

Moisei Ginzburg's Studies in Milan (1910 – 1914) and Italian Architecture of the Early XX c

Anna Vyazemtseva^{1,*}

¹Scientific Research Institute of Theory and History of Architecture and Urban Planning, Branch of the Central Institute for Research and Design of the Ministry of Construction and Housing and Communal Services of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia

*Corresponding author. E-mail: anna.vyazemtseva@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Moisei Yakovlevich Ginzburg (1892 - 1946) - an outstanding architect of the XX century and one of the key figures of constructivism used to pass the first years of his studies in Europe and most of all – around 4 years - in Italy, in Milan, at the Brera Academy and, as it turned out, in Milan Polytechnic. The paper proposes to describe, on the basis of archival data, the conditions that formed Ginzburg's creative personality, the features of the architectural education system, the methods of teachers, the main trends in the architecture and urban planning of Italy of those years, in relation to the further work of the architect and his theoretical legacy, pointing out some possible influences and interactions.

Keywords: *Moisei Ginzburg, constructivism, architectural education, modern movement, Italy, Milan*

I. INTRODUCTION

Little is known about the years of studies Moisei Ginzburg (1892 – 1946), one of the leaders of Russian and Soviet constructivism and an undeniable protagonist of the international ‘modern movement’, that passed abroad, mostly in Italy.

All we have is a short mention in his autobiographical note for the GAHN (State Academy of Artistic Sciences), written in 1923 [1], a rather brief paragraph in the monograph by S.O. Khan-Magomedov [2], the only published biography of the architect and partially published Ph.D. thesis by Luka Skansi [3]. However, the five years that Moisei Ginzburg lived in Milan seem to have left an important, if not crucial, impact on his professional formation.

II. GINZBURG'S REASON FOR STUDYING ARCHITECTURE IN MILAN

We know from Ginzburg's autobiography that he left Minsk, where he was born in 1892, after graduating from the Commercial school in 1909, and lived ‘in the south of France and mostly in Italy’ where he ‘complete his studies at the architectural department of the Academy of Fine Arts’ till 1914 [1].

According to Khan-Magomedov's book, based

mostly on Ginzburg's private archive (now at the Schusev Museum of Architecture, Moscow), Ginzburg first had a short stay in Paris, where he studied architecture at the *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts*, and then in Toulouse, at the *École des beaux-arts et des sciences industrielles* [2]. Then, for undetermined reasons, Ginzburg preferred Milan, where, among academical studies, he ‘attended art history seminars and travelled extensively in Italy, studying and drawing monuments of Italian architecture’ [1].

This episode of architect's biography is rather uncommon not only because it shows the interest of the future protagonist of Avant Guard architecture in Italian, mostly classical, heritage, but also because it reveals his solid academic formation.

The choice to study abroad was not usual for Russian architects of that time. We know for example that his senior contemporaries, Ivan Zholtovsky (1867-1959), Ivan Fomin (1872-1936), Alexej Schusev (1873 – 1949), Vladimir Schukò (1878-1939), travelled to Italy as fellows of Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, after they had finished their studies. The protagonists of Russian architectural Avant-Guard – the Golosov brothers, Ilya (1883 – 1945) and Pantelejmon (1882-1945), as well as Konstantin Melnikov (1890 – 1974), never travelled to the Apennine Peninsula, and one of Vesnin brothers – Viktor (1882-1950), had seen the *Bel Paese* only in 1935. Vyacheslav Oltarzhevsky (1880-1966) studied in Vienna only for one year in 1906, when the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture – *MUZhVZ* was closed because of

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students' political manifestations [4]. Of course, the choice to pursue higher professional education abroad was supported by the very good financial condition of the Ginzburg's family. His father Yakov Ginzburg was a successful architect active in Minsk in the beginning of XX c. (according to Ginzburg's heirs' testimony), at the time of Russia's industrial growth, the start of its capitalist development and increasing middle class wealth. The idea to direct the son to architectural and construction studies at Europe's famous architectural schools, seems logical.

Yakov Ginzburg probably also had another reason to provide his son with a European education rather than having him attend the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts or the Imperial Polytechnic Institute in St. Petersburg, the capital of the Russian Empire. The 'Pale of Settlement' [5] – a law that was in act in Russia from 1791 till 1917 – forbade citizens of Jewish religion free movement and settlement on the territories of the Empire. The interdiction did not concern Jewish people baptised as Russian Orthodox, and some categories were exempt, including those with a degree from higher education. Moisei Ginzburg's diploma from the Commercial school of Minsk testifies his religious confession as "Jewish". Therefore, French and Italian institutes perhaps were the only possibility for him to obtain a professional degree. It is indicative that vast majority of other Russian students at the Milan Polytechnic, who studied there during the same period, came from the regions of the 'pale of settlement' along the western and southern borders of the Empire (cities and towns of contemporary Byelorussia and Ukraine) [6, 7]. It was perhaps not a coincidence that one of the very few other Soviet architects with an Italian degree was Boris Iofan (1891-1976), the famous winner of the Palace of Soviet competition in 1932 and the protagonist of the propaganda program of the 'assimilation of the past' ("*osvojenije nasledija*"). He too, was born in a family of Jews religion, in Odessa. He studied and then worked in Rome from 1914, and came back to Russia only in 1924, after the Revolution [8].

We can only hypothesise about why Ginzburg left Paris, a city that at the time was the world centre of arts and architecture, for less important cities as Toulouse and Milan. Although not as important as Paris, Milan, in early 1900, saw a period of rapid development. Following the Unification of Italy in 1861, the city had entered the era of industrial development, something that was reflected in its urban and social character. It is not a coincidence case that the building intended to celebrate the birth of the new country was the Trade Gallery, realised by Giuseppe Mengoni (1865 – 1867) in the central Piazza Duomo, next to the medieval Milan Cathedral with its neogothic façade. In the 1900s, Milan seemed an enormous construction site. Perhaps 18-years old Moisei Ginzburg had the same impression

as Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916) who in 1906, in a letter to his family, wrote: 'I am in a really amazing place. It is something terrible, strange and fascinating' [9]. In 1910, Boccioni joined the futurist movement, proclaimed a year earlier by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), and signed together with other artists (among them Carlo Carrà, Gino Severini, Giacomo Balla, Luigi Russolo) 'The Manifesto of futurist painting'. Boccioni was so impressed by the rapid growth of the city that he created a series of works with Milan construction sites, such as 'Houses at Porta Romana' (1909-1910, Banca Intesa San Paolo, Gallerie d'Italia di Piazza Scala, Milan) ("Fig. 1") or a huge canvas 'The City rises' (MoMA, New York, 1910-1911), experimenting with effects of light, local colours and transmission of movement.



Fig. 1. Umberto Boccioni, Houses at Porta Romana, 1909-10, Gallerie d'Italia di Piazza Scala, Milan.

III. PROGRAMS AND TEACHERS

As to Ginzburg himself, Khan-Magomedov's biography, based on the private archive of the architect and his family memories, has mentioning of the 'Milan Academy' [1],[2] as a main place of Ginzburg's studies, where he studied in the group of Gaetano Moretti, while 'trying to fill the gaps in his education [he] [...] attended classes in the local polytechnicum' [2]. The register of students from the Historical archives of the Brera Academy show, however, that Ginzburg followed the Academy as a student at the *Politecnico*, enrolled in *Architettura civile* (Civil Architecture), and that he only followed a few courses [10].

From 1865 to 1915, the discipline 'Architecture' of the graduate program of Civil Architecture at the *Politecnico* was held jointly with the Academy of Fine Arts of Brera, and classes were taught at Brera [11]. Ginzburg began to study in Brera in 1910 as a student of Civil Architecture at the *Politecnico* with the group of 2nd year of the preparatory course and followed the courses of *ornato e figura* (ornament and figure) and *architettura* (architecture).

The Archive of the Brera Academy, studied for the first time by Luka Skansi [3], has rather poor information on Ginzburg's activities. However, an

unexplored personal folder of Ginzburg's from the Politecnico Archive – *Moisé Ghinsburg, matricola* [student's card] n. 2234 [12] ("Fig. 2") contains some documents that reveal some information about his student years: his birth certificate and diploma from the Commercial school of Minsk with the translation in Italian, the requests for admission to the studies and to the exams. Ginzburg is present in the register of grades (unfortunately incomplete), with the list of the exams passed by each year, with results [6], [7].

The certificate testifies that Ginzburg, as expected, was excellent in drawing and calligraphy. He also obtained highest grade in chemistry, commercial correspondence and commercial arithmetic, as well as in 'God's Law' (Religion). He had 'good' in mathematics and sciences, but only 'sufficient' in Russian, French and German. In other words, his choice of future career seems to be not only the result of wanting to obey his father's will.

October 27, 1910, Ginzburg enrolled in the first preparatory course of the Department of Architecture of the Royal Higher Technical Institute of Milan (which at that time was called the *Politecnico*), having paid the stipulated fee of 75 Italian lire per year¹.

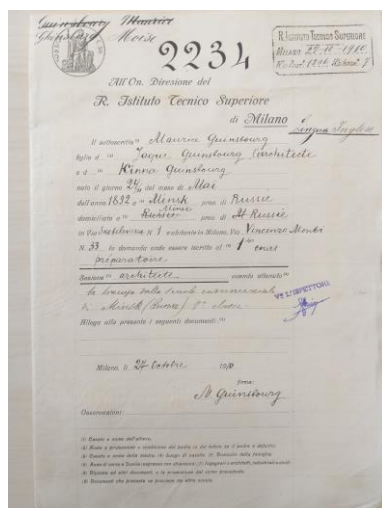


Fig. 2. Statement by Ginzburg M.Ya. on admission to 1st preparatory course at the Royal Higher Polytechnic Institute, section Architecture'. [12]

Ginzburg's first address in Milan – via Vincenzo Monti n. 33 – was in the Magenta area – a new bourgeois district a few minutes away from Donato Bramante's famous church, *Santa Maria delle Grazie* (1492), which hoess Leonardo's 'Last Supper' (1490s). Ginzburg's flat was also close to the Sforza Castle and the Sempione park, which had just been set up for the international exhibition opened in 1906, in honour of

the opening of the Simplon tunnel, which connected Milan to Central Europe. The Brera Academy was on the way to the *Politecnico*, then located in Piazza Cavour.

Lectures and exercises started on November 3, 1910. In total, 17 students studied at the preparatory course at the Department of Architecture, while, as a comparison, there were 385 students at the Engineering Department. The programme consisted of sciences, technical architecture disciplines and some subjects from the humanities. During the first two years, Ginzburg took courses in mathematical analysis, experimental physics, general inorganic chemistry, mineralogy and building material, ornament and figure, architecture and English, and he always obtained good grades [13]². He showed good results even in Italian language and literature – 7 of 10, not lower than his Italian classmates.

The Architecture course was directed by Gaetano Moretti (1860 – 1938) [14] who in 1908 had inherited it from Camillo Boito (1836-1914), a very important figure in Italian architecture in the late XIX c., and the founder of the department. During first two years (*scuola prepratoria*), the course was taught by the architect Giuseppe Boni (1882-1936) [15], just nominated professor of Academy of Fine Arts Brera. Boni was a young architect, just graduated as a Professor of architectural drawing in Rome and as a Civil Architect at the *Politecnico* of Milan. He had just won *ex aequo* the competition for the Chair of Architecture at Brera, and had started a promising career, obtaining a title as Honourable member of the Royal academy of Fine Arts in Bologna (1910), and then in Brera (1912). At the time, he had already realised some important projects. He operated in eclectic style with the elements of *stile floreale* ("Fig. 3"). He did not have a strong individual style, but combined his knowledge of the practical side of profession with an interest in the history of architecture, publishing some historical essays [16].



Fig. 3. Giuseppe Boni, Pavilion of Italy, Exhibition of books, Leipzig, 1914.

¹ Equal to around 300 EUR in 2020: <https://inflationhistory.com/>

² The journals of 1911/1912 and 1913/1914 are missing in the Politecnico's Archive.

Khan-Magomedov only mentions Gaetano Moretti (1860 – 1938) among Ginzburg's professors. Moretti taught the upper years – *scuola di applicazione*. «One of the most talented professors in the Milan Academy, known for his works within and beyond Italy» [2] had a lot of commissions in the field of great public buildings, but also was engaged in restoration and housing construction. He was disciple and collaborator of Camillo Boito and Luca Beltrami, the protagonists of the development of scientific restoration in Italy. Boito, the greatest architectural theorist of the XIX c., teaching the subject, gave architecture a philosophical basis that could be absorbed by Moretti and transferred to his students. Indeed, Ginzburg started his career with theoretical writings, first of all the *Rhythm in Architecture* (1923) [17], where his strong theoretic preparation is easily noticeable.



Fig. 4. Gaetano Moretti, Monument of Argentine Republic in Buenos Aires, 1909

Then, in 1910s, Moretti won some international competitions, including the Palace of Justice in Montevideo in 1913 and the Monument of Argentine Republic in Buenos Aires in 1909 ("Fig. 4"), an emblematic production for the Italian architectural school that combined eclectic monumentalism with high construction quality, ready to be exported, however interrupted by WWI. Moretti could also solve technical challenges and realised some important functional constructions, including one of the first power plants in Italy, in the town of Trezzo sul Adda (1906-1907) on the Adda River ("Fig. 5").



Fig. 5. Gaetano Moretti, Power Plant on Adda, Trezzo d'Adda, 1905-1906.

Of course, Ginzburg could not ignore the influence his teacher's work had in the new areas of industrial architecture and mass housing, combined with the deep knowledge of the history of architecture and construction requested for the restoration. As Boito wrote, 'each architectural style, therefore, has its own structure which comes from the internal distribution of the building, the quality of the materials used in the construction, the static order of the factory, the natural conditions of the country, certain principles of science and architectural practice. Different, like everything else, according to centuries and places' [18]. Indeed, Ginzburg would maintain the attitude of the Milan school and he preserved his interest in the history of architecture as a field for professional reflection. He would later teach History of Architecture at the Moscow Institute of Civil Engineers and became, as early as 1944, the chief editor of 'Universal History of Architecture', the publishing project of the Academy of Architecture of USSR [19].

IV. DIFFERENT FACES OF AVANT-GUARD

Both professors were promoters of refined and cultured eclecticism, based on deep knowledge of heritage. This trend was dominant in Italy of early XX c. and became the target of the attack of futurist movement, found by F.T. Marinetti (1876-1944) in Milan in 1909, a year before Ginzburg's arrival. 'We want to free our country from the endless number of museums that everywhere cover her like countless graveyards' [20]. A year later the already mentioned *Manifesto of Futurist painters* was launched, followed by other articles, performances, exhibitions. Ginzburg could not not be aware of them, not have heard about scandals provoked by futurists' *epatage* behavior, and he probably had seen the exhibition of the drawings of *Città Nuova - The New City* by Antonio Sant'Elia (1888-1916, only four years older than Ginzburg) [21] ("Fig. 6"), exhibited in Milan in May of 1914, which will be discussed below.

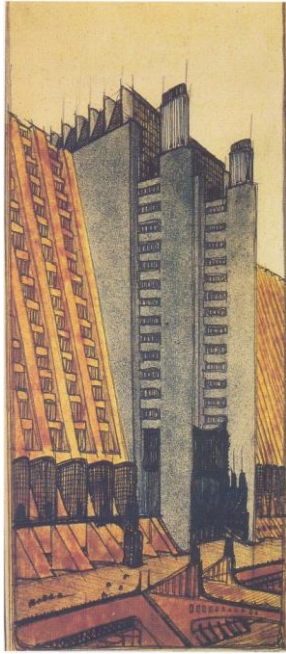


Fig. 6. Antonio Sant'Elia, Città Nuova, 1914, Pinacoteca Civica, Como.

Could Ginzburg have been influenced by the futurist movement? We do not know, but in his 'Italian diary', he expressed some kind of rebellion against the 'academic' approach to the profession, that was 'in the air': 'The true work of the artist is a revelation of what you carry in your soul. The artist does not fit within the framework of the frozen canons and traditions, he is constantly looking for and opens up new ways for creation'[2].

In 1911, Ginzburg moved to via di San Gregorio, 54, not far from the Central Station, that from 1912 would be the site of the monumental reconstruction project of Ulisse Stacchini, completed only in 1931. Several major public buildings were designed around this year, when the Royal house of Savoya celebrated the 50th anniversary of the foundation of Kingdom of Italy, united under their leadership. The Anniversary was commemorated with a great event – The Universal Exhibition hold in Rome and Turin, the royal residence city not so far from Milan. The Turin part was dedicated to 'Industry and Labor', the Roman one to archeology and ethnography, with a large 'International Exhibition of Art', realised in the gardens of Villa Borghese. The architecture of the exhibition presented the triumph of *Liberty* and the eclecticism based both on classical and local regional traditions which had become a sort of an official stile of the Unification. The construction works of roman edition of the Expo were directed by Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960), at the time young and ambitious architect who would later become the main conductor of all more or less important things that happened in Italy under

Mussolini's dictatorship [22], established gradually from 1922. Futurism was only a one voice inside great eclectic culture which dominated the country. Italian *Liberty* in architecture, contrary to French and Belgian *Art Nouveau* or *Austrian Jugendstil*, was mostly decorative, and proposed few innovations in spatial solutions. Essentially, it was an updated edition of eclecticism, and in painting it became a version of academic tradition in art. In this context, the ideas of Boccioni's *Manifesto of futurist sculpture*, including 'lines-forces', 'construction of a body's action' or 'purity of plastic rhythm', could have been attractive to the young Ginzburg for their innovative, formal and conceptual approach to the artistic expression.

Rather than the Boccioni's ideas, more relevant for Ginzburg's professional identity could have been the visit of the exhibition of the *Nouve Tendance* group, where Antonio Sant'Elia participated [21]. Sixteen graphic works by Sant'Elia represented visionary projects of the 'City of the Future' – *Milano 2000* (Pinacoteca Civica, Como), with skyscrapers, railroads entering the houses and multilevel streets. In occasion of the exhibition, he launched the *Manifesto of futurist architecture*: 'In modern times, the process of the consistent stylistic evolution has come to a stop. Architecture is breaking free from tradition. It must perforce begin again from the beginning'. [23]. Sant'Elia criticised contemporary Italian architecture, eclecticism and academism and promoted a reflection of the city of tomorrow, a refusal of historical forms and realised with innovative materials. His definition of futurist architecture is 'the architecture of calculation, of audacity and of simplicity' [23].

Sant'Elia followed courses of architecture, as Ginzburg, at Academy of Brera from 1909 till 1911 and then, in 1912 he graduated in architecture in Bologna. It worth pointing out that that in Italy, until 1920 [22], a diploma from the Architectural faculty of Academies of Fine Arts was a diploma as 'Professor of Drawing', and did not entitle the holder to sign projects. That explains the career of Sant'Elia and also why Ginzburg preferred the *Politecnico* to an academic education. Who knows if the two met during their classes at Brera or in the rooms of the Brera Gallery, located in the same building, perhaps in front of Piero della Francesca's Montefeltro altarpiece?

During two years of specialisation, Ginzburg studied, always with good results, rational mechanics, land measurement and survey, and construction design. Architecture, decoration and figure, perspective, history of architecture were taught by Brera's professors, the already mentioned Moretti, Giuseppe Fei, Giuseppe Mentessi (1857-1931) and Giulio Carotti (1852 – 1922). Carotti was a well-known art historian, author of the Pinacoteca of Brera catalogue, and had participated in the restauration of Da Vinci's 'Last Supper'. Also the

personality of Mentessi [24] could have been important to Ginzburg: the professor of perspective was a relevant painter who belonged to symbolist and divisionist movement. He was a friend of Gaetano Previati's (1852-1920), a key figure of divisionism, and shared with him the research for symbolist expression, modern revision of ancient myths and 'scientific' representation of light that gave impetus to the development of the Avant Garde trends in Italy. The light and colour, even if translated in very different keys, would become a fundamental part of Ginzburg's *modus operandi*.

Even if the system of teaching was rather conservative, in the halls of Brera and the *Politecnico*, there was a fermentation that formed very different and bright artistic personalities. In addition to the already mentioned Sant'Elia, who died in WWI and 1920s was recognised as a founder of Italian modern architecture, together with there was Emilio Lancia (1890-1973), Giovanni Muzio (1893-1982), Giuseppe De Finetti (1892-1952) all of them protagonists of so-called *Novecento* – "XX century" – style, the melt of classical basis and modern simplification. In 1910, when Ginzburg arrived in Milan, Piero Portaluppi, the leader of Milanese Art Decò graduated in architecture from the *Politecnico*, and Carlo Carrà graduated in painting from Brera. Starting from 1918, Carrà, one of those who signed *Manifesto of futurist painters* in 1910, would become one of the protagonists of the Italian 'Return to order' and of Italian XX c. art.

In 1913, Ginzburg's address changed again, when he moved to Corso Porta Nuova 9, a few steps away from the Brera Academy. The last document from Ginzburg's archive at the *Politecnico* is the request of the admission to the summer exam session dated 26th of June 1914 with an archive stamp from 14 August 1914 [10]. On the 28th of July, Austria declared war on Serbia and on the 1st of August Germany declared war on Russia, starting the first world conflict, a war that would change the of world's geopolitical maps profoundly. Both in Ginzburg's autobiography and in Khan-Magomedov's book, 1914 is the year of Ginzburg's return to Russia, where he continued his studies in Riga's Polytechnic, relocated to Moscow.

The architect's heirs keep a drawing, unpublished but mentioned by Khan-Magomedov, known to be one of those which would constitute his graduation project and signed 'Solitudine'. *Uno dei cinque pannelli per vestibulo di una villa. Moise Ghinsburg. 26 marzo 1915* 'Loneliness' ("Fig. 7"). One of five panels for the hall of a villa. Moise Ghinsburg. 2 March 1915'. The drawing is a Liberty style coloured sketch for a panel that represents a scene from the Carnival with masked persons, a festive crowd that faces a sad Piero, sneaking away from the gusts of wind.



Fig. 7. Moisei Ginzburg, Loneliness. Project of mural painting. 1915. Private collection.

V. CONCLUSION

The inscription suggests that Ginzburg left Italy a year later, only when Italy joined the Entente forces on 23d of May 1915. The second and last year of the *specializzazione di architettura* that Ginzburg followed, was dated 1913-1914, meaning that he didn't attend the third year of the course, requested to graduate. In any case, since the onset of WWI, the mobility on the European territory had been complicated. Only further archive research can clarify how long a young man had to stay (intentionally or because of the circumstances) in Italy before being able to return to his native country. One more issue needs to be taken into account. Already in the autumn of 1914, militarist views in Italy were rather strong. On November 15 that year, Benito Mussolini left the socialist movement and founded the *Popolo d'Italia*-journal, that would become the forerunner of fascism. In Milan, the war was clearly 'in the air'.

We do not what happened with most of Ginzburg's Italian works. But we can recognise one of them in the image reproduced in his book 'Style and epoch' (1925) [25], and reproduced in Khan-Magomedov's biography, indicated as "Lokshin House" in Evpatoria in Crimea ("Fig. 8"), designed together with Naum Kopelovich, his classmate from the *Politecnico*, born on 28 May 1892 in Mogilev, Russia (now Bielorussia), and resident in Ekaterinoslav (now Dnepr, Ukraine). In the model of the building on the photo, it is easy to recognise the architectural style of architecture taught in Milan in the years that Ginzburg studied there. A closer examination of Ginzburg's projects and theoretic works show a rather explicit connection with the Italian academic system, approaches and ideas spread in Milan in 1910s, that a more detailed study perhaps could clarify further.

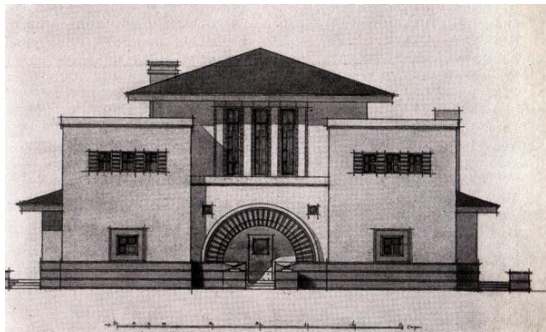


Fig. 8. M. Ginzburg, N. Kopelovich. Villa in Eupatoria. 1917 [2].

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