

**STATELESS: A RUSSIAN
CHILDHOOD IN FASCIST
ITALY**

MARITA DRESNER

CPL EDITIONS

Unpublished biographies
and correspondence

**STATELESS: A RUSSIAN
CHILDHOOD IN FASCIST
ITALY**

MARITA DRESNER

Copyright © Marita Dresner

CPL EDITIONS, New York

Centro Primo Levi, Inc.

www.centroprimolevi.org

Book design: designwajskol

Production: Sofia Quaglia

FOREWORD

By Alessandro Cassin

One of the great pleasures of many years of studying and presenting public programs on the history and vicissitudes of Jews in Italy, has been meeting in person individuals for whom this is not just an interesting story, but their own history. One such happy instance occurred to me following the presentation of Primo Levi's *Complete Works*, at the National Book Festival in Washington DC, in 2016. As I came off the stage, I was approached by Marita Dresner who introduced herself and began telling me some of her remarkable family stories.

I subsequently met her again several times in New York and in Washington, along with her daughter Denise. While visiting her home she showed me part of her extraordinary archives. I found in Marita Dresner a living treasure: a woman who has lived a full and adventuresome life and preserved it with formidable memory, sense of humor, and critical insight.

I have remained in touch with her, convinced that her story deserves to be told, and was very happy to include a chapter of her childhood memories in Italy on our online magazine Printed Matter.

Her family history, storytelling ability, and fantastically rich multigenerational archive can be fruitfully studied

by historians, students, filmmakers, and biographers. Within three generations, across world wars, revolutions, statelessness, rescue, languages and geography; with several "new beginnings," this family story touches upon many of the Jewish experience's central themes.

I await with trepidation what can emerge from these sources.

INTRODUCTION

By Marita Dresner

This reminiscence covers my childhood years in Italy during Fascism and up to emigrating in 1939. It is based on my archive of family letters and other material, and on my own memories of growing up.

The full archive spans three generations and continents, from the end of the 19th century through the 20th. The correspondence consists of around 1,500 letters, in three main categories: the letters between my grandmother (Nonna) and her children, and of her daughters to each other, after they were all displaced to different locations by events – the First World War, the civil war in Russia and the revolution; the correspondence between my father and his family in Russia until his defection in 1928, when he was made to cease all communication with them; and documents relating to my late husband's experiences during the Holocaust.

The first group of letters, translated from Polish, Russian and German, describe in vivid detail their daily lives and activities, and how they coped and tried to get back to normality in the '20s. Other correspondence from the early 20's, mostly between my parents (who married in 1919), again describes the difficulties people had trying to connect with each other and deal with bureaucratic problems arising from changed borders, loss of citizenship,

and so on. In addition to these letters, there are many diaries, pocket notebooks, school and other official documents, and hundreds of photos.

The second group illuminates my father's extraordinary life. Involved in the 1905 revolution in Russia as a student, he then had to flee the country. He went to the USA via Japan, but didn't like it and decided to leave for Europe after a year. He lived in Italy until 1917, when he returned to Russia to welcome the revolution. He was quickly disillusioned by what he saw. In 1925 he was sent to Rome as press attaché at the Soviet Embassy. He defected in 1928 and remained in Italy as an "apolide" (stateless) until the Racial Laws were enacted. In 1939 he left for the US with his family. The story of his life appears in a book in Russian, published in Israel, about Russian Jewish writers, and there is a chapter about him in a book published in Russia about diplomatic defectors. I have written a brief account of his life. Also there is a translation of a memoir he wrote about covering the Kronstadt mutiny of 1917 for his newspaper, and how, through a quirk of fate, his life was saved there. Here too, I have many documents and photos.

The documents and photos about my husband's survival during the Holocaust tell how he escaped from German-occupied Yugoslavia to Italy, then fled illegally on skis through the Italian border to Switzerland. He remained interned there until the end of the war and emigrated to

the US as a DP in 1950.

I also have a full account in French by my cousin (Nonna's granddaughter), a child Holocaust survivor saved by a French farmer who was later named at Yad Vashem as a Righteous Gentile.

In addition to the letters, the archive has many diaries, pocket notebooks, school and other official documents, and many hundreds of photos, going back to the 1880s.

CHILDHOOD – GROWING UP IN ITALY 1925-39

In 1924, when I was born in Moscow, my father was working at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1925, we moved to Rome where he had been assigned as press attaché to the Soviet Embassy.

We lived in a villa with a garden on the Via Salaria with other diplomatic staff and the Ciotti family, the Italian owners. In 1926 my sister Viera was born, and my maternal grandmother, *Nonochka* or *Nonna*, joined us from Berlin and became a permanent part of the family. Her presence brought the addition of another language being spoken in the family; while Russian was the common language, she and mother spoke only Polish between them, while we little ones began babbling in Italian picked up from the embassy's household help.

In the summer, like most middle-class Italians and Europeans, we went to the seashore in Cesenatico on the Adriatic coast. We shared a small villa and a maid with another member of the Soviet staff and her children. Photos from that time show my visiting Moscow grandfather with us at the seashore, as well as other relatives who came for brief visits.

That was the last "normal" family vacation before we became refugees.

In 1928, father was recalled to Moscow, but he refused to go back, becoming one of the very early defectors from the Soviet diplomatic service. We lost our Russian citizenship and remained in Italy as stateless persons with a Nansen passport issued by the League of Nations.

Family vacation by the sea, 1927.
From left to right: my aunt Nina
visiting from Berlin, Nonna holding
Viera, father, me, mother, and
grandfather.



MEMORIES OF ROME POST-EMBASSY PERIOD

Moving out of the Soviet housing, we lived briefly at the Pensione Rubens in downtown Rome. It was not far from the Piazza di Spagna, and I remember distinctly the Bernini boat at the foot of the Spanish Steps. When I first saw it again eighteen years later I was shocked to see that it was not the huge barcone I remembered, but a rather small boat. That time, when I returned, I also went looking for a fountain in the shape of a lion's head which had impressed me so much at age 5; not surprisingly, it was in the Via Bocca del Leone.

From the Pensione, we moved to what was probably a furnished apartment or rooms. I have no recollection of that period except for a very traumatic experience I had when we lived in Viale Cernaia where Nonna took us to play in the *giardinetto* (small city park): I have a very vivid memory of playing with a big ball when a dog jumped at it, bit into it and broke it. I cried and cried.

There were also rides in a donkey cart in the Villa Borghese where I was taken by my visiting Russian grandfather.

So much for my memories of Rome.

MILAN

I guess my parents couldn't find any way of making a living in Rome and they decided, in 1928, to move to Milan where father had friends.

While father was still at the embassy, my parents must have been considering a possible defection, so mother decided to go to Paris to take a course at the Ecole de Beauté to gain some practical skills. She had never worked before, having come from a well-to-do family in Poland; the revolution had interrupted her university studies in Kharkov (first in medical school and then switching to law school). Now, as it turned out, with the diploma of a qualified masseuse and beautician, she became the main earner in the family for the next ten years in Italy (and the first years after emigrating to the U.S.). She was a charming, well-educated lady with knowledge of several languages, and she succeeded in building up a private clientele among the rich ladies in Milan. It was hard work, but she supported the family for many, many difficult years.

In Milan, my not so practical father tried his hand at various things for a number of years – at one point he worked in a bookstore, and he continued writing for a Russian émigré newspaper in Paris and for some Italian magazines. He also wrote a book, based on historical events in Russia, which was published by Mondadori; another book was already at

the publisher in 1938, but because of the new racial laws, the contract was cancelled. Also because of the new laws, he lost the job he had at the Montecatini library since the beginning of 1937.

When we first arrived in Milan, we lived in two furnished rooms until 1931 when we moved to a very nice small unfurnished flat on the second floor of a "villetta" in Via Sidoli, where the owner lived downstairs. When we moved to Via Sidoli, our very creative and artistic aunt Nina had a carpenter build a piece of furniture she designed for the room we girls shared with Nonna. It consisted mainly of shelves for our books and toys, and a section for hanging clothes; there were no doors to it and it was closed off with curtains. We thought it was terrific! The furnished rooms where we had lived before had heavy, traditional furniture consisting of armoires and chests of drawers. Our new home, sparsely furnished with improvised furniture was airy and cheerful, and Viera and I loved it.

But we soon had to move again. At one point, the landlord went to court to complain that my parents had fallen behind with the rent payment. The judge told him to requisition our furniture; the landlord replied "What furniture? These people have only boards!" And so we moved, with our "boards", to another apartment not far away, in Via Sangallo; it was a very small apartment, consisting of two bedrooms, a corridor, a dining room, a very small kitchenette and a bathroom. It also had a

balcony which gave out on the street and where mother started growing flowers.

Looking back, I can't imagine how we managed in such a small space, but somehow our parents and Nonna made it a livable home. The bedrooms – one for our parents and one for us girls with

Nonna – were furnished as day rooms; Nonna organized birthday parties for us there and the adults socialized with friends in the dining room over the customary Russian tea.

My sister (in front) and I with our
parents, Milan, 1931.



HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

The only holiday we celebrated was the traditional Russian New Year's eve. The adults got together at home with their friends; they must have had a radio or a Victrola because I remember our parents moved their bed into our room to make room for dancing.

As for us children, every year we put on a skit for our parents: I was an old man with a hunchback and a sack over my shoulder, a cane, and a long beard made of strips of paper, to represent the old year, who was chased out of the room by my sister, clothed in infant's attire to represent the baby new year. Father did some magic tricks, we sang songs, and were sent off to bed before midnight.

The only other celebrations – and more personal – were family birthdays. These remained very important “holidays” throughout our lives, all the way into adulthood and old age, wherever we were with family members. They consisted in having a “birthday table” which was something like the spread of X-mas presents under the tree in many homes. The breakfast table would be spread with presents and the obligatory flowers, and, since greeting cards were non-existent then, little hand-written notes were attached to each present to indicate who the giver was. Always there was a book, and maybe a toy or game and “useful” presents such as a hankie, a pair of

socks, stationery, a notebook...

A special dessert at dinner was part of the celebration, and something we always looked forward to with great anticipation: for my birthday in May, Nonna made *blinchiki*, a kind of crepe filled with jam, and wild strawberries – then in season – with whipped cream. Viera's birthday was in February and coincided with the Carnevale when it was traditional to eat twisted dough strips deep-fried in oil and covered with sugar, called, in the Milan dialect, *ciacer de don* (women's gossip). Nonna made them for us at home and we knew them by their Russian name khvorost.

The children who were invited for the birthday party came in costumes; Viera's and my costume were made out of papier maché by our seamstress neighbor. Socializing with schoolmates or street playmates did not exist. The children who came were always those of family friends, and ranged from age 3 to 12 or 13; they came with their parents who sat around for tea while we played musical chairs and other indoor games.

GAMES AND PLAYTIME

There were no outdoor public playgrounds then and children either played in the street or public parks, or the richer ones, in private gardens of their villas, and, if indoors, in each other's homes. Playmates were usually the children of friends of the parents.

Viera's and my playtime was always under the care of Nonna. She often took us to the very large Giardini Pubblici where there was also a small zoo. There we met Mrs. Tina Levi with her three children who became our best friends, and remained so during the 10 years we lived in Milan. When outdoors, we played ball, hide-and-seek, running games, jump rope, hopscotch (which was called *il mondo*). Usually we played on our street, in front of the house, with kids who lived there. Since there were no cars around, the street was safe. Sometimes, a horse-drawn cart would come, selling fruit or vegetables, and the vendor would "sing" out, advertising his merchandise.... the housewives appeared at their windows or balconies and would shop by putting money in a basket and lowering it to the street for the vendor to place the products in. Other carts went by with a sing-song "*compro stracci, bottiglie....*" ("I buy rags, bottles"). There was also a cart filled with horse manure, and the driver would collect with a shovel what was left on the street by the horses and used as fertilizer. Often there were street singers, with an

accordion, or trumpet, or a barrel organ with a monkey sitting on top, or a parrot in a cage....and when you gave it a coin, the parrot or monkey picked out from a box a slip of pink or blue or yellow paper with your fortune on it. The street singers sold sheets with the text of all the popular songs.

Sometimes, we borrowed somebody's roller-skates, or, better still, scooters. Children who couldn't afford store-bought scooters made them with two wooden boards and small wheels. We also played with a "*cerchio*", a wooden hoop which we pushed with a stick while running alongside it. Then there was "*diabolo*" which required a lot of skill. It was a great toy, consisting of a wooden double-cone with a groove, and two sticks joined by a heavy string; you had to balance the toy on the string and throw it up high in the air and catch it back on the string, which was difficult to do. It was a game which existed already in the time of my mother's childhood – she had been very good at it and taught us all the tricks to getting it right.

With a regular ball, we played a lot of singing rhymes, going through various motions as we threw it against the wall. One year, mother returned from the States with a quoit. It was made of hard rubber, and in those days it used to be played on board cruise ships, where it was called "*deck tennis*". We called it "*il disco*", and it created a sensation on our street since it was unknown in Italy. We were very good at it and played it all the time. (I suppose

it was something like playing Frisbee years later, except that, since the rubber was hard, you often broke your nails or hurt your fingers catching it.) That year my mother also brought back a packet of Chiclets, and the *gomma Americana* too created a sensation among our street playmates with whom we shared it, cutting each little piece in half. (I seem to remember that we saved it and chewed it again the next day.)

The other sensation from America were the shorts mother brought us – hand-me-downs from an American relative. I am sure the fashion must have already been known in Italy, but it was a novelty in our modest neighborhood; and a sensation they must have been because to this day I can see in my mind exactly how they looked: plaid, multicolored, with little metal buttons on the sides.

When we got a little bigger, in our pre-teen years, we went walking on our own with our friends, the Levi children, to the “prati”, our “wild west”. Our house was not too far from the city limit, where new houses were being built, but there were still meadows around (with even a few grazing cows) and a tiny little stream flowing in the grass – we called it the Yangtze River, and the stones on the side of it were the Great Wall of China. We dropped a handkerchief or paper boats in it, and followed them as they floated down the stream. Or we pretended to be searching for a treasure in India and discovering it in cave—a pile of rocks. It was all great fun, being free to run around in the fields.

Further away, across the meadows, were the railway tracks, and our game was to watch the trains, and count the cars of the very, very long freight trains.

And what did we play indoors? At the Levi's, it was the most fun because they had a very large apartment with many rooms where we played hide-and-seek. They even had a small storage space with shelves. We used to climb up and sit on the shelves and see who could fart loudest. In our own very small apartment we had very little space. So we played board games, jigsaw puzzles, and put on little skits with Nonna's help. She always found ways to occupy us. She taught us songs in many languages and dances like the "krakowiak" and polka and tarantella.

And, of course, much time was spent reading. Before we could read by ourselves, the adults would read to us from Russian picture books and Russian fairy tales.

When I was three, mother sent me a picture book in French from Paris, "Le Petit Poucet" (Tom Thumb). Father read to us in Russian from Tolstoy's and Pushkin's tales for children. Nonna would tell us German fairy tales. We had already been exposed to other languages in lullabies and nursery rhymes, and we learned Italian rhymes and ditties playing with other children on the street.

We loved the adventure books by Salgari, a very popular author of children's books, and world classics which were

published in abridged, illustrated editions for young people. We also liked comic books of Superman, Tarzan, and we were devoted readers of the weekly *Corriere dei Piccoli*.

In 1930, our parents started a family diary; we would sit around the table and tell them what to write about our day (all this in Russian); we did this for several years, though later with long interruptions. Apart from its obvious educational value, it was a wonderful way to spend time together.

We had a couple of friends whose parents were well to do, and when we went to their house we played games which we couldn't afford to have at home. Like Monopoly. It was my dream to buy it, and when I was 13 or 14, I started earning pocket money by babysitting so I could buy it – it cost 50 liras, which was a lot of money then. There was a period when Viera and I got 1 lira a week for doing house chores. I never did get Monopoly because circumstances changed and we had to prepare to leave the country.

In 1932, a family friend lent us a radio – it must have made a big impression on us kids, and I remember it well. It wasn't really a box, it was just a tangle of wires and bulbs on a board, clearly homemade. It was meant especially for grandmother, who missed going to concerts, but we all listened to it in our free time. And Viera and I heard symphonic music and operettas for the first time.

A few years later, we got a regular radio; our favorite program was the *Quattro Moschettieri* (a take-off on “The Three Musketeers”), sponsored by Perugina chocolates, broadcast on Sundays at the time of the noon meal.

As for music, I remember the excitement of going to a concert at the Milan *Conservatorio* with grandmother when someone gave mother two free tickets. And when I was 13 or 14, father took me to see Carmen performed in the open air at the Castello Sforzesco.

There was no money to go to museums, but father made frames for a couple of reproductions of famous paintings: a detail from Michelangelo’s “Last Judgement” – the head of Adam with outstretched hand – and a Venus by Botticelli. He glued the paper prints to cardboard and framed them with strips of black electric tape; he made the glue himself – I remember the awful smell of it being cooked. Other art we saw was in the churches to which Nonna took us to see paintings and sculptures.

At age 10, I began attending the Ginnasio-Liceo Parini which was all the way across town. The No. 28 tram took me, in the heavy Milan fog, by the old Naviglio (the canal designed by Leonardo da Vinci) which was later covered up. (Only parts of it exist uncovered today).

I switched from the white uniform/smocks worn in elementary school to the black ones in secondary school.

Thursday was a day off school, but we went to school on Saturdays. Generally, there was less time for playing because we had a lot of homework which usually took up most of the afternoon. I have a clear recollection of father getting books that I needed: a big, heavy *Vocabolario* (a dictionary which I still have) a large geographic atlas, and, of course, the books needed for the various subjects..... all of them a huge expense, another sacrifice for the family.

Page 25 With playmates in the
nearby fields, Milan (1936)

Page 26,
With our friends, Beniamino and Lia
Levi..





FASCISM ENTERS OUR LIVES

While we were in elementary school it became compulsory to join the fascist youth organization, the "Piccole Italiane", for girls aged 6 to 13 or 14. Our uniform consisted of a black skirt, white shirt, a black cape, black stocking-cap, white stockings, black shoes, and white gloves, and a large, medal-like pin representing Mussolini pinned to our blouses. It had to be pinned at a given distance from the 2nd or 3rd button of our blouse, and a given distance from the shoulder. The reason I remember this is because I was once reprimanded for having the pin a few millimeters off. At age 12, girls had to add a cape to the uniform. In a letter, Nonochka writes that she went around looking for a reasonably priced cape, but the only one she could find cost 30 lire at the Rinascente. The cost of the uniforms meant a big sacrifice when there was no money and the family often lived day to day.

In 1938, when the Racial Laws came out, my sister and I were expelled from the Fascist party, much to the joy and relief of our parents.

WHAT "BEING JEWISH" MEANT TO US FOREIGN JEWISH CHILDREN GROWING UP IN ITALY UNDER FASCISM

When I was a child in fascist Italy, until the age of five I had never heard the word Jew or anything related to Jewish things. We were still part of the Soviet diplomatic staff in Rome. There were some other Jews attached to the embassy, but under the Soviet regime, religious practices were non-existent, and the only holidays that were celebrated were commemorations of national or historical events. And of course there was the New Year's celebration, which was always a big holiday with presents and the "novogodnyaya yolka" — the traditional Russian New Year's tree. All this came to an end when my father defected in 1928 and we moved to Milan.

At the time we started first grade in public school, religious instruction was part of the school curriculum. But father, who considered himself an atheist, did not want us attending religion classes, and the pagelle, our report cards, carried the notation "*insegnamento a cura della famiglia*" (religion taught at home by the family) in the space for grades in that subject. We never questioned what our parents told us and, since it never became an issue in school, it never occurred to me to ask for an explanation.

Our first Jewish connection came about in an unusual way

around 1929 or 1930. We were at the zoo in the Giardini Pubblici in Milan with our grandmother, and began playing with three other children who were there with their mother. As the woman spoke German to them, grandmother struck up a conversation with her. This was the beginning of a long, devoted friendship that lasted through the war and postwar years.

The Levis were well-to-do Italian Jews (the mother spoke German because she had been in school in Switzerland and was probably teaching it to her kids). As an active member of the Jewish community in Milan, Mrs. Levi invited us to the children's Purim parties and arranged for us to receive matzo at Passover; someone must have explained to us the meaning of it, but I have no recollection of it. Two of the Levi children, Lia and Beniamino (who today is a very known gallerista in Italy and France) were close to us in age and we soon became very close friends, spending time together, playing games at home and outdoors.

When I turned six in 1930, Mrs. Levi arranged for me — and for Viera the following year — to attend the *Colonia Israelitica Milanese* for the children of Jewish families in Milan.

Italy, under the fascist regime, had an extensive network of so-called colonie (summer camps).

There were colonies on the seashore and in the mountains where children usually spent a month. Many of the seaside colonies were along the Adriatic coast, next to famous beach resort towns, such as Riccione (frequented also by Mussolini).

The children were from paying middle-class Milanese Jewish families. My sister and I were there at the expense of the Jewish community as "refugees", along with two other foreign kids.

Our Jewish colonia, sponsored by the Jewish community in Milan, was also near Riccione. It took about 50 boys and girls from age six to twelve. It consisted of two large brick buildings which housed dormitories, dining hall, staff quarters, offices, etc. There was a large front yard, fenced off from the main road. The beach was on the other side of the road.

This was the beginning of our Jewish education.

The Colonia Israelitica Milanese at
Riccione, 1934. I'm standing with
my sister at the front, under the
corner column (I'm the taller one
to the right). I wonder how many
of those in the picture survived the
Holocaust, or emigrated, or are still
alive in Italy today.





LIFE IN THE COLONIA

In the morning, before breakfast, we would gather in the front yard for the alza bandiera, the raising of the Italian flag. After that we recited the "Shema Yisrael" (or maybe the morning prayer came before the flag). We were taught to say prayers in Hebrew on waking, before and after meals, and before going to bed. We learned them by rote and repeated them without knowing what we were saying. We were taught to sing Hatikva and other songs in Hebrew and we learned to dance the hora.

At mealtimes we filed into the dining hall where we sat at long tables; before starting our breakfast, we recited another prayer in Hebrew, and, after eating, another prayer thanking God for the food. (Viera wrote home complaining about all the prayers, but mother wrote back telling her she should be a good girl and pray.)

After breakfast we went to the beach with our signorine, the counselors. On the beach, we played games, building sand castles, and making small tracks in which to race the biglie, our small clay marbles; some of the children had fancy colored marbles which they brought along from home. One of the pastimes at the beach was weaving baskets with weeds that grew in the sand dunes.

Once a week we were all gathered together to write home

to our parents. Father had provided us with self-addressed and stamped cards and envelopes for the purpose. In my letters I asked them to send me the *Corriere dei Piccoli*, the weekly children's newspaper which we read regularly at home. I also informed them that I was eating well: pasta, risotto, and daily fruit.

Fare i bagni (going in the water) at the beach, in mid-morning, amounted to splashing around in shallow water for 20 minutes with the counselors. We were never taught to swim, just splashed around near the shore.

The *direttrice* of the camp was Miss Scaramella, a very imposing, portly lady whom I remember well. She had a big goiter and always wore a lavender colored scarf around it and a flowing lavender dress. Then there was the very nice *signora* Latis, and my favorite signorina Jacchia who seemed to be younger than the other counselors. A *signora* Usigli was a later addition to the staff; she came with her daughter who was our age. We became friends because they spoke Russian; I heard that at some point they went to Israel, or maybe when it was still Palestine.

After the beach we came home for our main meal of the day. Again, there were prayers before and after the meal. Maybe it wasn't a prayer, for I remember singing a song which went: "*Ti ringraziamo Iddio, pel pane che ci hai dato, il nome tuo sia lodato*" ("We thank you God, for the bread you gave us, may your name be praised"). But the

actual prayers were in Hebrew. In a notebook we kept at home in Milan with the words of songs we knew at the time (Russian, German, French, Italian), there is a Hebrew song which we wrote down the way it sounded to us: "egad, egad, ghiná chittaná". The tune is still in my head, but I wonder what a Hebrew speaker would make of the words; would they sound like nonsense or would they have any resemblance to real words? We were also taught to read and write Hebrew letters.

After our daytime meal, we had a rest period. Later in the afternoon we were often taken for walks in the neighborhood, walking in pairs in orderly lines together with our signorine. We wore uniforms: pink cotton smocks for the girls, blue shorts and shirts for the boys. Girls did not wear shorts in those days. Other pastimes consisted in playing ball games in the yard, counting games, skipping rope, learning songs and dances. We also amused ourselves by looking through the bars of the fence and counting the cars that passed by. Although the road was a main one, going to Riccione from the north, automobile traffic was far from heavy in those days; we made a game of guessing what city the cars were from according to their license plates.

In one of our letters to our parents, one summer we mentioned that the Duce (Mussolini) had driven by in his car and we all waved our hankies. We even thought he might come and visit us because our colonia had been

included in the list of *colonie fasciste* that year.

At the evening meal, we again had the prayer before and after eating, and later we gathered in the yard for the lowering of the flag and reciting "Shema, Yisrael" before going to bed.

That was the extent of our Jewish practice, which lasted only through the summer, after which we returned to our lives in Milan. The only other Jewish thing I remember was the one day in August when we didn't go to the beach, or anywhere else, because it was Tishabov, a very important holiday; but I don't remember what we were told about it. I know it's supposed to be a fast day, but I don't think the children were made to fast.

I went to the colonia for six years. We loved it and loved going back and seeing our old friends. Strangely, we never met any of them in the city during the year; probably because each family had its own circle of friends and children had their friends among the family circle. So, it was always very exciting being together again in the summer.

As we grew older, our summer games changed too. I remember, playing a lot of word games, drawing in the sand, and reading books. Viera did a lot of writing; she made up word puzzles, and wrote stories.

Then, in my last year there (1936), the colonia next to us was occupied with children from Germany. I don't know if Italy was hosting them or there was some kind of exchange, and I wonder whether the officials who organized this were aware of the proximity to a Jewish group. There was only the usual barred fence between us, and we could watch them when they did their raising and lowering of the German flag with swastika, singing their national hymn *Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles*. It didn't mean anything to us children, but it must have been very hard on the staff.

BACK IN THE CITY – LIFE IN MILAN

Back in the city, we resumed our usual life. In the fascist youth organization – the Piccole Italiane – we wore the uniform to fascist meetings and parades. We went to rallies, performed in sports arenas, and loved marching and singing patriotic songs. We came home from school with our heads filled with fascist propaganda. When Italy invaded Ethiopia we told our parents (the poor Russian refugees!) that they should adopt an Abyssinian child because it was Italy's job to civilize the natives. Viera, aged 10, wrote excitedly in her diary "*Viva il Duce, fondatore dell'impero!*" (Long live the Duce, founder of the empire), adding "We took Addis Ababa"; when she describes going to see Mussolini passing in a car, her excitement is reflected in her uneven larger handwriting.

We sang all the fascist hymns and yelled *Duce, Duce!* at all the party gatherings. We also sang ditties that made fun of the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie; one of them said, "*Con la barba del Negus farem gli spazzolini per pulir le scarpe a Benito Mussolini*" ("With the beard of the emperor we will make toothbrushes to clean Mussolini's shoes.")

When I was in the ginnasio, I joined a group of older students from the liceo to go and demonstrate in front of the Spanish Embassy in support of Franco. Not that I knew

anything about the civil war there, but it was an excuse to skip classes. (And to think that only six years later in the U.S. I was enthusiastically singing the songs of the anti-fascist Lincoln Brigade!)

How did our parents respond to this? They never talked politics in our presence; they probably tried to ignore our comments about fascism; after all we were stateless foreigners and maybe they worried that we could get into trouble in school if we repeated anything critical we heard at home. As it was, father was always worried about what possible consequences his defection from the Soviets would have on his father and five siblings left in Russia; he was considered a traitor and the Stalin regime was beginning to take harsh measures against those who had contacts abroad. He certainly didn't need to have additional problems in Italy.

1936 was my last year at the *colonia*; my sister went for another year, after which there was no more contact with the Jewish community.

Looking back, I marvel at how little Viera and I were told of the situation and of the problems the family was facing. We had always been sheltered from the harsh realities during all the years when there was no money and when survival for a family of five was a major problem. Occasionally I heard talk of going to the "lombard", the Russian name for the Monte di Piet , the city pawn shop ... I can't imagine

what my parents had to pawn except a few family rings.

Only many, many years later, I learned from various family correspondence what extremely hard years my parents lived through, when father tried his hand at all kinds of different things, mostly without success. With her qualification as a masseuse, mother worked for several summers in the first class of Italian cruise ships, traveling to the U.S. and the Mediterranean. After the summer cruises, she resumed the same work with the private clientele she had in Milan. Very often she was the only breadwinner.

I have no recollection of what we ate, but I don't remember ever going hungry. During bad times, Nonna would make dinner for the five of us with a concoction of 100 grams of mortadella dipped in egg and bread crumbs to resemble a cutlet. We often had *prostakvasha* for supper – a Russian dish of sour milk the consistency of yoghurt, which we ate with boiled potatoes. One year, Nonna returned from Switzerland where she was invited by a cousin, and brought back the recipe for muesli. That was quite a novelty, though it never became part of Italian cuisine. I don't remember what, if any, meat we ate, except the horse meat I was given as a cure for anemia.

Once a week, a Russian refugee came to the house selling fresh eggs wrapped in newspaper in a shoebox. Occasionally, we got parcels with chocolate from relatives in Switzerland, and once someone arrived from Poland

bringing salami and chocolate from our aunt in Warsaw.

I remember that Viera and I loved prosciutto and we were promised we would get some to celebrate the arrival of our visas for the U.S. – if they ever came.

Playing with the kids on the street, we would go to the corner latteria and get cones filled with *farina di castagna*, the sweet chestnut flour which would blow all over our faces when we filled our mouth with it – imagine gulping down a mouthful of flour! When there was a little money, we got the same cones filled with *lattemiele* (whipped cream), which, in winter, took the place of ice-cream cones. Rarely, on some big occasion, we went to the cremeria in the downtown Via Dante for hot chocolate with *maritozzi con panna* – sweet buns with whipped cream.

We also started going to the neighborhood Cinema Reale to see films with Olio and Stanlio (Laurel and Hardy), Deanna Durbin, Tarzan, and other movies considered suitable for children.

Through all the hard times, my parents maintained a semblance of normal life at home. In Russian tradition, they gathered with friends – other émigrés – for tea and Sunday afternoon poker games. Those among them who were single loved to come to our house because of the family atmosphere and traditional Russian hospitality, bringing 100 grams of *biscotti*, or a bar of chocolate for us children.

Nobody had much money, but this did not prevent them from having fun and enjoying their get-togethers. A few had families and brought their children to play with us. I am sure they must have discussed the political developments, and by 1938 everybody began worrying about the future and sharing information about emigration prospects.

By then, Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria started arriving in Milan. A neighbor in our building, a Hungarian refugee called Mrs. Buchwald, started a *mensa* (a kind of canteen) in her apartment, offering cheap meals to other refugees. Interestingly, in spite of the racial laws, the Jewish refugees fleeing Germany and Austria were not stopped from entering the country.

(Incidentally, in an article about Elena Ferrante's real identity, I read that she and her mother (who was Polish) lived for a while in via Sangallo in Milan. If so, she must have known of Mrs. Buchwald; it was a short street and there were no hotels or restaurants there.)

THE RACIAL LAWS 1938

Our “being Jewish” resumed in 1938 with the enactment of the Racial Laws. Suddenly, we were different. We could no longer attend school, and we were told we had six months to leave the country. (This law applied only to foreign Jews.) What did it all mean?

We were staying in a farmer’s house in the hamlet of Montagna in the mountains above Sondrio (our summer “vacation”) when we learned about the Racial Laws. Mother received a letter from Mrs. Levi in Milan who worried about where the children would go to school.

Father lost his job at Montecatini, and Mondadori cancelled the contract for the publishing of his book about *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which was ready for printing. (Mondadori had published another book of his a few years earlier.)

I remember that when we heard we were expelled from the Fascist party, Mrs. Levi took the expensive uniforms of her three children and threw them out on the street. Of course, being well to-do, she didn’t care, but our mother had a seamstress make use of our uniforms, adapting them for use as needed.

I think I must have been the only one for whom being

expelled from school was very happy news. I had average passing grades in my third year at the *ginnasio* but a failing grade in math. According to the norm, I had to take a remedial exam in October which, if I passed, would allow me to continue to the next grade in the liceo. Consequently I spent the summer struggling with math in preparation for the exam. The announcement about our not being able to continue school was the best news for me!

But it was a major catastrophe for the family. Very quickly the Jewish community organized its own school. It was not free. My parents couldn't afford it, but the Jewish community accepted my 12-year-old sister Viera for free; she was a very good student and probably passed some entrance requirements. At the school, she met up with the kids we had known in the past summer at the colonia. Some of them were in a Zionist youth group and had their own little paper. The little boy Viera had a crush on in the colonia in the previous summers, was active in the group and she was very happy to be part of it, writing for it and planning the layout of the paper. It was the age when they were beginning to think about serious issues and she was having a great time. I envied her.

Because I couldn't attend school, my parents decided it would be good for me to learn some skill that I could eventually use in whatever country we'd end up in. So, I was sent to learn to sew from a seamstress in our building;

at the same time, my sister would school me, passing on to me whatever she learned in the Jewish school, i.e. her regular subjects, but particularly English, which she had already been taking for a year at the ginnasio. (In the Italian public school, we didn't have a choice of language; we had to take whatever our particular class was assigned and mine had been German. I even learned to read and write Gothic script!)

The provisions of the Racial Laws called for all foreign Jews who came to Italy after 1919 to leave the country within six months. The fact that my father had lived in Italy from 1905-06 until 1917 didn't count. The family had come to Italy in 1925 (officially it must have been 1928, when father defected from the Soviet diplomatic service), and was therefore subject to the new law.

We were now officially identified as Jews, but what did it really mean to my sister and me? Why was the subject of Jewishness never talked about at home? Neither my father nor mother had any particular ties to the Jewish community in their youth. Father had grown up in Smolensk, outside the Pale. His father had a job there and they all spoke Russian at home, and he went to a Russian school, unlike most Russian Jews who lived in the Pale. Mother's paternal family in Tomaszow (near Lodz) identified as Jewish, and probably observed some holidays; her grandfather was head of the Jewish community, but at home he transgressed, and ate ham. But then she went to

a girls' school in Warsaw and a more secular environment.

The children with whom we had always played on the street asked us why we couldn't go to school any more and when we told them we were Jewish, they would ask us in wonder "What does that mean? Does it mean that when you die you won't go to heaven or hell?" We didn't know, and they decided we would go to "limbo" – whatever that was. They would ask us if we believed in Jesus and when we said we didn't, they said "but you do believe in the Madonna, right?"

Our neighbors were all very sympathetic and felt sorry for us. I remember one of them commenting that these poor people who were being expelled were after all "*anche loro dei poveri cristiani*" ("poor Christians too"), "Christian" meaning a human being. They were modest, working-class people, many of them using the PNF ("Partito Nazionale Fascista") lapel button to mean "*per necessita' familiare*" ("for family necessity"). They were impressed by my dignified looking, goateed father whom they all called "professore"; for years they accepted him in their midst at the corner café, playing cards at *scopa* or *scopone*. They thought my mother and grandmother were real *signore* (sophisticated women) even though we didn't have money and had to skimp on everything and recycle every piece of clothing.

My sister and I were friends with all the kids on the street

– the Tesoro children of the Neapolitan shoemaker, the daughter of the hairdresser at the corner, and the children of our *portinaia* (the concierge), whom we helped with their school work. They all cried when we said goodbye, leaving for the station with a taxi; this was an event in itself since until then, on the rare occasion when a “taxi” was needed, it was a horse and buggy – the *carrozzelle* in use for the purpose.

PREPARING TO LEAVE ITALY

Even if we didn't know much about it, in 1938 our being Jewish was about to change our lives forever. Faced with the threat of expulsion, father started contacting all his old friends from his time in Italy before the First World War.

Having worked as a journalist in Rome before he returned to Russia in 1917, he knew a lot of journalists, artists, writers, musicians who would often gather at the old Café Aragno near Parliament. Incidentally, he had been one of the original founders of the Associazione della Stampa Estera in Rome (the Foreign Press Club, still in existence).

One of the journalists gathering at the Aragno was Benito Mussolini, who was then working for the Socialist paper "Avanti", and father remembered him in his ill-fitting, worn jacket, going home for his noon meal when his wife Rachele came to fetch him.

One of the first people father contacted in Milan was his old friend, Prof. Cento, whose brother was the Papal Nunzio in Lima, Peru. He wrote to him to see if he could get us to Peru, and Viera and I were already imagining life there. Nothing came of it.

In Rome, there was his very good friend from old times, Umberto Bianchi, who had been a Socialist deputy in

Parliament, but he was no friend of the fascists and couldn't be of any help (at some point he and his family were interned by the Fascists). Another friend was Angelo Piccioli, who later wrote a book called "La Porta Magica del Sahara" (his interest in African culture and travel led him later to a position in Rome in the Ministero dell'Africa). When the race laws came out, father wrote him that we had to leave the country, and asked whether he could help since we didn't know where to go, and whether exceptions could be made to allow old-time residents of Italy to stay, or at least get an extension. Piccioli had no idea father was Jewish and answered immediately: *"Ma cosa dici, Pevsner, non preoccuparti, vieni a Roma che ti trovo un posto al ministero"* ("What are you saying, Pevsner? Don't worry, come to Rome and I'll find you a job at the ministry"). This shows how some Italians, even in official positions, had no idea what the race laws were all about, what it meant to be Jewish, and how people still thought that having a "carissimo amico" in high places would solve the problem. His connection to fascism was based on his interest in the culture of Libya, rather than political ideology, but at the end he was probably afraid for his life as a "collaborator" and, after 1943, followed Mussolini to the north and the end.

Mother wrote to Charlie Chaplin because there had been rumors that he was Jewish and he could help people to get out. Of course, neither was true.

Nothing came of all these contacts. In late 1938, father contacted HIAS (Hebrew Aid Immigration Society) in New York, asking for help in locating relatives who had emigrated from Russia to the U.S. at the turn of the century. HIAS placed an ad in a N.Y. Jewish paper, and, lo and behold, a reply came from an unknown cousin in Washington. He didn't know whether the recipient of his letter would understand English, so he dictated a letter to his Italo-American barber who didn't know how to write in proper Italian. But it was the beginning of an extensive exchange of letters leading to our eventual emigration. We eventually made it to the U.S. in July 1939, with our grandmother following us in September on one of the last commercial ships to cross the Atlantic before war broke out.

First letter from cousin in
Washington, replying to our search
for relatives in the U.S.

Washington D. C.

al di 4 novembre

Carissimo Eugenio.

abbiamo veduto el suo articolo
che lei a pubblicato sul giornale
di qua.

Spai tutte desideriamo di
sapere sue notizie, di come
si trova riguardo al suo stato.
Sua famiglia?

di cosa è la sua professione
come si trova?

spesso comodo lo pigliamo

di scriverci che noi tutti
abbiamo molto piacere di
sapere sue condizioni
come pure sappiamo bene
quello che accade sotto in
Italia.

Affettuosi saluti da noi
tutti suo cugino.

"Dearest cousin, we read what you wrote in the local paper. All of us wish to have your news, and learn about conditions there. Do you have a family? What is your profession and how do you live?

When you can, please write us since we would like to know about your condition since we know well what is happening in Italy. Fond regards from us all, your cousin"

EMIGRATION

It turned out there were five families of cousins living in Washington, children of five siblings of my paternal grandfather who had emigrated to the U.S. at the turn of the century. Their name was Wolf, shortened from the original Wolftraub. Grandfather was the only one who stayed behind in Russia to support their old father. He changed his name to Pevsner in order to avoid going into the Czarist army by assuming another identity.

The cousins in Washington, all born in the U.S., were professionals, had their own homes and were doing well, but in spite of this, the U.S. Consul did not consider their joint affidavits sufficient proof of support for our family of five. The initial elation at the discovery of these relatives changed to renewed uncertainty and worry.

A state of anxiety persisted for months during which there was a constant exchange of letters with the American cousins, with the consulate, with the Italian authorities regarding needed documents to show what money was being taken out of the country, with other authorities for a permit to take out our personal belongings, with committees of assistance to refugees, and with various people who could eventually lend needed money.

Some of the American cousins corresponded directly with

the consul on our behalf, pointing out their stable financial situation and the fact that they had served in the U.S. army during the First World War and were good American citizens. Their affidavits were still not sufficient. Finally, a cousin who had married into a wealthy family of prominent Washington Jews, came through with an affidavit from an in-law, with a guarantee for all five of us.

But this was still not enough. In a letter of April 1939, the U.S. Consul wrote that, "in accordance with a provision of the U.S. law, any person whose passage is paid by an Association or Society, is excluded from the United States". As our passage was going to be paid by HIAS, he wrote "it will be necessary to refuse your visa application".

This caused more anxiety and worry.

Father had to contact more people to try and borrow money to show he could pay for our transatlantic fares. Eventually this hurdle too was overcome. There remained the medical visit for which we had to go to the consular doctor in Naples.

Of course for us kids the prospect of the trip was very exciting. Father had told us about all the things we would see in Rome and Naples where we would have "pizzas" (I guess they were not widely known in the north). In Rome, we stopped to visit father's old friends, and to have a quick look at the Coliseum. We probably didn't see much

else since there was no money to stay in a hotel, and we probably went on to Naples.

There we stayed in a cheap pensione, recommended by the refugee organization. This was the first time in my life I slept in a "hotel" and I wouldn't have known what to make of it, except that later mother told me that she had worried about what her innocent daughters would make of the "night noises" in the room next to us.

Going through the medical visit was another source of anxiety; I had developed conjunctivitis and I remember mother putting drops in my eyes while in the consulate waiting room; the reason was that people were turned down for trachoma, and who knew what the unfriendly consular doctor might make of an eye infection.

In Naples, we admired Vesuvius, had pizzas, and took a carrozzella on the coastal road around the bay and up to the Vomero hill to visit friends of father.

In April 1939, we finally received our visas, and began to prepare for departure. Originally this was to be from Genova, but because of the complications of the tickets being paid by HIAS whose only office was in Paris, we had to travel to France and depart from Le Havre. Leaving

Letter from US Consul
refusing our visas.



THE FOREIGN SERVICE
OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

AMERICAN CONSULATE GENERAL

Naples, Italy, April 18, 1939.

Mr. Sannale Pavaner,
Via Sengallo 9,
Milan, Italy.

Sir:

Your letter of April 12, 1939, with its enclosures, has been received.

It is noted that in your application you state that your steamship passage to the United States will be paid by the "Hebrew Immigrants Society". I must call your attention to a provision of the American law which states that any person whose passage is paid by an Association or Society is excluded from the United States. Therefore, if your passages are being paid by this Society, it will be necessary to refuse your visa applications.

You are, therefore, asked to inform this office as to who will in fact pay for your steamship passages.

Your certificate issued by the Circuit Court of the United States for the Southern District of New York, in 1936, is returned herewith since it is not required by this office.

Very respectfully yours,

For: Thomas D. Bowman,
American Consul General.

Charles H. Hovey
Charles H. Hovey,
American Vice Consul.

Enclosures:
Certificate as stated.

Italy was heart-wrenching for all of us, especially since we had to leave Nonna behind. She had developed sciatica, couldn't travel, and remained with her daughter Nina. She joined us a few months later on one of the last commercial liners crossing the Atlantic on the eve of the outbreak of war.

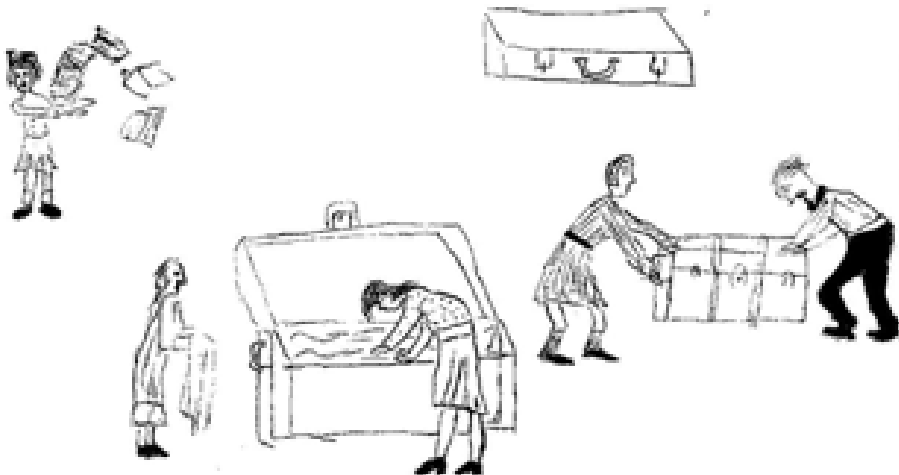
Looking back on our preparation for departure, on the packing of trunks, one of which was a large wicker trunk that must have come from Russia, and large canvas duffle bags, we must have looked not very different from the refugees one sees pictured arriving at Ellis Island much earlier.

Mother would have liked to leave all the old household items behind, along with our much recycled wardrobes. But she didn't know what to expect on our arrival in the U.S., nor how long it would take before anyone started earning enough to buy new clothes. So, in went the tea kettle and other kitchenware, sewing machine, along with bedding and clothes. Interestingly nobody questioned the packing of books, photo albums, school papers, and an incredible amount of letters. And along with these, went books of music scores – all the Beethoven Sonatas and others — which mother had played before leaving Russia; she obviously hoped she would be able to play again. And she did. One of the first things she bought when we were still not quite settled shortly after our arrival was a second-hand upright (still here)..

We left Milan in June. Many friends of the family and all our street playmates came to say goodbye. It was very, very sad and there were many tears. Even my teacher from elementary school whom I had for six grades, came to see me off with a box of candy for the trip. I still used to go and see her after I left elementary school, to bring her flowers on her name-day; I think she had a special feeling for us because of our being refugees, later subjected to discrimination.

Si preparano i bauli. Viera's drawing of packing for departure.

3 Si preparano i bauli



In my diary of the time, I describe the scenery from the train travelling to France. But what remains in my mind above all is the scene at the border crossing from Italy at Modane – my father, standing in the corridor, leaning out of the window, looking at the grazing cattle, exclaiming in a loud voice: “I salute you free French cows!”. Viera and I giggled, embarrassed by his outburst, and it was only later that I realized what it had meant to him to live for ten years deprived of free speech.

He felt the suppression of the regime to the point that he even worried about being stopped at customs for leaving the country with an object that was part of the “national heritage”: a 6-inch rusty iron nail from an ancient Roman ship. He had picked it up from the ground when as a young journalist he covered the story of the excavations of the Roman ships at Lake Nemi. The nail still sits on the mantelpiece in my house, along with fragments of Etruscan clay figurines and vases.

We stayed in Paris a couple of days, at a cheap hotel near the Gare St. Lazare, paid for by the Jewish Committee. Old friends of our parents took us around sightseeing. My letters to Nonna from Paris did not mention anything in particular. Was there nothing in Paris that impressed us? We saw my mother’s brother who had smuggled himself and his 3-year-old daughter into France from Germany. He was living in poverty, helped by the Jewish community. In 1942 he was arrested on the street, in the presence of

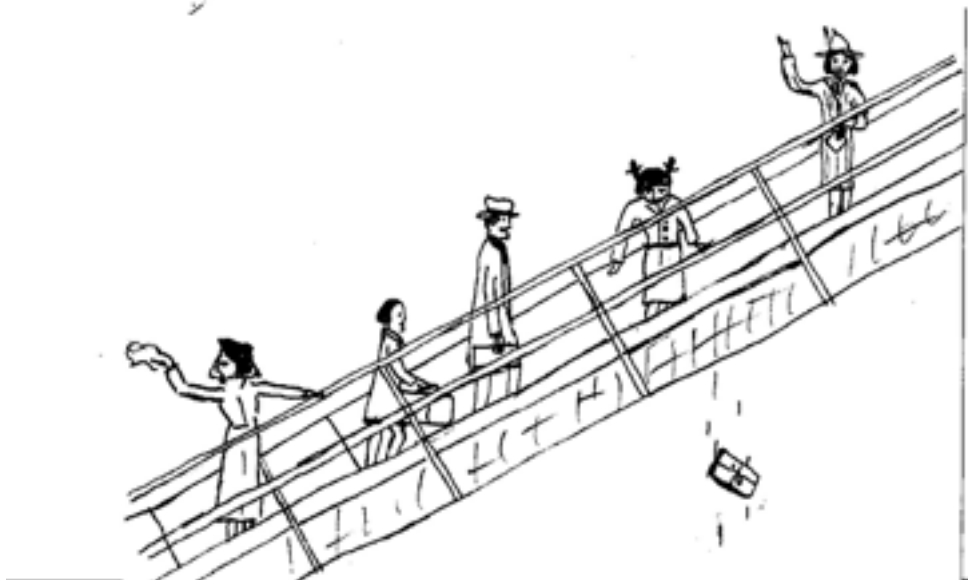
his small daughter, and deported to Auschwitz where he perished. The child survived and eventually was found and brought over to the U.S. by my mother.

On 23 June 1939 we sailed from Le Havre to America on the Champlain.

Page 61, *Baci, abbracci, lacrime, saluti* (Kisses, hugs, tears, farewells). Viera's drawing of our departure from Milan, June 1939.

Page 62, Viera's drawing of boarding the ship at Le Havre.





We were supposed to land in N.Y. on the 30th of June, but there was a heavy fog that day and we didn't pull into the pier until July 1st. I don't remember sailing into the harbor and seeing the Statue of Liberty, but as it turned out, we had it staring at us for the next five days.

During the trip, father became ill and was hospitalized on board with a prostate condition. Consequently, we were not allowed to enter the country and were detained on Ellis Island. An additional guarantee was required to show that someone would cover the expenses for an operation and other medical needs.

Relatives who had come to meet us at the pier immediately contacted the Washington families who had given the affidavits. Luckily, among the various in-law connections, a surgeon provided the necessary guarantee;

however all this happened at the start of the July 4th weekend, which meant that the judge in charge wouldn't look at the case for several days. When my anxious mother finally faced the judge and asked him when we could leave, she was rudely told: "You are not yet in the U.S. and can still be sent back". I can imagine my parents' state of mind.

We were there for five days; father was kept in the Ellis Island hospital, while mother, Viera and I were placed in the famous big hall where all the detainees spent the entire day.

My letter to Nonna on Ellis Island letterhead describes our stay there in much detail; I translate it below from Italian.

Our parents' intention had been to remain in N.Y. on arrival, but as father needed to undergo surgery, he left with mother for Washington where the sponsoring cousins offered to help. Viera and I went to stay with relatives in N.Y. until father got better and they would come back to N.Y. As it turned out, his convalescence took longer than expected; mother started working very soon at a beauty salon and she decided that life in Washington would be easier. She was probably right because father would have had a hard time finding a job in N.Y.

Viera and I joined our parents in Washington, and a month or two later, started high school.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
Immigration and Naturalization Service

Translation

July 2, 1939
Sunday

Dear grandma,

You will have seen from the envelope that we are in Ellis Island since yesterday; but let me begin from the beginning. Yesterday morning aboard the ship, they told us that since papa was sick we all had to get off on this island. At the pier aunt Stefa and uncle George had come to meet us and Adi plus papa's cousin with her husband. They tried to get us released, but couldn't do anything because the offices were closing at one and will not reopen until Wednesday because of a holiday. So, we and 13 other passengers of the Champlain came here; some of them were able to leave and there were 8 of us left. Papa is in the hospital ~~xxxxx~~ while we are in a section for people who came here because of their documents.

There are people who have been here weeks and months. There are all nationalities, negroes and many Chinese. This is like a prison. When we go to meals or come back, or go to bed, or go outdoors, in other words every time we leave the big hall, we are counted like sheep. All day long we stay in this big room which is full of hard benches, chairs, and a few armchairs in which one can take a siesta. In the room, against the walls are open shelves where we keep our suitcases and hang our clothes; it looks almost like an exhibition of rags. It is very funny. On weekdays, they take us out in the grassy yard to take some air for 25 minutes. On Saturday, 2 hours and on Sunday, 4 hours. That's lucky for us. Inside they never open the windows, all of which have bars. We sleep in a room with seven beds. At night they lock us in the room. The windows are very high up and all with iron bars and screens. There are only beds, no hangers, no nails on the wall, no chairs, nothing.

On the way to bed, in a single file, we pass a black man who gives us a small cake of soap each every day. At 6 a.m. they wake us; at 12, we have lunch, at 2 o'clock women and children get a glass of milk and at 5 we have dinner; at 7.30, we go to bed. We have to sit at a Jewish table, so while others drink milk at lunch, we can't have any if there is meat, and today we couldn't even have icecream. The food is literally disgusting (at least for me and Viera). At lunch: meat and potatoes or beans, and bread; ~~xxxxxxx~~ to drink, we get terrible coffee. In the evening, almost the same, except for tea instead of coffee; neither at noon or in the evening do they give us fruit or butter or water or wine. After the meals at the Champlain.....

The knives don't cut at all; a man said they are dull so You cannot use them to commit suicide! In the messhall there are 5 long tables of Chinese refugee boys. They walk in slippers all the time and the women in pajamas.

The yard where they take us out is surrounded by a metal fence; today there were visitors and they looked at us as if we were rare animals in a cage.

Here, everyone ~~sits~~ sits around all day chatting, reading, playing cards etc. Women are given pieces of cloth and embroidery material. Our only occupation is playing monopoly but since we cannot do that all day long, we are rather bored. These days, because of the holiday, the food was better but later it will be like Saturday's. We still didn't see papa but he wrote us that the medical inspector won't be in ~~in~~ until Wednesday & then we still have to wait a day. Who knows whether they will let us out then? Yesterday many new ~~xx~~ people came. Tomorrow aunt Stefa will come and papa's cousin who was here Sunday and brought us chocolate and cigarettes. We still have our chocolate from Nilsen and we eat it with the milk they serve us at 10, 2 and 7. Now it's 5 min to 7am and soon we'll go to breakfast and eat God knows what; but at least the bread here is delicious

~~-----~~

PS Next to our infamous island is the island of the statue of Liberty and when we look at it we think: some liberty!

Here everybody says Okay. In the morning when they wake us ~~up~~ and in the evening when we go to bed, they always say: Come on ladies, come on..

side note by Bob: Mr and Mrs Center just told us that everything is alright and the family can leave tomorrow so we'll come to get them and bring them in triumph to New York.

TO READ MORE

To read the whole original manuscript, email info@primolevicenter.org and we'll put you in touch with the author of the book.

Stateless: A Russian Childhood in Fascist Italy currently hasn't been written yet. Marita Dresner is working with a collection of notes, research and diary entries to create this piece. Contact us if you're interested in sponsoring this book (donating towards its writing, production and translation), or if you're interested in publishing opportunities for the book.

