

LOCAL NEWS

Remembering a man of faith and talent

By **SPECIAL TO THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE** | Press-Enterprise
August 4, 2010 at 1:50 am

Mario Levi was born in the industrial city of Turin, Italy, in May 1914, less than 60 days before the outbreak of World War I. Turin is the origin of the “T” in the name of the Italian auto company FIAT. Translated fully, that company’s name means Italian Auto Factory of Turin.

Mario showed brilliance and academic talent, so he was accepted for study at the Royal Italian University of Turin. He grew up in fascist Italy where Benito Mussolini was dictator. While many readers of history look back on Mussolini as a buffoon and see his fascist rule as ridiculous and inefficient, Mario told another version of fascist Italy.

As a person of Jewish descent, Mario and his family and friends were viewed with suspicion and hostility by the nationalistic fascists. Mario recalled standing with thousands of his countrymen in Rome’s Piazza Venezia to hear a speech by Mussolini.

Throughout the speech, Young Fascists, some of the most fanatical followers of the dictatorship, kept Mario and his friends under close scrutiny.

Many people forget that the Italian Fascist Party was the model for Hitler's Nazi Party. Fascist Italy had concentration camps and frequently tortured and killed political opponents. Mussolini's Fascists held dictatorial power in Italy for 21 years until Allied defeats of Italy forced Mussolini and Italy out of the war. Hitler's dictatorship lasted only 12 years.

Dictatorship, totalitarianism, torture and killings were all abhorrent to Mario Levi, so he migrated to the United States in 1939. He settled in Southern California, where he married Janice Houghton and had three sons and one daughter.

Mario was drafted into the U.S. Army in March, 1941. Stationed in Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, he was seriously injured in a training exercise. He was discharged in July, 1943.

Using the G.I. Bill, Mario attended the University of Chicago, where he earned the master's degree in psychology in 1950.

Professionally, he worked for the U.S. Air Force as a psychologist in a civilian research unit. Later he served as a psychologist in the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco.

In matters of faith, Mario and Janice joined the Unitarian Universalist Church, that small sandstone church located in downtown Riverside next to the public library. He and his wife soon became leaders of that church.

Mario Levi is one example of the many European refugees who have added greatly to the talent pool of the United States. In 1990 Mario died at age 75. He is remembered by the inscription on the sign on the front lawn of the downtown Riverside Unitarian Universalist Church.

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