

**Report by Robin Russin, Professor of Theater, UC Riverside on guest speakers Marco Salvatore, who had been a partisan during the war, and Napoleone “Leo” Jesurun and Olga Nerman, two other Jews who were profiled in the film we watched:**

THE STUDENT DOCUMENTARY “RIZZO É PATATE” (“RICE AND POTATOES”):

By Italo Todde. The film describes how as kids Jews and Catholics played together, a kind of bocce, soccer with an improvised ball, in the campo of the ghetto, until the police would chase them away.

Marco was born on the top floor of one of the ghetto apartment houses; but when the racial laws were passed a local woman he describes as a “witch” wanted their apartment, and told them “You’re all going to die.” Jewish kids did not attend the local school after 1938; he didn’t think much of it, as his parents never explained the racial laws to him.

Marco’s father was a Fascist, who joined the party when he was twenty-two. Many Jews went to San Marco, wearing their fascist uniforms, until 1938-9. At first, the Italian regime was kindly disposed toward the Jews, even the German refugees.

The film then goes to the students play-acting “Fagioli” (“Beans” or “Consent”), about an attack on a dissenter who doesn’t want to eat beans.

Another man (Leo, I think) in the documentary recalls being proud of being a Fascist, and devastated when a medal of honor he’d been given was taken away. His parents didn’t care one way or the other. A Christian woman being interviewed recalls seeing Mussolini, a big, bear-chested man, working the harvest with the regular folks. He was popular; but a hidden fear existed. By 1937-8, German Jews arriving from the north warned the Italian Jews, who began to be taken to the S. Dona camp. The woman says that they were young, no one thought about it. Life went on. In peacetime, Mussolini seemed levelheaded, but in wartime, with Jews being accused as spies for Russia, he lost perspective.

Some Italians were heroes who hid and protected Jews. Olga remembers after Sept. 8, 1943, a man warning them to run for their lives. Leo remembers playing ping-pong as a boy with Nazis who didn’t know he was Jewish. It wasn’t a matter of victimization so much as about those non-Jews who tolerated what was happening.

THE PANEL:

Olga claimed not to be a historian; she was from a family of non-practicing Jews, atheists, really. Her father described himself as an “ebreo ateo” – a Jewish atheist. Her father was Belgian, who moved on a temporary visa to Venice, where Olga was born. But she was always considered a “foreigner.” She was of Belgian nationality. Until 1938 there hadn’t been a lot of problems with fascism – lots of kids in school were fascists, and wore the uniform “inconsciamente,” without understanding. So the Racial Laws came as

a thunderbolt, everyone was surprised. They knew about 1933 in Germany, about Kristallnacht, but couldn't believe it could happen in Italy, where they were completely integrated. Jews had always been here; she felt anti-Semitism had a religious, not a racial form here.

Marco is now a gondolier and a regatta sportsman. He's always had a boat, a "vaporino" for fresh air. Jesua is his real first name, but everyone calls him Marco. He was born in the ghetto, 70 years ago, and studied Hebrew in the kindergarten. But this ended with the Racial Laws. His last name is Greek; the family came in the 1500's to Giudecca. He is proud to be Venetian. In 1940, when the war went against the Greeks, his family was sent away to a little town about 60 km away, San Dona di Piave, and they stayed there until 1943, living reasonably well. They couldn't have a radio or a maid, but he recalls his father sent him to learn the accordion. When fascism hit full force, even his father knew they were in for hard times. In 1943, he also started to ride a bicycle, which was a good way to make friends and learn places of refuge within the Veneto. His father became friends with a Gustavo Badini, a count, who won a silver medal in the Resistance. Gustavo told them they could find refuge in the town of Zenzo (sp?), so while from 1943-4 they were trying to find places to hide, they ended up in 1944 in Zenzo.

When Marco was 14 or 15, he was afraid of the Nazis, and his family got false documents under the name of "Salvatore" – he then entered the Resistance. He was always afraid of being captured and tortured; he would have been in trouble as a partisan and as a Jew. When in April, on a rainy night, he was on watch, he was thrilled to see the New Zealanders arrive. He saw a "fist" sign on the tank, which let him know what it was. The tank commander embraced him, and at last he knew he was free to go back to Venice. He also became a communist, and still is one; one day when he was playing soccer, a partisan asked if he was Jewish, and he said yes, and the man invited him to join the communist party.

Napoleone (Leo) had three main thoughts. First, the impossibility of translating the experience of what he lived through to us, today. Too many obstacles. Italy is too different now. Second, it's not really that the Jews didn't know what was happening, but that they didn't want to know, or to believe what they were hearing. They were scared of understanding the things they heard about the war. It is not the case that Catholics knew about the war and the Jews did not. Third, he wanted to share an explanation he used when talking in the schools: three essential facts in his "text:" the moment of the war, his return, and his need to speak about it.

Amy Kaminsky wanted to hear more from Olga, who talked about the news coming to them about the Racial Laws, and showed us a copy of the "Corriere della Serra" from 1938. She remembered how one after another these racial laws appeared, from 1938 -43, one after another each civil right was removed. "We got along," it was not living, it was vivacchiare. Olga could not study in a public school, so she had gone to a private, non-legal school; there was no legal status to education. She was allowed then to go to Jesuit schools as long as she could provide a (false) certificate of baptism. We experienced what all Italians experienced when the war broke, at first it seemed good that Italy and

Germany were winning, from a nationalist point of view. It all seemed “bello,” but in an ugly sense for us. But with the signing of the Armistice in 1943, it was a tragedy for my family, for all families. She credits her survival to people who used their heads, not being indoctrinated by totalitarianism.

Robin said that Italians seemed different to him, that good Catholics had risked their lives to protect the Jews. But in our studies we learnt that there were Italians who burnt synagogues. Robin asked the panel what they saw, and why some Italians went to the German side.

Napoleone offered a few lines from Primo Levi: Behind every saved Jewish Italian there's the hand of a good citizen; behind everyone deported, there's the spy, and the acquiescence of another citizen.

Marina Karem asked about their post war experience. How did life pick up after the war? In 1959 the Museo Correr had an exhibit of war memorabilia – Marina said that she didn't know anything about the Jewish experience before that exhibit, which made her feel sick. [I believe this was Marina's comment?: Leo spoke of feeling ill after seeing a concentration camp exhibit in 1959 at the Museo Correr]. Olga said, “We came to know what happened after the war. While we were hidden, we thought of it as forced labor, or punishment, but not as extermination.” Much was silenced, and Olga asked for Marco's forgiveness, because she said that the communists had their own reasons to make people believe they had been liberated by the communists. They'd heard they'd been saved by the communists, who had participated in the victory as “winners” (this was a subtle dig at Marco and his pride in the partisans). Italy could not show that it was a losing nation, it had to say that it was part of the victory of the Allies. Over the years after the war, the truth came out little by little. Many could have escaped but “chose” not to, since they couldn't believe what was happening. Olga spoke of having a sense of shame at having survived through sheer luck, not through any personal merit, while others, better people, had died. When the Fascists came looking for them at home in Venice, someone warned them to escape. She spoke of going through Firenze, to Rome, and hiding during the Allied bombing. When they were asked for documents they didn't know what to do or where to go. They didn't have much money, because contrary to popular belief, Olga noted, not all Jews are rich. Marco, responding to Olga's dig, said that it was a matter of survival for Jews to join the communists. “You have to imagine being Jewish, afraid to move a finger. You need to remember the communists who were massacred fighting the Nazis – but who would fight on by any means.” Marco's father in 1935 had joined the fascist party, and Mussolini had embraced little Marco – and at the time, he'd been very proud of this. He mentioned that 250 Venetian Jews had not returned after the war.

Leo then spoke of the “weight of memory;” he'd never been political, but is a socialist, or a communist, whatever. They were his friends. But with the Armistice (between Hitler and Stalin, there was a new pact for the Italians, and no one had the courage or the desire to speak; everyone was stunned and ashamed. Catholics had a tough time too. As the years passed, the problem of this history became easier to talk about. There was a “Day of Memory,” not just about what the Jews suffered, but what Italians had participated in.

Ignorance and indifference might be comprehensible but they are reproachable. That's when Leo started to speak in the schools. Two new articles of law were introduced on 20 July 2000: to remember the persecution, and those who risked their lives to save people, and an order that moments of learning and reflection be instituted in schools and elsewhere.

Luigi (Luis) Shein said he was born in Mexico during the war, so his knowledge is only of relatives who were murdered. He asked, what have we learned from all this? Will past fears return to haunt the future? Marco said the answer is to take part in the life of the nation. To live a political life. Jews need not abandon their identity, but should enter the public discourse, whatever their background. Olga agrees. She said that it is hard to explain what you would do because you have to find yourself in a situation in order to say: "I would act like this." In the war, she found herself forced to do things she'd never have dreamed of doing, acting as the moment required. She did not feel anything in terms of nationality. She did not feel Italian, she had a Belgian passport. She was a non-practicing Jew, but still a Jew. Fear for her came later, when she had to ask herself who she was. She had to put together a family, think of the future. She's not a pessimist, but she doesn't see a rosy future, there are many things that worry her, but if evil was defeated before, it can be again. For children today there is the insecurity of the future, and Olga had no answer for that. Leo added, one thing we can do is to keep telling the story to the younger generations, to bring them the story of human folly and tragedy that repeats itself century after century, it must be given back to the world because the whole world is responsible for the tragedy. There is a collective responsibility – Germany was just the focus of the problem at one particular time, but it wasn't the end of it. He lost many things during that period: the fascist medal of honor, of which he'd been so proud; citizenship; part of his identity; but he'd also gained and learned many good things. Now, he feels as if he's looking through a window at his life with some serenity, a sense of having overcome good and bad. This is the patrimony that he feels this generation gave him.

Mike Thaler noted that they'd emphasized their sense of integration into Italy before the Racial Laws. What if the bad guys had burned Catholic churches and desecrated holy relics? What would've happened then? It would never have been tolerated. And why, after Mussolini fell and the Armistice was signed with the Allies, were the Racial Laws never formally rescinded after Pietro Badoglio took over?

Leo answered that it's complicated; the world keeps changing. Now the socialists are anti-Israel, while the extreme right wing is pro-Israel. Olga said, you have to be Italian to understand. There were anti-fascists, but there were also many good fascists, fascists of all stripes. Besides, under Mussolini you had to become fascist. There were good fascists against the Racial Laws. There were also many indifferent people, there was much nonchalance because there was no choice in the matter. Olga said that one must take a position against things, and not only in one's mind, also through actions. Many Italians didn't do this. The church condemned them, but indecisively. It came down to personal actions. Marco lamented that fascism still survives. Regarding General Badoglio, it wasn't a priority. Italy had been under Fascism for twenty years; people were used to

feeling like puppets. There was also an air of unreality about it all, about the world they were caught in, until the Allies finally ended it. But they were good people: when they captured Nazis, they didn't massacre them. They didn't have a vendetta. Marco added that he was only in school until he was about 12 years old. For him the greatest tragedy, as a child, was losing his cross of merit.

Ronnie Scharfman asked about the film: how were the three of them approached by the filmmakers? Was it scripted? What do they think of the film? Marco said they were asked, and glad to do it. It was a simple thing to do, just tell the truth about what happened, even if he was ashamed of part of it (as with his dad's fascism).

Paul Skenazy asked if they knew about other groups that were targeted by the Fascists – homosexuals, gypsies, romanos, the physically and mentally handicapped during the war. Olga said she didn't know of any at the time, only later. She added a final thought, that from our questions she could tell none of us had been through a dictatorship, that dictatorship takes away your ability to think. It brainwashes you so that you cannot think as we do now. Her father had always been antifascist, he had always had his own ideas. She said that there had been an abyss between herself and him, because as a child you absorb a lot, and she could not understand her father's antifascism. The Duce had done a lot of good things – but Olga added that she did not think this because she thought this, but because it had been put in her head. If as a child you are told you are a dirty Jew, you will begin to think there is some truth to it.