international reputation, he began his career at the RAS in 1901, and managed to expand the company's interests outside Europe, from Morocco and Egypt to Syria, Iraq and the Far East. In 1939, he encouraged the organization of an exhibition dedicated to the RAS centennial. The exhibition, subdivided into 11 sections, was to be transformed into a permanent museum.

After the racial laws, he managed to be declared «not belonging to the Jewish race», thanks to his 'fascist credits', since he could demonstrate he that had joined the Fascist party in September 1922<sup>5</sup>. In spite of this, he resigned from his position as President and remained in the RAS as Director. He was replaced by his friend Fulvio Suvich, who had helped him to achieve the so-called *discriminazione* (discrimination).

New problems were to arise after the war. On May 13, 1945, Frigessi was arrested in Florence by the Allies, and imprisoned for some months in the Allied concentration camp at Collescipoli, near Terni. He was never formally informed what his charges were. The Allied Military Government removed him from his office and he became the object of a violent campaign by the American Jewish lobby<sup>6</sup>. In May 1947, thanks to the support of the American President Harry Truman, Frigessi was re-established in his former office at the RAS.

Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma represents a very interesting case of the Fascist Jews' situation. As Michele Sarfatti underlines, «the history of Fascist Jews still awaits to be fully researched in its complexity»<sup>7</sup>. At the beginning, the political program of the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF, National Fascist Party) did not include anti-Jewish views or aims. Until 1938, therefore, Italian Jews could join the PNF, become involved in the party's life and take important administrative roles. After the racial laws, Jewish people were not allowed to belong to the Fascist Party anymore. Jews who had acquired particular merits in the First World War, towards the nation or Fascism could be exempted from some persecutory measures: this particular exemption was called *discriminazione*.

On September 24, 1938, Arnaldo Frigessi and his wife, Nidia Castelbolognese, declared before a notary they intended to leave the Jewish community of Trieste<sup>8</sup>. His wife, born in

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<sup>2</sup> FRIGESSI 2002, p. 13: «I'm only looking for furniture! / But he does not know / he who sleeps in the bed / of our housekeeper / that at night read the Bible and Schopenauer» [translation by the article's author].

<sup>3</sup> BRASCA 2017, and related bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> BAGLIONI 1998; MILLO 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Archivio storico RAS-Allianz, Trieste, (from now on: RAS), RAS – Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà, Raccolta storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnaldo Frigessi, Juin 22, 1936.

<sup>6</sup> BAGLIONI 1998.

<sup>7</sup> SARFATTI 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Archivio storico Intesa San Paolo, Milano, Banca Commerciale Italiana (from now on: BCI), Fondo 9, Archivio Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma, b. 140, f. 7, September 24, 1938.

Trieste, was well-known for her deep patriotic feelings. She was registered in the Fascio femminile (the Fascist feminine party), and all their children were baptised and enrolled in the GIL, Gioventù Italiana del Littorio<sup>9</sup>.

To be exempted from the application of the racial laws, Frigessi undertook the process to be declared *Aryan*, submitting a Curriculum Vitae that underlined the «spirito fascista» (Fascist spirit) that had pervaded all his activity<sup>10</sup>. In 1941, the Municipality of Trieste informed him that his request to be declared not belonging to the Jewish race had been accepted<sup>11</sup>.

Nevertheless, in September 1943, after the German occupation, he was forced to leave Trieste and flee with his family in a cattle wagon to the South of Italy. Under the false name of Giuseppe Mariani, and with false documents, he lived in Perugia, near Salerno, and finally in Rome.

During the war, Frigessi had secured some precious personal objects in the RAS vault, in order to protect them from possible risks associated with the conflict. Between January and August 1941, he deposited some wooden crates closed with padlocks, a closed basket, some tin boxes with padlocks and sealed envelopes, war bonds and «un quadro di valore» (a precious painting), without any further description, in the security cell. Between February and December 1942, he deposited tin boxes closed with a padlock, crates and trunks, sealed envelopes, a hatbox, carpets, Japanese vases, and 3 packed paintings by well-renowned artists<sup>12</sup>.

Nothing more is known about the paintings. There's only a hint of them in the claim by Nidia Castelbolognese, presented in September 1954. She listed silverware, dinnerware, precious glassware, a golden cigarette box, 2 fur cloaks, clothes, a little locked wooden box containing private letters, and added: «Non credo sia qui il caso di elencare i mobili, i quadri, le stampe, e 13 tappeti, e le porcellane artistiche che ci furono confiscate»<sup>13</sup>.

On October 7, 1943, the German Security Police asked the RAS for the lists of Frigessi's valuables and objects. On October 13, they confiscated 13 precious carpets, issuing a regular receipt. The RAS worried about its responsibilities since it was the depository of Frigessi's property, and secretly wrote to Bruno Coceani, the *Prefetto* (Head of the Province), of Trieste. On October 22, the German Police Commander communicated the sequester and the confiscation of Frigessi's movable and immovable property<sup>14</sup>. As Daria Brasca reminds us, «The decision of the Third Reich to confiscate and to manage the artworks Jewish owned, [...], has to be considered as part of a wider policy framework regarding the control of the Alpe Adria territory»<sup>15</sup>.

As for cultural heritage, in the *Operational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral*, furniture was confiscated, and art collections and libraries were dismantled. High Commissioner Friedrich Rainer's decrees overrode those of the Italian Social Republic. Fausto Franco, the Superintendent of Monuments and Galleries in Friuli Venezia Giulia, often complained about being caught between a rock and a hard place: that is, between the Italian Ministry of

<sup>9</sup> BCI, Fondo 9, Archivio Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma, b. 140, f. 8, undated.

<sup>10</sup> BCI, Fondo 9, Archivio Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma, b. 30, f. 1, undated.

<sup>11</sup> BCI, Fondo 9, Archivio Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma, b. 140, f. 8, January 17, 1941.

<sup>12</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnaldo Frigessi, Elenco beni in cella.

<sup>13</sup> Archivio di Stato (from now on: ASTs), Trieste, Corte d'Appello III, b. 328, f. 13, Frigessi Nidia di Rattalma, September 1, 1954: «I do not think it appropriate here to list the furniture, paintings, prints, 13 carpets, and the artistic porcelains that were confiscated» [author's translation].

<sup>14</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnaldo Frigessi, G. Ruiz to Bruno Coceani, November 15 1943. See also: Promemoria per il Prefetto, February 11, 1944.

<sup>15</sup> BRASCA 2017, p. 100.

Education's orders and those of the German High Commissioner<sup>16</sup>. On November 15, 1943, Fausto Franco issued a note not only to ask for information about military occupations of historical buildings and war damages, but also to urge the *Prefetti*, Archbishops, Bishops, and Honorary Inspectors to prevent or control the illicit trade of artworks and their illegal exportation<sup>17</sup>.

On August 1, 1944, the RAS informed the *Prefettura* that the German Police intended to draw up a list of the objects belonging to Frigessi, and asked for appropriate measures<sup>18</sup>. On August 4th, the Supreme Commissioner ordered Hella Sauli to withdraw the crates and trunks stored in the RAS vault's locked room. The door was forced, and three trunks, a straw basket and two crates were handed over to Hella Sauli, who issued a regular receipt<sup>19</sup>. Furniture, paintings, carpets, artistic porcelains, prints, commemorative coins were looted.

Jewish furniture and property could be sent to Germany, sold through auctions or reused in different flats. When the Allies entered Trieste, they requisitioned some apartments, and sometimes got rid of the furniture they did not need, thus contributing to the dispersal of the objects. In 1950, the caretakers of an apartment block in Trieste, Francesco Deplicher and Francesca Janesich, were brought to trial. One of the apartments had been occupied by a woman working for the SS during the war. She was offered the opportunity to furnish it with Jewish pieces of furniture. In May 1945, the Allies removed all the objects they didn't need, and gave them to the caretakers, who accepted the gift. When the rightful owners returned and claimed their property back, the doorkeepers were accused of having received stolen goods, sentenced to 3 months in jail, and fined 300 lire. The Court of Appeal annulled the sentence because of the Amnesty issued by the Allied Military Government on March 2, 1946, General Order 46<sup>20</sup>.

The Allies' Jewish Property and Claims Office in Trieste organized some displays of the recovered objects in order to return them to the rightful owners. The exhibitions were publicized in the local newspapers, such as «Il Giornale Alleato», published by the Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories from 1945 to 1947. Small groups of claimants (two or three a day) were called to examine the objects and see if they could recognize them as their own.

In March 1945, Arnaldo Frigessi wrote to Dario Zaffiropulo, RAS Administration Director in Trieste, inquiring about his property's situation: «Sono preparato al peggio e quindi mi dica apertamente tutto, sia riguardo al mio appartamento di Trieste, dell'ammobigliamento [sic] e arredamento che è rimasto o che non c'è più e di quanto avevo nella cella della Compagnia, sulla situazione delle mie case e della mia campagna di Medea, su quello che era rimasto a Grado, su quel pochissimo che era rimasto nella villa di Opicina, sia sui miei titoli, sui miei conti in Banca e se sapete qualche cosa della villa di Cortina. [...] Io e la mia famiglia stiamo bene, dopo aver passato dapprima un periodo di completo isolamento nascosti a Roma e, dopo la liberazione, aver vissuto qui a Roma un altro periodo irto di difficoltà materiali e di preoccupazioni per il nostro paese, per la nostra Compagnia ed anche per mia figlia Laura, da cui per lunghi lunghi mesi non avevamo nessuna notizia»<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Archivio Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio (from now on: CISA), Vicenza, Archivio Fausto Franco, Cassa 17/11, b. R. Soprintendenza di Trieste, Roma, April 12 1945, Fausto Franco to Carlo Someda de Marco [archive being reorganised].

<sup>17</sup> Archivio CISA, Vicenza, Archivio Fausto Franco, Cassa 17/11, b. R. Soprintendenza di Trieste, November 15, 1943 [archive being reorganised].

<sup>18</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnaldo Frigessi, Promemoria per la prefettura, August 1, 1944.

<sup>19</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnaldo Frigessi, Verbale di consegna, August 4, 1944.

<sup>20</sup> *IL MOBILIO DEGLI EBREI* 1950.

<sup>21</sup> BCI, Fondo 9, Archivio Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma, b. 30, f. 3, Arnaldo Frigessi to Dario Zaffiropulo, March 30, 1945: «I'm prepared for the worst and so please openly tell me everything, both in regard to my apartment in Trieste, the furniture and furnishings that have remained or that there are no more and what I had in the cell of

In May 1945, a survey was conducted in Frigessi's villa in Medea. The building was being used as an institute for war orphans; furniture and linen brought from Trieste were still on place, but nearly all the other objects had been removed by the Germans<sup>22</sup>. As Frigessi wrote to Dario Zaffiropulo, they were very worried about the condition of their estate. His lawyer, Corrado Jona, had told them that some silver items, stolen from his apartment or from the crates deposited at the RAS, had been recovered in Trieste and exhibited at the *Mostra delle cose rubate dai tedeschi* organized by the Allies. His wife was planning to go to Trieste at the beginning of January 1946, to check out the objects and determine if they were theirs. He had also been informed that his car Artena had been taken by the Germans, issuing a regular receipt, and that the fine wines he had hidden in the RAS' vault had been stolen, «ma non per mano tedesca!»<sup>23</sup>.

At that time, Frigessi was living in Rome: «Per ora stiamo a Roma anche perché a Trieste non possiamo mettere su casa avendo perso troppo di tutto quanto formava il nostro *home* e perché il nostro appartamento è requisito [...], ma del resto per ora non mi deciderei neppure a rientrare in quella città che si trova in una situazione tragicamente dolorosa, e fino a tanto che non saprò l'ulteriore sviluppo della mia situazione personale»<sup>24</sup>. The letter is in Italian, but the word *home* is in English.

On October 16, 1946, Arnaldo Frigessi presented a claim not only for the objects stored in the RAS' vault, but also for those removed from his apartments in 1943-1944: carpets, lamps, paintings, silverware, a coin collection and porcelain, 13.641.700 lire worth. This claim substituted the one presented by the RAS company on Frigessi's behalf to the Allied Government on August 10, 1945<sup>25</sup>. This claim only listed 13 carpets, 3 trunks, two crates and one basket of unknown contents, a hatbox containing foodstuffs and clothes, and a car Lancia Artena, license TS 7135<sup>26</sup>.

Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma died in 1950. The ministerial decree April 18, 1957 recognized the modest compensation of one million for the property that had been removed, the maximum limit set by Law December 27, 1953, n. 968, according to art. 26<sup>27</sup>.

On May 20, 1959, Nidia Castelbolognese wrote to the Commissariato generale in Trieste: «Vi comunico che mi è impossibile venire a Trieste per vari motivi. Né desidero affrontare, ancora una volta, l'emozione di rivedere la mia Trieste dove ho vissuto i tempi felici della mia vita [...]. Per il giudizio definitivo dell'assegnazione degli oggetti da me riconosciuti come di mia proprietà, mi affido al vostro senso di equità. I piatti che ho portato a Milano sono perfettamente eguali a quelli che ho dovuto lasciare a Trieste perché altre persone li avevano riconosciuti come loro proprietà. Avevo – durante la mia brevissima visita a Trieste

the Company, on the situation of my houses and of my estate in Medea, on what was left in Grado, on that very little that had remained in the Opicina villa, both on my titles, on my bank accounts and if you know something about the villa of Cortina. [...] My family and I are well. We spent a period of complete isolation hidden in Rome and, after the liberation, we have been living here in Rome another period fraught with material difficulties and concerns for our country, for our company and also for my daughter Laura, from whom we had no news for long long months» [author's translation].

<sup>22</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnaldo Frigessi, Dario Zaffiropulo to Arnaldo Contini, May 29, 1945.

<sup>23</sup> BCI, Fondo 9, Archivio Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma, b. 18, f. 2, Arnaldo Frigessi to Dario Zaffiropulo, December 28, 1945: «but not by the Germans!» [author's translation].

<sup>24</sup> BCI, Fondo 9, Archivio Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma, b. 140, f. 10, Arnaldo Frigessi to Mario Luzzato, December 7, 1945: «For the moment we're staying in Rome, since in Trieste we've lost too much of what constituted our home and because our apartment has been requisitioned [...] I would not even decide to return to that city which is in a tragically painful situation, and until I know the further development of my personal situation» [author's translation].

<sup>25</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnaldo Frigessi, December 22, 1966.

<sup>26</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnaldo Frigessi, August 10, 1945.

<sup>27</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnaldo Frigessi, December 22, 1966.

– consigliato i vostri esperti di rivolgersi – per il definitivo riconoscimento e relativa assegnazione al legittimo proprietario – [...] al Signor Momo Janessich, il noto gioielliere di Trieste. Fu infatti a lui che mio marito aveva ordinato il completo servizio di piatti di portata d'argento dei quali, secondo me, fanno parte quelli ancora in discussione. Il servizio fu consegnato a mio marito nel mese di Maggio o Giugno 1930. Penso che il signor Janessich sia la persona più qualificata a poter con certezza, dichiarare l'epoca della fattura dei piatti in questione»<sup>28</sup>.

On October 4, 1959, Nidia Castelbolognese delegated Ladislao Szalai, the RAS Director, to recover some objects she had previously recognized at the Commissione per la restituzione dei beni mobili confiscati agli ebrei. On October 17, she was sent some of the recovered objects: silver forks, spoons and trays<sup>29</sup>.

In 1967, the procedure for compensation was still ongoing<sup>30</sup>.

Finalmente qualche arredo  
è ritrovato  
ammucchiato in un cortile  
umido, come fotografie  
ancora bagnate.  
Ci siamo anche noi  
in bianco e nero,  
adolescenti in missione  
(familiare)<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> ASTs, Trieste, Corte d'Appello III, b. 328, f. 13, Frigessi Nidia di Rattalma, May 20, 1959: «I tell you it's impossible for me to come to Trieste for various reasons. Nor do I wish to face once again the emotional upset of seeing my Trieste where I had spent my life's happiest days [...] For the definitive judgment on the objects I recognized as belonging to my property, I rely on your sense of fairness. The dishes that I brought to Milan are exactly the same dishes I had to leave in Trieste because other people had recognized them as their property, too. During my short visit to Trieste, I had advised your experts – for the definitive recognition and assignment to the rightful owner – to contact Mr Momo Janessich, a well-known jeweler in Trieste. It was in fact to him that my husband ordered the service of silver serving dishes which, in my opinion, are those still under discussion. The service was delivered to my husband in May or June 1930. I think that Mr Janessich is the most qualified person to declare the time of the manufacturing of the dishes in question» [author's translation].

<sup>29</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnoldo Frigessi, October 17, 1959.

<sup>30</sup> RAS, Raccolta Storica (RS), b. 94, f. 172, Avv. Arnoldo Frigessi, January 11, 1967.

<sup>31</sup> FRIGESSI 2002, p. 16: «At last some furniture / is found / piled up in a wet courtyard, / like photographs still wet. / We are there too, / in black and white, / teenagers on a (familiar) / mission» [author's translation].

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## ABSTRACT

In September 1943, Trieste became a province of the German *Operational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral*. By the High Commissioner Friedrich Rainer's orders, furniture belonging to Jewish families was confiscated, and art collections and libraries were dismantled. In the autumn 1943, and in 1944, the Germans even confiscated Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma's property, notwithstanding he had been declared as «not belonging to the Jewish race», thanks to his 'fascist credits'. Arnaldo Frigessi represents an interesting case of the Fascist Jews' situation. After the war, he was arrested by the Allies, and imprisoned for some months in an Allied concentration camp.

Dal settembre 1943 Trieste era diventata una provincia della *Zona di Operazione Litorale Adriatico*. Per ordine del Supremo Commissario Friedrich Rainer vennero confiscati arredi e smantellate collezioni d'arte e biblioteche appartenenti a famiglie ebree. Fra l'autunno del 1943 e il 1944, furono confiscati anche i beni di Arnaldo Frigessi di Rattalma, che si era distinto per 'meriti fascisti', ed era stato dichiarato, di conseguenza, «non appartenente alla razza ebraica». Arnaldo Frigessi rappresenta un interessante caso della situazione degli ebrei fascisti. Nel dopoguerra venne arrestato dagli Alleati e imprigionato per alcuni mesi in un campo di concentramento alleato.