

the
story
of a
jewish
boy

BY LEOPOLD BERMAN

Translated by Giuliana Carugati



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	9
Diary of Leopold Berman	13
Story of a Jewish Boy	45
Postscript	87
Afterword	89
About the Author	93
About the Translator	95

INTRODUCTION

by Simi Berman

This is the diary and writings of Leopold (Leo) Berman(n), a teenage boy living through the last days of World War II and the early post-war years in Italy.

His mother, Anna Tuch, was a strikingly beautiful young woman from Lvov, Poland. She came to Merano with her mother, after the death of her father, to be treated at Waldpark, the sanatorium Leo's grandfather, Maximillian Bermann, had opened, which had become famous for its grape cure, where patients would eat half a pound of the blue hard-skinned grapes from the surrounding vineyards three times a day for four to six weeks between September and October.

At Waldpark, Anna met Siegfried (Friedl) Bermann, Dr. Bermann's sophisticated and debonair son, who had studied soil agronomy at the University of Perugia with the intention of becoming a pioneer in Palestine. Anna and Friedl fell in love and became engaged. Soon after, Friedl wanted Anna to go with him to Palestine, but with Anna unprepared to follow after him, he went alone. When he returned a year later, they were married, though his interest in her had cooled while he was away.

After the marriage, Friedl and Anna lived at Waldpark along with Friedl's parents, brothers, and sister. In 1929, Leo's brother Raffaele was born, and Leo in 1931. Their first six years were spent in the cushioned environment of their grandfather's sanatorium, The garden, however, was Leo's own private Eden, luxuriant and secure. He climbed its fig trees, plucked its apples, and lost himself among the roses, tall grasses,

and other vegetation. He was a playful and athletic boy who loved to run and ride his bicycle up and down the hills around the sanatorium.

Raffaele (Ralfi) on the other hand, at the age of four, was placed in a clinic in Rapallo, on the Italian Riviera, to be treated for an inflammation of the lining of the lungs, never fully recovering his health and strength. One illness led to another; typhus, then tuberculosis of the bone, following him for the rest of his life.

In 1935, Friedl Bermann took the family from Merano to Milan where he opened a chemical factory to manufacture detergent. At this time, things had already begun to deteriorate, both in the marriage and with respect to the situation of the Jews in Italy.

During the next seven years, Mussolini's policy turned more aggressively racist as his alliance with Hitler strengthened. The edict of 1938, among other restrictions, forbade Jews from attending schools and Jewish teachers from teaching in them. Leo had had one year of school, from the ages of six to seven in Milan before the edict was enacted

In 1939, with a sense of impending disaster and a growing distancing of himself from his wife and sons, Friedl Bermann sailed to America. His delay in sending tickets for his family resulted in Anna, Raffaele, and Leo standing at the port while their ship, *The Rex*, set sail.

Stranded in wartorn Italy, Anna decided to go back to Merano with the boys. Though by now Merano was not safe for Jews, it was a place she knew and had personal resources. Nevertheless, they were able to remain there in relative safety until September 8, 1943. On that day, as described by Leo in his account, everything changed dramatically. When the Badoglio government, an interim government that had come to power after the fall of Mussolini, called for an armistice with the Allies, the hopes of all who had suffered during the fascist regime were raised.

In August 1944, after the German retreat from Perugia, Anna, Leo, and Ralfi managed to get a ride to Rome with a British soldier

in the back of a jeep. When they arrived in the city, Ralfi was placed in a hospital while Leo and his mother, now homeless, went to live in a Displaced Persons camp at Cinecittà, the film studio in Rome that had been turned into a temporary shelter for refugees.

The Bermanns met many other refugees there, among them Jews from all over Europe, who had survived and found their way to the DP camp in Rome. Stories were exchanged of the terrible ordeals that people had undergone during the course of the war. Leo kept a diary, a day by day account of some of these stories as well as other daily occurrences that were significant to him. He also took this opportunity, at age 14, to write *Story of a Jewish Boy*, an account of his experiences of the previous one and a half years.

diary
of
leopold
berman

APRIL 12, 1945

ROME

Uncle Hennek is leaving at 3 o'clock to go to an U.N.R.R.A.¹ rest home. This home is located on the via Cassia.

Ralfi has been sick for several days, but yesterday he had a very high fever. Mamma is very worried about him. Also Aunt Ada is not feeling well and has a small cough. The trial of Nazi criminals is taking place in Nuremberg. The American prosecutor yesterday has read an extremely secret document with regard to Czechoslovakia.

The document shows that the gas to subdue Czechoslovakia had been ready.

1 United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

MAY 24. 1945
CINECITTÀ

Yesterday was a day of ugly memories. In the afternoon, photographs of the concentration camps of Buchenwald, Weimar and Dachau were put up in the “bar.” I shuddered to think that among those bones could be those of my relatives. At night they showed an even more horrible documentary. One could see living skeletons, mountains of bones, and other scenes impossible to describe. I was speechless during the entire show, thinking how a few men could kill millions of people in cold blood and without distinction. Nothing could be enough punishment for these people. But the thing that made me most angry was that some of these lesser murderers are even here in this camp.

There was significant evidence against these evil-doers. After some Hungarian women spoke against the Jews, the kitchen staff refused to prepare meals for one or two days if these Nazis did not leave the camp.

MAY 28, 1945

CINECITTÀ

Yesterday morning we went to the lake at Albano. It is a wonderful place and we had a great time. Coming back, we were lucky to get a ride with a truck from the camp.

I had to stay up until midnight to study, and today I am really tired.

JUNE 4, 1945
CINECITTÀ

Two minutes ago I noticed Miriam Theriacovschi, crying outside. My mother told me that she was crying because she had learnt that her mother had been killed by the despicable Nazis.

I thought how fortunate I am still to have my mother. I also thought how many other children are crying for their mothers, and how many mothers for their children. How mournful this crying is, which can be heard even in this room.

JUNE 5, 1945
CINECITTÀ

Yesterday five Greek girls arrived from Rhodes who in 1944 had been brought to the camp in Dachau, Germany. They live in the room next to ours. The entire camp talks about them. The things they say are horrible. I will write them down as I heard them. These women have told of how they underwent a daily two-hour session of blows with a stick. Worst of all is that they told of having had to see their parents burn.

Everyone felt great pity for those girls who were helped in many ways here in the camp. They were given clothes and some beds. Every day one hears about more Nazi atrocities. Let us not forget them.

JUNE 6, 1945
CINECITTÀ

Tonight when I came back home, I found one of those Jewish women from Greece in our room. This girl had been taken by the SS from Rhodes to Auschwitz. There her parents and sisters were burnt. She was made to work because she wasn't either sick or too thin. The fact is that someone who only had a tiny blemish wasn't taken for work. From Auschwitz they were taken to Dachau in Germany. There she was made to unload pitcoal from train wagons and to cover craters made by bombs. On her arm she had a number branded by the SS.

JUNE 9, 1945
CINECITTÀ

Today mother is very nervous because we don't have any money and because of Ralfi. Every trifle gets her mad. I try to control myself as best I can, but sometimes nasty words escape me; afterwards I regret it bitterly. I really feel sorry for dear mother. All alone as she is, having to take care of me and Ralfi is certainly not an easy thing.

Here in Rome it is unbearably hot, and even the Egyptians say it is not as hot in their country.

I have a lot of work to do, because on the 25th I must take my exams.

JUNE 12, 1945

ROME

Today I went to visit Ralfi. He looks run down to me. The doctor says that he has influenza. After lunch, he had a fever of 38 degrees (centigrade).

JUNE 13, 1945
CINECITTÀ

Mother has decided to leave Cinecittà. We are going to Rome to the Pingis. In our room everything is upside down. So this sojourn has ended as well. We arrived in Cinecittà on August 29, 1944. Ten long months. Many things have happened. The war has ended, as well as many other things. My handwriting is not very natural because I am very excited.

JUNE 13, 1945

ROME

We are by now in Rome. We got here about half an hour ago. It's very nice here. There is a bedroom and a dining room; the furniture is brand new. The kitchen is very small but it doesn't matter. One thing that pleases me very much is the bathroom, because at Cinecittà it was really disgusting. I do not regret leaving the camp because it is more comfortable here.

I realize now that today is the 13th. Some people say it's badluck, but it seems the opposite to me.

JUNE 19, 1945

CINECITTÀ

It's Sunday today, and since I have finished almost all of my homework, I am very bored. So as not to sit doing nothing, I will write of something that happened during our flight. We were at Brogio, a village of four or five houses near Perugia. It was the 16th or 17th of June 1944, I don't remember very well.

At about 10 o'clock in the morning we saw a good number of German vehicles arrive, fleeing from the battle front, which was at that time near.

First came two tanks provided with anti-aircraft guns, which however were damaged. Afterwards came several cars and trucks. One of these, and precisely the one which was used as a machine-shop and had a generator in tow, stopped right in front of our house. That very morning the Allied airforce attacked the vehicles and we had a terrible fight because the Spitfire bullets were hailing down all around us. One thing was reassuring to us, another scared us.