

THE SCIENTIFIC CORRESPONDENCE OF CORRADO GINI: SYNTHESIS AND REFLECTIONS

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*One only makes books to keep in touch with mankind far
beyond one has ceased to breathe and thus to defeat the
inexorable fate of all that lives: transitoriness and oblivion.*

Stefan Zweig

Abstract: *This contribution provides glimpses from Gini's correspondence useful for learning more about his most significant relations in Italy and even more with other countries. Unfortunately not everything has been preserved and much has been lost, but there are symbolically important aspects to be found in what is left. Tone and contents emerge that enable us to clarify and partly correct widespread and inaccurate notions regarding our man.*

Keywords: *Corrado Gini, scientific correspondence.*

1. The many-faceted scientific activity and complex network of relations of the most eminent and versatile Italian statistician – whose interests extended to demography, sociology, economics and other related disciplines – is still worth studying today. His insuperable scientific stature, towering above any other Italian statistician, makes anyone who attempts to restore a part of Corrado Gini's work tremble.

I had the privilege of being his pupil at the end of the 1950s and to carry out research under his supervision, obtaining some recognition at the beginning of my university career. It has been my task to discover some unknown aspects from his letters. Although Gini's correspondence is incomplete because of lost or anyway untraceable documents, the subject matter and eminence of the correspondents provide an impressive testimony.

2. First of all, I found a folder, fortunately conserved in the library of the former Faculty of Statistical, Demographic and Actuarial Sciences in Rome «Sapienza» University. It contains letters both to and from Corrado Gini. Regrettably the reference period from the end of the 1920s to 1935 is very limited. Nonetheless some illuminating aspects can be discerned.

Moreover, I learnt from an article that the State Central Archives had acquired in 1999 a considerable corpus of papers and books from an antiquarian bookshop

in Rome (Montevecchi, 2002).¹ I therefore had access to Gini's correspondence with both Italian and foreign personalities.

Incidentally, I would like to point out that the letters sent and received are written in English, French and German as well as in Italian.

Finally, I have obviously left out the correspondence involving the operational aspect of Gini's frequent journeys to numerous European countries as well as to Egypt, Japan, United States and Mexico (where he led an expedition on the anthropological aspects of the native populations).

3. This contribution provides glimpses from Gini's correspondence useful for learning more about his most significant relations in Italy and even more with other countries. Unfortunately not everything has been preserved and much has been lost, but there are symbolically important aspects to be found in what is left. Tone and contents emerge that enable us to clarify and partly correct widespread and inaccurate notions regarding our man.

Gini's scientific papers on the topics of inference and tests hold positions that are very different from those of the Anglo-Saxon world and some of his perplexities and misgivings deserve renewed attention and reevaluation. But in any case he was greatly esteemed by his contemporaries, including those defending different views.

Very correct and mutually respectful tones were used in the correspondence with Jerzy Neyman, Karl Pearson, Egon Pearson and Ronald Fisher that I was able to consult. A very civilized scenario emerges despite scientific contrasts. Expressions are courteous and the phrasing shows a mutual consideration and even the desire to meet personally. Another aspect emerging in some of the letters was the confidential and affectionate tones used and, in the case of Giorgio Mortara, also humorous.

It thus seems possible to defuse the common idea of Gini's impregnable severity that created such a sense of awe. This would seem corroborated by photographs of the time. And yet I glimpsed in Gini a well-concealed and never obvious sense of humour, hardly perceptible at the time. Although years later, when reliving my memories, the signs seemed much less elusive. So I can offer some experiences, even illuminated by rare smiles when I finished my statistics examination with marks of 30/30 (the last of the Maestro's teaching career).

Gini also taught sociology, a discipline that he loved. During the first lesson, he said – and I am a witness –, that by definition sociology is the subject studied by sociologists. This statement was made with the greatest earnestness.

Even before graduating I was able to collaborate with him on aspects of the

¹ I would like to thank the staff in the reading room of the State Central Archives for having helped me consult the material of interest for my research.

fertility of primiparae, a fast growing research that he followed personally. One morning, Gini asked me to find the personal file of a Scottish student whose name I forgot. I told him that I couldn't find it, even after a second and more thorough inspection of the archives. He immediately concluded, impassively: «Then he must be dead. He's someone who quarrelled with me». It took me a while to grasp his meaning.

To move around the city he used a legendary bicycle. He also rode it to ceremonies, institutional offices, embassies and the like. The disdainful doormen were prepared to park cars. But they weren't so eager to do so with his bicycle, something that allowed him to appear disappointed.

4. Gini first met probability in 1907, at the second Congress of the Italian Philosophical Society (On the Concept of Probability) and continued to do so for the rest of his life, as proved by the paper on «The inductive applications of probability calculus» he gave for his 80th birthday celebrations in 1964. He considered his youthful essay on *a posteriori* probability (Gini, 1911) to be particularly well done. He also dealt with inductive statistics in his contribution «Statistical significance tests» to the VII Scientific Meeting of the Italian Statistical Society (SIS), the proceedings of which were published in 1945. One has to admit that all his work has the characteristic of inductive logic.

He mistrusted attempts to calculate probability from frequency distribution against deductive applications in which one tries to predict frequency from probability (Gini, 1907). He considered the choice from a collective reference (e.g. a population), which must be finite, to be fundamental. He thus focused on frequencies. But in the final stages of his reflections he admitted open collectives, in which at least a part of the events may occur in the future, thus approaching usual modern frequentist thinking (Piccinato 2011, p. 108). Even those who criticise him on this matter acknowledge that «his use of Bayesian analysis was often brilliant and anticipatory» (Ibid., p. 111).

Italo Scardovi's memories (Scardovi, 2016) contain facts that rectify the widespread view of a leading Italian statistician clinging to an entirely descriptive statistics and hostile to inference and thus gradually obscured by probabilistic sampling and inference. «Over the years Fisher's feelings of gratitude and respect for Gini remained unchanged». And this was not all. As soon as he heard about the criticisms of Italian leading statisticians (SIS scientific meeting) on statistical significance, Fisher hastened to write that he agreed with the logic of his objections. At the end of World War II in 1945, he also wanted to re-establish contact with Gini in the spirit of their cordial pre-war relations.

Finally, there is the admiration of Leslie Kish, who said «You Italians, who have had a Gini, why you've taken to aping the Americans?». Kish confirmed his

profound respect for the Maestro during his participation in a SIS Congress held in 1996 (Kish, 1996).

5. Gini was also a great thinker on various economic subjects, as proved by the admiration of personages such as Schumpeter and Pareto, of whom more later. In his study of income inequalities he proposed the R concentration ratio, still today highly relevant. He also worked out a descriptive index of the concentration curve, δ , that he compared to Pareto's α .

The links between these indicators are defined as follows:

$$\delta \cong \frac{\alpha}{\alpha - 1}$$

$$R \cong \frac{\delta - 1}{\delta + 1} = \frac{1}{2\alpha - 1}$$

Finally, he admitted that δ is less susceptible than α to the disturbing influence of evasion on income distribution (Gini, 1952-53, p. 361).

The correspondence also includes letters regarding an important essay. The first reflections on the gap between economic theory and reality were published in 1923-25 in the *Scientia* journal. Ten years later, Gini's thinking on this matter was entrusted to the same organ, in number 1 of March 1933 (pp. 189-212) with the title «Contrasts between economic theories and facts».

In it, he first of all points out the contrast between Malthus's theory and the reproductive behaviour of individuals. Statisticians have always argued that «the higher classes, with greater subsistence levels, are those who reproduce more slowly». And the richer populations reproduce less than the poorer populations.

He reproached economists for erroneous predictions. Sadly today we can only agree with him.

Gini maintained that the neglected role of psychic subsistence should be studied alongside physical subsistence. These aspects were to acquire theoretical and practical citizenship in the study of the psychology of consumption after World War II. He specified the role of «a handful of men, placed at the head of gigantic undertakings (...) (with) an inexhaustible thirst for renown and domination (...) but also with an instinctive need to build». This created a psychology of work, in which you work to work rather than for enjoyment. «The fact that the economist concentrates (...) his attention on issues that have an economic aim or on the economic outcome of only partially different issues, helps to widen (...) the gap between his conclusions and the behaviour of individuals or governments».

Gini emphasized non-logical actions, in which the result does not match the purpose, both because the purpose is different from it and because there is no purpose. Hence the conflict, according to Pareto, between economic theory and sociology, which studies people's real behaviour.

He claimed that political economy reaches conclusions of a dogmatic nature. He stressed the role of actions justified only by complaisant reason, even indicating the role of the subconscious.

The "Fondo Gini" in the State Archives contains letters from Pareto and Schumpeter in full agreement with the Maestro's results, marked by sincere cordiality. Vilfredo Pareto enjoyed his company and private conversations. And he was not the only one. Relations with Joseph Schumpeter developed through correspondence in both English and Italian. On 31 December 1932 – what a curious date! – the Austrian economist thanks Gini, writing by hand and in Italian, «for his flattering acceptance» to contribute to the volume in honour of Arthur Spiethoff, ending «respectfully yours». Gini replies as early as 16 January 1933, again in Italian, to his «illustrious and dear colleague» announcing his paper on the theory of economic conditions, including also the opinion of the Italian Committee of Economic Indexes. He specifies that «it was a great pleasure for me to contribute to the volume». Concluding the letter, he says that next summer he hopes to meet Schumpeter in America, during a visit that will end in Mexico for research on the primitive population. Schumpeter in turn thanks him, this time in English. The tone is very warm, well beyond the traditional courtesy of a Viennese gentleman, as its ending testifies: «I am sure that few contributions will please Spiethoff as much as yours». (11 May 1933).

Contacts with Luigi Einaudi include letters and postcards sent by the famous economist between the end of 1907 and January 1926. The relationship between the two becomes increasingly close and Einaudi starts addressing him in a familiar tone («tu») in 1913. The first letter, handwritten like the following one and on Regia Università of Turin headed paper, is dated 26 October 1909. In it, he discusses the effects of the 5% income tax and aspects related to currency values. Einaudi ends by saying that «statisticians can very reasonably not lose time with this nuisance».

On 17 November 1912, Einaudi is already writing «Dear Gini» and discussing something his correspondent has mentioned that interests him greatly. He claims that the variation in value of an unvaried quantity of goods caused by the increase in wealth occurring over the last decades in northern Italy «is highly unlikely». On 25 November, he writes in unusually aggressive language about the initiatives of «petty politicians and bureaucrats. And widows are cheated». Einaudi is enraged about hidebound Parliaments and politicians' foolish spending.

On 15 July 1913 he writes that «I'm convinced Italians would benefit greatly from a journal of economics, finance and statistics of high scientific contents» and invites Gini to create one with Jannaccone. On 14 January 1926 he thanks Gini for sending him his publications, so «invaluable for consultation».

Unfortunately the subsequent correspondence is missing.

6. Corrado Gini appeared on the scientific scene when statistics was still in its growth stage, especially in Italy, seeking its own identity, culturally uncertain about its role and dispersed in the academic world. A subject matter that is a meeting point of different disciplines, such as the relationship of sexes at birth and their distribution, was perfect for Gini. He dealt with it in his degree thesis of 1905 and continued to do so for his entire lifetime. He had an intense exchange of letters, notably with Anthony Edward of Cambridge University and traces remain for the 1957 to 1962 period. He had discussions and evaluation of results with numerous experts, including S.N. Sing of the University of California at Berkeley².

From the start, the Maestro pursued a high quality unitary vision with indomitable energy, assuming a leading role. He achieved important results with the establishment of ISTAT (Central Statistical Institute) and of a Statistics Faculty in Rome, also fostering profound relations worldwide, the expression and consequence of national and international prestige. The documents preserved in the archives are proof of this last aspect.

On 13 August 1929, Gini writes to Prof. Jacob Viner, editor of the *Journal of Political Economy*, University of Chicago. He hopes for a «common program by the economic services of the Statistical Institutes of: Harvard for United States of America, Toronto for Canada, London and Cambridge for England, Vienna for Austria, Budapest for Hungary, Warsaw for Poland». In Italy, ISTAT was just starting out, and the Statistics Faculty of Rome was to be born in 1936.

Gini made great efforts to have statistics recognized in the Italian academia. He wrote to Francesco Severi on 21 August 1935 about the need for the various schools and faculties to coordinate the teaching of statistics. The subject should be a preparatory course in all the faculties because «we can now say that no observational or experimental science can do without it». He then expresses the hope that civil servants can learn about and appreciate statistics. He concludes by arguing in favour of sociology, pointing out that Harvard had 48 courses on it.

In a letter written to Prof. Luigi Amoroso on 29 September 1935, we read that «Savorgnan told me that he had tried to convince you of the great importance of

² Prof. I. Scardovi gave me copies of this correspondence.

social statistics. It includes social insurance statistics, labour statistics, unemployment statistics (...) cultural statistics (...) tourism statistics».

In October 1947, the International Statistical Institute (ISI) appointed the Italians R. Benini and C. Gini as honorary members, accepting as ordinary members a good 18 Italians, including L. Einaudi, L. Livì and G. Tagliacarne.

However Gini is still not content. He tells the director of ISI that he is unhappy about the balance between the various nations' representatives, asking for a guarantee, obviously for the Italian part. He succeeds in re-establishing Italian as one of the ISI official languages.

Finally, referring to an election in the higher council of ISTAT, in which Prof. Albino Uggè was running against Gini, Prof. Jacopo Tivaroni wrote to him from Genoa (July 1947) saying that his competitor is an accomplished scholar but, «compared to you he's like a cat in front of a lion».

At this point there is a frustrating gap regarding subsequent years in the Fondo Gini in the State Central Archives. We can just note, in splendid isolation, the heartfelt wishes that W. Edwards Deming sent to Gini for his 80th birthday on 14 January 1965.

7. Gini travelled extensively. His expeditions for demographic and anthropological reasons were often adventurous when they took him to territories far removed from the modern world.

In 1933 he went on an expedition to Mexico for CISP – Italian Committee for Studies on Population problems – with four groups of five people each consisting of sociologists, anthropologists, economists, doctors and nurses. The surveys involved anthropological and physiological measurements as well as family composition and economy, for a total of 56 items per subject.

There was also an episode that had tragic consequences for many, although Gini fortunately escaped unharmed. The steamship *Principessa Mafalda*, with our man on board, set sail from Genoa on 11 October 1927 for Montevideo and Buenos Aires. The departure was delayed because of last-minute repairs. A stop of some hours in Barcelona, not included in the itinerary, also became necessary. The dossier in the Fondo Gini on the entire matter contains a document, which suggests that not all the required repairs were carried out. But it was never possible to establish with certainty the reason why the ship lost its propeller, causing it to take on water and sink. Not even the Genoa Civil and Criminal Court came, almost two years later, to any definitive conclusions (7 March 1929).

The shipwreck occurred on 25 October in a calm sea but with serious problems concerning the lifeboats. Many passengers died, some prey to sharks. The

legal proceedings report an estimated 300 victims. Gini, who was an excellent swimmer, survived. He wrote later that he had arrived in Rio half naked. He telegraphed his family on 26 October at 9.10 p.m.: «Safe. Continue Rio. Corrado». The communication was brief and terse, almost as if written by a modern Tacitus, betraying no emotion. He received numerous telegrams congratulating him on his narrow escape, including those from Marcello Boldrini and the Savorgnan family.

Later on Gini took legal action for the loss of documents with which he would have given lessons, as well as valuable books, clothes, gold cufflinks and other things. He asked for 100,000 lire in compensation, accepting a settlement without admission of guilt by the shipping company. He then obtained the reimbursement of expenses as well as his legal fees plus a sum of 20,000 lire, approximately worth 17,000 euro today.

8. During the 1930s Gini was awarded an honorary degree in economics at the Catholic University of Milan (1932), an honorary degree in sociology at Geneva University (1934) and an honorary degree in science at Harvard (1936). He achieved this last success during the American college's tercentennial year, as «one of the most eminent sociologists, statisticians and demographers in the world», written also in Latin and conserved in the Fondo Gini.

He taught at Harvard during the second semester of academic year 1935-36, giving a course on the self-regulation of corporate bodies. He gave a seminar on the evolution of the U.S. families and on migration. He had an assistant with the prestigious name of R.K. Merton.

The documents show that Gini also maintained contacts with other countries during World War II. Relations with the Secretary General of ISI continued in both 1941 and 1942. In the *Revue de l'Institut International de Statistique*, he published an article on population theories (1943). On 11 November 1944, he wrote to Herman Wold in Sweden, at Uppsala University, reporting among other things that Vittorio Castellano was a prisoner-of-war in Asmara, Ethiopia and that he was willing to speak at conferences on statistics or sociology. On 8 April 1946, Wold told him he was happy to hear that Castellano was back in Rome.

There was a concentration in Gini's epistolary relations during the 1946-47 period. At this time, he resumed contacts with the Central Bureau of Statistics in Jerusalem, writing to the director Benjamin Gil in Italian. The correspondence was still in progress in 1953.

In June 1947, Giuseppe de Meo applied for transfer from the Istituto Navale in Naples to the Statistics faculty of Rome. De Meo was to teach there as professor of economic statistics as well as President of ISTAT, up to his retirement.

In October 1954 Gini was awarded, to his great gratification, the IV Premio

Marzotto for economics and nutrition. It brought with it a cheque for 2,000,000 lire, worth approximately 31,000 euro today. Awarded prizes on the same occasion were Alberto Moravia for literature, Filippo De Pisis for painting and Pietro Valdoni for medicine and surgery.

9. The legend of Corrado Gini is based not only on his recognized genius, covering an astonishing range of subjects, but also on rumours: he was authoritarian and despotic. These latter traits, albeit relegated to hearsay, are associated with a personality committed to science with absolute rigour and total dedication of his mission. This entails a lack of empathy with minor personages, against solid and very cordial relationships with prominent figures.

Those who knew Gini are unanimous in stating that he didn't use harsh tones or demonstrate arrogant behaviour. But sometimes he made critical observations, although they never went as far as denigration. On the contrary, his relations with important personalities were always very correct, even those who held opinions he didn't agree with. With the people who shared his scientific views relations were extremely cordial and enduring. An illuminating example is the postcards Pareto sent to Gini, starting from 26 June 1914. Pareto writes: «Dear Professor, I would be very happy if you could come to Coligny for a day. It's a very long time since I've had the pleasure of seeing you. I trust we'll be able to spend the whole day together». Again on the 30th of the same month he thanks Gini for the book on economic pathology he received, adding: «I think it is very important for science and anyone who treats similar subjects must take it into account». He is obviously referring to Gini's work on economic pathology.

Relations gradually became even more friendly. The postcard in Appendix, written in 1923, starts with «Dear Colleague», with a capital letter. The ending is full of praise: «Your works on the wealth of nations will help to solve a very important problem (...). Believe me (...) Vilfredo Pareto».

The most curious letter comes from Alfredo Niceforo, sent from Paris on 4 July 1915 and written «with ultra-double spectacles». It is addressed to «Professor Corrado Gini, Second Lieutenant Explorer, 3rd Unit, 15th Field Artillery Regiment, 22nd War Zone Division - Italy». It's amazing the postcard ever arrived. Niceforo also wrote about the general atmosphere in Paris, providing a Camille Pissarro-type watercolour albeit teeming with soldiers of every kind, patrols and vigilantes.

On 19 June 1919 Federigo Enriques, an eminent Italian mathematician, wrote to him «with a friend's affection».

So it is easy to see that Gini's scientific and personal relationships involved personalities from very different cultural spheres.

10. Finally, to amuse the patient reader, the most singular letter of all, with passages of great levity. It is Giorgio Mortara writing, of whom I have an unforgettable memory. Returning from the exile forced on him by the racial laws and reinstated in the chair of economic statistics, he was the co-supervisor for my graduation session. He had read my thesis attentively and was very generous about it. I also had contact with him afterwards, among other things to admire a great gesture: for the wedding of his assistant he gave the bride to be a diamond ring!

But to return to the letter, which besides its humorous tone had clear hints of scientific dissent. On 18 October 1919 Giorgio Mortara writes, on headed paper of the *Giornale degli Economisti e Rivista di Statistica*: «If the rumours are true that you're engaged please accept my affectionate congratulations. I'm certain that you'll never have to regret your choice, just as I know I'll never have to regret mine. And I'm happy that you've entered the competition with me in this sphere as well; but I warn you that I don't intend to enter the repopulation competition, at least until they've quadrupled our salaries».

11. The reconstruction of the main traits of such a vast collection of letters, albeit with the inexplicable absence and loss of documents in some periods, completes the portrait of a personality so varied and complex that any attempt at synthesis is nigh on impossible. In any event we can be certain, paraphrasing Garcia Lorca, that, «it will be a long time, if ever, before there is born» another data-science genius so versatile and innovative as Gini.

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APPENDIX

DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED STATISTICS,
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE.

The Francis-Galton-Eugenics-Laboratory.

The Biometric Laboratory.

Until the phenomena of any branch of knowledge have been submitted to measurement and number it cannot assume the status and dignity of a Science.—FRANCIS GALTON.

The reply should be addressed to the undersigned at University College, London, W.C.1.

Date 25th May, 1934.

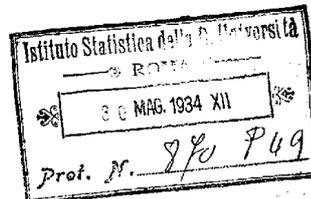
Dear Professor Gini,

Thank you very much for your letter and the two offprints of your papers which I am very glad to have. In the paper with Professor Galvani you have, of course, gone into the matter of representative sampling in much more detail than I attempted, and I shall be very interested to examine what you say. In my paper I was primarily concerned with illustrating the importance of the use of statistical method in a variety of industrial problems, and it was desirable not to overweight the contents with theory, as these people are very easily frightened!

Yours sincerely,

FR Pearson

Professor C. Gini,
Istituto di Statistica,
10 Via delle Terme,
Roma (30).
ITALY.

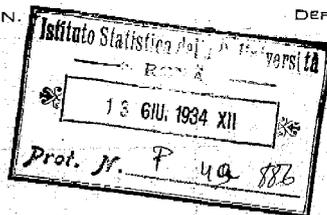


DR. JERZY NEYMAN.

DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE.

LONDON, W.C.1.



17-V-1934.

Dear Professor Gini,

I am going to discuss several recent statistical investigations in which the representative method was used. Among others I shall be concerned with your important work, published in the *Annali di Statistica*, Serie II, Vol. II. I should like to reproduce from this publication some diagrams. Would you mind this?

On the page 83 of your paper you publish the map of Italy showing the distribution of the "circondari" which were included into the sample. It would me most interesting for me to have the distribution of all circondari upon the area of Italy. If you have such a map with the subdivision into circondari and if you would care to send it to me, I should be most grateful.

Yours faithfully

J. Neyman

691 / P4-a

2 Scott Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts
11 May 1933

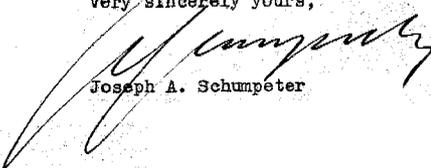
Professor G. Gini
via Terme 10
Rome, Italy

My dear Professor Gini:

I wish to thank you very much for your most interesting
reprint which you have been so good as to send me.

Allow me to take the opportunity to thank you also again
for your generous contribution to the Spiethoff volume which is now
about to appear. I am sure that few contributions will please
Spiethoff as much as yours.

Very sincerely yours,


Joseph A. Schumpeter

Celigny li 8/1, 1923
Caro Collega

Grazie per la gentile sua cartolina che, secondo i suoi motivi, ha fatto molto piacere alla Sig. Rigis ed a me.

Le cattedre di farmacia della Com. noi siamo del disarmonico solo per dare prova di buon volere. Proverò se non viene di andare a girare per i lavori di questa Commissione. Se s'è bene, allora, mi ritirerò e verrà un altro.

Al disarmonico credo poco, ma penso molto che in proposito non stia su si' leonzo l'Alba. Se non così, questi comitati sono quelli del Governo; e questo comitato decisi se non invogliò a lasciare una prova che in caso comba no scappare avrei parlato. Spero che ella e sua moglie siano in ottima salute. La Sig. Rigis è da tempo ammalata con dolori venisimali; è malatia non penso loro una buona amica. Lo st

Adresse des Absenders - Text
Adresse de l'expéditeur - Texte
Indirizzo del mittente - Testo

al solito - I miei lavori sulla
richieste delle Nazioni saranno
a scioglimento un importante insieme
problema

M. G. G. Affine
Alfredo Paraf

Postkarte. Carte postale
Cartolina postale
SCHWEIZ SUISSE SVIZZERA

25
HELVETIA

Ill^{mo} Sig. Prof^o
Conrado Gini
R^{ta} Università di Padova
Padova
(Italia)