

Two Fables

By Giorgio Bassani
in The Novel of Ferrara

1.

ONCE upon a time, when I was a boy, there lived in Ferrara a Jewish Signorina who was not ugly, nor poor, nor stupid, nor too old—not especially desirable, if the truth be told, but not in the least deserving to be scorned—for whom, however strange it may seem, her family had not yet managed to find a husband. Strange? Well, yes. Within the confines of our community, and at that time, such a thing presented all the features of an exception. Deploying, as usual, the network of family relations and acquaintances, but also calling upon the women's section of the Italian Jewish Society, should have moved things very effectively toward the desired end. Similarly, the dance parties held during *Purim* in several locales annexed to the Temple on Via Mazzini or in the entrance hall of the Jewish kindergarten on Via Vignatagliata, parties attended by crowded, whispering rows of matrons seated along the walls and busy at their embroidery, or, in the most troublesome of cases, the letters that the Rabbi Dr. Castelfranco was implored to write to his colleagues in the neighboring Emilian or Romagnolo or Veneto cities should have done the trick: one way or another, these were the means to ensure that at the opportune moment the right person ended up presenting himself. There was never a reason to despair. When the city itself lacked sufficient resources to pro-

duce a spouse, at last a Lohengrin* would arrive from far away: to see, to be seen, and almost always to bring the matter to a fitting conclusion.

In 1934, Egle Levi-Minzi had reached the age of thirty-three. For what reason she had remained a spinster, I couldn't say with certainty. The only daughter of elderly, rather well-off parents, she still lived in their house, and, at certain precise hours of the morning and afternoon, she would always be found promenading through the streets of the center in their company—they made a nearly inseparable trio, noted by the whole city and almost proverbial. What I do know is that when they, the parents, had begun to look around in search of a possible son-in-law, the major resistance always came from her, the person most closely concerned. To keep her in this negative frame of mind, one likely component was a bit of filial and virginal mania, an excessive attachment to her old father and mother. Another, perhaps, was a secret suggestion which influenced her in the mad period of her early youth—the period, it's worth remembering, of the notorious Fascist squads of the Po Valley, so similar in many respects to our own times—some violent image of masculinity, which then, in the years that followed, had hindered her from turning toward different male types . . . However it was, the fact is that every time Egle Levi-Minzi found herself faced with a choice, this one wouldn't do, this other, likewise, that one, I ask you, that other one, you must be joking. A grimace adorned her large, melancholic mouth, already a little fallen at the corners: a slight, irritated lowering of the sparsely belashed eyelids over her sad, watery-brown, Sephardic irises: and the last suitor was added to the gradually lengthening list of rejects.

Almost halfway through 1935, I believe it was actually in June of that year, an utterly different reception awaited a suitor who had come from far further off than Bologna, or Ravenna, or Mantua, or Rovigo, or Venice. He was Russian, or rather Ukrainian. The child, he too, of parents no longer young, he was twenty-seven years old. His name was Yuri: Yuri Rotstein.

* The title figure of Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* (1848); a German romantic character inspired by the mysterious, damsel-rescuing Knight of the Swan in Arthurian legend.

The little family had arrived in Ferrara during the summer of the year before from Odessa. Having got off the Trieste train, they had encamped haphazardly in a small hotel in front of the station. But already before Yom Kippur they were occupying, rent-free, needless to say, a small apartment in a house on Via Vittoria which had belonged, from time immemorial, to the Jewish community. They had asked for refuge, and they had received it. The father, besides, given his perfect knowledge of all religious matters, and of written and spoken Hebrew, had been speedily given work, with duties that fluctuated between those of cantor and synagogue attendant: assigned as assistant to the rabbi, and in some cases even as his substitute, for the Sabbath morning services, for less imposing burials and for the kosher slaughter of farm animals. In brief, within a couple of months they were already well established. They expressed themselves in a slow Italian, at times with oddly harsh, Byzantine inflections; not exactly correct, one might say, but quite effectively comprehensible. The first time they presented themselves in the community's offices, the father, speaking also for the other two, had made mention of Erez, of America . . .

Father and son looked alike. Both of them tall, a good bit taller than the average height of those who went to the German School synagogue. They both had the same kind of face: long, bony and gaunt, with protruding cheekbones above which shone the same little bright-blue, slanted, *muzhik* eyes. The mother, by contrast, was short, fat and round: a servant or peasant type, with reams of white handkerchief tied round her neck.

But what most struck those present, both downstairs, in the space reserved for men, and up in the women's gallery, was the incontestible dignity of all three, the utterly unforced and moving nonchalance with which, in exchange for some modest assistance, they still behaved in the manner of guests. It was not as if they had the air of saying: "At the end of the day we're all equal, of the same religion, brothers, so this is also our house and home." Not at all. From the straightforward manner all three of them adopted at the Temple, silent, composed, without giving offence by any special Ashkenazi exhibitionism (the father still retaining his kafftan, his sparse little blondish beard, as well as the pious side locks of the same tint that curled out at his ears from under the round hat he wore; and the mother her big peasant neckerchief; though the son, by contrast, was

correctly dressed in the Western style in grey flannel), they seemed troubled only about one thing: to reassure the assembly of their unwavering intent to be off again as soon as possible. They merely asked to stay for a short while, just for the time needed to get their breath back. After that, we could be sure, they'd soon enough resume their wandering through the wide world.

They weren't ever to resume their wandering through the wide world. And so their names can still be found, among those of the 183 Ferrarese Jews deported to Germany during the winter of 1943 to '44, on the great commemorative stone attached to the facade of the Jewish Temple on Via Mazzini.

However, all considered, their transmigration from the East to the West was not in vain. Egle Levi-Minzi would have a son: a male child, whom she first felt suddenly calling out to her in that very Temple, on a long-ago Saturday evening at the end of May, while she looked through the grating of the women's gallery down into the vast hall crowded with men.

It had been a question of only a few seconds.

All the men were facing toward the Chief Rabbi Castelfranco, waiting for him to intone the final solemn blessing, the *berachah*. Only one among the many, that young Ukrainian, an immigrant of but a few months, had turned round and was looking behind. He was peering up, in the direction of the women's gallery, with his magnificent blue, smiling, winking, wild eyes. So why shouldn't she have a son with that young man?—Egle Levi-Minzi had said to herself, as though awakening from a prolonged torpor. It was clear. It wasn't her that the youth was greeting, but rather the old countrywoman, his mother, who was sitting next to her. And yet, why not pretend to make a mistake, and why not respond to his smile, to his curt nod of salute, with something similar? He was poor, a foreigner. Young, younger than her by quite a few years, almost a boy. But poor. Without a house of his own. A wanderer. His parents could continue to live in the flat on Via Vittoria where the community had installed them. The young man, on the other hand . . . It was worth the effort to try. To try him out.

She had smiled. She had waved her hand.

After a moment of hesitation, the other had lifted two fingers to the brim of his hat, making a faint bow.

No, it had indeed been worth the effort. The child that Egle Levi-Minzi had was truly exceptional: a lively boy, intelligent, irrepressible, very beautiful—so much so that to the few of us who had escaped the death camps and all else, and who in 1945, no longer divided into men and women, or between one religious school and another, who found ourselves once more together at the Italian synagogue, he seemed the very personification of life that eternally ends and begins again. He was called Yuri. Yuri Rotstein. Tall, thin, bony, with those slanted eyes flashing blue above his sharp cheekbones, he still lives with his mother, alone with her forever, in their big house in Ferrara.

2.

DO YOU remember the Albergo Tripoli, the shady little Ferrarese hotel of the worst quality, that before the war could be found a few steps from the Estense Castle, in the vast piazza behind it—that same Albergo Tripoli I've had other occasions to mention? Well, imagine it one December night about forty years ago, and so in the darkest period of Fascism, and late at night, very late, a few minutes before they closed.

Down in the entrance hall the lights had already been turned off. When suddenly, there at the end of the hall, the door with its emerald-colored glass was swung open (a gust of humid wind swept through the empty hall and reached as far as the counter where the night receptionist sat) and, gradually emerging from the shadows, a man approached.

He walked slowly, weighed down by a big suitcase. He had the collar of his overcoat turned up, the rim of his hat tilted down to hide his eyes. Who on earth could it be? the receptionist asked himself. By the look of him, one would have thought he was a commercial traveler.

"I would like a room," said the man quietly.

"I'm afraid we won't be able to help you there," replied the receptionist.

He opened the register in front of him, hardly bothered to scan it, then made a grimace.