

Background to "Story of a Jewish Boy" by Leopold Berman

My husband, Leopold Berman, who wrote this account of his experiences in Italy during WW2 when he was a boy of 14, was born in Merano, Italy in 1931.

Merano, a spa-resort in the Dolomites, was, from the late 19th century, host to a significant Jewish community which contributed to its thriving economy. The Bermanns were an important family in this community. Leo's great-grandfather, Josef Bermann, had come to Merano from Kremsier, Moravia to be the shochet there. His grandfather, Maximillian, became a doctor and opened the sanitarium, Waldpark, to which people came from all over Europe to take the grape cure. One of the people who came from Poland was Leo's mother, Anna Tuch. At Waldpark she met Siegfried (Friedl) Bermann, Dr. Bermann's son who, having studied soil agronomy at the University of Perugia, was planning to become a pioneer in Palestine. He and Anna became engaged and when he returned, a year later, they were married.

After the marriage, Friedl and Anna lived at Waldpark along with Friedl's parents, brothers and sister. In this cushioned environment Leo spent his first six years along with his older brother Raffaele. The sanitarium's garden was his own private Eden; a place of luxuriance and security. He climbed its fig trees, plucked its apples, and lost himself among the roses, tall grasses and other vegetation. He was a playful and athletic boy who loved to run and ride his bicycle up and down the hills around the sanitarium. Growing up surrounded by those mountains, learning to know them from the many hikes he took with his father along their craggy reaches, he developed a love of high places that stayed with him throughout his life, shaping his weltanshaung.

Raffaele, on the other hand, was at the age of 4 ½ placed in a clinic in Rapallo, on the Italian Riviera, to be treated for an inflammation of the lining of the lungs, never fully recovering his health and strength. One illness led to another; typhus, then tuberculosis of the bone. He was thus an invalid from an early age.

In 1939, with a sense of impending disaster and a growing distancing of himself from his wife and sons, Friedl Bermann sailed for America. His delay in sending tickets for Anna, Raffaele and Leo resulted in their standing on the shore as the ship, The Rex, that they were to have taken, departed without them.

Anna decided to go back to Merano with the boys; it was a place where she knew people and had personal resources. But by now Merano was not safe for Jews. Nevertheless they were able to remain there in relative safety until September 8th, 1943. On that day, as described by Leo in his account, everything changed dramatically. At that time The Badoglio government called for an armistice with the Allies who had landed in Sicily. This raised the hopes of all who had suffered during the Fascist regime. Instead, the German army swiftly took charge, unleashing all its fury upon everything in its retreating path, including its former allies, the Italians.

The first part of the account, which was actually written in the d.p. camp in Rome, 1945 when Leo was 14, ends with the Allied bombing of Bologna. The second part is a day to day diary of his life in the d.p. camp after the Allies had taken over.

Since there was no longer a place they could consider "home", the Bermanns, along with many other refugees from all over Europe, spent some time in this camp for displaced persons in Cinecitta, Rome, the studios of the Italian film industry that had been lent for this purpose at the end of the conflict. There, stories were exchanged of the terrible ordeals that people had undergone during the course of the war. Leo heard them and was greatly affected. It was at this time that he wrote the account of what had happened to him and his family over the past two years. His sensitive nature was outraged by what he himself had seen and the stories he heard there in the camp, and he made up his mind that he would some day go to Palestine to live, believing, then, that Zionism was the only solution to the "Jewish Problem".

After some time spent in the camp, Anna was able to rent an apartment for herself and Leo in Rome. (Raffaele was in yet another sanatorium in Leysin, Switzerland.) There, with the help of devoted tutors, Leo was able to make up all the schooling he had missed in the previous years.

On the back of a photograph he sent to his father when he was 15 were written these words: "This is the face of a boy whose youth was taken from him, who doesn't know anymore how to cry or laugh, that life has crushed under the inhuman weight of cruel reality. In this photograph you see the mask of a face; if that mask were lifted you would see a mind troubled by life, that too cruelly torments your son."

In 1947, a plane ticket arrived from his father and Leo, the first of the three to leave, flew off to America and the start of a new life.

Afterword:

After Leo died in 2003, I remembered the diary he had written as a young boy during the second world war in Italy, lovingly preserved, through our many moves, in an old silver paper candy box, waiting for him to find the free moment to translate and hand down the memory of his experiences to his son, grandson, niece and nephew. Somehow, the moment never came.

Two dear friends, Giuliana and Giulianina Carrugati, agreed to come to Brattleboro, taking time out from their busy schedules to translate the precious memoir and in three days of furious work it was finished. There he was, revealed in those pages as a remarkably thoughtful and impressionable boy, conscious witness to a brutal piece of history.

Those early, extreme experiences had a powerful effect on the man he became. Leo the architect, dreamer, builder, had a passionate interest in Tikkun Olam --fixing the world. Whether it took the form of repair, restoration and preservation of forgotten old buildings, keeping the past in tact while making room for the future, or working within the community, sharing his expertise with those needing to improve their lives, he gave of himself freely and equally to everyone. Perhaps the seed for this commitment was rooted in his early initiation to the best and worst in humans that war elicits. Perhaps, also, the clear mind and generous heart of the man saw everywhere and always the possibility of renewal and the urgency of remembering.

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