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La colpa di essere nati: Exile Through the Eyes of Italian Jews

Song of Exile

Exile is the emptiness—for however much you brought
with you, there's far more you've left behind.

Exile is the ego that shrinks, for how can you prove
what you were and what you did?

Exile is the erasure of pride.

Exile is the escape that is often worse than the prison.

Exile is the xenophobe—for every single one who likes you,
you'll find ten in whom there is nothing but hate. . . .

Exile is the loneliness in the middle of a crowd—

Exile is longing never to be fulfilled,
it is love unrequited, the loss never replaced—
the listless, loveless, long wait for the train
that never arrives, the plane that never gets off the ground.

Exile is the end and never the beginning—

Exile is the eruption whose lava stream carries you away—
it is the eternity measured in minutes, the eyes
that never enjoy the familiar sight,
the ears that listen to alien music.

Exile is a song that only the singer can hear.

Exile is an illness that not even death can cure—for how
can you rest in soil that did not nourish you?

Exile is the warning example to those who still
have their homes, who belong.

But will you take heed of the warning? (Cited by Tabori 14)

The Italian writer Primo Levi urges us to answer that question. The danger in viewing another as an Other, of believing that “ogni straniero è nemico” lies

in its overwhelming destructive power, for when this “dogma inespesso diventa premessa maggiore di un sillogismo,” Levi warns us, “allora, al termine della catena, sta il Lager” (*Se questo è un uomo* 9).

On the tenth of January, 1946, almost a year after Primo Levi’s release from Auschwitz, he wrote a poem entitled “Shemà.” His poem, addressed to those who “still have their homes, who belong” juxtaposes their image of comfort to the image of a prisoner, “reduced to bestial condition, only questionably a human being” (Harrowitz 32). His words ask us to consider whether a man is still a man, and a woman still a woman when subjected to the utmost atrocities. For at Auschwitz, as Elie Wiesel wrote, “not only man died, but also the idea of man” (in *Literary Exile* 705):

Voi che vivete sicuri
Nelle vostre tiepide case,
Voi che trovate tornando a sera
Il cibo caldo e visi amici:

Considerate se questo è un uomo,
Che lavora nel fango
Che non conosce pace
Che lotta per mezzo pane
Che muore per un sì o per un no.
Considerate se questa è una donna,
Senza capelli e senza nome
Senza più forza di ricordare
Vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo
Come una rana d’inverno. (Levi, “Shemà,” *Ad ora incerta*)¹

While the first part of the poem confronts the reader with a question, the second part of the poem commands him to never forget it:

Meditate che questo è stato:
Vi comando queste parole.
Scolpitele nel vostro cuore
Stando in casa andando per via,
Coricandovi alzandovi:
Ripetetele ai vostri figli.
O vi si sfaccia la casa,
La malattia vi impedisca,
I vostri nati torcano il viso da voi.

Levi’s words are a paraphrase of the *Shemà*,² the most basic and essential prayer in Judaism. Recited daily, it is a call to monotheism, a command to love

the Lord, to teach and forever remember His word:

Hear O Israel: The Lord Our God, The Lord is One. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words which I command thee this day shall be in thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and thou shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house,

and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. (*Deuteronomy* 6)

Levi's command, however, is of a much darker call—it is the command required after the events of the Holocaust. And it is the curse upon those who forget, for their very forgetfulness lies in the perpetuation of such inhumanity. "Forgetfulness lies at the root of exile, just as remembrance lies at the root of deliverance," Elie Wiesel cautions us (Wiesel and de Saint-Cheron 96). It is for this reason that Holocaust survivors such as Primo Levi and Wiesel have striven to retell their stories, to resume the survivor's sacred responsibility of bearing witness to the horrible truth. Levi sees it as "un dovere" yet also as "un rischio: il rischio di apparire anacronistici, di non essere ascoltati" ("I sommersi e i salvati," *Opere* 819). For though there comes a healing in sharing, there lies the pain of recalling that which cannot be understood by those who have not experienced it. "È un godimento intenso, fisico, inesprimibile, essere nella mia casa, fra persone amiche, e avere tante cose da raccontare," Levi recalls in *Se questo è un uomo*, "ma non posso non accorgermi che i miei ascoltatori non mi seguono . . . essi sono del tutto indifferenti: parlano confusamente d'altro fra di loro, come se io non ci fossi" (53). As another Holocaust survivor observed, the *univers concentrationnaire* is "a universe apart, totally cut off, the weird kingdom of an unlikely fatality" (Radcliff-Umstead 61). Exile proves inescapable, for even upon one's return, it haunts the individual.

Exile, with its accompanying physical, psychological and religious anguish, has been an intrinsic part of Jewish thought and history since the destruction of the First Temple. The image of the Wandering Jew forever in exile, without a homeland, is merely a mirror of an historical reality.³ This exile has not only entailed physical and material displacement. For a people whose identity, at least initially, depended on their faith, an exile from Israel was devastating since their religion was intrinsically tied to the land. As expressed in the prayer, "The Anguish of Zion:"

The headstone [Jerusalem] has been turned into ruins, into a plowing ground, and the inheritors of the Heritage [Torah] have become an object of scorn among the nations. My heart aches within me, pained and anguished, for we

are left as without a father and have become as orphans. [Israel,] tender and delicate, who was surrounded by a hedge of roses, is now in distress [and] is handed over into the hand of her adversaries. [Jerusalem] the faithful city has become as a window, and the children [of Israel of whom it is said,] "Who can count them?" have been sold without money.

(Cited in *From Exile to Redemption* 3)⁴

This spiritual anguish was felt intensely by a population who, strong in religious faith, suffered a feeling of being disconnected from the Divine. As the Jewish people resettled in other lands, a new attachment to the adopted homeland often challenged the spiritual connection previously felt for the holy land, Israel. With loyalties torn, a return to the spiritual homeland was not always easy. As the Jewish Italian poet Angiolo Orvieto expressed in his poem "Il vento di Sion:"

The beckoning mirage of Zion
is small comfort to a Florentine Jew
even if I too dream happily of palm trees
and of Temple's columns arisen again
Too much lively Latin wind
has stirred my Eastern blood
lulled by age old indolence
Palm trees, yes, but the cypresses of Florence?
The Temple, yes, but what of this cathedral
with its marble flowering in the sky?
I am not like him, the one who calls for me
like a human bell, for I would not be able
to turn my back on my Tuscan people
even though at times they cry "Down with the Jews"

Here are my roots, too painful
to sever . . . and then, for what dream?
The Messiah will come, but perhaps not quite yet
Leave me be with this air, these bronzes
and Verrochio's marbles, the smiling images of Ghirland
with the octaves of my beloved Poliziano! (Cited in *Garden and Ghettos* 153)

This poem, written in 1928, was witness to another crisis occurring within the Jewish community. With the progressive emancipation of Jews throughout Europe during the nineteenth century, the Jewish community faced a period of change and instability. Assimilation, accompanied by frequent conversions to Christianity, weakened Jewish identity and faith. The rise of positivism in science and philosophy further undermined traditional religious beliefs. Inevitably, Jewish communities became "less clearly defined and there ensued

a collective crisis of assimilation and identity" (Moloney 56). Ironically, marginalization from society had helped to maintain Jewish values and identity.

Assimilation within society and loss of religious faith did not, however, free the Jews of their cultural heritage. At the turn of the century Italian Jews, no longer confined to the walls of the ghetto, still felt the burden of their Jewishness. Italo Svevo, seemingly oblivious to his cultural and religious heritage, suffered the "small discomfitures of being a Jew without any of the consolations of Judaism" (Moloney 57). In 1880, he was refused employment because of his "Israelite" heritage. The writer's use of numerous pseudonyms attests to a desire to conceal his origins; origins which he solemnly acknowledges as being difficult for his two Jewish literary friends, Umberto Saba and Giacomo Debenedetti. Contemplating an essay on Kafka, he commented: "Yes, he was a Jew. Certainly, the Jew's position is not a comfortable one" (Gatt-Rutter 57).

Svevo recognized a dilemma which forever confronts the Jew: the weight of carrying a heritage which, even if not embraced, carries a responsibility, an awareness, a certain sensitivity. Natalia Ginzberg addresses this in her autobiographical work *Vita immaginaria*:

Io sono ebrea. Tutto quello che riguarda gli ebrei, mi sembra sempre che mi coinvolga direttamente. Sono ebrea solo per parte di padre, ma ho pensato sempre che la mia parte ebraica doveva essere in me più pesante e ingombrante dell'altra parte. (177-78)

Both Svevo and Ginzberg rarely, if ever, make mention of their Jewish identity. Yet, they do not seem to overlook its personal significance. No longer connected to their religion, their Jewishness still entails a sense of exile, of alienation. Its focus, however, has shifted. While the religious Jew suffers a spiritual anguish in his exile from both God and Israel, the exile of the non-religious Jew carries a psychological dimension, an exile suffered from the sense of feeling Other. Though the focus of alienation has shifted, its sense is still there. Whether the Jew is religious or not, the feeling of exile exists; actively apparent during wartime and even during peace, a feeling that, as Elie Wiesel claims, is

... still present, but different. Exile in peacetime makes us feel uncomfortable. It's a kind of reminder: Watch out, you will not be here long; you come from somewhere else, and someday you will be going somewhere else. (92)

Elie Wiesel's words would have seemed irrelevant, however, to the Italian Jews at the turn of the century. By the mid nineteen-hundreds, most Italian Jews were middle class, well-educated, highly secularized citizens. Accepted in society, traces of anti-semitism were, by and large, uncommon. It is for this

reason that during the later years of Fascism, racial discrimination and persecution came as a shock to the Jewish community. Italian Jews generally viewed themselves as “Italians first, Jewish second” (Segre 18). Most young Jews were drawn to secular and humanistic ideologies rather than Jewish religious and cultural traditions. Primo Levi himself comments that his Jewishness, before the war, was simply “un puro fatto culturale” (*Autoritratto* 19). Ironically, Levi’s experiences during the Resistance and the Holocaust deepened his Jewish identity. Levi testifies to this himself, for in the midst of persecution he renews and recaptures a heritage, an identity that lay latent. Levi’s awareness of his heritage and pride in it grew in relation to the racial persecution and developed as a result of his survival in Auschwitz: “Sono diventato ebreo in Auschwitz. La coscienza di sentirmi diverso mi è stata imposta Facendomi sentire ebreo, [Auschwitz] mi ha sollecitato a recuperare, dopo, un patrimonio culturale che prima non possedevo” (“Cronologia” xliii). Through his encounters with the Eastern European Jews, he discovers a culture that is strange, because of its different language, yet also oddly familiar. During the recital of the Kaddish, the Prayer for the Dead, Levi listens to their words and experiences a sense of shared destiny—that “dolore antico del popolo che non ha terra, il dolore senza speranza dell’esodo ogni secolo rinnovato” (*Se questo* 13) which draws him closer to his Jewish identity. In the tragic making of history every prisoner’s story becomes the story of, as Levi writes, “una nuova Bibbia” (*Se questo* 59).

A recapturing of identity is, in the midst of exile, essential to the individual. For writers such as Levi and Bassani it is crucial to recover one’s identity and heritage. Even for a writer like Umberto Saba, who never claimed a connection to his Jewishness and was unwilling to “recognize a cultural distinction between what was Jewish and what was not” (Hughes 67) for, as he wrote in his preface to *Gli ebrei* “differences are more a matter of style than substance,” all being nothing more than “a splash of color” (Saba, *Stories* 11), a walk by the Jewish cemetery rekindles a memory of comfort. In his poem “Tre vie,” he recalls with affection his Jewish ancestry:

il vecchio cimitero
degli ebrei, così caro al mio pensiero,
se vi penso i miei vecchi, dopo tanto
penare e mercatare, là sepolti,
simili tutti d’animo e di volti. (Saba, *Per conoscere Saba* 201).

The cemetery serves as a place to remember one’s ancestry, to recapture one’s heritage, a link with the past which is as real as the present. In Bassani’s book *Gli occhiali d’oro*, the Jewish narrator also expresses this affinity with his cherished past. Here though, the cemetery is not simply a place of affection,

sympathy and compassion, but a place of redemption, where the narrator, by recapturing the value of his past, renews his sense of self. In the midst of lethal persecution, the narrator must struggle to redefine himself, for his identity is no longer inescapable from the image created by society. By finding a link to his own past and place in the community, he is able to overcome an overwhelming sense of desolation. In his moment of “silenzio ostinato” of desperation, of an “atroce senso di esclusione,” he recovers his past, becoming part of something which is greater than the destructive label placed on him by society. Overlooking the city and Jewish graveyard, the young man overcomes his identity crisis and sense of alienation:

Quand'ecco . . . mi sentii d'un tratto penetrare da una gran dolcezza, da una pace e da una gratitudine tenerissime. Il sole al tramonto, forando una scura coltre di nuvole bassa sull'orizzonte, illuminava vivamente ogni cosa Mi era bastato recuperare l'antico volto materno della mia città, riaverlo ancora una volta tutto per me, perché quell'atroce senso di esclusione che mi aveva tormentato nei giorni scorsi cadesse all'istante. (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 84)

In the midst of persecution, both Bassani and Levi recognize the healing power felt upon connecting to one's heritage and self. Both writers, however, recognize the difficulties faced by those who, having survived persecution, must return to society. For the absence of persecution does not guarantee an absence of pain. Primo Levi discovers that exclusion created by history haunts the individual even after the event. From the destruction suffered from an historical exile comes the anguish endured of an interior exile. Ridden with a sense of guilt, Primo Levi is tormented by the question of why he has survived and what right he has to the life he leads. He is a “guiltless victim” but as a survivor he carries a heavy weight. In the poem “Il superstite” Levi implores the ghostly companions who haunt him to leave:

Indietro, via di qui, gente sommersa,
Andate. Non ho soppianto nessuno,
Non ho usurpato il pane di nessuno,
Nessuno è morto in vece mia. Nessuno.
Ritornate alla vostra nebbia.
Non è mia colpa se vivo e respiro
E mangio e bevo e dormo e vesto panni.

On the threshold of returning home, Primo Levi faces the challenge of retelling his story and the double anguish that accompanies it: the fear of being silenced, misunderstood and the anguish of a forever haunting memory. The German's cruel words, that “if anyone did by chance survive and try to tell the

story, no one would believe it" (Feldman 147) haunt Levi, for tragically, they have proven true by the groups and individuals who have insisted that the Holocaust never took place. And his attempt to return to normalcy, to escape the memory of the concentration camp, proves impossible. In his poem "Alzarsi" Levi dreams "of going home, of eating, of telling our story," yet, as the poem reveals, even after reaching home he finds no peace. He writes:

Ora abbiamo ritrovato la casa,
 Il nostro ventre è sazio,
 Abbiamo finito di raccontare.
 È tempo. Presto udremo ancora
 Il comando straniero:
 «Wstawac.»

"Wstawac," the Polish word for "Wake up!", is the "condanna di ogni giorno" (*Se questo* 56) which announced the beginning of each excruciating day in the concentration camp. Even now this word tortures Levi's consciousness, rendering him forever victim to the past.

The struggle to return to normalcy and its inherent difficulties is expressed by Giorgio Bassani's fictional character, Geo Josz, in his short story "Una lapide in via Mazzini." In this story, as in others, Bassani represents existence as a "state of exile where individuals remain forever excluded from the life of others." Exile also transcends "geographical and political banishment as it comes to represent the psychological condition of being apart from others" (Radcliff-Umstead 37-38). Geo Josz, the only Holocaust survivor of his town, Ferrara, returns to discover that his name is inscribed on the plaque being put up on the synagogue in remembrance of the 183 Ferrarese Jews who were deported to Germany in the autumn of 1943. The town has chosen to include him with the "dead past," a past that the community would prefer to forget, acknowledging it by the simpler means of a plaque that may collect dust in time. "Egli era tornato quando più nessuno l'aspettava. Che cosa voleva, adesso?" (Bassani, "Una lapide" 100) the people of Ferrara ask. Exiled into death, he returns from it; yet, seen as a haunting remnant of the past, he suffers ultimate exclusion by the rejection of the community.

Upon his return to Ferrara, he is barely recognized. Starvation edema has transformed his body into a mass of fat, fat which the townspeople see as proof of the favorable conditions of the concentration camp—"L'edema da fame non esisteva, era una invenzione bella e buona" (Bassani, "Una lapide" 101). Even when the community does accept him, it is on their own very narrow, superficial terms. Apologies are given for not having recognized him immediately, for having tried to "respingerlo, di escluderlo" (Bassani, "Una lapide" 109) yet their

“inclusion” of him never addresses who he is as a person. Their insistence that they too have changed—“Ma vedi: anche noi siamo cambiati, il tempo è passato anche per noi . . .” (Bassani, “Una lapide” 109)—resounds as a hollow supplication to a man who has survived an indescribable horror. Their conviction that life must go on, that a bright future awaits all, sounds meaningless to Geo, for he cannot separate himself from his past experience.

Why is it that he must hold on to his memory, to a past that seemingly condemns him? The community asks:

Possibile che dopo essere sceso all'inferno, e per miracolo esserne risalito, in lui non ci fosse altro impulso che di rievocare immobilmente il passato, così come provava in qualche modo l'agghiacciante schiera di fotografie dei suoi morti? (Bassani, “Una lapide” 111)

Yet, how can we determine a past static when the past itself is in constant dialogue with the present? As Eugenio Montale conveys in his poem “Dora Markus,” one’s past, as opposed to facts on a blackboard, cannot be erased. Dora, herself Jewish and threatened by Nazi persecution, carries “una storia di errori / imperturbati e la incide / dove la spugna non giunge” (Montale 159). Dora, as Bassani’s protagonist Geo, is part of a past which concurrently defines the present. However victim to his past, he is also defined by it. If he were to sever himself from it, he would lose a part of his very self.

Geo is never successful in conveying the horrors of deportation because the community, in its belief that history will fade into oblivion, refuses to acknowledge a reality they themselves were guilty of creating or condoning. Geo’s only path for acceptance is by socially conforming and disassociating his past from the present. Yet, the veil of conformity is forever lifted when Geo is confronted with an image of that very past which haunts him. All the agony that Geo strives to suppress surges forth when, during “una passeggiata,” he sees a former Fascist Secret Police informer, Lionello Scocca, standing against a marble shaft that “aveva tenuto in piedi, per secoli, uno dei tre cancelli del ghetto” (Bassani, “Una lapide” 116). Even here, it is as if his insidious presence is a warning to the Jew that he is forever under the observant eye of the controlling society. Scocca’s presence, however, reveals the underlying hypocrisy and deceit concealed under a facade of normalcy. The audacity of this man who, as perpetuator of hideous crimes and untold suffering, now stands calmly, innocently on a street corner, is too much for Geo—and the silent lie is broken by Geo slapping Scocca, with “due schiaffi secchi” (Bassani, “Una lapide” 118). By condoning the presence of such a criminal the city has fallen back to its corrupt and superficial ways. Yet, in a twist of absurdity, Lionello Scocca is pardoned by the community and it is instead Geo who is criticized for his actions.

From the moment of his reawakening, Geo Jozs endeavors to compel the people of Ferrara to remember their past. By appearing publicly in his squalid concentration camp uniform and showing photographs of his dead relatives, Geo is determined to reveal a past of suffering, now overlooked by the public. Throughout the city, however, the immediate reaction is to reject the reminder of a past best forgotten. As one critic observes,

To the public the man in the ragged camp uniform is a *travestito*—someone in disguise or costume. But in truth, the actual masquerade was Jozs in his newly tailored suit strolling at dusk and smiling at lovely girls on bicycles, as if nothing had ever happened to him and his family. (Radcliff-Umstead 58)

This, however, is the masquerade that society accepts; just as the old-line Fascists, “vecchi, ormai inoffensivi” are offered respect, even sympathy in their demure, quiet ways. These are men who appear “tanto più umani, tanto più commoventi e meritevoli di pietà che non l’altro, che non Geo” (Bassani, “Una lapide” 123). Tragically, in Geo’s attempt to instill “the lessons of yesterday”⁴⁰ his exclusion from the community is sealed. The people fail to display any sense of guilt or profound change. Ultimately, Geo’s reintegration into the community proves impossible.

Rejected by the community, Geo seals his exile by disappearing from the city, abandoning it forever. While Geo chooses to leave Ferrara, suicide is often chosen by the individual as the only response possible to exile.⁵ Death is not viewed as an escape from life but as the ultimate solace from the exile that is endured. In Bassani’s novel *L’Airone*, the protagonist destroys himself because his identity has been shattered. In the midst of despair and endured persecution, self-inflicted death is viewed as the only possible solution. Levi, too, spoke of this consolation in death, in his poem “Verso valle:”

Fin quando mi obbediranno queste buone membra?
È fatto tardi per vivere e per amare,
Per penetrare il cielo e per comprendere il mondo.
È tempo di discendere
Verso valle, con visi chiusi e muti,
A rifugiarsi all’ombra delle nostre cure.

In Bassani’s short story “Il muro di cinta” we are told that “soli i morti stanno bene” (9) In his novel *Gli occhiali d’oro*, death brings final liberation in the midst of social banishment. Destroyed by the limitations and prejudices of the community, Dr. Fadigati commits suicide as the only response possible to the complete destruction of his identity. Dr. Fadigati’s “colpa” lies not in his being

Jewish, but in being a homosexual. Disdainfully accepted, this “vizio di Fadigati” is hypocritically accepted by the community only when it is kept secret.

Through the eyes of the narrator, who is Jewish himself, Dr. Fadigati’s exclusion from society parallels his own situation. As the community’s rejection of Dr. Fadigati increases, the narrator’s sense of isolation grows deeper. The result of being “different,” of being Jewish, is felt in numerous experiences that reinforce the individual’s sense of fear, solitude and bitterness. The sin of being Jewish, and the persecution because of it, is theorized as the result of the “ira celeste.” Thus justified, society punishes the Jew by the promulgation of the “leggi razzionali.” Overcome by an “atroce senso di esclusione” that torments the narrator, his future is bleak, one of “persecuzioni e di massacri” that “fin da bambino ne avevo continuamente sentito parlare come di un’eventualità per noi ebrei sempre possibile” (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 84). From this fear and exclusion, a hatred grows towards the oppressor, an “indicibile ripugnanza, l’antico, atavico odio dell’ebreo nei confronti di tutto ciò che fosse cristiano, cattolico, insomma goi” (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 84). The Jew’s “umiliazione, ribrezzo” exists because of the humiliation of a society that has marked him as different—the degradation stemming from the belief that, as Levi warned us, “ogni straniero è nemico.”

As society’s persecution intensifies, the friendship between the Jewish narrator and Dr. Fadigati’s becomes stronger. The narrator accepts and tolerates Dr. Fadigati. By sharing an understanding and compassion that can only be felt with another outcast, exclusion becomes the “ultimate form of social identity” (Radcliff-Umstead 83). Dr. Fadigati is driven to a state of complete isolation—“Ma era possibile durare indefinitamente a vivere così, nella solitudine più assoluta, circondato dall’ostilità generale?” (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 99) Separated from society, he also suffers from an identity crisis: “Accettare di essere quello che sono? O meglio adattarmi ad essere quel che gli altri vogliono che sia?” (Bassani, *Gli occhiali* 110) Society has lead him not only to hate his true self, and detest the mask he carries to cover it, but to reject the alternative—conformity, which is a type of deception and insanity.

The narrator experiences this same rejection due to his Jewishness. Acceptance by society is impossible as it lies in negating the individual’s essential being: “for Fadigati to give up being homosexual or for the narrator to give up being Jewish would mean for each of them to give up their identities—identities that they may not have chosen but which nonetheless define them and without which they would be nothing” (Radcliff-Umstead 83). To be born Jewish is, as Ferdinando Camon observed in an interview with Primo Levi, “una colpa. L’ebreo per il solo fatto di essere nato doveva scontare questa ‘colpa’: la colpa di esistere” (*Autoritratto* 30).

Thus, the Jew, by being born a Jew, is in automatic exile. This exile, initially caused by historical events, is followed by a profound state of psychic exile. For both Primo Levi and Bassani, exile is experienced physically and psychologically, via their Jewishness. Their writings reflect the moral and psychological anguish of racial persecution and the painful struggle required to maintain one's identity. Bassani is unique in embracing his Judaism; he alone celebrates his "Italian Jewish heritage as the underlying and pervasive theme of his work" (Hughes 115). This contrasts sharply with other nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian Jewish writers. Natalia Ginzberg and Carlo Levi, as well as Umberto Saba and Italo Svevo, make few comments in respect to their Judaism. Neither do their writings have specifically Jewish characters or themes. Thus, one may ask if their Jewishness influences their writings. If there is a Jewish perspective within their writings, how is it expressed? And is exile, the age old theme of Jewish consciousness, expressed in their writings which seem otherwise lacking in Jewish content?

Many critics have asserted that in Svevo's writings there are no "discernible elements . . . which on first reading might be termed Jewish" (Moloney 52). This seems surprising considering that Svevo was raised and educated within a Jewish environment. In addition, Trieste's Jewish population, relatively large for Italy⁵² stood at cultural crossroads with Vienna and its Jewish community, thought and culture. Though Svevo's writings reflect little of his Jewish heritage, his correspondence reveals a writer who has not forgotten his origins. In a letter from London in 1903, he writes his wife: "Kiss my Titinia [Letizia] and remind her of her father who may—as she says—no longer be a Jew but is more wandering than ever." During a later visit to London, Svevo tells us that upon suspecting that there were thieves in the house, he stepped away from the front door "with the prudence that Marco ascribes to my race" (Gatt-Rutter 144)

Is Svevo's Jewish sensibility only reflected in his autobiographical works? The critics Debenedetti and E. Levi, whose essays on Svevo as a Jewish writer are most well known, both detect a Jewish element underlying his writings. While Debenedetti speaks of a "hidden" Jewishness, Levi states that Svevo's "introspective, self-doubting, self-deprecating characters are Jewish types" (Moloney 54). Other critics have made reference to Svevo as being a "psychological Jew" in the sense that his characters reflect

psychological traits commonly attributed to the Jewish sensibility: a sense of personal oppression made sociable by an acute but gentle self-irony, a passion for introspection and a simultaneous sense of the absurdity of life's logic constantly surprised by fantasy and desire. (Lebowitz 40)

Umberto Saba, himself, called his friend Svevo "psychologically Jewish down to

the very marrow of his bones" (Cited by Weiss 135).

While the characteristics of Alfonso Nitti in *Una vita* and Emilio Brentani in *Senilità* may be viewed as Jewish, these characteristics are also systematic of a historical period. Svevo's "disagio" and "senilità" are a reflection of the reoccurring concepts of the *mal du siècle*, that literary period in which:

a universal nausea fills the heart of the Slavs, the Germans and the Latins and displays itself in the first in the shape of nihilism, in the second in the shape of pessimism, in us [the Latins] in the shape of solitary and bizarre neuroses.
(Furbank 160)

Thus, the traits displayed by Svevo's characters are not exclusively Jewish. Not even his use of humor, which Luti states is "legata alla sua stessa *forma mentis*, che è borghese ed ebraica" (Moloney 55) should be labeled as specifically Jewish. Irony is appealing to and used by many writers. It is, however, Svevo's mode of expressing this irony that is unique. By drawing upon his Jewish heritage, Svevo depicts the humor of a stock Jewish character in his novel, *La coscienza di Zeno*. The protagonist, Zeno Cosini, presents himself to us as a *schlemiel*.

The *schlemiel* is a literary figure in Jewish, and especially Yiddish, lore. He is the result of the rich culture and tortured history of Eastern European Jewry. Despite centuries of persecution and harassment, the communities strength lay in its marked resiliency. Without succumbing to desperation or defeat, the community "learned to absorb severe shock without abandoning the image of man to which it had pledged itself, and without losing its love or desire for life" (Wisse x). The techniques used to survive, however, inevitably produced some self-disgust and bitterness. Yiddish humor reflects this. It is cuttingly sharp; yet, it preserved sanity in the midst of absurdity.

The *schlemiel* is the individual whose life-style reflects these conflicts. He is "a fool; not of the charming, wily or saintly variety, but weak, inept and frequently disliked. In spite of his vices, or the humiliations he may suffer, he is a comic hero" (Moloney 60). Indeed, Zeno's failures comically turn into success: he proposes to the three Malfenti sisters and is accepted by the one he doesn't want to marry, who, ironically, proves to be the best wife after all; he is unfaithful to Augusta, yet his infidelity strengthens the marriage; he achieves success on the stock exchange, whereas the handsome and "healthy" Guido Speier fails miserably. While both Guido and Zeno are incompetent as business men, Zeno's awareness of his inadequacies saves him. Guido, instead, is hindered by a false sense of security, which prevents him from seeing his own failings until too late. Zeno's "own defeatist acceptance of inadequacy preserves him where Guido is destroyed" (Furbank 184). Ironically, from Guido's ruin on the stock exchange, Zeno continues to speculate with the firm's remaining

money and is highly successful. As Albert Goldman observes, the schlemiel's power "rests on his daring to lay bare his own weakness and to acknowledge his own limitations. Although he may appear pathetic or absurd, the schlemiel conceals behind his mask a hidden strength: a shrewd sense of self-preservation" (Cited by Weiss 63) His weakness proves to be his strength, for otherwise how could a weakling survive?

Traditionally, the schlemiel's humor is used in self-defense; he bases his life "on the assumption that because he is absurd he cannot be tragic," and thus "he retains the capacity to hope in circumstances which would drive ordinary men to despair" (Moloney 60). This belief comes through in the schlemiel's joking humor, which can be seen in the following:

Sometime during World War I, a Jew lost his way along the Austro-Hungarian frontier. Wandering through the woods late at night, he was suddenly arrested by the challenge of a border-guard: "Halt, or I'll shoot!" The Jew blinked into the beam of the searchlight and said:

"What's the matter with you? Are you crazy? Can't you see that this is a human being?" (Cited by Wisse 3)

The Jew here is completely rational within the context of an ideal humanism. Yet, given the political reality he is seen as a fool, completely out of line with actual events. Zeno Cosini presents himself as this same fool when, during his morning walk, he is unexpectedly caught in the outbreak of a war. Zeno's walk is interrupted by the threatening warning of a soldier who, at gunpoint, yells at him to go "Zuruck! [Indietro!]." Disgusted with this treatment, he comments: "Pensai che al mio arrivo a Lucinico mi sarei subito recato a protestare dal capovilla per il trattamento che avevo dovuto subire" (Svevo 464-65). Later, upon coming across a battalion that blocks his path, Zeno is again verbally attacked to his utmost amazement. When an official detects Zeno and shouts: "Che cosa vuole quello scimunito?" Zeno is shocked—"Stupito che senz'alcuna provocazione mi si offendese così, volli dimostrarmi offeso virilmente." He continues:

Gli raccontai che a Lucinico m'aspettava il mio caffelatte da cui ero diviso soltanto dal suo plotone.

Egli rise, in fede mia rise. Rise sempre bestemmiando e non ebbe la pazienza di lasciarmi finire. Dichiarò che il caffelatte di Lucinico sarebbe stato bevuto da altri

Non era facile di adattarsi di rinunziare al caffelatte da cui distavo non più di mezzo chilometro E mitemente domandai all'ufficiale:—Ma a chi dovrei rivolgermi per poter ritornare a Lucinico a prendere almeno la mia giubba e il mio cappello? (Svevo 465-66)

In the light of historical happenings Zeno appears the utter fool. Yet, his seemingly misplaced indignation reveals the insanity of the world itself, by “provoking our recognition that in an insane world, the fool may be the only morally sane man” (Wisse 4).

Zeno finds himself in a ridiculous and threatening situation. As the schlemiel, he is also the symbol of the entire Jewish people. As a metaphor for European Jewry, the schlemiel is seen as “the model of endurance, his innocence a shield against corruption, his absolute defenselessness the only guaranteed defense against the brutalizing potential of might” (Wisse 5) The schlemiel’s actions are the result of a technique required if he is to survive. In the midst of persecution and oppression, the Jew’s weakness, irony and foolishness become his strength and key to survival. Svevo, by presenting us with the character of Zeno, portrays a unique yet, nevertheless, recognizable variation of a stock Jewish type. Through the guise of the schlemiel, Svevo reveals his response to the difficulties of exile.

The critic Giorgio Voghera claims that the Jewish writers from Trieste “non hanno infuso nella loro opera alcunché dello spirito biblico; né di quello sionista; né di quello dell’ autentico giudaismo dell’ oriente europeo e dei ghetti” (Langella 13). While this is true for both Svevo and Saba, their writings are not completely devoid of any Jewish quality. Their works evolved from “una coscienza ebraica,” from the weight of their very heritage. Yet, there works also went beyond a completely Jewish perspective; both writers reflect the universal problems that face all men. As James Joyce realized by making the hero of *Ulysses* a Jew, the protagonist Leopold Bloom is more than just a Jew, for “the Jew with his ‘hangups’, his self-doubt . . . and his awkward, alienated stance is a twentieth-century symbol for Everyman” (Weiss 140). In his poem, “La capra,” Saba specifically indicates that the “viso semita” of the “capra solitaria” is no more than “un verso prevalentemente visivo” (Guglielmino 454-55). Though the animal is identified as Jewish, its pain is an anguish felt by all, “un dolore universale.” By transcending his own Jewishness, Saba’s poetry expresses the “condizione universale di dolore.” Yet, the Jewish condition embodies and intensifies that very pain, for while pain thresholds vary among peoples, the Jewish community’s threshold has proven exceedingly high. Just as the “Chinaman” in Vittorini’s *Conversazione in Sicilia* symbolizes an utmost solitude, for Chinese solitude, in rural Sicily, is said to make him “più uomo,” the Jewishness of the “capra dal viso semita” symbolizes all suffering, yet intensified. While “alienation is . . . a central feature of human existence” (Kaufman xvii) the Jew carries an extra weighted history of it. As Elie Wiesel comments on the meaning of exile for him:

I experience it [exile] metaphysically because a writer probably experiences certain things more intensely and a Jewish writer even more so.

(Wiesel and de Saint-Cheron 92)

Thus, Saba's sense of exile extends beyond his being Jewish to an exile that is universal, endured by all human beings. As Carlo Levi observes:

la capacità di trasformare questa universale angoscia nata nel fanciullo è rimasta nella vita individuale di un uomo, di volgerla in fuori, di esprimerla e trasformarla in universale amore e comprensione. (228)

From his childhood, Saba experienced the pain of being abandoned by his non-Jewish father—"di malinconia fui tosto esperto; unico figlio che ha lontano il padre" (Saba, *Per conoscere Saba* 297).⁶ Raised by his Jewish mother, his father became "l'assassino." Expressing his mother's warning in a poem, Saba reveals a painful realization:

Non somigliare—ammoniva—tuo padre
Ed io più tardi in me stesso lo intesi:
Eran due razze in antica tenzone.

The "due razze in antica tenzone" form the two poles of conflict within the poet, a "dissidio" which, Carlo Levi claims, "fu insomma uno dei motivi iniziali e profondi della sua poesia" (229). In "Le fughe," Saba expresses this pain:

«O mio cuore dal nascere in due scisso,
quante pene durai per uno farne!
Quante rose a nascondere un abisso!»

In *Gli anni della psicanalisi*, Giorgio Voghera observes that Saba claimed that "the dilemma of the Triestine Jews was that they had been brought up between two truths, that of their family and that of the surrounding Christian world" (Weiss 134). Even though Saba never distinguished himself as a Jewish writer, his writings are not completely devoid of Jewish influence: his *Gli ebrei* is a collection of short stories dedicated to his colorful memory of the Triestine ghetto and the Jews in his family and his poem "Tre vie" renews cherished memories in the Jewish cemetery. As other Jews, Saba could not escape his birthright. Forced into exile due to Italy's racial laws, Saba first escaped to Paris, followed by a year of hiding in Florence. Hidden in Montale's house in Florence, there lay only a fine line that separated life from the zealous patriot who "per il compenso di 5000 lire a testa" (Saba, *Per conoscere Saba* 60) would send him

to the Germans and his death. His poem "Vetro rotto" captures the oppression and doom that surrounds him:

Tutto si muove contro te. Il maltempo,
 le luci che si spengono, la vecchia
 casa scossa a una raffica
 Ti pare il sopravvivere un rifiuto
 d'obbedienze alle cose.
E nello schianto
 del vetro alla finestra è la condanna.

This poem speaks as well to all those in hiding, whether as a Jew or a partigiano fighting against Fascism. Carlo Levi maintained that Saba's talent lay in his ability to universalize everyday life. While he claims that Saba wove "un filo, una tradizione ebraica" within his writings, "perché il carattere di Saba era profondamente ebraico" (C. Levi 230), it is from this "carattere" that a new identity is found and shared with others. In a verse from "Mediterranee" he defines himself and his poetry:

Pianse e capì per tutti
 era il tuo moto

And in "Preludio e fughe" he writes:

Poche ore serene
 il dolore mi lascia;
 il mio e di quanti
 esseri ho intorno

Saba's pain goes beyond the personal—"Parla interrottamente di sé: ma appunto perché crede nell'esemplarità della propria vicenda esteriore e interiore, perché ritiene che si rispecchi in essa il dramma non di un uomo, ma **dell'uomo**" (Saba, *Coi miei occhi* 13: emphasis mine).

Primo Levi, as Saba, lifts his works to a level of universality. His goal is not to pour out endless indignation, but instead to explore "alcuni aspetti dell'animo umano" (P. Levi, *Se questo* 9). *Se questo è un uomo* is unique in that, as opposed to other Holocaust literature such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* where "the protagonist is initiated into death rather than life," Levi "chronicles the survival of a man from innocence to understanding and from weakness to the strength of self-knowledge" (Gunzberg 82). The suffering endured during exile and the feeling of alienation and pain pave the way for a greater humanity. As Elie Wiesel observes, there is a "creative side of exile." From the ruins of suffering, the writer

must reveal a higher truth, a greater hope—"It is the writer's task to make sure that his writing helps to raise man higher and not to degrade him" (Wiesel and de Saint-Cheron 92-93).

Primo Levi, Giorgio Bassani, Natalia Ginzberg, Italo Svevo, and Umberto Saba all experienced the pain of alienation, the anguish of exile, the sorrows of life. Though each writer reacted differently to the effects of exile, they all shared one common goal—to reach a better understanding of themselves and humanity. "When an Italian Jew wrote of the sufferings he or she had endured, it was not simply as a Jew: it was as someone giving testimony on behalf of all the victims of oppression, wherever and of whatever religious origin they may be" (Hughes 65). No matter how subtle their Jewish consciousness, however, they ultimately fulfilled Judaism's highest command. For "the substance of Judaism," Elie Wiesel tells us, is identical to our greatest challenge—the calling "to remain human in a world that is inhuman" (in *Literary Exile* 707).

Paula Matthews
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Notes

¹This poem and all further citations of Levi's poetry are taken from *Ad ora incerta*.

²*Shemà* means "Hear" or "Listen" in Hebrew.

³See Paul Tabori 53-60, for a discussion on exile, Jewish history and the Wandering Jew.

⁴This prayer—from the *Selichos* for Asarah BeTeves, *Siddur Tehillat HaShem* 356—is read on the day which commemorates the destruction of the Temple.

⁵See Radcliff-Umstead 136-46, 157 for a further discussion on death/suicide as a response to and liberation from exile.

⁶Following cited poems are from *Per conoscere Saba*.

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