

Mara Josi, *Rome 16 October 1943: History, Memory, Literature* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2023), pp. 179.

by *Michele Sarfatti*

Mara Josi's book examines how the Nazi round-up of Jews in Rome on 16 October 1943, from the arrests to the deportation on 18 October, has been represented in literature. The Author analyzes what she calls "the four most influential texts" in literature (p. 2) that are either entirely devoted to that episode, or that devote a considerable space to it: Giacomo Debenedetti's *16 ottobre 1943*,¹ Elsa Morante's *La Storia. Romanzo*,² Rosetta Loy's *La parola ebreo*,³ Anna Foa's *Portico d'Ottavia 13. Una casa del ghetto nel lungo inverno del '43*.⁴ The Author does not, therefore, explore historiographic texts, diaries, autobiographies, or biographies. The texts chosen by the Author are in fact the most important ones dedicated to that event, both for their narrative and for their structure. These are the books whose influence on the public memory of the "16 October" has been strongest; literature is "both a channel for perpetuating traditions and a source of new perceptions of the past" (p. 13).

Josi summarizes what historians have written about that event without questioning their narrative, informs us that historical documents about it are meagre, and reminds us that no photographs of it exist.

Because of this scarcity of documentary sources, both Debenedetti's text and the three later ones have come to be seen as "bearers of historical knowledge and channels of memory; not only outcomes of remembrance but also active ingredients in the process of forging cultural memory" (p. 3).

The Author describes each work, pointing out the links to other texts by the same author, highlighting their individual style, and outlining their important role in

¹ Giacomo Debenedetti, "16 ottobre 1943," in *Mercurio. Mensile di politica, arte, scienze* 1, no. 4 (1944), 75-97. English edition: Giacomo Debenedetti, *October 16, 1943; Eight Jews* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

² Elsa Morante, *La Storia. Romanzo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974). English edition: Elsa Morante, *History: A novel* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

³ Rosetta Loy, *La parola ebreo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997). English edition: Rosetta Loy, *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2000).

⁴ Anna Foa, *Portico d'Ottavia 13. Una casa del ghetto nel lungo inverno del '43* (Rome: Laterza, 2013).

forging Italian cultural memory of the Roman round-up and of the Holocaust in general.

For each of the four authors she also details if they had a direct connection to Judaism, if they were born before or after the round-up, and where they were on 16 October.

All the quotations from the four books are published in the original Italian, followed by an English translation.

As already said, the book's aim is not to examine and to discuss the events of 16 October as reconstructed by historians or told by literary authors. It does not, for instance, investigate Debenedetti's statement "chi scrive questo racconto passò la mattinata del 16 ottobre in casa di una sua vicina" (The writer of this account spent the morning of October 16 in the house of a neighbor) (p. 43). Josi highlights instead and documents Debenedetti's ability in transforming memories (even personal ones) and witnesses' narratives into a "powerful and incisive means of recalling the round-up" (p. 44).

In comparing the four texts, the focus is on their defining aspects. Debenedetti, for instance, is the one who devotes greater attention to Jewish tradition and religious life. Morante, who could draw on a greater number of historical documents, inserts into her narrative passages in which "her writing is systematic, precise, and objective" (p. 79). Loy, who writes as a "non-Jew," obviously has a "tangential perspective" (p. 108) and the Author remarks that her book came out at the same time as other books and films (such as Francesco Rosi's *La tregua*, and Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella*). As for Foa's text, Josi takes into consideration both the original work and the children's book derived from it (*Portico d'Ottavia*, with illustrations by Matteo Berton),⁵ and highlights how structure and narrative are centered on the visual perception of historical events, thus inviting readers "to see the persecution and the deportation in the place where they occurred" (p. 148). Altogether, Josi's treatment of the question "of the triangular relationship between history, memory, and literature" (p. 151) is interesting. The book makes for smooth reading, and the Author clearly has carried out an extensive bibliographical research.

⁵ Anna Foa, *Portico d'Ottavia*. Illustrazioni di Matteo Berton (Rome: Laterza, 2015).

In my view, it would have been useful to elaborate further on the comparison between some crucial points in the historic events and in the four narratives. One of these points concerns the area in Rome called “Ghetto” even today, that is the area where for three centuries, until the mid-19th century, all Jews had been forced to live. In the summer of 1943, Debenedetti, Morante and Loy, who was a child at the time, did not live in the former Roman ghetto (irrespective of their religious affiliation), whereas Foa was born in Turin in 1944. Later, Foa lived in a flat in that part of town, and this drove her to write a book on the persecution that had taken place in that *casa nel ghetto* (house in the ghetto). The other three writers, on the other hand, on 16 October were living (or had sought refuge) in other parts of town or other localities. Moreover, the arrests on that day were carried out all over Rome. Nevertheless, in his book Debenedetti focuses specifically on what happened in the ghetto, and the same is true for Morante and at least partially for Loy. The quality of their books has strongly contributed to fix in the cultural memory the idea of “the ghetto” as “the place” of the round-up, thus almost establishing a connection between the Nazi round-up and the policy of the old Papal States.

The Author has shown excellent capabilities in this book, and I hope she will expand her work to also include this kind of subtopics.

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