

## *Lectio Magistralis*

**Roma Tre University, Department of Philosophy, Communication and Performing Arts  
November 21, 2018**

*Edith Bruck\**

**Abstract.** On November 21, 2018, Edith Bruck received at *Roma Tre University* the *Laurea honoris causa* in “Information, publishing and journalism”, and here the *Lectio Magistralis* she gave on that occasion is published. The *Laudatio* was delivered by prof. Paolo D’Angelo, Chair of the Department of Philosophy, Communication and Performing Arts. The Commission was composed by prof. Lorenzo Cantatore, prof. Lucia Chiappetta Caiola, prof. Paolo D’Angelo, prof. Massimiliano Fiorucci, prof. David Meghnagi, prof. Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, prof. Susanna Pallini, prof. Paola Perrucchini, prof. Veronica Pravadelli, and prof. Anna Lisa Tota.

**Keywords:** Auschwitz, Anti-Semitism, Holocaust, Literature, Shoah, Witness.

### **Editorial note by David Meghnagi\*\***

Edith Steinschreiber Bruck was born in Hungary in 1932. She was deported with her parents, two brothers and a sister to the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Kaufering, Dachau, Christianstadt, Landberg and Bergen Belsen, where she lost her parents and a brother. After the war she traveled widely until 1954 when she settled in Rome. Through literary works and public appearances, Bruck has devoted her life to bearing witness to what she experienced in the Nazi concentration camps. She is the author of several novels, collections of short stories and volumes of poetry. She translated works by Hungarian poets in Italian. She wrote for radio, television and theater, worked as a journalist, as a screenwriter and directed three films. Today she is on the most prolific writer of Holocaust narrative in Italian. On November 21, 2018, Edith Bruck received at *Roma Tre University* the *Laurea honoris causa* in “Information, publishing and journalism”.



**Ceremony at Roma Tre University, November 21, 2018**

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**Prof. Luca Pietromarchi (Dean of *Roma Tre University*) and Dr. Edith Bruck (writer)  
*Roma Tre University*, November 21, 2018**



**Prof. David Meghnagi e Dr.ssa Edith Bruck  
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I never would have been able to pursue an education, regardless of anti-Semitism and racial laws, because of poverty among the poor. My university is called Auschwitz. A place that has become the epitome of Evil, among the 1635 concentration camps in uber-civilized Germany and in countries occupied and allied with Hitler. A university where you can learn everything for good, including all about yourself: Anthropology, Philosophy, History, Psychology, Faith and Religiousness, the value of life and of bread.

The pain when a beautiful, blond child spits on you. How enslaved men are more helpless and incapable of looking after themselves. How women are stronger, more resilient, more cunning and able to come up with tricks to avoid being selected for the crematorium, and so live another day.

Invisibility. The language of blasphemy. The behavioral differences between social classes. The shame and pity felt towards those who torture, not for oneself. And how cold, hunger and terror impair reasoning, and impair feelings.

One sees how deportees who have long become *Kapò* have been fully dehumanized, and how our fellow female internees can be ready and available for miserable deeds that give them the chance to steal a few bits of turnip from the bottom of our slop. But light can break through the dark too, when a soldier hands you a warm potato, a glove with holes in it, traces of jam in the mess tin he throws you to be washed, and the question “What is your name?”, that sounds like a voice coming from the skies, you’re no longer just number 11152.

You exist! And so you hope, and you leave that Hell a better person:

“You can never be a racist, a fascist”.

“You will never discriminate anyone”.

“You will never be like your persecutors”.

I, who graduated from the University of Evil with honors, I learnt Good, I extracted gold from dung. I am struck twice today, when I hear a woman from Padua coming out of church and telling a journalist how she wishes all emigrants would just drown. And a man from Lodi, referring to children who can’t access the school canteen as “dog ticks”.

I am afraid of blind terrorism, of Islamic fanaticism, or the black wind blowing once again over Europe and beyond.

I wonder why humanity will never learn anything from its crimes, and will continue to perpetrate them: it is easily seduced by nationalism, racism, hate, selfishness. It builds walls, barbed-wire fences; it shows no mercy for those fleeing war, hunger, violence and torture.

Rather than confronting its past, it will deny its complicity and responsibility for what happened yesterday, what is happening today and what could happen tomorrow. What were Gulags and death camps for?

You can’t heal from Auschwitz neither by writing nor by talking about it, but it’s a past that must be told, especially for the young, for their present and for their future, because everything affects everyone.

Communication isn’t just pressing a button, it’s knowing and respecting any human being of any religion and color, if we still want to be called human.

History is riddled with lies, mystifications, interests, wars, ambitions, power and exploitation of the weakest.

The role of a witness is draining, awkward, talking about the past and re-living it is a burden, but it’s always worthwhile because there is someone who listens.

In my case, young people (few or many, it doesn’t matter) read and graduate on my books.

The language I adopted since I arrived in Italy in 1954, has been my salvation, my freedom, the armor that has protected me from the pain my mother tongue induces in me.

If I write *BREAD* in Hungarian, I instantly see the image of my mother next to the oven, in her forever floury apron. Her face, red from strain, and her happiness for the five buns, one for each of her five children. Italian bread is simply one that comes from the bakery.

The Italian language is my home, my country. I have loved this language I adopted in my adult years; I loved it and nurtured it like a child and it has nurtured me and allowed me to speak the unspeakable.

When my spirits are low, I wonder if there's still any use in writing, screaming, testifying and awakening consciences. Then I tell myself: "Go ahead, act, walk, believe, love for as long as there is even just one more reader, one more person who will understand every individual's right to dignity; there are no sub-humans only sub-ideologies that lead to barbarity.



**Dr. Edith Bruck at home**  
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### **Excerpts from letters I received from Italian students:**

*"...This letter is a cry for help. I ask you to help my young conscience remember, and help keep the spirit awake that rebels against such an ugly world and that I can't ignore (as it is mine too). I ask you, if you have time, to correspond with me, and help me mature by sharing your pain. A pain that, if I may say so, with all due respect, I almost envy as it has gifted you with a degree of strength, sensitivity and dignity that I will never know. I understand your desire to keep your pain to yourself, and I apologize if my request may come across as violent, but I ask you, please, to teach me how to talk about deportation. We kids of today, so stupid and ignorant in the face of war survivors, can continue denouncing the atrocities that took place in the heart of Europe just half a century ago, and keep honoring the promise you made to all the people who, dying in the camps, have begged you to TALK ABOUT IT. I, a Christian, ask you, a self-professed secularist who has proven to be a person of profound religiosity (as your husband rightly told you), to help me carry out the commitment I assumed embracing my faith. This request might sound odd, but please believe me when I say I am sure that no support will be greater than your example..."*

*Laura*

*"...you are walking away at a slow pace. I think you are happy, because you have had an opportunity to tell your story and the story of your people, and there's no doubt that, knowing what happened, we won't allow it to take place again. NEVER AGAIN!!!"*

*Matteo*

*"... I am not sure whether Edith has been able to feel my happiness, but I know that if I'll ever meet my primary school mates, I will be able to tell them I have met a survivor and writer in the flesh, and I'll assure them she was neither old nor hunched, but rather full of strength and immense happiness in passing down the true value of life..."*

*Martina*

*“...she was never pathetic. She made me think deeply about many things that I had never been told before, she wanted us to understand that the Nazi period must not be forgotten, that it’s a reality which still lives, hidden behind different disguises, and that there are still people who die today and lose their lives to injustice. Damn!”*

*Cornelia*

*“... overall I felt anguish, sorrow, like a lack of air. At times endearment and fear, too. Moreover, when talking about Germans, concentration camps, the subjugation of Jews, I am overwhelmed by an immeasurable feeling of impotence that crushes my spirit. Out of all the poems, I really liked Birth by chance. As my teacher read it, each new verse felt like a heavy burden falling upon my heart.”*

*Maurizio*

*“...in particular, the poems and the book Letter to my mother have moved me deeply. They are very touching. I am not indifferent to all the suffering you and other Jews have experienced during Nazism. I will remember the people who died in concentration camps.”*

*Marco*

*“...the poem Every beginning is already the end reflects what is happening today because of people’s superficiality. We often tend to trivialize things, even love – one of the most beautiful things in life”*

*Fabio*

*“I have thought deeply after reading some of the writer’s work, and I believe there is evil inside each one of us. The crucial difference is that some of us manage to fight it, while others exercise it against people. I felt discomfort, because evil prevails over the weakest ones.”*

*Tina*

**Excerpts from letters I received from Hungary after a screening of a documentary film (1982) on my first visit back in my native village:**

*“...the trip back to Hungary, the offer of flowers, the homemade pasta of Lidi the neighbor, they only make the tragedy grotesque, unable to break through the icy armour of death. Making this movie was a good thing, because you took the unspeakable pain of many people upon yourself.*

*With my greatest respect”*

*Markus*

*“... dear Edith. Please know that you have a good friend in Hungary, someone who isn’t a writer or an artist, but simply one of many who work a lot but keep their eyes open and think. I am grateful to a person like you. You write and speak in my name too, and for this I owe you a thank you...”*

*Katalin*

*“...I am only seventeen. Neither my family nor my school have ever taught me anything about the past. You helped me understand everything. You can count on me, from now on I won’t be anti-Semitic anymore...”*

*Roza*

*“...my son came back from school in tears because he was called “Jew”. My husband asked him what tone of voice was used, and the boy (only six years old at the time) replied that the tone was cruel, that being Jewish couldn’t possibly be a good thing. We are Jewish but he doesn’t know this... what should we do?”*

*Magda*

*“...someone told our eleven year old son that his family was Jewish. He spat on us, insulted us and then he ran away from home. You, who are full of courage being Jewish (even though you live in the West and not here) please advise us on how to get our son back...”*

*Iren*

*“...I don't understand how the State could possibly choose to spend our money on a movie about a Jew who did the opposite of many others who didn't run away from their homeland and participated to the construction of socialism ...”*

*Olga*

*“...I am not ashamed to confess that, even though I am a man, I cried all through the movie”*

*Gyorgy*

*“...the movie has shaken many dirty consciences in our country, and it has revealed some hidden truths. Why isn't it screened earlier than 10.30 pm, and shown in schools too? You should suggest that to the competent authorities, since you are in a position to do so...”*

*Anna*

*“...Edith! The world is rotting. Most of these pigs still live among us. They have no face. They have changed it. They aren't recognizable anymore. I am not Jewish! But I am sorry, and I am ashamed I can only be a Christian! A believer, you see fate hasn't spared me either! If I could, I would take a lot of your burden – may you be happy! Somewhere, once, Anatole France said to someone: “it is in men that men find comfort”. Unfortunately I don't believe that's true! When men really had to do something important for each other, great minds were purposely paralyzed! They preferred to opt for posthumous remorse! That isn't visible from the outside! My sick nation, kneeling before us, IS GUILTY! Edith! Write! Write! And then write some more! Please don't stop.*

*With sincere devotion”*

*Ferenc*

*“...dear Mrs. Edith, I decided to write to you because the day I met you was one of the most important days of my life... I have often asked myself who will take your place in passing on the story of the biggest massacre ever, Nazi fanaticism, the hatred for innocent children, women and men. Who will remind others of that which you could never forget? I know we are surrounded by ignorance and that young people don't want to know anything about this, they even deny the existence of death camps and they are hard to persuade otherwise; I tried to tell the story of camps to my schoolmates, that story of yours which could become our future.*

*...no prayer in the world will ever be able to undo what was done to you.*

*...your books can teach me about you and your life, even if that is very painful and it takes the smile away from my lips, the joy and illusion of a better world.*

*Thank you, especially for the time you shared with me, I hope I will see you again; that would mean a lot to me because there are no more people like you, or better there aren't many left.*

*With great affection”*

*Maria*

These letters are another reason to keep going, working, writing.

#### **Links**

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<http://streaming.uniroma3.it/streaming1.htm>

[www.ansa.it/canale\\_lifestyle/notizie/people/2018/11/21/laurea-a-bruck-ho-studiato-ad-auschwitz\\_deb6e5e2-a273-4295-b7eb-8e071a042b07.html](http://www.ansa.it/canale_lifestyle/notizie/people/2018/11/21/laurea-a-bruck-ho-studiato-ad-auschwitz_deb6e5e2-a273-4295-b7eb-8e071a042b07.html)

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