

If you have never told your children.
The experiences of a Jewish child caught between Fascism and Nazism

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Abstract. This Jewish author born in Turin writes novels for youngsters. In this testimony she speaks of her experience as a child, when from one day to the next, her life and the lives of her parents were devastated by the 1938 racial laws. At the time the author was only six years old. Then the deportations began and the need to hide in order to avoid the Nazi and Fascist roundups. Suddenly her parents became fragile and in need of protection. She was still a child, but felt as if she was older than them.

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I was six years old then the Racial Laws were introduced to Mussolini's Italy, and I was living in Turin where I had just finished first grade in an old state primary school.

One summer afternoon at sunset down by the sea, my father and mother summoned me and very cautiously informed me that I would not be able to return to my school the following year. I asked them why and my mother calmly said that the Italian government did not want Jewish children to attend school with all the others. I did not ask again.

I was only six years old and I really did not care about that old school where I had made no friends at all.

The confused sort of unease I experienced was caused by the pointless caution in my mother's voice. I had wondered what the meaning might be for such a solemn tone used to tell me something that in my opinion was of no importance at all. I perceived instantly that something was wrong and I increasingly sensed that somewhere there must be "an enemy" but I had not yet identified where it was hiding nor any idea what guise it had assumed.

Life returned to normal. In the autumn I enrolled in the Jewish school in Turin and I immediately liked it, also because my cousin Adriana went to school there... Our parents took us to school and collected us and in the afternoons we did our homework and played, while on Jewish holidays plays were performed at school and family dinners held at home. However, even surrounded by this placid normality, every now and again I continued to hear the play-acted and false statement that "all was well."

My father had lost his job ("all is well"), we had been obliged to move to another city in search of a "secret" job because no Jew could be employed anywhere ("all is well"), and we had moved to Milan and then to Rome where my father had at last found a small and "private" job (this time the "all is well" was true).

We had left the school, our home, our city, our Turin relatives, but then we had found another city, another school (Jewish of course) and friends to replace relatives. Perhaps the "all is well" was acceptable.

After all, it was a life that was spent following its own rhythms and was accepted as it happened with rain in the autumn and scorching summer sun. No one would protest about changing seasons

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and I, for example, would not have dreamt of complaining because there was no sea in Turin and in Liguria there was. And so, in spite of the vague uneasiness that I occasionally experienced, it was to be expected that I should lead a life restricted by rigid and precise limitations.

When Fascism's special laws started to restrict the lives of Italian Jews in 1938, I was only just starting to gain an awareness about life. I had not had time to become accustomed to a *before*, so it seemed natural for me to calmly accept life in a cage.

When I think of that, I always remember what the Hungarian Jewish author Imre Kertesz, winner of the 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote on this subject.

Of course the tragedy he experienced in a Nazi concentration camp when he was only fifteen is not comparable to my modest experience as a survivor of persecution.

With all due respect and having applied the correct proportions, the concept theorised by Kertesz is the same one. There is a difference in the approach of those who, experiencing pain, continuously confront a different past (such as Primo Levi) and those, who like the Hungarian author, experienced concentration camps when they were very young, while they were still growing up and therefore free of all reference points in a *before* of freedom. (Also, according to Kertesz it is only when starting with such an approach that one can speak of a special language of the Holocaust).

I repeat this in order to compare Kertesz's experience and my own which requires a serious reduction of levels, but the central issue is generally speaking similar. Living in the times of Fascism's racial laws, I experienced them with natural acceptance because it never crossed my mind that there could be a different way of life.

There is a second element linked to this, the attitude assumed by adults. My parents believed it right to only provide us with factual information concerning practical aspects of our lives. They did this in a totally non-judgmental manner, if anything minimising the importance of matters. This was of course a psychological and behavioural attitude dictated by love and a desire to protect us, but that ultimately turned out to be profoundly mistaken. As everyone now knows, everything children do not understand they "feel" with more painful intensity. And that is exactly what must have happened to me.

Almost every day I experienced the angst and anxiety hidden below the smiles and the tra-la-la and I was never at peace.

This was made worse by the fact that I could not imagine the cause of such anxiety. There was certainly an enemy threatening our family, but I had no idea who it was. It never crossed my mind that it was the same people who had made us change our school, our friends and our city.

No one had ever spoken of Mussolini or fascism being evil, and even in the Jewish school we studied the same curriculum as in state schools, with coloured pages that always exalted "Our beloved Duce."

However, it was not mentioned as a generic sense of protection that inspired my parents, but a real fear that in public their children might repeat words and opinions expressed at home, certainly endangering the family (remember Skarmeta's wonderful story about the Chilean boy who had to write an essay about "How we spend the evenings in our family" and whose family actually spent every evening plotting in secret meetings?).

Then we moved to Rome and I went to the Jewish school there. By then I was in fourth grade (I had enrolled mid-year) but I instantly understood that my world was turning topsy-turvy.

In that shambolic school characterised by the irreverent and libertarian Roman spirit, I realised that they laughed about Mussolini and about fascism, telling more or less political jokes, and, watched by the teachers, chalked was used to write that special mathematical division on the

blackboard that I mentioned in my first book “*REDUCE divided by RE. Exercise: the RE goes in the RE once and down with the DUCE*”.

Initially I stared at all this in amazement, but very quickly my mind started to grasp matters.

So... Mussolini and fascism were the invisible enemies.” The “baddies” existed and at last I had identified them.

Perhaps I am speaking of all this in a too light-hearted manner, but that is just a façade. It was precisely with the awareness achieved in those days that a sort of remorse that has never given me a day’s peace entered my life. I had not participated, I had not even partially assumed some of the burdens that my parents had carried all on their own (my sisters were younger and therefore not involved at all). Alone they experienced the anguish of seeing their children expelled from schools, alone they wandered with no home and no jobs, caught in a trap that increasingly suffocated them and, even worse, that dreadful responsibility of having to make decisions. Over centuries, the knowledge that your choices could save your children or lead them to death must have caused unbearable suffering.

I was a little girl, but over the years I had grown up. It would have been good for my parents to let themselves go a little and it would have been good for me too.

When the Germans occupied our city in September 1943, the situation suddenly changed. This was the last act. It is true that fascist laws had taken all rights away from Italian Jews. Jewish citizens were no longer citizens, but defenceless pariahs who could only help one another, however...

However, with few individual exceptions, until then no one had been directly in danger of losing their lives just for being born a Jew. There were anxious whispers about whether with the Nazis in the city, Jews would be hunted down in Italy too. Would there be arrests, would all assets be seized, would people be deported on cattle trucks to unknown destinations?

And yet... and yet it seemed there was a ray of light for the Jews in Rome. Towards the end of September the Germans had summoned the leaders of the Jewish community and proposed a pact. The Jews were to hand over fifty kilos of gold within thirty-six hours in exchange for a promise that no Jew would be harmed.

The Jews believed them, but on the other hand what else could they do? After all, thinking and rethinking about it, the pact was feasible. How could the Germans be brutal against the Jews almost directly under the Pontiff’s eyes?

It was one thing for the Vatican to hear of tragic news coming from far away and a gesture of far greater contempt to see Jews deported just a few yards from St Peter’s cupola. The gold could therefore be a devious compromise.

And so in our home, as in other Jewish homes, gold was collected. Children were no longer distanced from such events because the “beast” had entered our lives and could bite us too. We sisters had given our mother our gold chains with the Maghen David, the Jewish star our grandparents had given us when we were born, and I remember that I reminded my mother that the massive handle of a very old evening hand bag from distant times was solid gold. Our family’s contribution was certainly not decisive, but in the end, with great difficulty the gold was collected and delivered to the Germans.

At the time my mother and father exchanges the comforting words that all Jews in Rome exchanged with a timid expression of hope in their eyes. “*Nothing will happen to us. You see they are afraid of the Pope? They resolved the problem by asking for gold*”.

Hope had appeared in our lives, but, as far as my parents were concerned, instinct had overcome hope, sending very different messages.

And so, with no warning at all, one rainy morning my mother loaded us three girls onto a bus and took us out to the countryside to a convent with which she had reached an agreement who knows when.

“Nothing is going to happen,” she told us for the thousandth time, “but we would feel a little happier if you spent some time in a safe refuge.” She explained that in that convent there was also a school we could attend, of course using the false name we had already assumed.

I must admit, this was not like before, when my mother never told me what was happening to Jews simply to protect my childhood. This time she hid nothing from us, she was not lying, the Jews believed in the “Vatican safety”. In our case, what saved us, was our parents feeling “a little happier.”

When at dawn on October 16th, 1943 the German openly defied the Vatican by bursting into the homes of the Jews living in Rome, my sisters and I were happily in a classroom at the convent.

At one point, looking out of the window, I saw my mother looking dishevelled in the school courtyard. It seemed impossible, it was morning, there were classes, and my mother never came at that time of day. When at last the nuns gave me permission to go down, I ran all the way downstairs as if I had experienced a premonition. Then I stopped in my tracks. I had never seen my mother cry before. “The Germans are taking away all the Jews” she told me through her tears, “We managed to escape because someone warned us on the telephone.”

After that, the tragedy inexorably continued for hours and days like a dark carpet being unrolled.

My mother found refuge in a building owned by the convent, but far from us children, my father was in search of refuge somewhere in the city, and in the end, torn like the survivors of a battle, a queue of terrorised parents was asking the convent to take in their children. One, two, five, twelve, the nuns always said yes and slowly a dormitory was filled with Jewish girls. There must have been at least thirty of us.

Once in bed, in the intense darkness of the night, they told us what had happened. They told us what we, already safe in hiding, had not seen, experienced and suffered.

It was not my mother’s fault, it was she who saved our lives, more than my father with his fragility.

However, in spite of everything, and totally unfairly, I must confess that it was at that moment, when I was not yet twelve years old, that I lost confidence in adults. Nothing of all they had told us was true. They could not unsheathe a sword to protect us when we were in danger. They were tiny grains that history could crush before they could do anything for their children. They were undefended human beings and sentenced us to forever feel undefended.

The German occupation of Rome lasted nine months, then the Americans came and with them, freedom.

Even before being told, I knew that when I returned home I would never again see some of my friends from the Jewish school.