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SUMMARY

This study is the result of an interview with Edith Bruck which took place on May 3, 2006, in her apartment in Rome. The purpose of my paper is, in part, to expose and discuss in detail a series of conditions that created a new ghetto for the novelist who survived Auschwitz; this time a thematic ghetto. Focusing on the author's recent statements, this essay will begin by discussing some of the difficulties encountered by Primo Levi in his dealings with the Einaudi publishing house; moving on to Edith Bruck's experiences as a Holocaust witness who, eventually, found herself blocked in this role, in part because of pressures she felt from the Italian publishing industry. Analyzing her experiences in the world of cinema, I will then transition to a discussion of some stormy events which took place in the former Yugoslavian republic, and later in Italy, during the shooting of two films on the holocaust: *KAPÒ* by Gillo Pontecorvo for which the author worked as a consultant (without ever appearing in the credits), and *ANDREMO IN CITTÀ* by her husband Nelo Risi, based on Bruck's story contained in the homonymous book. In particular, the author's difficult relationship with director Pontecorvo will be brought to bear, and the surprising behavior of Italian newspapers (from the political right and left) following an unfortunate incident when the writer was assaulted by a Bosnian man who hated Hungarians.

KEYWORDS

Edith Bruck, Holocaust literature, Italian cinema, censorship, Primo Levi

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EDITH BRUCK'S EXPERIENCE IN ITALY
PUBLISHING, CINEMA, AND THE THEMATIC GHETTO

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The bulk of the considerations which I am about to offer have been either directly cited from or inspired by a recent interview with the Hungarian novelist and poet Edith Bruck. I feel I should point out that my intention is merely to bring her words and thoughts to your attention. I should mention that one of the main points in my presentation concerns a past disagreement between two artists, namely Edith Bruck and Gillo Pontecorvo. While my considerations might strike you as controversial, they nevertheless have to do with an old dispute that has since been resolved in some fashion. During our conversation, which took place on the afternoon of June 3rd, 2006 in her apartment in Rome, she spoke of her friend Primo Levi's disappointment at the rejection of his first book, *Se questo è un uomo* (*Survival in Auschwitz*). It is a known fact that its rejection by the Turinese publishing house Einaudi came at the hand of an acquaintance of Primo Levi, the late Natalia Ginzburg. Levi's disappointment was discussed in detail in an article written by Fernando Camon for the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* on December 23rd, 1996, titled 'L'incubo del rifiuto' (The nightmare of rejection). Perhaps, the worst repercussion of this rejection, which came at the beginning of Levi's literary career, was that it mirrored the fear caused by a much more painful and personal nightmare, one that Levi had shared with other inmates in Auschwitz only to discover that it haunted them as well: the fear that, upon finally returning home after the camps, and being reunited with family, friends, and peers, one's testimony of the Holocaust would be either rejected as falsehood, or avoided and hidden like an unbearable and uncomfortable truth (Camon 1996).

There is certainly a symbolic affinity between the nightmare here described and the reality of rejection once experienced by Primo Levi. Simply put, the message he was being conveyed was that he was not going to be allowed to share his truth about the Holocaust through publication, or at least, not according to the timeline he would have preferred. While Edith Bruck has first hand knowledge of this uncomfortable situation that developed between Levi and Ginzburg, her reaction at the time was a mixture of sympathy and disappointment. While she supported Levi's contention that the rejection was decidedly ill-advised, she was disappointed by his unwillingness to denounce this treatment publicly. Perhaps Levi simply did not want to speak out against Natalia because of the position she held in the Italian publishing industry, but one must also consider that the two of them were part of the same community.

Edith Bruck's many re-visitations of the subject of the Holocaust in her books has been well documented over the course of the last 10-15 years, thanks to such scholars and translators as Ruth Feldman, Brenda Webster, Gabriella Romani, Rita Wilson, and Adalgisa Giorgio. Giorgio studied Bruck's progressive thematic movement away from the concentration camps in a significant selection of her works, adopting the author's autobiographical debut *Chi ti ama così* (1959) as a necessary point of departure. She traced and quantified the references to the *Shoah* in Bruck's novels, and also analyzed a tendency that the author has since abandoned; or rather, the use of third person narration instead of first person. Although Giorgio's essay titled 'Dall'autobiografia al romanzo. La rappresentazione della Shoah nell'opera di Edith Bruck', was published in 1999, Giorgio's considerations do not include the novel *Il silenzio degli amanti* from 1997, in which the author reverted to the use of a first person narrator. Since 1997, Bruck has, in fact, consistently produced fiction written in the first person. In her essay *Signora Auschwitz* (1999) Bruck discussed the role of the writer-witness at length, a role that has defined much of her literary activity, as well as that of Primo Levi before her. In this text she freely admitted that this role has been both a blessing and a burden, as it has both brought her strength and drained her of it over the years. While she recognizes the need to educate schoolchildren on the *Shoah*, she has – at times – felt inclined to never visit a school again.

In *Signora Auschwitz* she mentioned the publication of her novel *Il silenzio degli amanti* (1997, *The silence of the lovers*, still unavailable to Anglophone readers), and described it as a "cute idea", a sort of thematic vacation from the difficult subjects she often chooses to address in her writing. The novel in question allowed her to explore the use of a male protagonist, in this case a homosexual, or perhaps bisexual man whose (female) friend is involved with a married person. The plot deals candidly with some very modern and current issues, and allowed her to remain within the literary niche that she considers her own; or rather, the use of literature to expose and condemn the injustices present in society, particularly those caused by the proliferation of hatred, bigotry, and stereotypes.

With the exception of *Il silenzio degli amanti*, the issue of the *Shoah* is present in the majority of Bruck's publications, in one form or another. In some cases, we can see evidence of her using the Holocaust as an implied element in the lives and experiences of her protagonists, instead of making it the central motivation and inspiration behind her works. Hence, Adalgisa Giorgio was correct in saying that Bruck has taken to exploring the long-term repercussions of the camps on the individual and on society. A perfect example is the novel *Transit* (1975), in which a woman is hired to be a consultant for a film detailing the female experience in Auschwitz. This text brilliantly exemplifies how such negative experiences (and the ability and willingness to recall them) can be inextricably linked to someone's professional and financial worth. In a more recent work titled *Nuda proprietà* (1993, *Bare property*), a woman residing in Rome is evicted from her apartment, and decides to pursue an unlikely and uncomfortable relationship with an elderly woman whose late husband had been an SS officer – in order to gain her favor, and eventually,

upon her death, take possession of her residence. The protagonist, a Jewish woman named Anna, is not dissimilar from other characters created by Bruck: she is a Holocaust survivor who has made a life for herself in Europe, a fact that she only attempts to share with the old woman, referred to as Frau Kremer, at the end of the novel. The word 'Holocaust' never appears in this text, and there is only one specific reference to Auschwitz. Nevertheless, these elements of history are the single strongest source of conflict and tension between the two main characters. These are just two examples of how Bruck has tried to find some form of creative distance from the *Shoah*, without going as far as removing it from the consciousness of her characters.

Until recently, her readers have been left to wonder if she has ever attempted to publish another book that has absolutely nothing to do with World War II. It is thanks to a recent interview by Maria Cristina Mauceri (2006), if the issue of a 'thematic ghetto', in which Bruck finds herself enclosed, has made its way into this paper. In fact, Mauceri's work was a great source of inspiration behind my decision to interview the author. When I asked Bruck about two novels that she has been unable to secure a publisher for, she spoke frankly about the limitations that have been placed on her literary and journalistic endeavors. Issues of prejudice, exploitation, and civil rights in modern Europe have become her niche, her self-proclaimed area of specialization. Her desire is simply to expand on this *niche* and her exploration of it, to use her craft to speak for all the victims of injustice who do not have a voice. The author freely admits that she may be, in part, complicit in the creation of this 'ghetto', these walls that have encapsulated her artistic production. While she certainly wishes at times that her name were not automatically (and often exclusively) associated with Holocaust literature, she is aware of the choices she made that could have contributed to this tendency exhibited by many scholars and editors. Surprisingly enough, the manuscripts she has been unable to place with Italian publishers tackle some very current and important issues, such as the abduction and sexual exploitation of young Albanian girls, and the plight of a woman whose lover is more than thirty years younger than her, crushed by the impossible standards of perennial beauty imposed by society and the media. These daring and highly relevant works have been, up to this point, summarily rejected by Italian editors, to the extent that Bruck has been tempted to give up on ever seeing them in print (Bruck, personal interview 2006). One might argue that the *thematic ghetto* she has been trapped in puts her in a situation which is the exact opposite of Primo Levi's first experience with Einaudi: editors seem to only be interested in her writings that deal with the *Shoah*.

Bruck's aforementioned novel *Transit* presents scholars of literature and cinema with a most unusual conundrum. The innumerable references to the film *KAPÒ* by Gillo Pontecorvo (1959) within this text are undeniably specific, so much that anyone who compares the film to the novel could identify it as a source of inspiration behind this work of fiction. Despite my many efforts and research strategies, I was initially unable to find any tangible evidence of the author having

been involved in the production of this motion picture. Only by speaking to her in person was I able to verify my theory that she had, in fact, worked as a consultant for Pontecorvo on this project, as an expert on the female experience in Auschwitz. During our interview Bruck stated that Pontecorvo's attitude in the workplace was reminiscent of a "concentration camp commander" ordering people around, being inflexible and insensitive to the needs of his colleagues, and, on one occasion, scaring the author by showing her artificial cadavers. Such treatment caused Edith to leave this job earlier than she would have foreseen, and the director's reaction was to keep her name and contributions out of the credits, and to pretend, over the course of the last four decades, that she had no involvement in the making of this film. After the author published *Transit* in the 70s, Pontecorvo refused to even greet her for ten years, until her husband Nelo Risi eventually helped make peace between them. The director had apparently adapted some portions of her autobiographical text *Chi ti ama così* and included them in the script for KAPÒ without acknowledging this fact. Those who are familiar with the motion picture are possibly aware that the first half of the movie is judged by some film scholars as superior (in both quality and authenticity) to the second part, in which a love story develops between two of the main characters. One can only speculate as to how much better the film could have been if Edith Bruck had remained until the project was completed. The result of this experience could be considered a misappropriation of intellectual materials for personal and commercial gain. This regrettable event recalls yet another form of *ghetto*, aside from a thematic one, in which artists can find themselves: one created by plagiarism; or rather, a failure to give credit where it is due.

Just like the motion picture KAPÒ, Nelo Risi's film ANDREMO IN CITTÀ (1966), based on Bruck's short story by the same title, was filmed in Belgrade. Only a few years after her experience working with Pontecorvo, Edith returned to this city to embark on another cinematic endeavor. While she certainly had no trouble having her contributions to this project acknowledged in the credits (and recorded in the annals of film history), this return to Belgrade to work on a movie brought about yet another highly unfortunate incident, one that still haunts her to this day. It was during this period of her life that Bruck was assaulted by the manager of a clothing store because of her Hungarian accent. This man who broke her wrist had apparently lost his brother in the war and still harbored an intense hatred for all Hungarian nationals, whom he considered to be fascists. This frightening assault, and the subsequent mistreatment suffered by Bruck at the hand of police agents, is described vividly in the novel *Transit*. The most fictional aspect of this novel is not the reality it depicts, but the mixing of events from two different moments in Bruck's life. After having been marooned in the woods at night by a policeman, Bruck found that the local papers had smeared her good name, and accused her of causing an incident instead of being a victim. To make matters worse, the chief of police and a mysteriously appointed lawyer began visiting her frequently, pushing forth an agenda designed to bury this incident without any admission of guilt by anyone. Her desire to have the slanderous statements retracted from the newspaper turned this

into a potentially explosive situation, to the point that the local authorities even threatened to block the production of the film. The result of this discrimination towards Edith is symmetrically opposite to the thematic ghetto she spoke of recently. Instead of delaying or preventing her from sharing an artistic representation of life and history, like in the case of the film *ANDREMO IN CITTÀ*, the thematic ghetto Bruck is currently operating in limits her creative expression to the subject of the *Shoah*, as if to suggest that she has nothing else to offer the Italian and European literary scene.

Upon her return to Italy after the completion of *ANDREMO IN CITTÀ*, Bruck found that, because of the incident in Belgrade, for the first time, she was being “attacked by leftist newspapers, and both supported and exploited by the right-wing press”. Although she would certainly not describe herself as a Communist, Bruck also admits that she never would have expected to receive any form of support in writing from those journalists that align themselves with the political right. This incident reminded her of the need to protect her privacy and her own interests from those who are willing to use the misfortunes of others as ammunition for their own political battles. This is one of a variety of reasons why she has given up on her desire to be a member of the Italian *albo dei giornalisti*. Although she was given considerable creative freedom during the time she spent working for the national broadcast corporation RAI, Italian newspapers in particular have always been interested in her work because of her heritage and life experiences. Unwilling to be relegated to writing only about ‘questioni ebraiche’ (Jewish issues), the author prefers to concentrate on the themes of her choosing. In conclusion, it is important to remember that the author is not accusing or placing blame on anyone in the Italian publishing industry. In fact, she admits that her writing is, in one form or another, completely related to a single purpose: the desire to denounce all injustices and abuses of power – not in order to seek revenge, but because someone has to speak out. When asked about her motivations for writing *Transit*, Bruck mentioned both the mistreatment she had suffered 47 years ago at the hand of her friend Pontecorvo, as well as the Belgrade incident in the mid 60s, but she proceeded to relate this novel to the authorial intent behind all of her other writings by offering the following commentary:

Non [l’ho scritto] per vendetta, questo deve essere molto chiaro, io non ho un sentimento vendicativo nei confronti di nessuno, né odio nessuno, neanche i tedeschi, anche perché me lo chiedono sempre quando vado nelle scuole. Io sono libera proprio di questi sentimenti così terribili e negativi che ti avvelenano la vita, la tua vita, quindi è una cosa per cui mi sento molto graziata, molto liberata, molto benedetta, molto favorita per questo mio non sentire odio verso assolutamente nessuno. Quello che io sento molto invece è l’ingiustizia. Ho pensato che, prima o poi, questo mio lamento contro le ingiustizie che ho subito, sia perché mi hanno rotto il polso, sia perché lui [Gillo] si è comportato in questa maniera così sbagliata, non amichevole, anche perché era un amico, ho detto che va denunciata, quindi secondo me *Transit*, come tanti altri miei libri, è una denuncia: denunciare tutti i soprusi, tutte le oppressioni, lo schiacciare l’altro, il non riconoscere l’umanità dell’altro. (personal interview)

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