

## NATIONAL IDENTITY FROM OVERSEAS

**Martino Oppizzi** – In 1862, just one year after the foundation of the Kingdom of Italy, the Italian emigrants of the Egyptian city of Alexandria made a rather singular request to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Rome. They asked if they might establish an Italian college for the children of emigrants in their city. This represents the first milestone in the birth of a new institution, the Italian Schools Abroad, which came to form a network of more than a thousand establishments with more than a hundred thousand children at the beginning of the 20th century. It had a complex mission, that of both channelling the children of emigrants so as to connect them to their homeland and of establishing a new sense of national identity outside national borders. Emigrants in general felt above all linked to the region to which they belonged, and this represented an additional challenge for the Italian state because it had to forge an Italian identity, and not one that was Sicilian or Sardinian, or Tuscan, or that of a Lombard abroad. And this inevitably pushed teachers to apply certain policies in schools, for example to oppose dialects and the hybridizations that were being formed between Italian and Arabic in the countries of North Africa.

All the actors have left a lot of traces that I am studying at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs today. There are mountains of paper - we are talking about more than 7,000 boxes - the annual reports of local directors, for example, and lists of students. Sometimes there are educational programs, sometimes periodicals for children and if we are lucky, we also find albums of photographs or the homework of students.

Other documents reflect the political changes that took place during the 20th century, in particular the transition to the fascist regime when the Italian state set up a project for the totalitarian transformation of society in which children were pivotal. I have seen that in most cases the teachers played the game of the fascist regime. For example, when Mussolini's brother, Arnaldo, died in 1932, a teacher at the Italian primary school in Sfax had the students at her school write letters to Mussolini himself! To send condolences, of course, but also to express their support for the regime, so there are students who express both their emotional attachment to the regime and at the same time the penetration of fascist ideology in these schools. There were Jewish students in these schools, and in 1938 they found themselves almost marginalized from one day to the next and even expelled from these schools.

So every day I take advantage of this vast documentary repository to answer more general questions: how the Italian state shaped the sense of belonging to one's homeland while outside the nation, and how one lived an Italian childhood beyond national borders.

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