

Expelled From the Garden

The World War II tragedy of Italy's Jews, as preserved in the collected fiction of Giorgio Bassani.

By FERNANDA EBERSTADT

ALMOST 50 YEARS before the Italian filmmaker Luca Guadagnino brought André Aciman's haunting novel "Call Me by Your Name" to the screen, Vittorio de Sica made a movie that set my generation of young American Europhiles dreaming.

"The Garden of the Finzi Continis," in which golden youths played out their sexual yearnings and ambivalences on the grounds of a palace in Ferrara owned by a glamorous Jewish family, was based on an eponymous novel by Giorgio Bassani (1916-2000). As in Aciman's novel, Bassani's narrator looked back two decades to his youth. But the year on which "The Garden of the Finzi Continis" focuses — the year, in fact, that darkens most of Bassani's work — is 1938, when Mussolini's racial laws barred Jews from all areas of civic life.

THE NOVEL OF FERRARA

By Giorgio Bassani

Translated by Jamie McKendrick

744 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. \$39.95.

By 1943, the Finzi Contini family — impish blond Micòl, as well as her parents and grandmother — would be deported to Germany, along with almost the entirety of Ferrara's remaining Jewish community. This was also the year that Bassani, himself a Ferrarese Jew, left his native city after several months' imprisonment for anti-Fascist activities.

Bassani went on to have a distinguished literary career in postwar Rome. As an editor, he deserves eternal praise for championing both the young Pier Paolo Pasolini (with whom he collaborated on a few film projects) and Giuseppe di Lampedusa, whose "The Leopard" had been rejected by other Italian publishers as too old-fashioned, too upper-crust. Yet almost all of Bassani's own fiction centers on Ferrara, the faded, mist-bound Po Valley city he fled at the age of 27.

"The Novel of Ferrara," translated by the British poet Jamie McKendrick, is a curious kind of reconstruction. Although its two volumes of short stories and four novellas were originally published separately, Bassani revised these disparate works over the years, retrofitting them into one "novel," with a presiding narrator whom he identifies in a concluding essay as himself. This work, whose final version was published in Italy in 1980, is now appearing in English for the first time.

Ferrara is indeed the novel's unifying matrix. Throughout its 700-odd pages, we crisscross the city's grand thoroughfares, its former ghetto and city walls, its cafes, brothels, schools and cinema. We learn the cultural significance of attending the Ger-

man synagogue ("so severe and contrasting in its almost Lutheran gathering of prosperous, burgherly Homburg hats") versus the Italian synagogue ("more working-class and theatrical, almost Catholic") or of vacationing at the bourgeois seaside resort of Riccione versus the more plebeian Gatteo.

This homey particularity of place — combined with the first-person plural Bassani employs to relay accepted opinion in "our city" — might almost give his novel the faintly ironic small-town self-absorption of a "Winesburg, Ohio." But Bassani, in his mild, diffident fashion, is a moralist, and to be a Jew living through World War II in a town where everyone knows everyone else's business only means that one's sense of betrayal is the more intimate.

In "A Memorial Tablet in Via Mazzini," Geo Josz, the sole survivor of Ferrara's Jewish roundup, unexpectedly returns from Buchenwald. But his fellow citizens (who have seized his family's properties) soon turn upon this Ancient Mariner, who haunts the Caffè della Borsa, importuning the customers with tales of the way each member of his family was exterminated.

"How forced and exaggerated, in short, how false, these stories of Geo's were. And then what a bore!" say townspeople, eager to begin the promised "new era" — an era, Bassani seems to suggest, that can only be constructed by opportunists with good reason to bury the past.

Giorgio Bassani belongs to that extraordinary flowering of Italian Jewish writers, from Natalia Ginzburg to Primo Levi, who came of age under Fascism and thus grew up skeptical, allergic both to absolutism and pious rhetoric. Theirs was a strange twilight generation. Their parents, it might be said, were still riding what Bassani calls "the euphoria of civic equality" following the Unification of Italy, when Jews, recently liberated from the ghettos, threw themselves into public life as statesmen, scientists, scholars, entrepreneurs and, with their country's entry into World War I, as soldiers. These were "modern" Jews, like the father of Bassani's narrator, who belongs to a synagogue much as he belongs to the Merchants' Club and who, "romantic, patriotic, politically naïve," joined the Fascist Party on returning from the front in 1919.

But Bassani's narrator has grown up in darker days. Still hard-wired with bourgeois codes of academic and professional achievement, he nonetheless feels himself "nailed by birth to a destiny of exclusion and resentment," paralyzed by a bitter sense of futility and inertia. While his father, listing the "patriotic merits" of Italian Jewry, assures his family that the pro-



A street scene in Ferrara, Italy, around 1937.

In a small community, one's sense of betrayal is all the more intimate.



Romolo Valli and Dominique Sanda in "The Garden of the Finzi-Continis."

posed racial laws will never pass, the son foresees a "future of persecutions and massacres" for Ferrara's Jews, herded "like so many frightened beasts" back into the ghetto, "from which, when all was reckoned up, we had emerged only some 70 or 80 years ago." It's symptomatic of Bassani's historical pessimism that his two finest

novellas end with their respective protagonists' suicide.

In "The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles," we follow the fortunes of Athos Fadigati, a gentle, kindly doctor whose homosexuality is tolerated until he embarks on a masochistic and highly public love affair with a vicious local youth. As Proust did, Bassani likens homosexuality to Jewishness, and Fadigati's tragic ostracization is played out in parallel with the growing isolation of the narrator's own family, of their expulsion from all the activities and institutions that had formed their daily life.

"The Heron," Bassani's masterpiece, takes place on a single Sunday in the late 1940s, when Edgardo Limentani, a Jewish landowner who spent the war in Switzerland, goes shooting for birds in the Po delta. Over the course of the day, Limentani finds himself increasingly alienated from the new Italy he encounters. He is equally repelled by the Communist-inspired sharecroppers on his farm, who are demanding a fairer deal, by the former Blackshirt who owns the flourishing hotel-restaurant where he stops for lunch and by the restaurant's new clientele, Milanese industrialists out for a

day's sport, who seem "a different race, stronger, more full of life, more attractive, more likable!" In a kind of anti-epiphany, Limentani realizes that it's money that confers their superhuman air of well-being. Compared with this new god of money, all the old allegiances — religion, family, land, Fascism, Communism — are of little importance. It's a new world in which he can find no refuge.

Concentration camp inmates recounted their nightmares of returning home and finding the door locked to them or of discovering that their family members, like Geo Josz's fellow townsmen, were indifferent to their tales. Bassani, in these cultivated worldly-wise stories, so steeped in tenderness, rage and loss, is like someone returned from the underworld to bear witness.

His "Novel of Ferrara" is an uneven enterprise. The two collections of short stories ("Within the Walls" and "The Smell of Hay") aren't the equal of the four sublime novellas, and McKendrick's translation is a little less felicitous, say, than William Weaver's earlier renditions of "The Heron" and "Behind the Door."

Nonetheless, Bassani's history of the "little segregated universe" from which he was expelled is essential reading for anyone thirsting for an understanding of the complex density of Europe's multicultural inheritance, or wondering whether the world we know might once again be falling for the temptations of fascism. □

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