

**NO STAMPS IN THE
ITALIAN ALPS**

STELLA BOLAFFI BENUZZI

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and correspondence

**NO STAMPS IN THE
ITALIAN ALPS**

**THE LEGACY OF MY
CHILDHOOD AMID RACIAL
LAWS AND RESISTANCE
STRUGGLES, 1943-45**

STELLA BOLAFFI BENUZZI

Translated by Colin Thorn
and Vicky Franzinetti

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FOREWORD

By Alessandro Cassin

Stella Bolaffi Benuzzi's memoir unravels along parallel tracks: the recollections of her experiences as a young girl in hiding between 1943-45, and related entries from psychoanalytic sessions in which those memories are elaborated.

Written with flair, insight, and a taste for paradox, the narrative captures the mindset of a precocious seven to ten-year-old girl facing extreme and unexpected adversity.

When in 1938, Fascist Italy promulgated the racial laws, the Bolaffis, a respected middle-class family from Turin, were immediately stripped of their rights as citizens. As bad as things were, they remained in their home until 1943. Stella's Catholic mother died that year and their father too suddenly disappeared. Soon after she and her brother, Alberto, found themselves hiding with their grandfather in the Lanzo Valley in Piedmont.

After the Armistice of September 8th, 1943, the Nazi-Fascist manhunt of the Jews began. The author's aunt and uncle fled to Switzerland. Her father, Giulio Bolaffi, an interesting figure in his own right who kept a diary during the war, decided to stay and fight leaving his children. He was reunited with them after eighteen months. In the wake of the Liberation, they learned that he had led a

six-hundred-men strong partisan's division of "Giustizia e Libertà," named Stellina, after his daughter.

While the first-person narration describes the life of a city girl, displaced among shepherds and mountaineers, the emphasis is on the fears and trepidation, that is, on the emotional disruption caused by living in hiding and without affection.

We also learn much about the family: two very different grandmothers, one Jewish and one Catholic, on the children's life in Turin before the tragic turn of events and their resettlement in the mountains. Events and anecdotes flow on the pages as seen through a girl's eyes, her keen sense of humor and observation. Her inner life is set against a landscape populated by an impressive cast of characters, among whom a special mention goes to the protective teacher Gabriella Foà and the paternal grandfather Alberto Bolaffi, a British subject, who in 1890, created a philatelic business in Turin.

Self-searching and compelling, this memoir addresses the long term consequences of having once been persecuted, and as well as the patient- therapist dynamics of Freudian analysis.

A FAMILY ON THE RUN

In the autumn of 1943, my aunt – that is my father’s sister – turned up out of the blue in our mountain house in Mondrone in the Lanzo Valley with her husband and her two children, one aged eleven and the other nearly thirteen, still in their sandals.

They had been out hiking near their country house in the Mantua area when someone had tipped them off that the police were waiting at home to arrest them for being Jewish, so they fled without picking up their things. In the beautiful park surrounding Villa Enrica¹, which my father had rented from a Jewish woman who usually spent her holidays there, we all used to play together,

¹ With their thick beech and chestnut woods, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards the Lanzo valleys had become a popular summer resort for Jewish families from Turin. Following the outbreak of war and racial persecution, many Jews took refuge there. Although the valley people knew them well, they never turned them in. In this connection mention should be made of a plaque of eternal gratitude placed in Ceres in 1999 by the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, and the 2001 documentary produced by RAI (the Italian state television broadcaster) for *Sorgente di vita* (the bi-monthly programme dedicated to Jewish culture), *I giusti della montagna* (the Righteous of the Mountains) and the short volume *Dalla villeggiatura alla clandestinità* by Bruno Guglielmotto-Ravet and Marino Periotto (Società Storica delle Valli di Lanzo, Lanzo Torinese 2002).

even though my brother and I were two or three years younger than them. My cousin Guido was a bookworm, my father travelled back and forth between there and Turin where he still worked, albeit in an office that was now “underground”. He bought me a book called *The Snake Charmer*, a marvellous book! I used to read it at night, as happy as I had been when my mother, who had died of consumption that spring, used to read Salgari’s novels to me.

Guido took the book without telling me, and I searched high and low for it for two whole days. When I finally found out that he had it, I would have killed him, but the phone rang and as usual, in five minutes we had to pull on our walking boots and run up to the *baite*². The army roundup column combing the area had already passed through Ceres, and only eleven kilometres of main road separated us from them. If we managed to hide in the *baite* before they passed through further down, they would no longer be able to see us from the village or find us at Villa Enrica.

We children were the quickest, while Grandpa Alberto was the slowest of all, even slower than our diminutive grandma, as he suffered from a heart condition. When the army roundup column turned back, we too would head back to Villa Enrica to resume our comfortable life – leisurely, even – with a servant and a tutor.

² *Baite* (singular *baita*): mountain refuges used for stabling animals in the summer and where shepherds slept too.

Our grandfather read *Pinocchio* to us. It was a tad boring because every now and again he would stop, since he was translating it from English. Nevertheless, it was pleasant to sit by him as he was always so laid-back and droll. In the evening he used to teach us French and we almost felt as if we were at school like all the other non-Jewish children. Grandpa Alberto knew seven languages: he hadn't received much schooling because he was an orphan and had to work, but he enjoyed studying and Greek and Sanskrit too. As a youngster he had worked in a sporting goods shop and taken part in the Torino-Milano bicycle race, but over time he developed an ever greater passion for stamps and gave up the cycle racing. When he married Grandma Vittoria, they had to go to the consulate in Genoa because he was a British subject.

My grandmother's parents were none too happy about their engagement because they said stamps wouldn't put food on the table. In the space of a few years, Grandpa Alberto became the curator of Queen Elena of Savoy's collection: he had to have a morning coat made because he had been invited to Court. No one said another thing about it and they were married. He established his stamp business in 1890.

In August 1943, Giuseppina B., the young teacher who had taught me the third year primary school syllabus in Bormio when my seriously ill mother was in hospital in Sondalo, had to return home because she could no

longer work for an Israelite family: this too had been decreed by the Racial Laws and staying with us became too dangerous. She was replaced by Miss Gabriella Foà, with whom we had become acquainted when we were evacuated to Acqui. She taught us prayers in Hebrew and their translation, along with the Ten Commandments. The one I remembered best was "Honour thy father and thy mother", although I would have liked to add "Honour thy grandfather and thy grandmother" too.

In Mondrone, my paternal grandfather became my new teacher and I was growing increasingly fond of him, though I did miss my grandmother Irma terribly and hadn't seen her for over a year. She didn't know where to get in touch with us, so she couldn't even write letters, but my father had resolved thus.

Now they made us attend Sunday Mass, although we didn't know how to make the sign of the cross properly. There was lots of soft snow that winter and we children took to jumping down into the garden from the first floor. One stormy evening in early December there was a power cut and the phone rang. They put us to bed, but in the middle of the night we heard footsteps shuffling around the house and the grown-ups roaming around with candles. When dawn broke they made us get dressed. This time we didn't run up to the usual *baite* but to two vacant rooms in a house in the village on the second floor. There were nine of us because my father had left almost

immediately afterwards, we didn't know where or why, and we didn't see him again for eighteen months.

"Don't make a sound," Grandpa Alberto told us. "They're looking for us, and they think these rooms are empty." At first we thought we would have to be quiet for a few hours, but it went on for ten days. When night fell, the owners of the house would come upstairs and bring us something to eat and take away the chamber pots because there were no toilets. We heard that the Fascist Police had placed seals on the front door of Villa Enrica: had they found us at home, we would have been arrested. We had avoided deportation by an hour.

Shut away in the darkness of those two rooms, time crawled by. Grandpa no longer read *Pinocchio*; there can't have been room for it in the suitcase. They got us to draw. There was still a lot of snow, but we couldn't play at jumping out of the window, because the SS and Fascist³ patrols of the Monte Rosa Division were marching around the village: the search continued.⁴

³ Known as the *Repubblichini* because they supported the newly founded Republic of Salò or Italian Social Republic, a puppet state set up by the Germans after Italy's surrender and led by Mussolini. (Translator's Note)

⁴ With an order issued on 30 November 1943 the head of the police Tullio Tamburini stated that it was the duty of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana, the German puppet state headed by Mussolini after the armistice, to identify and arrest any Jews on Italian soil, following the raids by the Nazis such as the one they

I fell ill and had a raging fever. I was rather in awe of my uncle as he was a man of few words, but deep down he was a good man. As a youngster he had been sent away to Germany to study by himself, and now he had a large textile factory. He came into the room we were in, approached the sofa I was on and asked Miss Gabriella why I was sleeping on my own and the four of them in the one bed.

“Does she have a throat abscess?”

“Without medicine it could be serious.”

And then they started talking to each other in a low voice.

I thought that if I died, taking me out would be trickier than taking out the chamber pots.

My grandfather came close to me and said: “Stellina, as soon as you’re better we’ll start your French lessons again so you don’t get behind.”

carried out in the Rome ghetto on 16 October 1943. Hence the Fascist police actively sought Jews, to put them in the provincial concentration camps and then on to the sadly famous camp in Fossoli, in the province of Modena, but was under Italian control until March 1944. A clear picture emerges in L. Picciotto’s book *L’alba ci colse come un tradimento* (Mondadori 2010), which provides documentary evidence refuting the view of the historian R. De Felice who places Italy outside the cone of shadow cast by the Holocaust (“*fuori dal cono d’ombra dell’Olocausto*”).

At long last, after ten days, the search patrols withdrew from the Lanzo Valley. We were able to go outside, and we scattered to the four winds: me wrapped in a blanket in the arms of the son of the brave lady who had taken us in to the hotel in the village where the district doctor came to examine me. By that time, I no longer needed one: the abscess had eaten away one of my tonsils but then it too had withdrawn.

My uncle managed to escape with his sons to Switzerland, among the last to do so, via the upper slopes of Mount Bisbino with the help of some smugglers, wearing city shoes in the snow so as not to arouse any suspicion. The main risk was getting turned back at the border by the Swiss police, leaving them in the jaws of the Nazi-Fascist police, as had unfortunately happened to others. Our grandparents hid in a farmhouse down in the plain; little did I know that I would never see my dear teacher again. Grandpa Alberto died on September 26, 1944, after a routine operation. My father only heard about it a month later and we didn't find out for even longer.

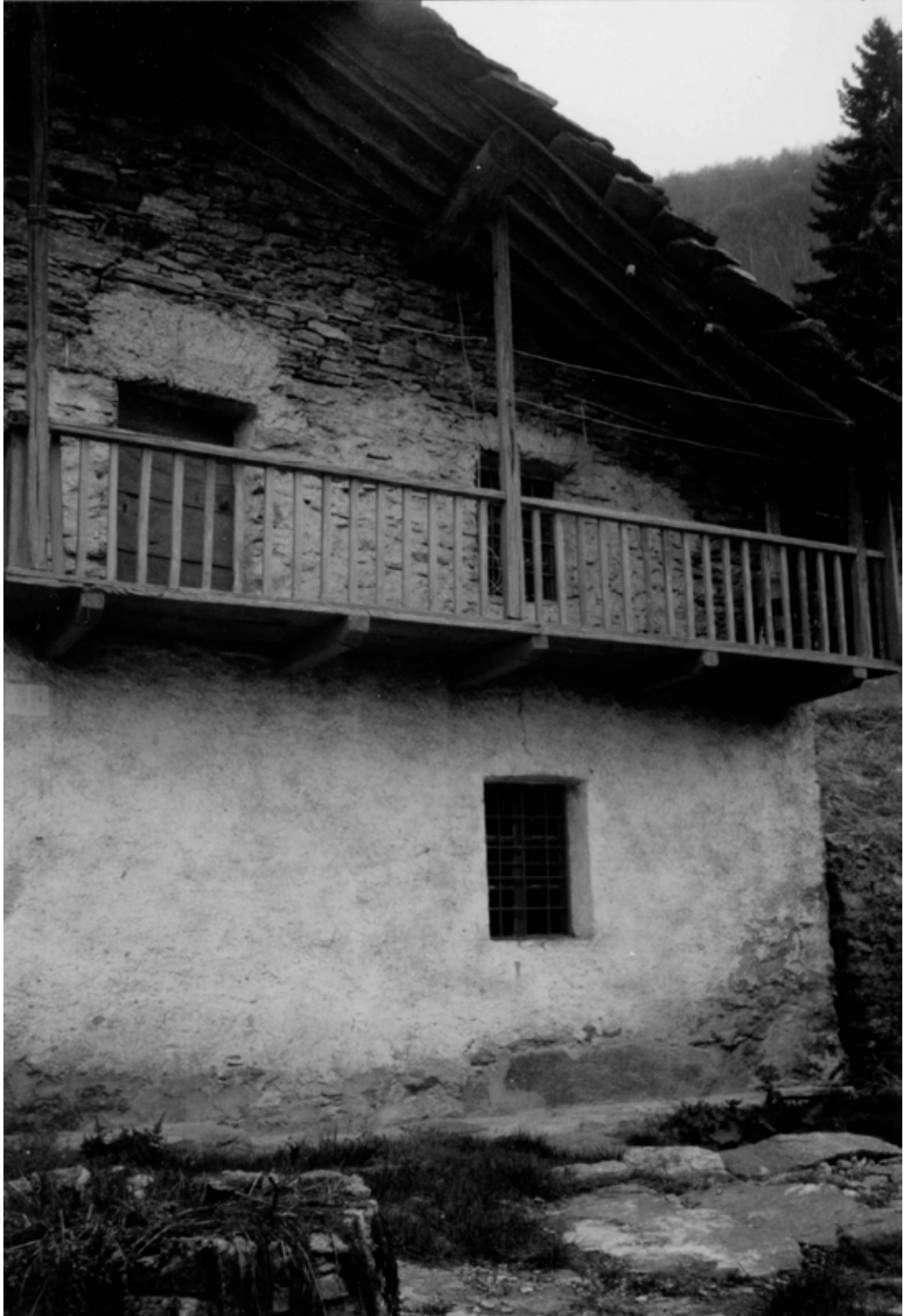
My brother and I then moved on to Chialamberto in the Val Grande with Miss Gabriella Foà, whom we had to learn to call 'aunt', so as to cover our tracks, and from there on to Vonzo, a hamlet where our 'aunt' had worked as a young teacher. And we didn't see our father for over a year and didn't know his whereabouts.



Page 13 Stella and her brother Alberto among toys at the Grand Hotel Nuove Terme in Acqui before persecutions.

Page 14 our mountain cabin in Vonzo.

Page 15 a view of the Vonzo's hamlet.





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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stella Bolaffi Benuzzi, was born in Turin in 1934. She is the granddaughter of Alberto Bolaffi, the pioneering Italian philatelist and founder of the Bolaffi Stamp Company, and sister of Alberto Bolaffi Jr. After graduating in Classics and Philosophy from the University of Turin, she specialized in Psychology, subsequently becoming a psycho-analyst and a member of the International Psychoanalytical Association.

She is the author of several books, of which this is her first.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS

Victoria Franzinetti, born in Cardiff (UK) in 1953, lives in Turin (Italy). She is a professional translator and interpreter with exhaustive experience working from Italian to English, she is enrolled in PROZ and holds a Certified PRO certificate.

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