



**Piera Sonnino.** *This Has Happened: An Italian Family in Auschwitz.* Foreword by David Denby. Epilogue by Giacomo Papi. Afterword by Mary Doria Russell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 218 pp. \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-7508-9.

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## The Destruction of a Family

The English translation of Piera Sonnino's *Questo è stato* is a welcome contribution to the literature dedicated to the ordeal experienced by Italian Jews during the Holocaust. The memoir, originally titled by the author *La notte di Auschwitz*, was written in 1960, but was released to the public only forty-three years later.[1] It is the riveting account of the sufferings brought upon a Genoese Jewish family of eight members by the Fascist and Nazi persecutions, culminating in their arrest by the Italian police and deportation to Auschwitz. Only Piera made the journey back. The text is a powerful reconstruction of the destruction of a family, also displaying literary qualities that go beyond its pure testimonial value.

The memoir can be divided into three sections. As David Denby points out in the foreword to the volume, the first one opens "a little stiffly" (p. 4) with the description in broad brushstrokes of the Sonninos' Southern origin and middle-class social position, although lowered to a level of "dignified poverty" (p. 25) which they hid to everyone outside the family. With an insightful remark, Sonnino writes that this socially rather reclusive attitude implicitly implied abiding by the official optimism of the Fascist regime, which did not "tolerate economic catastrophe" (p. 35). Moreover, and tragically, the family's determination to stick together in the face of adversity did not help them in finding escape routes, and may have actually "hastened their destruction" (p. 10), as Denby notes.

The second part reconstructs the family's first encounter with the catastrophe, represented by the gripping stories of persecution heard from German Jews arriving in Genoa in 1934, and describes in a limited number of pages the "lightning bolt" (p. 37) represented by the anti-Semitic laws of 1938. The memoir then recounts the year following the armistice of 8 September 1943. Here the book describes a desperate running in circles, from Genoa to Sanpiederdicanne, Pietranera di Rovigno, to

Genoa again, and Carignano. In these places the Sonninos experienced, along with fear and hardships, the solidarity of local communities. Sonnino explicitly recalls one "poor peasant of Sampierdicanne" who did not divide humanity between Jews and non-Jews, but "between those who possess everything and those who possess nothing" (p. 41), as well as his fellow villagers, the employer of her sister, Maria Luisa, who offered a safe refuge, and even the marshal of the *carabinieri* of Rovigno who, instead of putting the family under arrest, informed them that the small town was not safe anymore for them.

Sonnino expresses her gratitude to all these people, as well as to the German woman whose offer of warm tea and a piece of bread is seen by the author as a display of the real Germany, uncorrupted by Nazism. At the same time, not unlike in Primo Levi's works, there is no desire for revenge in her description of perpetrators, such as the Italian policemen who arrested her along with her family—even though they have, in her memory, the face of death (p. 78).

In 1944, after months of restless wandering in the Genoese countryside, the Sonninos had no alternative but to return to Genoa. Thanks to the help provided by the secretary to the cardinal of Genoa Don Repetto, the family found accommodations until their capture nine months later. The fact that the house in which they were arrested was situated on the same street where the family first lived in Genoa adds an eerie irony, but it also indicates the lack of viable escape alternatives.[2]

The arrest closes one section of the memoir, with the family on the transport to the "center of the nightmare" (p. 98), and opens a new one, set in the camps. Here, Sonnino's writing becomes even more evocative, her descriptions more powerful (and successfully rendered in Ann Goldstein's translation). The camps—first Auschwitz, then Belsen, Braunschweig, and Bendorf Am

Main—were all hellish places. The physical symbol of this living inferno was represented by the mud: “a sea of mud, a plain of mud. A freezing, dark, muddy madness” a mud never seen before, so hostile that it seemed alive, “as if death had given birth to a monstrous, vermin-like form of life, treacherous and perfidious” (pp. 97, 106). In the extreme conditions of the camps, where even nature was hostile, Piera’s only comfort was her closeness with her two sisters, Maria Luisa and Bice. Maria Luisa was the strongest of the three, able to instill hope and faith in Piera’s and Bice’s hearts. When Maria Luisa was suddenly transferred to another camp, Bice’s health and will to survive quickly deteriorated. In excruciating pages, we read of Piera’s desperate attempts to comfort her sister, Bice’s death, and the ghastly description of the disposal of the body.

From that moment on, Piera’s memories became “confused, detached, impersonal” (p. 139). Sonnino’s account reflects this loss of lucidity. Of the Bendorf am Main camp where she was transferred at the end of March 1945, Sonnino preserved only an “animal memory” (p. 139). The distinction between memory and hallucination is blurred. The writing reflects the numbing of her senses. Instead of the precise and suggestive descriptions of previous events in the camp, her style is now broken, composed of very short sentences, with no room for reflection, as in the description of the last transfer before liberation: “they push us into a railroad car. They close the door. The train moves. I have no sense of direction. Again an absence.... I wake up on something soft and hard at the same time. I touch it. There are legs, it’s a stomach, it’s a bed. A face. Frozen. I have slept on a dead woman. Again a void” (pp. 140-141).

The next moment of consciousness, after these hallucinated memories, came on 17 May. The war was over. Sick but alive, in September Piera returned to Italy. After the war, she married the *l’Unità* journalist Antonio Gaetano Parodi, became close to the Italian Communist Party, and gave life to her two daughters, Bice and Maria

Luisa.

While absolutely engaging to scholars with an interest in the history and memory of the Holocaust (in particular in relation to the Italian case), this edition of the memoir is clearly targeted at a non-specialist public. The volume is supplemented by David Denby’s foreword, a brief historical note by the translator Ann Goldstein, a fourteen-page photo section, an interesting epilogue by Giacomo Papi (the journalist of *Diario* who first read the memoir) with more details about the months spent by the family in hiding as well as about Piera’s life after the war, a selected list of further readings, and a reading group guide for the memoir. The book’s only weakness is perhaps represented by the afterword by Mary Doria Russell, whose pages on “what went right in Italy” (pp. 179-210) seem at times to present a rather one-sided description of Italy’s relationship to the persecution of the Jews, as well as displaying some factual inaccuracy, as in her reconstruction of the events surrounding the round-up and deportation of the Jews of Rome (p. 196). In fact, contrary to what is claimed by Russell, the German looting of 50 kilograms of gold preceded the round-up.[3] But these are minor complaints, which by no means diminish the value of this important memoir, which fully deserved to be selected as a runner-up for the 2006 National Jewish Book Award, Biography and Autobiography Category.

#### Notes

[1]. It first appeared in the special issue “Memoria” of the magazine *Diario* (23 January 2003), and was later published in volume as *Questo è stato. Una famiglia italiana nel lager* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2004).

[2]. For a similar, although less tragic, episode see Aldo Zargani, *Per violino solo. La mia infanzia nell’Aldiqua 1938-1945* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2002 [1995]), 34-35.

[3]. See Robert Katz, *Fatal Silence: The Pope, the Resistance, and the German Occupation of Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003), 74.

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