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SET SAIL – Holocaust as History and Memory

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Collaboration and resistance in Italy, with a description of “Il Romanzo di Ferrara” and memories from my grandmother and her sister.

At the beginning of the Second World War, the Christian Church in the Vatican City and Benito Mussolini were in a good relationship. Pope Pius XI, whose real name was Ambrogio Damiano Achille Ratti, preferred the modernist Italian dictator to the traditionalist German dictator, Adolf Hitler, who did not agree with the thoughts of the Church. Pius XI thought about religion as a way to be in contact with God and get to know morality and spirituality, but still he made a deal with Mussolini, so that in Italy there was the political religion, because as the Pope said, if there was a totalitarian regime, that would be led by the Church, since every man belongs to it. He thought him and Mussolini had common goals, which were authority, family, order and moderation, but Mussolini made a speech where he minimized the importance of the concordat.

The Pope was against the Racial Laws and every anti-Semitic action, since Jesus Christ himself was a Jew. Before he died, Pius XI wrote a letter about his anti-Fascist and Semitic thoughts, that Pius XII, Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Pacelli, made disappear some time after its circulation. He was not forced to destroy it, also because he knew that for Ratti it was a very important document, but he still did it because Italy was a Fascist country and during his all period being a Pope, he never tried to stop the atrocities that the dictators were creating; part of the Italian population defined him like the best Pope during the Second World War, the other part considered him “Hitler’s Pope”. The two Popes were very close when Ratti was still in power, but Pacelli never carried forward Ratti’s Semitic aspirations, so what they were expectations of what the Pope before Pacelli wanted to create, finished too early because Pius XII never brought them to an end.

The Pope, right before the march on Rome, made a document telling priests and bishops to not participate to political parties, even if they were Catholic parties.

The letter that Edith Stein, a German Jewish philosopher, sent to Pius XI in April 1933 testifies to the fact that protests against persecution of the German Jews were lodged immediately. For Nazi anti-Semitism struck the Jews immediately, as soon as the Ermächtigungsgesetz was approved giving Hitler full powers without need to consult parliament. The boycott of economic activities and the expulsion from public offices of all non-Aryans started on 1 April 1933. The inexorable escalation that would have led to the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, Kristallnacht of 1938 and the Final Solution of the 1940s had begun.

Documents from the Berlin nunciature provide testimony and note Hitler’s growing annoyance about German bishops expressing their opposition, prohibiting Catholics

from joining Hitler's party and the Nazi militiamen. On 16 March 1933 the Berlin nuncio Cesare Orsenigo reported on comments from the newspapers regarding a coming together of Catholics and Hitler. Hitler declared himself a convinced supporter of the profound sense of Christian religion, sought to avoid conflicts between the Christians denominations and guaranteed the rights and liberty of the churches: "so they do not have to worry about their freedom". He emphasized that they needed soldiers who were believers because they make excellent soldiers, and they would keep the confessional schools naturally with teachers that are also believers. Hitler asserted that he considered the Jews to pose a threat, he recalled the attitude of the Church and deplored the fact that liberalism had overlooked this danger. He concluded that he viewed the members of that "race" as a threat to the state and to the Church.

In April 1933 Cardinal Faulhaber stated that the Jews knew perfectly well how to protect themselves on their own. In face of the mounting atrocities of the German government, Pope Pius XI, with the help of Eugenio Pacelli, nuncio to Germany, and German Bishop Michael Faulhaber, in an unprecedented outreach to the entire German faithful, issued the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*. Appealing particularly to the youth and the laity, the encyclical challenged Germans to use conscience as a final resort in assessing the validity of a religious institution or political movement. In its address to the German people, *Mit Brennender Sorge* reflected the delicacy of the relationship between the Holy See and the Nazi regime by not referencing any person, party, or organization specifically. Nevertheless, the purpose and the timeliness of the encyclical was lost on few, partially dispelling the widespread belief that the Catholic Church turned a blind eye to the Third Reich.

Minister Ciano's visit of June 1936 established Italo-German cooperation, proclaimed by the Dux in Milan on 1 November when he spoke for the first time of a Roma-Berlin axis. On 14 September 1937 Ambassador Pignatti stated that the Holy Father was irritated that Mussolini went on a trip in Germany, not knowing that Mussolini went to Germany not to foment the war, but to avoid it. In 1937, Cardinal George Mundelein of Chicago criticized Hitler and the Nazis in a public speech. As Paul O'Shea relates in his book "A Cross Too Heavy: Pope Pius XII and the Jews of Europe," the Nazis demanded that the Vatican reprimand Mundelein, which Pacelli said was not possible as long as Nazi breaches of the concordat continued. Pacelli also leaked to the press that the Vatican did not disapprove of Mundelein's speech and favorably compared the speech to the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*.

On the occasion of Hitler's visit, Pius XI described the svastika as a cross inimical to the cross of Christ. During Hitler's stay in Rome, while the light of the city shone and fireworks celebrated the event, the Vatican remained in complete darkness. The pope made a point of leaving Rome for Castelgandolfo where as reported in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the daily newspaper of the Vatican City, he could breathe better air.

On 7 April 1938 Mussolini suggested through a letter to Pius XI to excommunicate the German dictator; this propose was rejected. It is hard to understand if Mussolini wanted to sympathize with the pope or he really wanted to end his deal with Hitler, since the American forces were starting to defeat Germany. On 15 June, in a discussion with the Italian nuncio, the minister of foreign affairs affirmed that he had always sought to do whatever possible to advance the requests coming from the Holy See and regretted failure in this regard on one issue only, that of establishing peace between the Church and Germany.

The American Jesuit John LaFarge arrived in Rome in June 1938 and the pope asked him to draft the text of a new and harsher encyclical against racism and anti-Semitism, stronger than *Mit brennender Sorge*, a recollection of the Führer's visit, symbol of the accord between the pope's native Italy and Nazism. LaFarge met Ledóchowski in Rome to deliver the text of the encyclical so that it could be presented to the pope. Pius XI received the text only four months later and after twenty days he died. Ledóchowski intentionally delayed, holding up delivery to the pope who was seriously ill and not expected to survive much longer.

In December 1938, various papal representatives were asked to help converted Jewish professionals forced to take refuge abroad, especially in Canada.

Giuseppe Nathan was a Jew who married an Australian woman, who recognized the danger of living in Italy during the Fascist period and fled with his family in Australia; then he came back to Italy in 1944 thinking persecutions were about to end, he found refuge in a monastery, while his family were hidden in private houses of non-Jewish people that helped them. Germans found and arrested him, he ended up in Regina Coeli, a prison in Rome. He never got deported in a concentration camp, and after war, he started working again in the Bank of Italy.

The Jews of Italy trace their roots back hundreds of years before the barbarian invasions, in fact, if one wishes to speak of "pure blood" in Italy, one thinks first of the Jews. During the Christian Era and the Middle Ages Jews in Italy started to experience restrictions and persecutions. The Counter-Reformation introduced the phenomenon of the ghetto. Jews could work only as street peddlers, hawkers, ragpickers, dealers in second-hand merchandise and pawnbrokers. Women mended old clothes for their men to sell. Poverty, malnutrition, and disease were endemic, the housing was wretched and the stench appalling. Jews dealt with problems of isolation and despair by educating themselves. Jews in Italy paid crushing taxes and tributes, with no hope of appeal.

Italy hosted some of the most oppressed ghettos in the world. 15% of Italian Jews did not survive. Many Jews were not averse to joining the Fascist Party. In the mid 1930s Hitler began to press Mussolini to do something about the Jews, and the Fascists changed their attitudes and policies. There were about 700 Jewish officers that kept serving the country until the Royal decree in 1938 that stated that Italian citizens of Jewish race could not undertake military service in peace and war. The involvement

of Jews with Fascism is not surprising, many Jewish people were part of the middle-class and in 1921 Fascism was a anti-worker of the middle-class movement.

On July 14, 1938 Mussolini embraced the “Manifesto of the Racial Scientist”, which stated that the civilization of Italy is of Aryan origin, and there exists a pure Italian race to which Jews do not belong. Between September 2, 1938 and November 17, 1938, Italy enacted a series of racial laws. Some of these laws included:

- Jews were banned from jobs in the government, banking, insurance, education, entertainment industry and the practice of law.
- Jews were banned from attending all education institutions.
- Marriage was prohibited between Jews and non-Jews.
- Jewish property was confiscated.
- Jewish businesses were “Aryanized”.
- All foreign Jews were required to leave Italy.
- Jews were forbidden to employ non-Jewish Italian domestics.
- Jews were forbidden to serve in the military.

The morning after Mussolini declared war on the Allies, Italian police began to arrest foreign Jews and placed them in Regina Coeli. By September 1940 there were fifteen concentration camps. Men lived in unfinished huts, without electricity nor water and malaria was endemic. The arrest and deportation of Italy’s Jews, including those in territories occupied by Italian forces, had to wait until after September 1943, when Germany occupied the northern part of the country. Thanks to the refusal of large parts of the Italian population, and of Italian security officials to cooperate with the Germans, the final number of Jews who were murdered in Italy was approximately 7,000, with more than 40,000 surviving the war. It must be noted that until the German occupation, Mussolini’s government never delivered Jews to German officers so they could not deport them in concentration camps. Anyway, after Italy entered war, attacks on Jewish individuals and shops increased significantly. Fascist thugs raided cafés frequented by Jews, beating up anyone they could catch. In Ferrara, particularly vicious anti-Semitic tracts were distributed to the public in July and September 1940. A famous collection of five stories about this city is “Il Romanzo di Ferrara”, by Giorgio Bassani.

1. Lida Mantovani is a young girl who has just given birth to a boy named Ireneo. When she soon realizes that her father, David, has gone and abandoned her forever, Lida leaves the room where she had lived with him to return to her mother Maria, who lives in a small house near the walls of Ferrara. After a few years Lida attracts the attention of Oreste Benetti, a slightly older bookbinder by trade, he gets into the habit of going every evening at the same time to visit the two women, conversing with them on various topics, above all of Catholicism, of politics and of Irenaeus, to whom the man becomes attached as

if he were a son. Oreste ends up marrying Lida. The two live happily and without particular problems until Oreste's death, which occurred prematurely nine years after the wedding. At this point, however, Lida understands that perhaps Oreste was never really happy with her: they didn't have the son he so much wanted, but perhaps death prevented his hope of becoming a father from turning into despair.

2. The narrator talks about a girl with a modest, named Gemma Brondi, and dr. Elia Corcos: Jewish doctor who, starting from humble origins, managed to gain the respect of the city's upper middle class thanks to his skills, which will allow him to become Head of the Ferrara hospital as well as personal doctor of the rich Duchess Costabili. Gemma and Dr. Corcos got engaged, married and immediately had a child, Jacopo, followed by Ruben. After Gemma's death, in 1926 Luisa, the sister, moved to the house of Elia and her son Jacopo, as housekeeper, where she would remain to live even after the autumn of 1943, the date on which the well-known Israelite doctor and his son would be deported to Germany.
3. Geo Jozs was deported in 1943 to Buchenwand by the Germans and in August 1945 he returned to Ferrara. Determined to reopen the business of his father Angelo, who traded in fabrics, and apparently willing to reintegrate into society, one fact changes things however: one evening Geo publicly slaps Count Lionello Scocca in via Mazzini, already a spy for the OVRA , for no apparent reason, if not perhaps, as some witnesses claimed, some questions about his family that the count would have asked him. Since then he begins to show up in the most popular places in Ferrara always covered in those clothes he wore on the day of his return, increasingly thinner every day; as soon as he tries to strike up a conversation, everyone avoids him like he's a plague victim. Finally, in 1948 Geo disappears: he had received his entire building in via Campofranco back and he could give new impetus to his father's activity.
4. Bruno Lattes, son of a lawyer, lives in a state of despondency and social isolation from which he tries to escape, is driven by an intense cultural curiosity to meet Clelia Trotti, an old teacher, a socialist revolutionary. The two begin to meet frequently, at the home of the old woman and also at his. For some time the young man seems to share her faith in freedom and in the rebirth of socialism. Bruno is not the person imagined by Clelia. In fact, he suddenly abandoned Ferrara in 1943 and moved to America to teach Italian literature. Their last meeting takes place near the Ferrara cemetery, on the lawn of Piazza Certosa. Clelia died in prison in 1943 at the age of just over sixty, but it was only in the autumn of 1946 that the civil funeral was held in Ferrara, in which Bruno also participated. Now on his way to a university career and on the verge of becoming an American citizen, he returns to his hometown feeling like a stranger.

5. This last story is inspired by the real episode of the killing of the fascist Federal Iginio Ghisellini. Pino Barilari is a pharmacist who spends his days solving puzzles and crosswords looking out the window of his house in Corso Roma in Ferrara, right above the pharmacy inherited from his father. On the night of 15 December 1943, a tragic episode took place in the city: eleven people, all considered opponents of the Regime, were taken from their homes or from their hiding places and killed in Corso Roma, in retaliation. Their bodies are abandoned on the sidewalk, near the Barilari pharmacy. When the war was over, in the summer of 1946, a process began to identify the person responsible for that night's massacre. The main accused is Carlo Aretusi, a fascist who participated in the March on Rome, in which the pharmacist also participated. The only witness that Aretusi fears is Pino Barilari, who in all probability witnessed the killings of that December 15 from his own home. However, the pharmacist, during the trial, to the precise question that is addressed to him, replies only: "I was asleep". In reality, that evening, he not only witnessed the shooting hidden behind the glass of his window, but he also saw his wife return from a love affair. Starting from that night in 1943, in the meantime, Pino Barilari had lost all interest in puzzle magazines, then he had been left by his wife, and his only occupation became that of lurking in the window of his house all day, observing passers-by and mumble a "Hey!" or an "Look out!", as if he doesn't care to be heard, when someone walks by the place where he knows the execution took place.

An example of a nondocumented order of Hitler came from a deposition in 1972 by former SS General Karl Otto Wolff. When Hitler intended to occupy the Vatican and deport the pope there were no written instructions for this secret order. Closer to home in the spring of 1940 President Roosevelt contacted unsuccessfully Mussolini in an effort to keep Italy out of the war.

It is important to remember Lucio Caracciolo, an Italian journalist that in 1980 interviewed many people so they could tell their stories. Here are some examples. Caracciolo interviewed professor Daniel Carpi, who affirmed that a lot of non-Jewish Italians helped Jews hiding them in their houses. He also said that the figure of Benito Mussolini is ambiguous, because his ideas seemed confusing. A woman called Blanka Stern was also interviewed and she talked about the behaviour of Italians towards herself. She said that there was humanity and most of Italians thought that maybe she was not Catholic, but they are all Christians and most importantly humans. She talked about a specific person that she wanted to remember, a brave woman, Mrs. Irma Andriol. On 8 September 1943 Blanka knew she had to escape, but she was pregnant. Irma brought her blank identity cards and told her to attach our photographs to them. Caracciolo talked also to another woman, Erna Nachmias. She said that most of the Italian officers were actually polite with Jews. She remembered

that one night her son, who was two years old, was playing outside and fell. She saw a lot of blood and it was past the curfew, but she still went to the hospital. On the street she ran into a police officer, who asked her what she was doing outside after the curfew. She explained the situation and this man took them to the hospital and waited for them to finish the visit, then brought them back home.

Another man to remember is Marco Hermann, he was born in Russia and came in Italy in 1943, Italian soldiers helped him cross the front of Russia. His parents got deported and he was alone with his brother. They both got arrested, Marco escaped, while his brother got deported in a concentration camp and died. Italian soldiers helped him during all his journey, saying that they were just doing their duty, but in the reality, they were kind people, they also had families and they were forced to fight the war. Marco lived with an Italian soldier's family in Verona that took care of him. The soldier, Giovanni Ferro, got captured and he did not see him until 1961, when Marco came back to Italy after the war, joining the Partisans, because in 1945 he unsuccessfully went back to Russia to look for his family.

It is necessary to remember all the people that died for helping Jews.

My family experienced both German occupation and they hid Jews in the house where me and my family go every summer. Before the German occupation in Italy, my family used to live in Viale Trastevere, in Rome, where there is also a ghetto. In their building there were many Jewish people and under this building there was a restaurant. The owner of this restaurant used to whistle every time soldiers came to arrest Jews, to inform them so they could hide. My family used to hide in their house a child of a Jew family in that same building. The father of this kid was very ill, so at one point he could not even get up from his bed, soldiers found him and sadly he ended up in a concentration camp. Anyways, thanks to the non-Jewish people that helped Jews, most of them survived.

German soldiers arrived in Italy on 8 September 1943.

My mother's grandparents and parents used to live in Rome, but her grandpa, Ludovico, moved his family in the countryside, precisely in Manziana, because he was scared that Rome would have been bombarded. In September 1943 German soldiers occupied their houses, they arrived with tanks. My grandma, Antonina, was 11, and her sister, Camilla, was 8. They arrived during the night, waking up everyone, and Zia Camilla told me a young man woke her up gently, picked her up and brought her to her mother, Lucia. Nonno Ludovico used to work in Viale Marconi and to not leave his women alone with the soldiers he used to bike for a three-hour ride every day multiple times a day to go to work and go back home. These soldiers have never been disrespectful to my family, they were polite, they used to sleep on the floor in the living room so the children could sleep on their beds. My grandma told me that one time a soldier was showering outside, where her and her sister were playing. Ludovico, their dad, risked being shot because he got mad to the soldier saying that he could not be naked in front of children, but actually, the soldier said he was sorry

and he put his clothes on. Zia Camilla remembers a young soldier that used to sit under a big tree in our garden and cry for hours looking at the pictures of his children and his wife, knowing he would have not seen them again. This man used to play with my grandma and her sister, to make them feel safe in that situation. On 22 January 1944 Americans landed in the port of Anzio, and the German soldiers left the house to combat them; they all died. Zia Camilla is currently writing a book about this experience, to show that many German soldiers were forced to fight for the country and they really just wanted to hug their families again.



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