

Recorder's Report for Dr. Margaret Brose's first lecture (devoted to *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini* by Giorgio Bassani)

Dr. Brose began her discussion by providing a brief chronology of the Fascist Era in Italy, "Il ventennio nero (The black twenty years). The era is marked at the beginning by the March on Rome in 1922 and at the end by the liberation of Italy from Nazi German occupation during 1944. It would be inaccurate to mark its end with the overthrow of the Mussolini regime a year prior because in German occupied areas (including Rome, Ferrara, and Venice) the plight of Jews worsened after Mussolini's ouster as a result of Nazi authorities actually taking charge and beginning the deportation of Jews to the death camps in Germany and Poland (as alluded to in the Epilogue of *The Garden of The Finzi-Contini*). Racial laws were first imposed in Italy in 1938, which corresponds with the temporal setting of the novel, *The Garden of The Finzi Continis*.

Attention then turned to the history of Ferrara (the setting of the novel). Ferrara had served as a haven for a proportionally large Jewish population during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and its history, which combines elements of acceptance and rejection, renders it a paradigmatic city reflecting the dualities of the Jewish experience in Italy as a whole. The first recorded Jewish habitation in Ferrara was in 1227, but Jewish life there achieved a 'Golden Age' during the reign of the Este dukes who were comparatively generous to Ferrara's Jewish residents. The Este dukes imposed very few restrictions on where Jews could live and, almost uniquely, on what occupations Jews could pursue, including many trades and manufacturing jobs. Ferrara received a huge infusion of Sephardic Jews and subsequently Jews from all over Europe after the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. Toleration and general inclusion came to an end with failure of the legitimate hereditary line of Este dukes and subsequent displacement of the Este dynasty to Modena in 1597 at which point the city came under direct authority of the Papacy as part of the Papal States. A ghetto was then imposed, lasting until its abolishment in 1859 when Jews received full citizenship in what would soon become a united Italy. By the early Twentieth Century, most Ferrara Jews had once again become highly assimilated. Their connection to the Risorgimento had led to a strong sense of Italian nationalism amongst most of the population, and many local Jews even belonged to the Fascist party, including one who served as Ferrara's mayor for a decade in the late 1920's, early 1930's. The novel reflects these conditions. Thus, the imposition of racial laws in 1938 which would culminate in the arrest and ultimate deportation of 96 Ferrara Jews to the death camps came as an especial shock to most of Ferrara's Jewish residents.

*The Garden of the Finzi-Contini* is the first Italian novel that specifically describes being Jewish in Italy, and in it, Giorgio Bassani uses Ferrara as a microcosm for the Jewish experience in Europe. Though an immediate success, the novel drew fire from Marxist and Neo-Realist critics for its lyricism and its frequent allusions to a wide variety of European and American literary sources. The novel may be viewed as a 'Bildungsroman', the story of the formation of moral, psychological and intellectual development of its main character. When asked about the obliqueness of the novel's reference to the Shoah, Bassani apparently stated that his object was not to record the crime but to focus on the human loss. The epigraph from *I Promessi Sposi* which begins

the novel can be seen as a crib on Bassani's aesthetic that the novel should record "only a little of what has already happened." Bassani deliberately avoids the 'big picture' focusing instead in great detail on "the little bit that the heart knows." As to external events, the author remarked that one word, "Buchenwald," would suffice to conjure them. The novel explores the tensions produced by contradictory impulses of inclusion/exclusion – the exclusions sometimes externally mandated but often internally imposed and the inclusions often, paradoxically, exposing "the isolation of assimilation." The big house and surrounding wall of the Finzi-Contini family can be seen as a reducing series of self-imposed exclusions and exiles, where each site balances on a systematic exclusion, be it the hut, the grotesque monument to the dead elder brother, the carriage house, the tennis court, the Spanish-rite Synagogue reserved exclusively for the Finzi-Contini family, or the Magna Domus. Dr. Brose characterized the big house as "a house of the living dead where everyone is stalled in the past." Within the house, further zones of exclusion occur: the library, Micol's bedroom, the dining room etc. Micol has surrounded herself with delicate glass lattimi which symbolize the Finzi-Contini obsession with the past (parallel to the holy relic status awarded to her grandmother's letters with the poet Carducci) but the lattimi may also represent the fragility of their social status. Micol's ironic nickname for the narrator is Celestino, recalling the name of the Hermit Pope who made The Great Refusal, and thus implying further self-imposed exclusion. Throughout the novel, Venice is portrayed as an exotic sometimes incomprehensible place (as embodied in the hard-to-follow dialects of Micol's bachelor uncles). The occasional use of Ferrarese Jewish dialect by numerous characters and the private language that Micol and Alberto have invented exclusively to speak to each other serve as verbal representations of the exclusion/isolation rampant within the Finzi-Contini household. This serves to reinforce the insular status of the house in its garden, cut off, apparently, from the rest of Italy, the rest of the world, but not in actuality as events would prove all too certainly. Micol has been characterized as an unattainable Beatrice type, even as an 'ice queen.' However, she like all the other Jewish characters, can be more accurately described as suffering from a 'temporal illness' which allows no future. Various unfulfilled romantic triangles emerge over the course of the novel, some with heterosexual implications, some with homosexual implications, and several with actual or symbolic incestuous implications (e.g., the attachment between Micol and Alberto or Micol's ultimate characterization of the narrator as a potential brother rather than a potential lover). The frame of the novel, starting with the Etruscan tombs episode and ending with the reported deportations evokes the necessity of memory and the human impulse to give burial to the unburied dead. The lack of romantic resolution within the novel becomes emblematic of the unfulfilled lives blocked from fulfillment by various social and personal obstacles and cut short by atrocity. Bassani does not extend the arc of events to depict the atrocity, simply enumerating what followed in a brief Epilogue.

Later in the evening after the unsuccessful attempt to show the film, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* by Vittorio DeSica, the group reconvened to discuss the differences between the novel and its cinematic representation. Dr. Brose indicated that DeSica has asserted that he made this film to satisfy himself. It does not conform to the Neo-Realist aesthetic of his earlier films, for example, *The Bicycle Thief*. Apparently after a string of unsuccessful films, DeSica sought a vehicle to create his cinematic legacy and acquired

the rights to make the film, employing Giorgio Bassani as one of the scriptwriters. Upon its release, the film achieved international critical and box office success, and earned DeSica a string of awards, including the Academy Award for best Foreign Film. DeSica's choice to have Micol portrayed by a French actress and to have Alberto portrayed by a German actor drew fire at the time, though the very foreignness of these actors may actually suggest the 'otherness' of Jews in Italy. By abandoning the Etruscan episode and carrying the events forward to include scenes of the deportation of the Finzi-Contini family and the narrator's father, DeSica creates a different frame for the novel, beginning with flashbacks to shy looks exchanged between Micol and the narrator during childhood synagogue services, each shielded under a father's taled, and ending with the symbolic adoption of Micol by the narrator's father after she has been separated from her own family during the deportation round-up. When the narrator's father puts his arm around Micol, it is as if a barren marriage has been achieved and she once again is given shelter under a symbolic taled, though one that the audience realizes will fail to protect her. Many in the room were bothered by the director's choice to show an actual clandestine romance between Malnate and Micol when the novel makes it clear that this 'romance' is almost certainly a delusional product of the narrator's frustration and confusion of feelings. This can be seen as a reductive literality.

While a case can be made for the artistic superiority of either the film or the novel, and while both contain genuine artistic flaws, it is apparent these competing versions of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* represent significantly different tellings of the story.