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TRANSLATING *LA PAROLA EBREO*:
ROSETTA LOY AND A CHILD'S-EYE VIEW OF ITALIAN FASCISM

by

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I am writing this paper to discuss *La Parola Ebreo*, a memoir by Italian author Rosetta Loy (1931-2022), a portion of which I have translated. Written in 1997, the book recounts Loy's memories of growing up in Rome during the 1930s under Benito Mussolini's Fascist rule. Born in 1931, Loy was raised in a well-off Catholic family in Rome, surrounded by both Catholic and Jewish neighbors. As a young child, Loy had no knowledge of any distinction between these families. The story starts in 1936, when Loy was just 5 years old, at the precise moment that she learns the word "Jew" (*ebreo*) and begins to understand that some members of her community are different from her. As Loy begins to gain an awareness of the world around her, she describes her parents' attitudes towards Fascism, Mussolini, and their Jewish neighbors, as well as her and her siblings' experiences learning about Judaism and Catholicism through school, the church, and their German *au pair*. She intersperses these anecdotes with historical context and explanations of the greater political situations in both Italy and Germany. This tactic grounds Loy's childhood recollections in historical fact and helps her readers to interpret certain memories which Loy—as a child—was unable to understand. The memoir offers an important insight into the Italian response to the increasingly extreme politics of their own country (and that of their German neighbors), through the fresh eyes of a young child. Loy's childhood perspective allows her to question things which many adults may take for granted, and the innocence of her youth only emphasizes the horror of the atrocities her nation was complicit in.

I chose to translate a portion of *La Parola Ebreo* for several reasons. Firstly, Loy is relatively unknown outside of Italy. Her imagery is evocative and her style is simple but elegant, and from a purely creative perspective I believe that she deserves greater appreciation as an author. I have consistently found reading *La Parola Ebreo* to be a truly enjoyable experience, even as Loy deals with incredibly heavy and tragic material. The second reason I was compelled

to translate this piece is the current political climate of Italy—as well as many other nations around the world, including the United States, Great Britain, France, and Brazil, to name a few. Increasingly, countries are flirting with far-right politicians who espouse racist, exclusionary ideas, and romanticize a past where life was better for the “real” members of their communities. The election in October 2022 of Giorgia Meloni as Prime Minister of Italy marks this concerning trend in Europe and elsewhere. Former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro’s supporters’ attempt in January 2023 to oust current President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva is an even more recent manifestation of the same trend. *La Parola Ebreo* serves as a critical reminder of the true nature of that romanticized past, and the cost at which it is achieved. Loy also reminds us of the dangers of complacency in the face of hateful rhetoric, and the responsibility that each individual bears to those put at risk by these far-right stances.

My translation is meant to draw attention to an important perspective on a time in our not-so-distant past, so that readers in the current day can be reminded of what that time actually looked like. It can be tempting to dismiss apparent similarities between the political atmosphere of the twenty-first century and that of the early-mid twentieth century, and to fall into complacency. This memoir serves as a practical reminder of how easily the atrocities of one’s own government, or of a neighboring country, can become quotidian, and seem not worth taking action against.

I also hope that I will be able to help in bringing well-deserved appreciation to *La Parola Ebreo* for its merit as a well-written piece of literature. Considering Loy’s recent death in the fall of 2022, I may be slightly late to the task, but this does not diminish the quality of her writing, or its potential to have a positive impact on the world.

I want to begin by saying that I am by no means an expert in the field of translation. I have taken a total of two courses on it in my lifetime, which I understand is relatively little experience. I have approached this project not as someone with things to teach, but with things to learn. Indeed, there is already a published translation of *La Parola Ebreo* called *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy*, translated by Gregory Conti, which was released in 2000. I am not attempting to replace or emulate that in any way. Although this is by no means my first translation project, it is certainly my longest. I consider this project something of an experiment: a means to test my abilities a little more than they have been tested thus far. I am decently satisfied with the result, although I'm sure I could spend forever trying to find the perfect analog for some of those particularly tricky words and phrases, if I let myself.

One interesting aspect of working with *La Parola Ebreo* specifically is deciding how to approach specific cultural references that would have been well-known and easily understood in Italy during the 1930s, but may not carry much weight to a modern, English-speaking audience. The songs Loy and her siblings sing, the poem she learns in elementary school: these are artifacts of a particular moment which are unfamiliar to many people. Loy also includes some mentions of public figures, such as politicians, who are not always well-known in the twenty-first century, English-speaking world. This brings up a long-standing debate in the translation community around whether to make changes or additions while translating to create a final product that will feel more familiar and easily understandable to readers in the target language, or to leave things as they are, and thereby attempt to retain more of the original culture's distinctive character. This also applies to translating figurative language. Sometimes a common metaphor in the original language will not transfer easily into the target language. Is it better to translate it literally, and risk leaving readers confused while giving them a glimpse into a different way of seeing the

world, or to find a comparable metaphor in the target language, so that readers will understand the sentiment effortlessly, even though they will miss the opportunity to see the comparison exactly the way the original author meant to convey it? In his discussion of this particular puzzle, translator Mark Polizzotti says that “[proponents] of literalism argue that a benefit of preserving the foreignness of the foreign and bringing the reader to the author is that you move readers out of their familiar space and into somewhere new.” (Polizzotti 50) Personally, I am inclined to agree with this stance. I feel that a benefit of reading texts in translation is to be exposed to new and unfamiliar perspectives, and the particular language that authors use is one way to understand those perspectives better—even if it does mean that readers of the translation sometimes have to think a little harder about what certain phrases mean. Indeed, as Polizzotti points out, “... it would be utopian to pretend that the reader of a translation is truly experiencing the original, or that in the reading of any translation there isn’t a degree of difference—*difference* rather than *loss*—between the text being translated and the translation itself. The heart of the matter lies in whether we conceive of a translation as a practical outcome or an unattainable ideal.” (Polizzotti 5)

I feel that I should also address my choice of a passage from *La Parola Ebreo*. My decision to start at the very beginning of the memoir was, overwhelmingly, a practical one. I was limited by time and the length of my project, and it would have been completely impossible to try and translate the entire book. I toyed for some time with translating several, smaller, selected passages, but ultimately decided against it. My goal with this paper is not to examine specific episodes from the memoir, but to discuss the context and value of the text as a whole. My translation serves as a window into the text for those unfamiliar with it, but does not attempt to

single out certain portions as having greater significance than others. I hope that my readers are able to gain an appreciation for Loy's work and for this specific piece through my translation.

Rosetta Loy was born Rosetta Provera on May 15, 1931, in Rome. She was the youngest of four siblings, born into an upper middle-class family. Her father was an engineer while her mother worked as a clerk. Her family's employment of Annemarie, the *au pair* meant to teach the children German, as well as descriptions of trips to the countryside or the brand new ski resort in the mountains, give a clear impression of their economic comfort and relatively high social status—they have one friend who is married to a baron, and another who is a physician for the royal family. This position in society gives them a significant level of safety even as Mussolini continues to crack down on political dissent. Loy describes her father as “allergic” to Fascism. His discomfort in being associated with the party is certainly evident in the scene at the train station, when he completely ignores his wife and son, because his son is wearing the uniform of the national Fascist youth organization. And yet, he registers with the party when it becomes clear that he will not get work otherwise, instead of following in the footsteps of his longtime friend Fioravanti, who leaves to work abroad rather than register as a Fascist. It is choices like these that serve to shelter their family from the consequences of Fascism, rather than working in the interests of the greater community.

Having this type of protection places Loy in a very interesting spot as a witness of the events of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Although they have friends and neighbors who are Jewish, they themselves are not directly affected by the increasingly racist and antisemitic policies of Mussolini's government, or by the eventual cooperation with the Germans. Loy is able to observe from the outside, and yet from quite close.

Another interesting aspect of Loy's perspective is her age. The story begins when she is only 5 years old—just at the point where she is beginning to gain an awareness of the world beyond her immediate household and friends. This is a time when children are not yet so accustomed to the world that they take for granted certain systems or beliefs that adults might not think to question. Particularly in the earlier parts of the memoir, we can see Loy's attempts to understand the world as she learns about it for the first time. Many of the memories she recounts are of interactions with other people or trips outside of her home, but many are also her own internal stream of consciousness as she grapples with certain ideas. One of the first subjects we see Loy ponder is the idea of Jewish identity. After she first learns from Annemarie that Jews are different from Catholics, she goes through all of the people and biblical figures she knows who are Jews, and tries to characterize them, implicitly ruminating on the things that make these people similar to her, and the things that make them different. She is not old enough to be aware of the negative stereotypes that shaped public perception of Jewish people throughout Italy, and the rest of Europe, so instead she is able to try and make her own observations. As the story goes on, Loy becomes more aware of societal perceptions of Jews, through neighbors, domestic staff, and the nuns at her school. And despite the implementation of racial laws, and the general escalation of antisemitism, she turns away from the hatred she witnesses, or doesn't think of it at all.

This is where Loy's interspersal of historical context becomes especially helpful. What the child Loy did not see or did not understand, the adult Loy can explain for her audience, filling in the gaps where her memories are limited. This is particularly powerful at the end of the book, when Loy recounts the various fates of her Jewish neighbors, and other Jewish people in Rome who she either knew personally or heard about later.

La Parola Ebreo offers a perspective akin to that of so many people who were bystanders during the Fascist period and World War II. At the same time, many contemporary readers may be able to identify with her experience as a sheltered witness of hatred and racism, and may find Loy's reflections on personal and collective responsibility a useful reminder in light of increasingly popular far-right political movements worldwide.

It may be helpful for me to provide some context for how Italy got to the point where *La Parola Ebreo* begins, in 1936. The early twentieth century saw Italy in an identity crisis. It was still a relatively new nation, having been unified only in 1861. Italy had struggled to establish a robust economy and a strong sense of national unity. Rebellions sprung up in the south, in response to newly levied taxes, mandatory military service, and general discrimination by the north directed at the south. Victoria De Grazia, scholar of the history of Western Europe and Italy in particular, writes in her book *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945* that “...neo-mercantilists worried about optimizing population size to supply cheap labor, satisfy military needs, and keep up home demand. By the turn of the twentieth century, these concerns became complicated by additional worries: declining fertility rates, ethnic minorities whose racial characteristics and nationalist strivings allegedly undermined national-state identity, and finally, internal fertility differentials that threatened the proliferation of the least fit while the elites dwindled away.” (De Grazia 4) Concerns about the stability of the class system and worries that the peasants and working class felt little loyalty to their government meant that many members of Italy's bourgeoisie and ruling class were seeking some way to achieve political and economic stability. Nationalist thinkers such as writer and aristocrat Gabriele D'Annunzio held a powerful sway over the minds of the literate population. D'Annunzio's writing in particular

included quasi-Darwinian themes, comparing Italians against people of other races and nationalities, and cultivating an aspiration to the elevation of the Italian people above others. Jared Becker says in his book *Nationalism and Culture: Gabriele D'Annunzio and Italy After the Risorgimento*, that “D'Annunzio's zestful versions of the Darwinian struggle, together with his image of a happy race constantly elevating itself, left a deep imprint on Italian national-imperialist ideology.” (Becker 123) To say that D'Annunzio's racism was without antisemitism would be an oversimplification. However, as Becker continues, he explains that “Like much of Italian nationalist culture, D'Annunzio finds anti-Semitism to be of little interest. Yet it would be a great error to conclude that he is therefore removed from the racist thinking which is integral to the ‘revolutionary right’ in France and to the ‘conservative revolution’ in Germany. On the contrary, we have seen that D'Annunzio directs a perfectly brutal racism against the enemies of a new imperial Italy.” (Becker 125) D'Annunzio's thoughts can certainly be seen as representative of more general Italian thought regarding ideas about race. Again, it would be remiss to completely disregard the underlying antisemitism in Italian society, or to argue it away as less worthy of critique than antisemitism elsewhere in Europe because it was less vehement. But it is important to acknowledge that at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was less central to the issue of the formation of Italian national identity. In later years, as Mussolini rose to prominence and developed his Fascist ideology for the first time, D'Annunzio would distance himself from Fascism and publicly disagreed with many of Mussolini's stances and political decisions. Nevertheless, Mussolini had utilized D'Annunzio's nationalist and imperialist ideas heavily in the formation of the Fascist platform. Mussolini's early Fascism, though racist, mirrored D'Annunzio's thought in that it was not particularly focused on

antisemitism. Explicitly antisemitic policies in Italy were significantly correlated to Hitler's rise to power in Germany, beginning in the 1930s.

In 1914, the sought-for opportunity to reinstate social order arose in the form of World War I. Although a member of the so-called "Triple Alliance" with Germany and Austria-Hungary, Italy chose not to join the conflict immediately when war was declared. Instead, negotiating separately with Britain, Italian leaders signed the Treaty of London in 1915, which pledged Italian support to the Allies with the stipulation that Italy would receive land then held by Austria, should the Allies win the war. Despite ultimately being on the winning side of the conflict, Italy found itself woefully unprepared for this new type of warfare. The government promised land to its soldiers in the event of victory, in order to raise morale and enthusiasm for the war effort. Unfortunately, this promise was an untenable one. After suffering several devastating defeats against Austria in the later years of the war, Italians were resentful and reluctant to continue with the conflict. And once the war was over, the final negotiations between Axis and Allies did not grant Italy the territories it had requested in 1915, making the government unable to fulfill its pledge to its soldiers. Instead of furthering the nationalist cause, World War I had only made the Italian people more disappointed in their government.

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, beginning in 1917, only furthered the social unrest. Though it was unique in its extremity, it came in tandem with growing labor movements and the increased popularity of socialist thought across Europe and across the world. In the wake of World War I, the Italian bourgeoisie felt the looming threat of change to the social order, and in response, gravitated towards an up-and-coming strong-man: Benito Mussolini. Formerly a socialist who had become an ardent nationalist during the war years, Mussolini made a name for himself via his gangs of "blackshirts" and their violent clashes with striking workers and leftist

protesters. He and his newly formed National Fascist Party gained rapid popularity, and in 1921 Mussolini was elected to the Italian Parliament. The very next year, in October of 1922, Mussolini led his supporters in the famous March on Rome, where he forced the Prime Minister, Luigi Facta, to resign and King Victor Emmanuel III to declare a new government under the National Fascist Party, of which Mussolini was the new Prime Minister.

With the Fascist government installed, the state began to implement changes in Italian society. A high level of attention was paid to the private lives of Italian citizens. “In no previous period did state action focus so intensely on institutionalizing what Michel Foucault has called ‘the government of life,’” says Victoria De Grazia. (De Grazia p 3) Mussolini’s ultra-nationalist goal was achievable only if every citizen knew their precise role in society, and was devoted to fulfilling that role in service of the country.

The education system was one of the crucial tools in this endeavor. “The public school is by far the most efficacious means of winning the allegiance of a nation’s youth to national ideals,” wrote Columbia University professors Herbert Schneider and Shephard Clough in their 1929 book *Making Fascists*. “The Casati Law, of November 13, 1859, provided for free public instruction [in Italy], and the Coppino Law, of July 15, 1877, made attendance compulsory until the age of twelve.” (Schneider and Clough 83) Fascism took those earlier laws much further, and made changes to curricula so that children were taught Fascist social values beginning in kindergarten. As Schneider and Clough describe it, “[Fascist education reform] forces all children to attend school until the age of fourteen; it introduces new pedagogic methods and a new curriculum, and it floods the educational system from kindergarten to university with Fascist doctrine.” (Schneider and Clough 84-5) Boys were expected to grow up to be soldiers, while girls would become mothers. And those women who were already mothers were expected to

continue the work of raising their children according to Fascist values. Although women could not vote, they nonetheless played a vital role in the social and political development of the new Fascist Italy. And to make sure that they performed this role well, they were also subject to constant messaging reinforcing the new feminine ideal of the hardworking, practical and frugal mother of many children, who she must raise to be physically fit so that the next generation would be equipped to serve the nation as well. According to De Grazia, “Excluded from the formal political system, [women] were nonetheless socialized through the civic culture to fulfill their duty to the state. Through schooling, military training, and public rituals, the political elites, entrepreneurs, and social reformers sought to impress on their compatriots the civic obligations, collective virtues, and personal values required for citizenship in nation-states embattled in an increasingly competitive world system.” (De Grazia 6)

This is the version of Italy into which Rosetta Loy is born, and which she describes in *La Parola Ebreo*. She calls her kindergarten teacher, the first exposure she has to the public school system, a “fervent Fascist,” and recalls learning to recite a poem about Mussolini in that teacher’s class. Fascist youth groups for both boys and girls were established, and ultimately became compulsory: Balilla for boys and Piccole Italiane for girls aged 8 to 14, and Avanguardisti for boys and Giovani Italiane for girls between 14 and 18. These groups were designed to keep children physically strong, and to train the boys in particular in combat exercises, to prepare them to be soldiers as adults. Loy describes her older brother’s initial enthusiasm for the Balilla meetings, and his excitement at getting to wear his new uniform for the first time—at least until their father’s displeasure with his son’s involvement with Balilla becomes evident. She also writes about her envy of her sisters’ Piccole Italiane uniforms, and her desire to have one of her own.

Balilla and the other Fascist youth groups also represent a power struggle between Fascism and the Catholic Church. As of the late 1920s, when Schneider and Clough were conducting their research, they wrote that “The Fascists first abolished [the Catholic Scouts and the Catholic Athletic Association] only in small places of less than 20,000 inhabitants, but in 1927 they abolished all of them, and Balilla now has a complete monopoly of the field of boys’ clubs.” (Schneider and Clough 78) Both the Church and the National Fascist Party were competing for control over the social upbringing of Italian children, as well as general authority over the duties and obligations of Italian Catholics. Gabriele D’Annunzio had, in his nationalist writings, begun to develop a sort of neo-pagan mythology through his depictions of modern Italy as cultural and spiritual successor of the Romans. This did not lead him to turn away from the Church, however. As Schneider and Clough put it, “D’Annunzio and his schools had led many to a neopaganism and to the cult of ancient Rome, but most of the Nationalists, and recently D’Annunzio himself, recognized the Catholic church as essentially Roman and imperialistic, and, hence, as Italian.” (Schneider and Clough, 63) Mussolini struggled to reconcile the two at first, however, and while Loy spends more time discussing the relationship between the Vatican and Hitler, we can understand from her explanations the ways in which Fascist political ideology was seen by the Church to sometimes be at odds with Catholicism. Like Loy’s “blind faith” in the Befana, the mythical witch who brings gifts to children on Epiphany, her brother had equally strong faith in the goodness of Fascism, by way of his Balilla troop. Their parents did succeed in reducing his faith somewhat, though, which only emphasizes the importance of home life in reinforcing—or countering—Fascist beliefs.

Likewise, Loy’s *au pair* Annemarie has a significant impact on young Rosetta’s understanding of the world, sometimes even unintentionally. The very first scene of the memoir

is a powerful example of this fact. In a few, short minutes, Loy learns that some of the people in her community are Jews, and that this means that they are different from her, though they look the same; that they “cut” their babies in some way when they are born; and that Annemarie seems to dislike them. Although Annemarie apparently forgets this conversation, Loy spends a long time ruminating on what it means, and how it connects to other parts of her life, like the little girl she meets playing on the piazza, or the stories from the Bible she has learned.

Ultimately, Mussolini embraced the Church as a necessary and even useful institution, given the deep-running Catholicism of Italian society. Children studied Catholicism as a subject in school, according to Schneider and Clough: “The child begins with the commonplaces of worship, dogma, and mythology, until he becomes familiar with the religious life of the people.” (Schneider and Clough, 65) Likewise, “The most far-reaching aspect of Fascism’s attitude toward religion, though not the most tangible, is the success of the movement in building up its own religious atmosphere and rites.” (Schneider and Clough 73) The ability to abide by ritual and authority was key for Mussolini’s authoritarian vision, and cooperation with the Church helped him achieve that.

The racial laws targeting Jews in Italy were passed in the fall of 1938. Loy says that at this time there were 58,412 Jewish residents in all of Italy, 10,380 of whom were not Italian citizens but foreign nationals. Upon the implementation of these laws, Jews were prohibited from teaching at or attending any school attended by Italian students, owning companies with over 100 employees, owning land or buildings above certain values, or serving in the military, to name some of the decrees. At this point in her memoir, Loy is seven years old, and so her growing awareness of the world coincides with this crucial inflection point in Fascist policy.

I have alluded earlier to the current political climate today and its relevance to the events recounted in *La Parola Ebreo*. As previously mentioned, there are a number of countries here in the twenty-first century that have embraced far-right, ultra-nationalist politicians or parties, particularly within the last five to ten years. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus largely on the current state of Italian politics, but I will discuss Brazil and the United States as well, in order to give a fuller picture of the political trends that are occurring.

Italy's current Prime Minister is Giorgia Meloni. She is the nation's first-ever female Prime Minister, and she is also the head of the right-wing party Brothers of Italy. The party is known for its anti-immigrant sentiment, and embrace of traditionalist values regarding subjects such as abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. Although Meloni was only elected as Prime Minister in 2022, she has been involved in politics since she was young, and is not afraid to align herself with Fascism. In a 2018 article for Duke University's *World Policy Journal*, journalist Barbie Latza Nadeau examines this tendency of Meloni's. The article, entitled "Femme Fascista: How Giorgia Meloni became the star of Italy's far right," opens with a scene of Meloni holding a campaign rally with Rachele Mussolini, granddaughter of Benito Mussolini, in front of a Fascist-era building. "In the center of town, Latina's city hall is set in a tower facing the Piazza del Popolo. At its base is an inscription beckoning peasants to 'look at the tower rising above the plains as a symbol of Fascist power.' As the backdrop for Meloni's speech, the imagery was picture-perfect." (Nadeau p 15) While this open embrace of Fascism may seem shocking to outsiders, Nadeau makes the point that, among a certain part of the Italian population, support for Benito Mussolini never really waned, even in the eight decades since his death. "Polls consistently put [Mussolini's] postmortem approval rating at 20 percent nationwide, and the numbers climb much higher among those affiliated with the right." (Nadeau 17)

Meloni is by no means the first Prime Minister of Italy to publicly embrace such a close relationship with Fascism. Silvio Berlusconi, who served as Prime Minister several times between 1994 and 2011, is also not shy about his admiration for Benito Mussolini. Nadeau writes that “Berlusconi has often compared himself to Mussolini, and at a 2013 ceremony for Holocaust Remembrance Day he commented that the dictator should be remembered for his positive record: ‘The racial laws were the worst fault of Mussolini as a leader, who in so many other ways did well.’” (Nadeau 17)

One common feature of right-wing nationalist politics is the glorification of the past. Chiara Bonacchi, in the fourth chapter of her book *Heritage and Nationalism: Understanding Populism Through Big Data*, analyzes references to certain topics on social media by various Italian political figures and their supporters. She writes, “... the Greco-Roman world was referred to as an aspect of the cultural distinctiveness and make-up of Europe as a whole by two major parties on the centre-right and right of the political spectrum: Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and Brothers of Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni.” (Bonacchi 63) Ancient Rome in particular was a favorite subject of Mussolini’s, who frequently utilized the idea of modern Italians as the cultural (and ethnic) inheritors of the Roman legacy, as a tactic to promote nationalism. Berlusconi and Meloni are not the only ones to lean into this tactic in recent years, either. CasaPound Italia, the political party self-titled as “Fascists of the Third Millennium,” (Bonacchi 62), also focuses heavily on this theme: “CasaPound Italia contrasts supposedly glorious and foregone times with the decadent present and argues, on this basis, for the need to preserve the monuments that were left to us as a legacy of that past... this idea is also a recurring topos, albeit of course not exclusively so, in the rhetoric of Mussolini.” (Bonacchi 63)

With regards to Brazil, recently-ousted former President Jair Bolsonaro provides a similar example of the kinds of politics I have just described in Italy. Bolsonaro is known for his super-nationalist stances and conservative views on issues such as abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, just like Meloni. Last fall, Bolsonaro lost his re-election attempt to Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (known mononymously as Lula), who had been president of Brazil previously, from 2003 to 2010. Lula is a left-wing politician who, despite facing corruption scandals, has remained a fairly popular candidate. He was sworn into office for his new term on January 1, 2023. Just over a week later, on January 8, thousands of Bolsonaro's supporters stormed Brazil's Congress and Supreme Court, smashing windows and barricades and forcing entry to the buildings. The riots were provoked by the belief that the recent election had been conducted fraudulently, and that Bolsonaro was the rightful president. Although it is not an exact mirror, this event draws unsettling parallels to Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922.

Similar events have taken place in the United States as well in recent years. Right-wing populist Donald Trump was elected to the American presidency in 2016. He built his base through his anti-immigrant, America first policies, and this base has remained largely loyal. In 2020, when the presidency was up for re-election, Trump promoted the idea that the election might be fraudulent, and that if he were to lose it would be due to foul play. Trump did, in fact, lose to current president Joseph Biden, and no genuine evidence of voter fraud or miscounted ballots has been found. Despite the unsubstantiated nature of the claims, supporters of Trump marched on the U.S. Capitol Building in January of 2021 as the results of the election were being certified by Congress, once again echoing Mussolini's forcible ascent to power.

My reason for discussing these examples is because I feel that they demonstrate the necessity of keeping narratives like *La Parola Ebreo* in the public consciousness. It is stories like

Loy's that remind us today of what risks we run when far-right nationalism is allowed to go unchecked. It is only by keeping alive the testaments of those who have witnessed such extreme and outright persecution first-hand that we may hope to recognize the warning signs of similar potential tragedies to come.

La Parola Ebreo is an engaging and skillfully written memoir. I hope that my attempt at translating a portion of it will do justice to Loy's language, as well as convey the specificities of the moment the memoir depicts. When reading the book for the first time, I was struck by the vivid yet impressionistic quality of Loy's memories. From a creative perspective, this is one of the things that compelled me to translate this piece. I am hopeful that I've been able to retain that characteristic to some extent.

My other reason for translating *La Parola Ebreo* is essentially the oft-repeated sentiment that if we do not know history then we are doomed to repeat it. I do not mean to imply that narratives about Fascism, or about the lead-up to and early years of World War II are few and far between. Rather, I think that Loy's version of this story offers a fresh perspective, and one that many can learn from. Her position as a close observer of Jewish persecution in Rome, while never being directly affected herself, may resonate for readers who are not the targets of systemic persecution in their own countries but who witness it around them. And Loy's youth at the time of the events allows her to make clear just how unnatural and unnecessary such types of persecution truly are. Her innocence and ignorance remind adult readers that many injustices which they take for granted are based on entirely false premises. With this in mind, my wish is that this reminder will prove useful for my twenty-first century readers as they navigate a world filled once again with highly nationalist, conservative political leaders who resort to

demagoguery and scapegoating. As I have described above, the social and political conditions which led to Italian Fascism and the nation's cooperation with the Nazis developed over many, many years, and were not the result of an over-night change. *La Parola Ebreo* reminds us of the deeply tragic consequences of ignoring the increasingly concerning policies of such a government. It is my hope that with this reminder, we may all find ourselves more able to stand up against bigotry and to protect the most vulnerable members of our communities in the face of persecution.

The Word “Jew”

1.

If I go back in time and think about how the word “Jew” came into my life, I see myself seated on a little light blue chair in a child’s room. A room with wallpaper that has peach blossoms scattered across it in a few spots. It is late spring, and the tall window which leads out to the stone balcony is opened wide. I can see into the apartment across the street, where the curtains in the open windows sway in the breeze. In this house there is a party, and I see people coming and going. In this house a baby was born recently, and the party is for him.

“A baptism?” I ask.

“No,” says the woman seated across from me in another little chair, where her body is hunched over like a ball. “Certainly not,” she repeats: she is Annemarie, my *Fräulein*. “They’re Jews,” she adds, gesturing with her chin towards the window, “they don’t baptize their babies, they circumcise them.”

She says “*beschneiden*” with a disgusted grimace. The word means nothing to me, but it contains “*schneiden*,” which I know well.

“What?” I murmur in disbelief.

“They cut off a little piece of flesh,” she responds brusquely.

“*Mit der Schere...?*” I whisper. I can see the blood, a sea of blood bathing the baby’s basket.

The explanation is vague but chilling. Annemarie hints at some part of the body which I don’t know while she glowers sternly through the window: “*Vielleicht mit der Schere, ja, dass weiß ich nicht...*” Beyond those windows I see little girls passing with bows like my own on their heads, ladies with pearls at their throats and draped in soft knitted clothing like my mother’s.

“*Sind Juden*” she repeats; and the gaze of her beautiful eyes the color of the sky is fixed severely on a footman who is making the rounds with a tray. Perhaps hidden among the cups of tea is the little piece they have cut from the newborn. A tiny finger, a strip of skin.

Signora Della Seta is also Jewish. She lives across from us: she is old, or at least she seems so to me. When I am sick she comes to see me, I have a fever and my body sinks into the big double bed in my mother’s room. Signora Della Seta has gray hair tucked into a net. She brings me a gift. It’s a little box wrapped in blue satin inside which is a celluloid baby doll held firmly in place by elastics sewn into the lining; another elastic tightly holds a miniscule baby bottle with a red nipple. To me it is a beautiful gift: attached also are a pair of underwear and a little t-shirt. I adore Signora Della Seta, even if she is Jewish.

On the floor above live the Levis. They are noisy, you can often hear them playing piano, and the mother has dark eyes that shine brightly; they are less genteel than Signora Della Seta, and we only run into them in the stairwell or the elevator. They don’t bring me gifts. They are also Jews, Annemarie tells me. Sometimes Giorgio Levi will ring our doorbell and ask my brother to go and play ball with him at the gardens of the Villa Borghese. Giorgio is a year older, he is tall and has dark wavy hair, and the cheerful expression of one eager to get down the stairs and join his playmates. Upon my brother’s return, as he washes his feet in the bidet, he complains that Giorgio is bossy, and that when someone doesn’t pass him the ball quickly enough he elbows them in the side.

At kindergarten, Mother Gregoria shows us colorful illustrations from the Bible. She has round, ruddy cheeks. She is small, and even she sits in a little chair in her long habit of white wool with pleats that widen at the bottom, and a red embroidered heart on her chest, pierced in

memory of the Passion of Christ. On the page which turns before our eyes, right between her pudgy hands, Abraham raises the sword to kill Isaac. Isaac is Abraham's son; but luckily the angel arrives and puts a stop to it. Abraham and Isaac are Jews. The seven Maccabee brothers are also Jews, and they burn to death for not renouncing God. God, however, was uncaring, but luckily Christ came down to earth, and this was very very good. He has long brown hair and blue eyes; everyday when I arrive at kindergarten, he is there waiting for me, and his rosy plaster hand gestures to the heart laid bare on his chest, from which a few droplets of blood ooze. The heart is where love is: Christ loves us. We are Christians, I was baptized at St. Peter's, and my godmother is Signora Basile. She is old like Signora Della Seta but is much skinnier, and her long neck and small head make her look like an ostrich; my brother, once when she came to visit us, opened the door to the parlor and said "Signora Basile has a mustache!" before running away. It's true, the hairs on her upper lip are long and gray, a bit bristly and they poke my cheek whenever she bends down to give me a kiss. She has sweet round eyes, she didn't get angry even that afternoon when my brother had offended her with his jibe. For my baptism, she gave me a gold chain with a pendant of the Madonna of Pompeii, which I suck on when I'm in bed in the dark. Every year for Christmas, Signora Basile organizes a charity raffle for the poor members of our parish. Pilate was a Roman, and the Pharisees and scribes were Jews. Herod was a Jew, and Caiaphas. Also Barabbas. They were all Jews, except for the centurions.

On days when I don't go to kindergarten, Annemarie takes me to Valle Giulia to an isolated park which flanks the Museum of Modern Art. I'm always bundled up in a scarf and wool beret, because my health is not as strong as my sister Teresa's. There is hardly ever anyone else at Valle Giulia, but I'm not supposed to play with other children anyway because they might

get me sick. Some way away from the benches, there is sometimes another girl, destined, like me, for solitude, who stays squatting in the gravel with her brightly colored shovel. I can see her white underwear, the same underwear from Petit Bateau that Annemarie helps me into every morning. I squat as well, and watch her. She is blonde, and her hair falls in waves around her very pale face. I'd like to have her shovel. Around her neck she wears a golden star. Annemarie calls me, she has been talking to the little girl's governess: the girl is very rich, they tell me. Maybe I can play with her. I turn to look at her sitting in the gravel; I am fascinated by the dangling star that sparkles in the sunlight. I ask her if I can touch it.

"No," she responds, "you can't." She doesn't want me to get too close.

As Annemarie and I go home, I tell her about the star.

"It's the Star of David," she says. Mother Gregoria has shown us a picture of David, who threw the stone at Goliath. "Instead of a necklace with the Madonna, or baby Jesus," Annemarie explains, "this little girl wears the six-pointed star." She doesn't say it, and I don't know how I know, but I understand that this girl is Jewish. I immediately think of scissors and blood.

"Did they cut her too?" I ask.

"What are you talking about, cut what?" she says in German. I am also supposed to be speaking German, or else she won't respond to me.

This star seems to me to be full of mystery. I envy this girl who wears the star instead of my boring pendant.

This is the winter of 1936. I read a book which tells the adventures of a Catholic boy, besieged by non-believers who want to make him renounce Jesus, among whom are the very bad freemasons. The boy travels on a boat, where there is a Jew who is also very sinful. Everyone wants to cut the boy off from his faith, but he resists and prays to the Madonna. At one point he

is almost blinded. I don't like this book, it's stupid and cruel. I like the book about the Sandman, who sprinkles silver dust on childrens' eyelids and takes them to Dreamland. I also like the book where la Befana struggles through the snow in the middle of the night and slips into people's homes through the chimney. I have a blind faith in la Befana (I believe wholeheartedly?), even though we never get snow in Rome, and we don't have a chimney either.

But before we return to the little girl sitting on the small blue chair, watching intently through the window, I'd like to back up and start when this girl was born, in the ninth year of the Fascist era, in number 21 Via Flaminia, in the room called the "red room," because of the wine-colored wallpaper. Only a few days later, as drops of rain splattered the car windows, she was taken to St. Peter's Basilica to be baptized. Her young brother and two small sisters accompany her in the arms of wet nurses and governesses (the oldest is four years old, while the youngest is just fifteen months), and at the baptismal font is bestowed upon her, along with her other names, the name Pia, in honor of the pope under whom she was born: Pius XI.

In the same year, in November, a statement from the Ministry of Public Instruction is circulated to university instructors, imposing an oath of loyalty to Fascism. Out of 1,200 instructors, 1,188 take the oath and commit to teaching according to the principles of Fascist doctrine; only 12 give up their seats.

Also in 1931 was the release of the new novel of esteemed and famous author Giovanni Papini, a Florentine intellectual of great genius and mental capacity, who in the early years of the century had been considered to be a "heretic." But in 1921, following a public conversion to Catholicism, he wrote *The Story of Christ*, a novelized biography which takes up the legend of the "Wandering Jew" to reveal "a truth even scarier than the historical narrative." The

immortality of Buttadeo, who is condemned to wander endlessly, is, to Papini, in fact a metaphor for the blood of Christ, which will always be on the hands of the Jews: punished with the Diaspora, isolated from other people, the descendants of those who killed the son of God persist, and still do not convert. Papini recounts also how these perennial travelers have since “discovered a new homeland in gold,” while others, coming from the “ghettos of the Slavic countries,” “dirty and greasy,” represent even today the “yet-living figure of the true Buttadeo.” It is an argumentative novel which raises much controversy, but in one year it sells 70,000 copies and is translated into French, English, German, Polish, Spanish, Romanian, Dutch, Finnish, etc.

The new book is called *Gog*, from the nickname of the protagonist, and presents a series of imaginary interviews held by a rich and eccentric American businessman, in order to discover “the secret ills suffered by modern-day society.” Via the protagonist, Papini pretends to interview Gandhi, Freud, Edison, Shaw, and gradually a whole series of figures from this century. In this way we also meet the prototypical Jew, embodied by Benrubi, Gog’s secretary: “a short young man, with slightly sloping shoulders, hollow cheeks, deep-set eyes, hair already starting to turn gray, a greenish complexion like mud from a swamp... and an expression like a dog that’s afraid of being hit while also knowing that he is indispensable.” Provoked by his boss’s questions about Jewish cowardice, Benrubi launches into a lengthy explanation of why “unable to use iron, the Jews, to their detriment, protected themselves with gold... The Jew, having become a capitalist as a legitimate defense, is now found to be, due to Europe’s moral decay and mysticism, one of the rulers of the land... dominator of both rich and poor... How could the trampled and spat-upon Jew take his revenge upon his enemies? Through abasing, demeaning, unmasking, dissolving the ideals of the Goyim. By destroying values which Christianity dictates we must abide by. And in fact, if you have been watching closely, for the last century Jewish intelligence

has done nothing but soil and undermine your most dearly held beliefs... since Jews have been able to write freely, all your spiritual scaffolding has been threatening to topple.” Benrubi lists a number of people such as Marx, Heine, or Lombroso, destroyers of Christian values, to finish: “[The Jews,] Born amongst different peoples, dedicated to different topics, all of them, Germans and French, Italians and Poles, poets and mathematicians, anthropologists and philosophers all have a common character, and a common goal: that of questioning recognized truths, to bring low that which is high, to defile that which seems pure, to make unstable that which seems solid, to stone those who are respected.” (*Gog* will be chosen in April of 1943 by Vichy Radio for a propaganda broadcast; and in the same year the officer training school of the Republic of Salò will adopt the text for a course on antisemitism.)

But even if Papini is a writer greatly appreciated in my family, and *The Story of Christ* and *Gog* are lined up on the bookshelf in the hallway across from biographies of Napoleon and novels by Bourget and Fogazzaro, my family was not fascist, or even racist. Some confusion might be raised by the books of Ugo Mioni, a priest known as the “Catholic Salgari,” which, despite their undoubtedly antisemitic influence, were read aloud. But the preference for him was certainly for religious reasons.

My father studied with the Barnabites of Lodi, at a boarding school which he entered at the age of ten and stayed until eighteen, other than the twenty days of vacation each year with his family. His stories about that time always leave us amazed and slightly nervous. Through his words, alive again the children lined up by their bed in the dormitory awaiting the orderly who would take off their little black boots. The orderly passes through quickly and tugs so forcefully that the children fall to the ground, and every time it feels like their feet are coming off with the

boots. The water for washing in the morning is covered with a sheet of ice in the pitcher. The students are allowed to play tag only on the condition that they not touch each other: this never works. They can only use a piece of rope which some of the older students leave to freeze in the courtyard fountain to become a rod, and with which they hit their smaller companions violently. The wait for his mother, who comes once a month, is agonizing. The cold and darkness on some cloudy mornings made my father so melancholy that he preferred to spend the whole day without eating, alone in an infirmary bed.

Yet in a short time, the irreverent and reckless child who had skipped school to go swim in the Po was transformed into a model pupil, who, by the end of high school, had attained an “Honorable Mention,” a recognition which meant his painted portrait was hung in the school’s gallery. Afterwards, he went to the Polytechnic University of Turin, where he studied passionately and discovered politics. Almost immediately he registered with the Italian People’s Party, and he and his friend Fioravanti became enthusiastic followers of Don Luigi Sturzo. The war of ’15-’18 found him a non-interventionist, and luckily he was declared unable to serve due to thoracic insufficiency. He was allergic to fascism right from the start. He was already an engineer who had made a name for himself in the construction of homes, bridges and roads, and in his optimism thought fascism a mere flash in the pan. Even after Matteotti’s assassination, he expected Mussolini’s rapid decline. Instead it was the exact opposite. And so, in order to stem the chatter of the enthusiasts in the office of the new regime, he attached a card in the lobby with the message “Do not discuss politics in this office.” He married late—my mother is thirteen years younger than he.

Later on, he had to register with the National Fascist Party if he wanted to keep working with the overwhelming majority of Italians, and to wear the badge on his jacket lapel. He doesn’t

own the full uniform though; the rare times when he has to wear the black shirt (the inauguration of worksite, the visit of some official to a nearly-finished road or bridge) we children enjoy his mocking impressions in front of the mirror. His best friend from his time with the Italian People's Party is still the engineer Fioravanti, who has chosen instead to work abroad rather than get some party card.

One of my mother's best friends married a Jew, the Baron of Castelnuovo; and Signora Della Seta often sits in our parlor in the exact same chair which Signora Basile frequently occupies. My mother goes willingly into shops with names such as Cohen and Piperno. Amongst her favorites is Schostal. And our pediatrician is Professor Luzzatti, a doctor to the royal family. *Volljuden*, as Hitler would say.

The first tragic date for Italian Jews is, in fact, Hitler's ascension to power in 1933. Something profoundly new has made its way into the minds of the 40 million inhabitants of the peninsula. With castor oil and the cudgel of fascism, it began to superimpose the fatal and sacrificial choreography of the swastika, while religious-based anti-Judaism (more than likely to diminish over time) was found alongside fanatic hatred of pagan mysticism. The declaration against the Jews of March 29th, 1933, less than two months after Hitler's nomination as Chancellor of the Reich, divided German citizens into aryans and non-aryans (it takes just one Jewish grandparent to be determined as non-aryan). And even though the first decrees don't distinguish between *Volljuden* and *Mischlinge* (fully Jewish people and mixed people), very quickly a particular kind of treatment is reserved for the *Volljuden* which excludes them from public life, and ultimately from their lives. They are already, by the end of 1933, the object of the

Judenrein, the “purging of the Jews.” Only later, with the war, will this treatment be extended to others.

Also in 1933 is the agreement between the Church and the Third Reich, promoted and signed by the Vatican’s secretary of state, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli.

During the July 14th session of the Council of the Ministers of the Reich, as can be deduced from the meeting records (C.I., doc. 362), the new Chancellor Hitler, who rules a state in which there are about 30 million Catholics, expresses his relief: “this treaty between the Church and the Third Reich, the details of which do not interest me in the slightest, has surrounded us with an atmosphere of trust which is very useful in our uncompromising struggle against Judaism.”

The German bishops welcome this news, which shelters them from possible Nazi retaliation, and permits them now to openly sympathize with the leader of the new Germany. Only Faulhaber, the bishop of Monaco, distances himself, and from the pulpit of the very cathedral in which he will be buried many years later, does not hesitate to speak out against the harassment which the Jews are being subjected to. But his Advent sermons on “Judaism, Christianity and German-ness,” despite being attended by such a crowd of worshippers that there were requests to install speakers so that he could be listened to in two other churches, no one else echoed his sentiments. His denunciation remains isolated, and the German Catholic hierarchy doesn’t feel the need to take a different position. (In Italy, Faulhaber’s homilies will be published in 1934 by the Catholic publishing house Morcelliana in Brescia, in a translation by Giuseppe Ricciotti. Mr. Ricciotti will also write an exemplary introduction.)

In France, there is greater attention on the part of Catholics. This is demonstrated by the writings and speeches of Jacques Maritain, and of Oscar de Ferenzy, and the declarations of the orator Marie-André Dieux, who, in April of 1933, declares at a solidarity rally for German Jews that “reparations for the past injustices committed by those of my own faith” are necessary. Don’t be deluded, though. Even in France these manifestos remain isolated. The majority of clergy and other Catholics hear very little of them.

But let us return to the little girl sitting across from Annemarie in the room with the peach blossoms on the walls. Annemarie is tracing for her from an album of illustrations from *Struwwelpeter*, the book about Shaggy Peter. She is good at drawing and the pencil traces the contours of Big Nikolas, who dips naughty children in ink, mocking a little black child for the color of his skin. Out of his gigantic bottle come the children, black from the tops of their heads to the soles of their shoes. Even the donut clasped in someone’s hand is black, as they run along merrily with the little black boy, who is no longer distinguishable from the rest.

In the afternoon, once my brother has finished his homework, we march behind him along the perimeter of the carpet in the front hall and sing, “Pretty black face, beautiful Abyssinian, wait and see, for the hour approaches...” with, by turns, a fez of purple velvet on our heads, from which dangles a ragged tassel. But it is in the spring especially when our singing repertoire is best on display. During our road trip to Ostia, to take the sea air, which is supposed to strengthen our lungs, our voices soar in intensely patriotic hymns. As we wind through the plane trees on the Via del Mare, our driver Francesco closes the glass divider so as not to be deafened, while we go from the exultant “Sun that rises, so joyful and free, tame your horses on our hills...” to the melancholy stanzas of “You never will see anything in the world greater than

Rome, greater than Rome...” That one ends very sadly because it suggests that the Major of Rome (certainly of lower rank than our Duce, Marshal of the Empire) is guilty of a terrible crime, or languishes in prison, behind bars forever, condemned never to see anything again. Luckily, then it is always time for “Rome reclaims the empire, the hour of the eagle will sound, the blasts of trumpets salute her flight...”, a hymn which seems to me glowingly exalant.

But one day we aren't supposed to sing *Faccetta Nera* anymore, and the fez is confiscated and buried in the chest of toys in the front hall. Domenico the porter explains to Annemarie that the song is banned because, with its address to the “beautiful Abyssinian,” it's dangerous to the pure Aryan race which we belong to. Now, when I go to the baker with our maid Italia to buy panini all'olio I watch the small black man made of painted iron with a certain apprehension. He holds a little box in his hands, and if I put a coin in—it only takes ten cents—the man bobs his head this way and that. The cashier thanks us. Now he is *Faccetta Nera*, even if Italia insists that this one is a black man from the missions.

In our house, the missions were very important. They are talked about often, and are periodically embodied by the priests with long beards who drink coffee in our parlor. They come from far away and bring gifts of sandalwood boxes and crucifixes inlaid with mother of pearl, and rosaries made of olives from Gethsemane. And tiger pelts with clawed feet and gaping jaws, and cold glass eyes. Before leaving they bless us children with a hand on the head. Once, after returning to Africa, they send us a photograph of themselves dressed in white, in front of a newly-constructed wooden church.

2.

In 1937, Hitler has been in power for four years and the first concentration camps in Germany have sections for Jews as well as politicians, largely those accused of “rape of Aryan girls.” Those with more foresight, and who are able to do so, have started to move away. But emigrating is becoming a risky thing to attempt: Jews are allowed to take less and less with them, down to only eight percent of their assets. And no one wants to do it without their money. In March, Pius XI publishes the encyclical entitled *Mit brennender Sorge* decrying Nazi neopaganism. In Italian it is called “With Ardent Concern.” And just five days later, with the encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*, he strongly condemns both communist atheism and materialism.

A few days after the publication of *Mit brennender Sorge*, Cardinal Mundelein of Chicago issues a violent attack on Hitler. Pius XI supports this, and the Vatican’s Secretary of State, Pacelli, finds himself forced to appease the German ambassador to the Vatican, Diego von Bergen.

1937 also sees a new edition of *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, edited by Julius Evola. The book contains a long and complex narrative. The first edition, published in St. Petersburg in 1903, was actually a translation of a text originally written in Paris from 1897-98, presented as a report of 22 out of 24 socio-political conferences (or “protocols”) held secretly in Basel during the Zionist conference of 1897—conferences which would reveal the vast and occult scheme by the Jews to conquer the world. The presumed “protocols” were, in reality, the fantastical invention of a secret agent from the tsarist police. And in Russia, the book spread especially well after the publication of the 1905 edition, which was included in the work of the mystic Sergei Aleksandrovich Nilus, *The Great Among the Small: The Antichrist as an Imminent Political Possibility*. But it is only after the revolution, when the White Russians carry this book with them

into the west, that *Protocols* gains real notoriety. Between the years of '20 and '21 it was published in Germany, England, France, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Italy; and the Bolshevik Revolution seemed to be the first stage of the occult project of Jewish domination.

Subsequently, the journalist Richard Graves discovers in 1921 that *Protocols* is nothing more than a plagiarized and paraphrased version of the libel published against Napoleon III: *The Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*, written by Maurice Joly and printed in Brussels in 1864. But this does nothing to impede its diffusion and success nearly everywhere.

Not in Italy. When it is published the first time in 1921 in two separate editions, edited by Giovanni Preziosi and Umberto Benigni, a fundamentalist priest, it went mostly unnoticed. The new edition of 1937, however, draws immediate interest and sells out in only three months. The notable essay "Impossible Antisemitism" by Jacques Maritain, published in the anthology *Présence* as a response to *Protocols*—which invites its readers to reflect on the antisemitism of some Catholic tradition and its conflict with Christian belief—is useless. Nor does the famous article by the Jesuit Father Charles in the *New Theological Revue* of Lovanio from January 1938 obtain better results. Nevertheless, Father Charles, after analyzing the falsehoods, concludes: "the Jews, who are purportedly guilty of these *Protocols*, are rather the victims, and innocent ones."

The young girls photographed during the summer of 1937 on Signor Stuflessner's terrace in Ortisei, obscured by giant crepe paper flowers, are celebrating that August 15th the return of their mother and father from a trip through Germany. Their parents tell of their journey over the new highways laid at Hitler's request, and speak of the marvelous *Autobahnen* which they drove on in their Astura without a single bump. They also describe their admiration of the order and

discipline, and the cleanliness of a people who have demonstrated that they possess prodigious organizational abilities. They do not tell about the enormous banners outside Rosenheim, just across the border between Austria and Bavaria, on which were written *Wir vollen kein Juden* in block letters. We don't want Jews.

It was written in Gothic lettering, black on yellow, which made quite the impression on my brother, who had gone with them; luckily, with his blond hair and deep pride in being Italian, it didn't concern him. He is ten years old, and after having admired the sentries standing guard at the military memorial in Monaco, so still they seem to be stone, he wanted to buy a toy helmet with a swastika on it. With the helmet on his head, during a break along the famous *Autobahnen*, a photograph is taken of him with his arm raised in the Nazi salute. A strange trick of the folding Kodak camera, to capture forever either an unconscious gesture or a momentary impulse. Was it excessive complaisance by our parents, sudden oblivion, or what?

But that winter, one of the many missionaries who come to visit will pat my brother's hair affectionately and say, as a compliment, "You look just like a little German," and, in a sudden afterthought, will tug sharply at his blond locks.

In October, our scholastic life suffers the first change of its brief history. My brother begins his first year of middle school, and must leave the Sisters of the Adoration, who only teach elementary school. It is decided that he will go to the Massimo Institute, run by Jesuits. It is in a big building from the seventeenth century, which is near the station where every Saturday an assembly is held, just like at every school in the kingdom: exercises, marches, and muskets to train the students for war. For this occasion, our mother buys a new Balilla uniform from the Zingone in the Piazza della Maddalena, with gray-green shorts and a black silk shirt. Dressed in

his new costume, with the fez and elastic shoulder straps, he goes to the train station with our mother to meet our father, who is returning from Turin. They are nervous and excited, standing on the platform as the train pulls up amidst clouds of steam under the great iron arches of the Termini station. Perhaps Mother wears a felt cap, or a light coat over her printed silk dress. Father steps out of the train a few cars down, carrying his indispensable briefcase, protected by a beige fabric cover. He is tall, thin, and still wears his collar starched: you can identify him from a distance by his gray hat which he lifts high to signal his presence. Mother smiles joyfully and waves her gloved hand, clearly saying “We’re over here, look!” As he approaches, Father narrows his eyes slightly, and for a moment his gaze is focused on her and the child in the uniform. Then he puts his hat back on his head, and blends into the crowd of other travelers and porters carrying luggage on their shoulders. Mother stands there, her hand still raised, unsure if she should lower it or not, while my brother waits at attention, brimming with pride, his fez slightly at an angle in accordance with regulation. Father doesn’t nod, doesn’t smile but walks straight ahead with his beige, cloth-covered briefcase; and before my mother can say a word, before my brother can move a muscle, he is past them, with his gaze fixed firmly ahead. Now his gray hat becomes confused with the other people in the grand atrium of the station. He disappears. My mother and brother are left alone next to the empty train cars, the last puffs of steam condensing into water on the tracks.

I don’t know what my mother and her uniformed son said as they returned home, with Francesco driving the Astura in the front seat. Whether the humiliation or the ridiculousness of it all won out. I also don’t know whether my brother’s aversion to the assemblies from that point on, and to the black silk shirt and the gray-green shorts, was born during that short trip home from the station, as the October sun glinted off the big metal M on his fez.

3.

On March 12th, 1938, German troops cross the Austrian border. On the 13th, the country is declared to be a part of the Grand Reich. On the 14th, Hitler enters Vienna triumphantly between two wings of a rejoicing crowd, while behind the barriers girls in costume wave bouquets of flowers. Via a referendum which will be open to the Germans as well, the Austrians decide that they are in favor of the annexation, the *Anschluss*, which will transform their nation into a new province of Germany; from this conference are excluded, naturally, the approximately 200,000 Austrians registered as Jews. Immediately a campaign of persuasion begins, which even the Church is invited to take part in. On March 15th, the bishop of Vienna, Cardinal Teodor Innitzer, meets with Hitler. Their conversation is so compelling that the Cardinal sends out a notice to various other dioceses, encouraging them to create propaganda in favor of the *Anschluss*—“with particular attention,” he writes, “to youth organizations.” Within the notice he assures the others that he has the assurance of the Führer, “that the Church will have no need to repent for its loyalty to Greater Germany.” On March 27th, in every church in the nation the collective declaration of the Austrian bishops is read aloud: “We acknowledge with pleasure that the National Socialist party has taken and continues to take groundbreaking action in national, and economic provision, as well as in the realm of social policy, for the Reich and the German nation, and especially for the most needy in our society. We are equally convinced that the National Socialist party has pushed back the threat of destructive atheist Bolshevism.

“The bishops send their best blessings to accompany this effort, and will instruct their congregants with this in mind.

“This Plebiscite Day, it goes without saying that it is our national duty as Germans to pledge ourselves to the German Reich, and we expect the same from all Christian believers who understand their duty to their country.”

On April 1st, Cardinal Innitzer sends a message to Cardinal Bertram, president of the conference of Fulda, which brings together the majority of Catholic bishops in Germany. In the message he expresses his hope that the German bishops will align themselves with the Austrian ones. And at the bottom of his appeal, before the signature, he adds in his own hand, “*Und Heil Hitler!*”

Almost immediately this provokes more than a few reactions. On April 2nd, the *Roman Observer* clarifies that the declaration of the Austrian episcopate was drafted and signed without the approval of the Holy See. But the evening before, at 8 o’clock, the Vatican’s radio station sent out a transmission in German, the subject of which was “what is political Catholicism?” The talk, which was very critical of the Austrian episcopate, and Cardinal Innitzer in particular, was given by a German Jesuit, who for obvious reasons wanted to remain anonymous.

The Jesuit in question is called Gustav Gundlach, and he is an expert in the social doctrine of the Church. But an informer inside the Vatican passes his name on to Berlin; and by the end of May someone warns Gundlach that if he returns to Germany he will be arrested.

Meanwhile, Cardinal Innitzer is urgently summoned by Pius XI, and he arrives in Rome by plane on April 5th. The result is a retraction of his sentiments, which the Cardinal issues in a new declaration where, in his name and the name of the entire Austrian episcopate, he invites Christians to disregard what he has said, because such political instruction is contrary to faith, and to Catholic freedom of thought. He also warns that no state or political party is authorized to use any previous statement for their own gain.

On April 10th, the *Anschluss* receives a massive “Ja”: 99.08% of the vote in Germany and 99.75% in Austria. The former Hapsburg empire is in that moment a new province of the Reich: the Ostmark.

Since October I have been in my first year of elementary school. It is already cold, and out in the garden the birds peck at the gravel while the trees are ruffled by the north wind. My teacher is a fervent fascist, and the first poem I learn is “On His Mother’s Knee Benito Read, Luigi Nason.” The name of the author, Luigi Nason, seems to me an integral part of the composition. On the cover of my notebook, the king and the Duce gesture towards tall white plumes. The king is short and skinny, which you can see clearly in the newsreels which I watch on those Saturday afternoons when I am slumped in my chair with boredom and father takes us to the Cinema Planetario. The Duce, however, is burly and full-chested, and goes on horseback to Villa Torlonia, or stands shirtless in the snow with skis on his feet. His blown-up figure dominates the dining room at the hotel in Terminillo, a newly opened ski resort marketed towards Romans, where we sometimes go to play on our sleds.

The one thing that saddens me is that I don’t have a uniform for Little Italians. It was decided at home that it was unnecessary; and when it is I use my sister Teresa’s. But at school, the Sisters never ask me to come in uniform: it is only required for the fifth grade exam, they say. I am sorry about the round black cape and the beret, and the stockings that seem like silk. When we play dress-up, my sisters use the capes like skirts that go down to their feet. I, on the other hand, have to make do with knotting my big floral kerchief around my waist, which at night covers the lamp on my bedside table. For some reason which must be found in childhood, our costumes always focused on our fronts; the back part, butt, back, calves, didn’t exist.

But more often, using ironed sheets, my sisters play “nuns,” and the dolls lined up on the chairs become very naughty children. I have an instinctive reluctance to put on monastic robes, even if only for a game, and I prefer to keep wearing my floral kerchief to play “teacher” instead. Sometimes I transform myself into a “sporty lady,” pinning my skirt together between my legs to make it seem as though I am wearing pants. The sporty lady drives cars, and flies an airplane. She smokes, and plays tennis.

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