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Source: *Italice*, Vol. 84, No. 2/3 (Summer - Autumn, 2007), pp. 606-613

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Italian

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40505721>

Accessed: 19-05-2017 13:50 UTC

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Intervista/Interview

EDITH BRUCK, A TRANSLINGUAL WRITER WHO FOUND A HOME IN ITALY:
AN INTERVIEW BY MARIA CRISTINA MACERI

*every day a miracle / I know that life is returned to me /
and that it will again be beautiful. (Specchi 2005)*

In the last twenty years, the number of translingual writers in Italy has increased, as a consequence of the phenomenon that Hans Magnus Enzensberger called Die grosse Migration. But the years after the Second World War were also a time of great migration, of people who left their countries to escape racial persecution (or the memory thereof) and totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe. Many of them migrated overseas, but some, like Edith Bruck and later Giorgio and Nicola Pressburger and Tomaso Kemény, arrived and stayed in Italy.

*At the end of war, Italy was poor and destroyed by bombing, very different from the rich country that now lures many migrants. Edith Bruck found an affinity between that poor Italy and the Hungarian village where she was born. In the Fifties in Rome, Bruck was able to create continuity with her past and find a voice to describe, in Italian, the terrible experience of a twelve-year-old child, violently separated from her mother who was eliminated at Auschwitz. To try to overcome this trauma, she became a writer. Her first book, the autobiography *Chi ti ama così* (1959; *Who Loves You Like This* [Paul Drys Books, 2000]), and later *Le sacre nozze* (1969), *Due stanze vuote* (1974), *Transit* (1978), *Mio splendido disastro* (1979), *e L'attrice* (1994) deal with survivors and their difficulties copying with a past that makes them vulnerable for their whole lives.*

*A few years ago I was working on a project on two translingual writers, Helena Janeczek and Helga Schneider, who wrote two books in Italian, *Lezioni di tenebra* (1997) and *Lasciami andare, madre* (2001; *Let me go* [Walker & Company, 2004]) in which they describe their conflictual relationship with their mothers and with the past of their countries. Both mothers, one as a victim and one as a persecutor, were involved in the Holocaust. I also read *Lettera alla madre* (1988) by Edith Bruck, a very intense and moving book, in which she makes interesting remarks about her drive to write, her mother, and their separation in Auschwitz. In the literature written in Italian by translingual writers, there is a stream that could be called testimonial literature; it is made up of works by women writers coming from Germany and Austria who face up to the Nazi past of these countries. Some are survivors, like Elisa Springer, author of *Il silenzio dei vivi* (1998), others are children of the persecutors, like Ursula Ritter, author of *Un bambino piange ancora* (2004). I think that Edith Bruck may be considered as the first writer of this genre. But it would not be correct to put Edith Bruck in the "ghetto" of testimonial literature, for she is the first to rebel against this classification. She feels the burden of being a witness of the Holocaust, as she describes in the book *Signora Auschwitz* (1999). Nevertheless she still feels obliged to perform this painful role; when I rang her recently, she was leaving for Florence, to speak in front of five thousand students on the "Giorno della Memoria," the day in which Italians remember the victims of the Holocaust. The poems of Bruck and other survivors must have really touched the hearts and the minds of the students: one of them said that "the greatest lesson one can learn is that in order to face up to certain situations, one must find the courage to share the pain."*

Without ignoring the testimonial value of Bruck's books, I think that some themes of her works are common to many writers in our age of the Great Migration, such as

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starting a new life in a different country, creating a new identity, the past effecting the present, and the sense of estrangement of a migrant.

*In this interview with Edith Bruck, I discuss several aspects of her work that are crucial for a translingual writer: her relationship with her country of origin and her country of adoption, her relationship with her mother tongue and her acquired language, and the problems that a migrant writer had to face half a century ago, when she started writing. Obviously her role as survivor of the Holocaust came out in this interview, and, in particular, her relationship with her mother, whose figure appears in many of her books of narrative and poetry, especially in *Lettera alla madre*. When I met Edith Bruck last year in Rome, I was not aware that this book was going to be translated into English.¹ I was delighted when she told me of the translation, because it will give English-speaking readers the opportunity to become acquainted with this interesting transnational writer. It was always my intention to make this interview available to those interested in Bruck who do not speak Italian. Now, even more, my hope is that these pages will shed light on the life and work of this profoundly human writer, who in spite of the terrible experiences she went through, tells us, as in her last work, *Specchi* (2005), that "every day [is] a miracle / I know that life is returned to me / and that it will again be beautiful."*

INTERVIEW

MCM: How did you arrive in Italy and why did you decide to start a new life in this country?

EB: I arrived in Italy by mere chance, while I was migrating from one country to another other. From Italy, I intended to join my sister who was living in Argentina. She did not send me the money for the passage on the ship and, besides, I did not have anybody who could support me in Argentina, so the Argentinian authorities would not have allowed me to stay permanently there. I had the impression that there was a welcoming atmosphere in Italy, there was this light, this sun, a kind of almost desperate cheerfulness, because one could still smell the effects of the war. In the Fifties, Italy was still suspended between the past and the present, and I said to myself that in this country I could live and create my new nest. But I did not have the slightest idea how. When I arrived, I was extremely poor. Like a migrant I had only a small suitcase, nevertheless I stayed here. At the beginning I lived right here, on via del Babuino, in a furnished room. I found a job at a famous hairdresser whose customers were rich and often foreign women. I was earning quite a lot, because I can speak several languages and I was able to welcome the foreign customers who attended that salon.

I come from a peasant background, and strangely enough Rome seemed like home to me; Italians were good people [*brava gente*], because, at that time, they really shared their dinner soup with people in need. Everything was very different from now. I found myself almost at ease with their poverty. Italy was like me then, while, nowadays, I cannot find any similarity between this country and me.

MCM: What is your attitude toward Hungary today? Did it in change in the course of your life, since you spent most of it elsewhere?

EB: This is a very painful story for me, because I am not really able to make peace with my country. I cannot reconcile myself with two countries, Hungary and Israel, with which I am at odds for different reasons. As soon as I arrive in Hungary, I regress dreadfully, I feel as if I were a child again, a persecuted and deported child. I visited Hungary many times, especially when it was still under a communist regime, which liked me very much, I don't know why. They even shot a film on my life, but every time I felt ill at ease, the language was hurting me, the swear words I heard on the streets or at the market. I had already heard those swear words used against me, and they reminded me of my parents, of having been discriminated against, of our poverty, of the unnecessary malevolence, of the fascist regime. For all these reasons, it is very

difficult for me to feel at home in Hungary. Among other things, when my sister and I returned from the concentration camps to our village, we were literally rejected. I could make an exception for Budapest, because it is a big city, like many others in the world, but when I am there, I wonder why they are speaking Hungarian, because I do not feel that I am in Hungary.

MCM: Which language did you speak at home?

EB: Hungarian, but my parents spoke Yiddish.

MCM: An Italo-Brazilian translingual writer, de Caldas Brito, said that our true motherland is childhood and the German philosopher Adorno, in exile in the United States, declared that our true home is writing. Baal-Makkshoves, a doctor and Jewish writer of the nineteenth century, stated that literature is the very home for Jewish people. With which of these statements do you agree more?

EB: With none. I do not like the words “motherland” or “fatherland,” because these words bring terrible images into my mind. Endless crimes were committed in the name of fatherland, as well as in the name of God. My country is between Piazza di Spagna and Piazza del Popolo, where I live, this is my village. When I go away from Italy, when I am not in my so-called “fatherland,” I miss Rome and my house and I look forward to going back, because I feel lost and uprooted everywhere. This flat, which is not mine, is my country. Here I feel at ease, this is Bruck’s bunker, as some people say. This is a house that does not belong to me and that I love so much I could even eat its walls!

MCM: Reading your works, I learnt that your reference point in the past is not Hungary as a country, but your village and the house where you lived as a child with your family. I had the impression that the house and the immediate neighbourhood were your “village.”

EB: They are my favorite “village,” but I must recognize that I loved the whole village intensely, probably because when I was there I lived with my family, because I loved its mud, I loved the river, I loved the dam, the cemetery and everything that was around me, except the poverty. I had a very hard and difficult childhood, but I do not think that I was unhappy, because most of the people living in that village were poor as well. It seemed to me that life was beautiful, maybe because I was still a carefree child: I used to play, I had a very lively imagination, and the future was in front of me. I think that childhood is very important, not only from a Freudian point of view, but because we have our whole life in front of us and we have a lot of time to realize our dreams. Now we are older and we have understood that dreams do not come true, but we must have new dreams, otherwise we cannot live. The problem is that our dreams decrease, as we get older.

MCM: The house is usually a maternal symbol. A house gives us a sense of belonging, and stability. From this point of view, you, with your attachment to your house, are very different to Giorgio Pressburger, in whose works spatial and sentimental nomadism are common topoi.

EB: I am closely linked with the earth, flowers, animals, while he is very cerebral. I am very deep and I follow my gut feeling. “Io sono terra terra, lui è aria aria.”

MCM: Your novels and short stories, *Le sacre nozze*, *Andremo in città*, *Transit*, *Due stanze vuote*, and the more recent *L'attrice* are set outside Italy. Your mother tongue is Hungarian and you write in Italian. Do you consider yourself a transnational writer, an Italian writer, or an author of Jewish diasporic literature?

EB: Let us say transnational. Unfortunately I am not regarded as an Italian writer. I think that I will remain a foreigner all my life. This is my experience in a place that is, on the whole, very hospitable, but which does not consider me an Italian, because whenever someone writes about me, I am called the Hungarian Jew or the Hungarian author. People often do not know that I write in Italian, many think that my books are translated; in my works, I deal with universal topics, but this is not understood. If I partici-

pate in a literary award, critics never attack my works, but I never find anybody who promotes them, perhaps because the topics of my books disturb the conscience of many Italians and Europeans. The Holocaust is not just about Jewish people but also those who planned and allowed it; it is the darkest event of the twentieth century. I witness to and I remind people of events that none wants to think about anymore, but I cannot refrain from writing about it, even if this hurts me. One day Calvino told me that I should have written in English and lived in the United States, because Italy is not the right country for my books. Maybe he was right, I do not know. The Italian readership is part of the global readership. Today nobody wants to face our past, especially people who did not live that past. To some extent, I am a nuisance. I find meeting students in the schools, where I am invited by their teachers, very tiring. Youth ignores history, people choose to be ignorant.

MCM: In most of your books you deal with themes linked with the Holocaust, but at the same time these themes are also related to universal problems that are still relevant for our age, for example the relationship between mother and daughter (*Lettera alla madre*), the relationship between man and woman, and the difficulty for women of a certain generation to live this relationship more autonomously (*Mio splendido disastro*), and the way in which gay people are treated (*Il silenzio degli amanti*). Finally, as you said, the theme of memory concerns all of us. I think that Calvino's remark was shortsighted.

EB: Certainly Calvino's remark shows the narrowness of his view about my books. He made this remark to me several times, saying "you Jews," but many of my readers are not Jews.

MCM: You started writing your memories (*Chi ti ama così*) in Hungarian and then you continued them writing them in Italian. What did it mean to you to write in another language?

EB: Yes, I started writing in Hungarian and then, while I was fleeing from Hungary, I had to throw them away. When I arrived in Italy, I was not even able to say "ciao." Learning Italian meant finding a way to express myself, to be reborn, and to say "I am": a new world opened for me. After six months, I was already speaking Italian because I learn languages easily. When I started writing, I discovered that I could write in Italian. From the time when I published the book, I never changed it. My books are born with their own languages. They are like nine-month-old children, completely formed and ready to come to the world. Writing in Italian meant acquiring a new moral identity, making the burden I was carrying inside lighter, because I was not able, at least a little bit, to vomit that terrible experience of the concentration camp that was poisoning my life. There was, and still is, a monster inside me. Nobody will write enough about that experience, because it is unspeakable. Before becoming a writer and a poet, I was only a refugee without a language; I did not know how to speak. I knew who I was, but by acquiring a new language I was reborn. It was easy for me to say what I felt, because I did not have control over the language and I could not grasp deeply the meaning of words. If I had written my books in Hungarian, I would not have said certain things. On the contrary I felt much freer in a language that was not my mother tongue. If I speak Hungarian, even nowadays, I feel stripped bare; for me Italian is like a dress, a defense, a mask that covers me, armour, shelter.

MCM: Today it is not easy for translingual writers to publish their works in Italy. How hard was it in the Fifties?

EB: The only problem I had was when a left-wing publisher wanted to publish the book but censored it by removing the parts where I had described the violence of Russian soldiers toward Hungarian women. I refused every kind of censorship. Then I tried with the publisher Lerici and he accepted my book.

MCM: I think that *Lettera alla madre* is a very important text to help understand you and your motivation to become a writer. The book was written in 1988, and you did not



[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

mother, whom he invokes, and of vaguely perceived flavors and smells of his childhood.

MCM: Your last book, the beautiful poem *Specchi*, published at the end of 2005, has a circular structure, as it begins and ends with the image of the menorah that watches over your room. This poem is a kind of autobiography, because you describe your life through the objects in this room, objects that, like mirrors, reflect images of your past, images of people whose lives intertwined with yours. The objects are mirrors, because as you say “they put together pieces of life.” I noticed that the image of the mirror, though in a different way, plays an important role in the ending of *Tracce*. In the last paragraph, Katia, the protagonist, has a pistol in her hand and she fires, perhaps accidentally, and the bullet hits her image in the mirror. The mirror breaks, creating a shape like a six pointed star; the allusion to her Jewish identity is clear. It is as if Katia, in order to go back to life, needs to get rid of her past, but it remains as a hole in the mirror. In the last verses of *Specchi*, you express your joy at returning to life after a heart attack. As in your first autobiographical work *Chi ti ama così*, life continues loving you and you continue loving it. Life triumphs over death one again.

EB: For a moment Katia believes, she almost fears and hopes, that she has cancelled her identity as a survivor. But Auschwitz, the Jewish star, is an interior tattoo that belongs to her and a mysterious hand gives her back her saved life, with mystical references, as in the last (and not only the last) verses of *Specchi*, the menorah lights up and watches over the darkened room where the poem is set.

MCM: Some of the themes of your works can be found in the texts of other translingual authors who write in Italian: to live away from one’s country of origin, to build a new identity, the effect of the past on the present, the estrangement felt by someone living abroad. Did you ever think of writing a novel about the new immigrants? I read somewhere that you were planning to write a novel about a prostitute from Albania.

EB: I wrote it, but the publisher refused it. It is a novel based on a true story involving a pilot and a young Albanese woman, kidnapped and brought to Italy and forced to prostitute herself. I was interested in the story of this girl who was deported, I could identify with her. The Albanese pilot found her and took her back to Albania. The novel was a good work, but they did not publish it, because publishers expect me to write about survivors or Auschwitz. It was a miracle that they accepted *Il silenzio degli amanti*. I want to be a normal person, I want to come out of the ghetto in which publishers have placed me, as a witness of the Holocaust, so I just finished writing the story of a woman who loves a man who is twenty years younger than her. I describe her fight to remain young and beautiful, but at the end she cannot stand it anymore and gives up. I have created the character of a woman who cannot manage to be beautiful anymore and to do everything that today’s society requires: to look young and to have plastic surgery. The novel is completely different from my previous books, so there is no danger that I can be identified with the main character.

MCM: Did you belong to the Italian feminist movement?

EB: Let us say that I participated in the feminist movement of the Seventies for two or three years, than I left it because I had some discussions with women who spoke as though Auschwitz had been a joke, and one of my friends was called a Jew. I do not think that women are better than men.

MCM: I would like to discuss your attitude toward Israel. I think that you developed a critical attitude toward Israel because you were hurt and deeply disappointed by it. For your mother, Israel was a myth, the Promised Land. In your book *Le sacre nozze*, you openly criticize the treatment of survivors of the Holocaust who migrated to Israel like you.

EB: At that time I was the first to write about these things. Nowadays Grossmann, Yehoshua, Oz, and Cohen speak critically of how the survivors were not welcome and not listened to. It was said that they were black sheep, who deserved to be killed,

because they had not defended themselves. It is like saying that we were cowards, while the people brought up in Israel were a generation born with the war, and during the war a new kind of Jew was born, a Jew who had a different conception of morality and life. We had been accustomed to walking with bowed heads because we were a minority. It was impossible to defend oneself in Auschwitz. Jews were not accustomed to using weapons, women worked and looked after their children, men studied. The Jews who were more assimilated, such as journalists, publishers and doctors, lived in cities, not in the country. For people like us coming from the terrible experience of the concentration camp, it was terrible not to find a glimpse of humanity. The arrival in the "Promised Land" was the wonderful fable my mother used to tell us, the great myth was becoming true. As soon as we disembarked, men were sent to fight. It was a nightmare: everything was a shock for us, for example, Hebrew was the sacred language for us, but in Israel it was the language used to send us to hell; the Yiddish of the ghettos was despised. It was difficult to live in a transit camp where we had to queue for a piece of bread under the surveillance of a person with a stick who reminded us of a *kapo*. Today I can understand this: the history of Israel, the continuous war, the difficulty finding accommodation for the immigrants. I can understand that neurotic country now, but I could not then.

MCM: In some of your novels you criticize the Jewish community in North America.

EB: I do not know the whole North American Jewish community. I am speaking of Jewish migrants, who live in their past, speak Hungarian (or Czech or Russian), among themselves and continue to eat Hungarian food. They do not belong to the country in which they live, even though they love it. They are not particularly interested in where they live because their heart is in Israel, about which they feel nostalgic. They seem to me to be uprooted and in eternal exile.

MCM: I had the impression that you criticized their Americanization.

EB: Yes, because they are often more North American than the North Americans. They are also racist toward black people. They have the superficial defects of the Americans, one cannot criticize the United States in front of them, but they do not know the country they live in very well.

MCM: Primo Levi considered himself an Italian Jew, which citizenship would like to add to your Jewish identity?

EB: I am a small being ("esserino") in the world. I could never fetch a weapon to defend a country, I am a born pacifist who despises every act of violence and abuse of power.

NOTES

¹Edith Bruck, *Letter to My Mother*, trans. Brenda Webster with Gabriella Romani, introd. Gabriella Romani (New York: The Modern Language Association, 2006).

²Lynn Z. Bloom, "Heritages: Dimensions of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Women's Autobiographies," *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (New York: Ungar, 1980).