

## RACISM IN ITALY

*By Martin Agronsky*

ITALY is one of the last countries in Europe where anti-Semitism might normally be expected to gain much headway. Roughly estimated, one Italian out of a thousand is Jewish — an exceedingly small proportion when compared for instance with the situation in Poland, where the ratio is one in ten, or in pre-Nazi Germany, where it was one in a hundred. Consequently, the relentless "race" campaign inaugurated by the Fascist Government early last summer surprised and puzzled Italians and non-Italians, Jews and non-Jews.

The first overt official step was taken on July 1 when the Italian Government issued a decree forbidding the public sale of translations of books by foreign Jews. Italian Jews were, for the moment, still allowed to publish books, but under such restrictions that their literary and scholarly output was sure to decline materially. Prior to the promulgation of this decree the government had avoided sensational acts, confining itself to the elimination of individual Jews from public office. With the July 1 decree, however, a period of active anti-Semitism began.

That the Fascists were preparing for more drastic measures was indicated on July 14 by the publication of a report, prepared for the Ministry of Popular Culture, laying down the "scientific bases" for an "Aryan" racial policy in Italy. This report, drawn up by a number of Italian university professors, sought to establish ten propositions, of which the following two will suffice to give the general tenor:

*Seventh: It is time that the Italians frankly proclaimed themselves to be racists. All that the Régime has done in Italy has a racial foundation. The Chief [Capo] has very frequently had occasion in his speeches to refer to the concept of race. The question of racism in Italy must be treated from the purely biological point of view without philosophical or religious implications. The concept of race in Italy must be essentially Italian and Aryan-Nordic in trend. This does not mean that German racial theories should be introduced into Italy as they are, nor is it to affirm that Italians and Scandinavians are the same thing. Its only object is to hold up for Italians a physical and above all a psychological model of the human race which, by its purely European characteristics, is completely separated from all extra-European races. This means elevating Italians to an ideal of superior consciousness of themselves and of their greater responsibility.*

*Ninth: Jews do not belong to the Italian race. Of the Semites who have landed*

on the sacred soil of our Fatherland in the course of centuries, nothing in general has remained. Even the Arab occupation of Sicily left nothing except the memory of a few names, and in any case the process of assimilation has always been very rapid in Italy. Jews represent only that part of the population of Italy which has never been assimilated, because it is made up of non-European racial elements differing absolutely from the elements from which the Italians originated.

The remainder of the report was in similar vein. It naturally received instant approbation in the Nazi press. Indeed, many observers believed that the whole thing was another of Mussolini's "stunts" to demonstrate his solidarity with Hitler, and that in a short while he would drop it.

Support for this belief rapidly dwindled as one prominent Fascist spokesman after another made anti-Semitic pronouncements. On July 25, for example, the Secretary General of the Fascist Party, Achille Starace, praised the above-quoted report and declared that it had been adopted as the basis for official action. According to Starace, the principal task of the Ministry of Popular Culture for 1939 would be the "elaboration and discussion of Fascist race principles."

After such categorical assertions as this — and they were paraphrased by other prominent Fascists such as Virginio Gayda, editor of the authoritative *Giornale d'Italia*, and Roberto Farinacci, former Secretary General of the Party — it should have been obvious to all that the Government was committed to a full-fledged campaign of "racial purity."

Under this belief I visited Italy in August to see what effect the policy was having on Italian Jewry. To my surprise I found that most Italian Jews still hugged the fond delusion that anti-Semitism would disappear as unaccountably as it had appeared. During the last two weeks of August I spoke with Jewish leaders in Rome, Milan, Florence, Trieste and Turin, the centers of Jewish population. Each assured me that they were confident that the Government's actions were the product of diplomatic expediency. Italian anti-Semitism, they insisted, was merely Mussolini's way of showing his solidarity with Berlin. They were certain that it would stop with journalistic polemics. Neither the August 3 decree excluding all foreign Jews from Italian schools nor the census taken of the Jewish population on August 23 shook them in this belief. No more than two hundred Jews left Italy in order to escape anti-Semitism before September 1, 1938.

The Italian Jewish community was finally jolted out of this

complacent attitude on September 1. According to a decree published on that date all persons whose fathers and mothers were Jewish, and who had settled in Italy or the Italian colonies (except Ethiopia) since 1919, must leave the country within six months, or become subject to expulsion. Profession of Christianity or any other non-Jewish religion was no ground for exception. Those affected, to the approximate number of 15,000, immediately lost their Italian citizenship — and that at a time when the plight of the stateless refugee was becoming increasingly acute. By March 12, 1939, they will be homeless, jobless and, unless the stringent currency exportation laws are waived in their behalf (which is extremely unlikely), almost penniless, for legally they may take out of the country only 2,500 lire (about \$130). Especially unfortunate is the plight of the five thousand Jewish refugees who fled to Italy from Germany and Austria, for they will now lose the meagre savings which they managed to bring with them. Once again they must begin life anew elsewhere.

On September 2, the native-born Italian Jews, who had hoped against hope that their turn would not come, fell victims to a new anti-Jewish decree. A few weeks earlier a manifesto excluding foreign Jewish students from Italian universities had been issued. The September 2 decree excluded all Jewish teachers and students from every university and school in Italy after October 16, 1938. A single exception was made in favor of native-born Jewish university students, who were permitted to finish their studies. This decree affected some 10,000 Jewish students and more than 500 Jewish teachers, of whom about 270 are university professors or instructors. Jewish members of academies, institutes, and scientific, literary or artistic associations were likewise informed that their resignations had been accepted.

At a meeting of Jewish professors which I attended in Florence it was estimated that the small elementary schools of the Jewish communities in Florence, Rome, Turin, Milan and Trieste, which in the past had accommodated about 1,200 pupils, might be extended to care for 2,000. The blow was softened somewhat by the subsequent announcement that the state would bear the cost of establishing Jewish elementary and secondary schools. These, however, cannot possibly cope with the educational needs of the Jewish community, now or in the near future. By this decree of September 2 what amounts to a Jewish scholastic ghetto was set up. The normal mixing of Jewish and Italian children has been

eliminated, and the Jews will become a people apart. All Jewish-written textbooks, even those "influenced by a Jewish trend of thought," have been banned from Italian schools. The work of educating Italian children to a hatred of the Jew will undoubtedly be the next step. Within the next few years a generation to whom the Jew is a "parasitic growth" and a "human toad" will grow up in Italy, as it already has in Germany.

The decrees of September 1 and 2 were hailed in the Fascist press as necessary measures of racial and social defense and as a noble contribution to civilization. The *Tribuna* of Rome commented that "Italy, whose present action is approved and commended by all nations and all political currents in the world which have not lost their sense of personal dignity, is offering to history a great example of spiritual resurrection and reorganization." The press further announced that there were in store other decrees which would eventually result in the almost total exclusion of Jews from the social, economic and political life of the nation. Events during the succeeding weeks only too faithfully proved the accuracy of this prediction.

In his Trieste speech of September 18 Mussolini declared: "Jews of Italian citizenship who have unquestioned military or civil merit in the eyes of Italy and the régime will find justice and understanding. As to others, a policy of separation will be followed. In the end, the world will perhaps be more astounded by our generosity than by our rigor, at least unless Semites beyond the frontier and, above all, their unexpected friends who defend them from too many chairs of learning, compel us to change our course radically."

This declaration, half-promise and half-threat, was amplified by a number of decisions reached by the Fascist Grand Council at its session of October 6. In the first place, the Council decided that a person was to be regarded as a Jew if both parents were Jewish, if his father was Jewish and his mother a foreigner, or if he was born of a mixed marriage and professed the Jewish religion. (On November 10 the Fascist Cabinet added another category — those who "in any other way show Jewish characteristics.") The Council then went on to decree an unconditional prohibition of marriages between "Italians" on the one hand and Jews and other "non-Aryans" on the other. Marriages between Italians and foreigners, even if Aryans, were also forbidden without the express consent of the Ministry of the Interior. The

Council also ratified the decrees expelling foreign Jews and stopping further Jewish immigration. However, as a token of Il Duce's generosity, various classes of Jews were expressly exempted from all discriminatory legislation (except that forbidding them to teach in Italian schools). These exemptions applied to the families of men killed or wounded in combat (including the Fascist Revolution) or who had "deserved well of the nation or of the Fascist régime." The number of Jewish families within these categories was officially announced on November 5 as being 3,522.

These concessions proved to be quite illusory. On November 10 the Cabinet decreed that no Jew, without any exception whatsoever, could be employed by the Government, the Party, the local administrative bodies, the labor syndicates, public and semi-public bodies of any kind, private institutions partly supported by the state, industrial and commercial enterprises in which the state supplies 50 percent of the capital, and banks of national importance. All Jews so employed were to be dismissed within three months. Only in the insurance business were the exemptions forecast by the Grand Council still valid. On November 19 it was reported that 15,000 Jews — practically all those gainfully employed — had been discharged.

But not only did the Fascist Government deprive the Jews of their jobs; it proceeded to take their property. The decree of November 10 also forbade Jews to own or manage establishments affecting the national defense or employing more than 100 employees, or to own land having a taxable income of more than 5,000 lire a year or residential property having a taxable income of more than 20,000 lire a year. All sales by Jews having in the meantime been forbidden, the decree amounted to the expropriation of no less than 70 percent of all Jewish property, estimated by the Government to total about 10 billion lire, though this figure may be excessive. The Government will probably pay the Jews with long-term, low-rate, non-transferable bonds. Thus a novel way will have been found to balance the budget. It is clear that financial considerations played no small rôle in the sudden outburst of Italian anti-Semitism.

One wonders at the capacity for understatement of the foreign press which even today writes about Mussolini's "mild" anti-Semitic measures. And the end is plainly not yet. Step by step the process of segregation proceeds towards the revival of the mediæval ghetto in Italy. Small wonder then that the Italian Jewish



community is thoroughly panic-stricken. The Pope, it is true, has repeatedly condemned "racial" doctrines, whether Nazi or Fascist, declaring them contrary to Christian teachings and a denial of the Church's right to carry on missionary work. But these pronouncements have apparently had little effect.

What occasioned this thoroughgoing campaign for Italian racial purity? Most Italians were as surprised as outsiders to learn that the tiny Jewish minority had so suddenly been found to be unassimilable — to be, in the words of Signor Gayda, "in but not of Italy." Mussolini's record is not that of an anti-Semite. The Italian Jews agree that he is much too intelligent to believe all that he causes to be printed about them. Some of his closest collaborators in creating the Fascist state were Jews. Prior to 1938 he had shown no particular animus against them. Indeed, upon several occasions he went on record as being opposed to anti-Semitism. On May 29, 1932, he wrote in his personal organ *Il Popolo d'Italia*: "The frequency of 'mixed marriages' in Italy<sup>1</sup> should be welcomed with satisfaction by all good and sincere Italians, for it constitutes a proof of the perfect civic, political and, above all, moral equality enjoyed by all Italians, whatever their distant origin."<sup>2</sup>

In the spring of 1932, during his famous "conversations" with Emil Ludwig, Mussolini declared:

"Of course there are no pure races left; not even the Jews have kept their blood unmingled. Successful crossings have often promoted the energy and the beauty of a nation. Race! It is a feeling, not a reality; ninety-five percent, at least, is a feeling. Nothing will ever make me believe that biologically pure races can be shown to exist to-day. . . No such doctrine will ever find wide acceptance here in Italy. . . National pride has no need of the delirium of race."

"That is the best argument against anti-Semitism," said I [*i. e.* Mr. Ludwig].

"Anti-Semitism does not exist in Italy," answered Mussolini. "Italians of Jewish birth have shown themselves good citizens, and they fought bravely in the war. Many of them occupy leading positions in the universities, in the army, in the banks."<sup>3</sup>

As recently as February 1938 the Italian Foreign Office declared that "a specific Jewish problem does not exist in Italy" and that "the Fascist Government has no intention whatsoever

<sup>1</sup> Of the approximately 400 marriages involving Jews every year, about 100 are between Jews and non-Jews.

<sup>2</sup> Paolo Orano: "Gli Ebrei in Italia" ("The Jews in Italy"), p. 124-125. This book, published in 1937, has become the bible of Italy's "scientific" anti-Semites.

<sup>3</sup> Emil Ludwig: "Talks with Mussolini." Boston: Little, Brown, 1933, p. 69-70.

of taking political, economic or moral measures against Jews, except such as are hostile to the régime."

That was in February. In July came the proclamation that "the time has come for Italians frankly to proclaim themselves racists." It is beyond the bounds of reason to suppose that during the few months between February to July the attitude of the Italian Jews could have undergone such a complete change as to necessitate their exclusion from political and economic life for "the good of the state." They could not all, in so short a time, have become "hostile to the régime." What had changed so suddenly was the attitude of the Government.

The most striking feature of Italian anti-Semitism is its artificiality. If there are 70,000 Jews in Italy, as the Government now claims on the basis of its recent census, this number is hardly an economic problem in a nation of 44,000,000. The pressure of numbers, which the Nazis have always given as a reason for anti-Semitism in Germany, does not exist in Italy.

The Fascists assert that Italian Jews occupying important posts in the army, navy, government and finance were deliberately leading the country to ruin. To demonstrate the utter improbability of this we have but to note that the number of Jews in such positions was minute. At the time the racist campaign was inaugurated, no Jew occupied an important post in the Fascist Party or in the diplomatic service. The only Jew who ever sat in the Fascist cabinet, Guido Jung, resigned as Minister of Finance five years ago — and to the accompaniment of laudatory editorials in the Fascist press. Though Mussolini has appointed fourteen "non-Aryans" to the Senate since he came to power, the functions of Senators are now largely ornamental. Of the Jewish Senators inherited from the pre-Fascist era, only about six are still living and of these the youngest is 78 years old. According to army and navy officers with whom I spoke, there were no more than eleven Jews of high military rank and about four or five of high naval rank. Among the latter is Admiral Moroni, who received the highest decorations during the Libyan and World Wars and who at the time of his recall in September was on active service in the Balearic Islands.

Furthermore, Jews held but 15 percent of the seats on the Italian stock exchanges. Only in the insurance field, where Jews directed the powerful *Assicurazioni Generali* of Venice and Trieste and controlled a number of smaller companies, and in the

textile industry, was their influence of great importance. I found it impossible to secure accurate figures on the number of Jews who were professional men, such as doctors, lawyers and engineers. But since the majority of Italian Jews are in trade, their proportional representation in the professions cannot really have been called a serious problem, though it is estimated that some six hundred doctors and lawyers were among the Jewish refugees who had entered Italy from Germany and Austria since 1933.

The Jewish minority in Italy has over the course of time been remarkably static. The great majority of the 50,000 native-born Italian Jews trace their ancestry back over a thousand years — there have been Jews in Italy ever since 139 B.C. And they have been a loyal minority. Their officially-acknowledged services to the nation during the *Risorgimento* and the World War need not be dwelt upon here. I cannot, however, refrain from citing a particularly poignant example of their patriotism. When the Treaty of Rapallo was concluded between Italy and Yugoslavia on November 12, 1920, the Italians living in Dalmatia were given the option of retaining or dropping their Italian citizenship. Of those who remained Italian, the majority were Jewish. Later on, however, life in Yugoslavia became impossible for these Italians and they were forced to emigrate to Italy. The reward for those among them who were Jews has been, under the terms of the September 1 decree, the annulment of their Italian citizenship. It is more difficult to feel sorry for the Jewish Fascists who once denounced as "enemies of Fascism" all of their fellow Jews whom they suspected of Zionist leanings. In Turin a group of these Jewish super-Fascists even went so far as to establish a weekly paper devoted to the castigation of whatever Jews they regarded as not sufficiently loyal to the Fascist state.

Mussolini's contention, as set forth in his Trieste speech, is that his racial program is entirely original with him and not borrowed from Germany. The validity of this claim is a matter for debate in Italy as well as elsewhere. In one of his utterances condemning racial persecution the Pope implied that the Italian dictator was imitating Hitler. This naturally annoyed Il Duce, who has no desire to be pictured as trailing in the wake of his German colleague. He has, in fact, been quite definite on this point, for at Trieste he declared that "those who pretend that we have imitated — or worse, have obeyed suggestions — are indeed poor half-wits on whom we hardly know whether to bestow our con-



tempt or our pity." Some observers hold that he was converted to anti-Semitism in order to insure the solidity of the Rome-Berlin Axis. According to this theory Hitler promised to help Mussolini in Spain, if in return Italy would officially adopt an anti-Jewish policy. It is also said that the anti-Semitic campaign was undertaken in order to placate Hitler for Italy's alleged lukewarm support in the early stages of the Czechoslovak crisis. As announced by Mussolini himself, at Trieste, Italy's racial problem "is related to the conquest of the empire; for history teaches us that empires are conquered with arms but are held by prestige. And prestige demands a clear and severe consciousness of race which establishes not only differences but the sharpest superiorities." Unquestionably, the acquisition of Ethiopia and the decision to colonize it with Italians raised the race problem in an acute form. The Fascist Government is determined to keep the hundreds of thousands of white colonists which it hopes to settle in Ethiopia (and in Libya, too) from interbreeding with the natives. Stringent regulations have repeatedly been issued forbidding not only miscegenation but various sorts of social intercourse between whites and natives. To carry out this policy of white superiority the Italian people must be made race-conscious. Articles "in defense of the race" are being published in Italy by the dozen. On August 5 there appeared a new semi-monthly periodical *La Difesa della Razza*. The pages of this lavishly illustrated review are given over to pseudo-science, "interpreted" history, appeals to race prejudice and editorial admonitions against racial cross-breeding. In the anti-Semitic articles, which occupy at least half of each number, the Jews are portrayed as conspirators against the Fascist state (whether as Communists, Masons, international bankers or Zionists) and as moral and physical degenerates.

The Fascist Government is toying with the idea of opening Ethiopia to Jewish settlement, though such a proposal seems hardly consistent with its efforts to protect "Aryan" colonists from "racial defilement." For centuries a body of Jews, known as the Falasha, has dwelt in northwest Ethiopia and it is now proposed that Jews expelled from Italy be sent there. An American Pro-Falasha Committee has been formed to further this project. If Mussolini can send to Ethiopia the 20,000 Jews who must leave Italy by March 12, 1939, he will have accomplished the twofold object of getting rid of these "undesirables" and of providing a body of high-grade colonists for his new empire.

The charge that the Jews in Italy have been carrying on propaganda and engaging in conspiracies against the Government is merely the Italian variant of the universal anti-Semitic accusation that Jews are everywhere traitors to whatever state gives them its hospitality. A few of the liberals who left Italy early in the Fascist era to carry on anti-Fascist activities abroad were Jews, men such as Modigliani and Treves, Socialist leaders, and the Rosselli brothers, assassinated in France by Fascist-hired *Cagouards* last year. Since the beginning of the anti-Semitic campaign a number of Jews in Italy have been charged with sedition and conspiracy. The Fascist press has also discovered that the imposition of sanctions during the Ethiopian War was the work of "international Jewry." Italian Jews must pay for this "stab in the back." Mussolini ascribes his failure to obtain loans in France, England or the United States to the hostility of Jews there, and he is said to have vowed that the Italian Jews must pay for the trouble these have caused him.

Fascist opposition to Zionism stems in part from the fact that the latter is an "international" movement. That this opposition also pleases the Arabs is, in Fascist eyes, a fortunate coincidence. But this is not the principal cause for the onslaught on the Jews. The primary motives originated in the necessities of Italy's domestic, not her international situation. One of the characteristics of a Fascist dictatorship is that the dictator must periodically divert the attention of his people from his failure to improve their economic and social conditions. This he does by embarking on some spectacular enterprise. The attack upon the Jews comes under this head, for the internal situation in Italy clearly is going from bad to worse. Ethiopia, far from having proved a boon, is a permanent drain on Italy's financial vitality. The civil war in Spain, continuing far longer than the Fascists had anticipated, is a running sore on the country's economy, already weakened by the irrational effort to achieve national autarchy.

More important as a motive was the desire of the Fascist Government to deprive the Jews of their property and their jobs. I have already dwelt on the measures by which Jewish property is being taken over. But the ousting of Jews from their means of livelihood is no less significant. The Fascist hierarchs are faced with the urgent necessity of finding places for the younger generation of Fascists — places in the government services, in the professions and in business. In the early years after the March on

Rome, jobs for deserving Fascisti could be found by ousting incumbents appointed during the preceding liberal era or by fitting them into the expanding framework of the Fascist Party and its subsidiary organizations, civil and military. But by the early thirties there were very few non-Fascists who could be displaced; and as for the Party, it was already overloaded with officials and hangers-on of countless species. What then was to be done with the young Fascists, raised in the cult of violence and taught that to youth belonged the Revolution and the State it had created? The Ethiopian and Spanish Wars have served to give occupation to many of them. But this has not been enough, for they want soft, "respectable" jobs in Italy, not the hardships of pioneering in a refractory land or death as mercenaries. To the Fascist hierarchs who must take care of these young bloods the idea of dismissing the Jews from government service must have been very welcome. The "Aryan" competitors of Jewish tradesmen, doctors, lawyers, professors, civil servants and others, would be less than human were they not pleased to receive the increased income which the anti-Semitic campaign will bring them.

But, clearing out the Jews will make room for only a part of the young men whose idleness is a danger to the régime. The rest must be taken care of otherwise, and this is being done by the enforced displacement of women by men. In a decree published along with the anti-Jewish edicts, the number of posts which women may henceforth occupy in the public services or in the offices of private concerns was limited to ten percent of the total. No limitation was imposed on the number who do the disagreeable work in factory or in field. Only those holding less toilsome posts must make way for the new generation of Fascist youth.

Probably no single one of the motives I have just enumerated would in itself have sufficed to launch anti-Semitism as an official policy in Italy. It was the conjunction of several or all of them that determined Mussolini, ever the arch-opportunist, to seize the occasion while it offered. That the Rome-Berlin axis might be strengthened and the Arabs pleased were for him happy by-products. But at bottom, anti-Semitism, like so many other of the strange phenomena of Fascism, represents just another stop-gap to hide the internal contradictions of the Fascist State. In any event, the anti-Semitic campaign can be counted on to occupy public attention for only a few months. In the near future Mussolini will have to invent some new diversion.