Mussolini's Jewess

by Michael McDonald

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July 29 each year marks one of the principal anniversaries of fascism: Benito Mussolini's birth on that date in 1883. To celebrate the occasion, thousands of his contemporary supporters assemble in Predappio (the village in which he was born) to pay tribute to the man who coined the term *fascismo*, launched the Fascist political movement in 1919, and ruled Italy as dictator from 1925 to 1943.

The annual commemorations in Predappio are wont to elicit a mixture of disbelief, disgust, and derision in most people who do not already know about them. Disbelief is occasioned by the fact that the Italian cult of Il Duce remains strong nearly three-quarters of a century after his death; disgust is aroused by the respect paid to a leader who dragged his country into the greatest catastrophe in its history, thereby sending at least a million people to early graves; and derision is directed at the figure of Benito Mussolini himself—the "Sawdust Caesar" whose name (in the words of his best biographer, Richard Bosworth) is more typically associated with "promiscuity, boasting, strutting vanity, petty cruelty, [and] incompetence" than with anything even remotely approaching greatness.

The annual Predappio spectacle is surely distasteful. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to indulge the commonplace view that Mussolini is best laughed at and forgotten. He continues to be an important historical figure, if only because he created the new type of modern barbarism that we know as fascism. "Fascism", as the political scientist Robert Paxton points out, "was the major political innovation of the 20th century, and the source of much of its pain." In only slightly different form, it is also, as we now see in Russia and Ukraine, becoming the source of much pain in the 21st. If we are to relieve the pain, we need to understand the illness, which means coming to grips with its source: Benito Mussolini.

To that end, scholars have taken many different approaches. One of the more curious, yet nonetheless fascinating, involves the decades-long effort by the historian Brian Sullivan, a

former research professor at the National Defense University, to assign the responsibility for both Mussolini's rise and the invention of fascism to a woman named Margherita Grassini Sarfatti. In 1993, Sullivan co-wrote (with the late Philip Cannistraro) *Il Duce's Other Woman*, a nearly 700-page biography of Sarfatti that received mixed reviews: The authors won praise for resurrecting an important figure but were criticized for exaggerating her importance. Now, after 15 years devoted to "researching and assembling" 14 articles by Sarfatti that appeared in an Argentine periodical soon after the end of World War II, Sullivan offers us *My Fault*, Sarfatti's autobiographical account of her time together with Mussolini before, during, and after his seizure of power.

If Sarfatti is known at all today—aside from having been portrayed by Susan Sarandon in the 1999 Tim Robbins film *Cradle Will Rock*—it is as one of Mussolini's lovers. That alone simply makes her but one of hundreds, but Sarfatti is strikingly different from the others. She stayed by his side much longer than most, she was highly intelligent, and she also happened to have been Jewish. Sullivan rightly contends that there was much more to Sarfatti than boudoir intrigue. Indeed, in the second and third decades of the 20th century, there were arguably few men or women who played a more pivotal role in the Italian cultural scene, or in Mussolini's life, than Sarfatti.

But Sullivan goes much further, referring to Mussolini as Sarfatti's "pupil and dependent." Where other scholars have seen her memoirs as a mélange of malicious gossip, Sullivan contends that they explore "the creation of a Frankenstein's monster." Sullivan's publishers, in turn, call *My Fault* not only "the most revealing portrait of the Duce" but also "a major contribution to the history of the origins and evolution of the Fascist regime." Sarfatti certainly merits a place in the history of Italian fascism, but she was not nearly the pivotal ideological figure depicted by Sullivan, who apparently plies his line not for the sake of novelty, but because he actually believes it.

My Fault: Mussolini As I Knew Him
by Margherita Grassini Sarfatti
Edited, annotated, and with commentary by
Brian R. Sullivan
Enigma Books, 2014, 323 pp., $26

Who was Margherita Sarfatti? *My Fault*'s introduction provides a lucid overview of her life. She was born in Venice in 1880, the fourth and last child of Amedeo Grassini and Emma Levi. The Sarfattis were wealthy (among other things, her father established the city's water taxi system of *vaporetti* to capitalize on the tourist trade), and his daughter grew up in highly privileged circumstances.

Her parents were Orthodox Jews, but Sarfatti received an outstanding secular education. Well read, fluent in several languages, including English, she became active in Socialist and feminist causes while still in her teens—hence her sobriquet in Venice as *la vergine rossa*, "the red virgin." Around the turn of the past century, she married a much older Socialist lawyer and moved to Milan to become the art critic for the Socialist Party newspaper *Avanti!*. It was there she first met Benito Mussolini, the paper's new editor, in 1912.

Sarfatti and Mussolini were inseparable for the next two decades, both in and out of the bedroom. Mussolini went so far as to refer to Sarfatti as his *mascotte*. She paid for his clothes, his car, his apartment, and much more. She joined with him as he broke with the Socialists over Italy's participation in the World War. When Mussolini founded his own newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, to advocate intervention, she went with him. When at the end of the war he organized his followers in the Piazza San Sepolcro in Milan (where the first *Fasci italiani di combatimento*, or combat bands, were formed), she was there, too.

Sarfatti was by Mussolini's side as well in the months preceding the March on Rome in 1922. It was in her villa in Soldo, a few kilometers from Lake Como, that the plans for the march were hatched, and she was physically "at Mussolini's elbow" when Mussolini was offered the premiership in 1922. By the time he took

office, she had also launched the political journal *Gerarchia*, a principal source of Fascist orthodoxy, which she managed for several years.

Sarfatti stuck by Mussolini during the crisis occasioned by the 1924 kidnapping and murder of the Socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti by Fascist thugs, an episode that aroused fierce opposition to fascism and eventually led Mussolini to crush the antifascist resistance and assume dictatorial powers. She then began to write the first authorized biography of Mussolini, which initially appeared in English in 1925. It appeared in Italy the following year with the title *Dux*. It ran through 17 editions between 1926 and 1938 and was translated into 18 languages. Her book, which was introduced into Italian schools, sought to create the legend of a new Caesar, a modern man of destiny for Italy. Because the biography sold well, Sarfatti was commissioned to write a series of articles in English for the Hearst newspaper syndicate, which helped to bolster Mussolini's image in America.

The 1920s were the high point of Sarfatti's life. Beginning in 1922, Sarfatti was the most powerful woman in the regime. She moved from Milan to Rome in 1926, where she set up a salon to win support for the regime from artists and intellectuals, whom she wooed with patronage. During this period Sarfatti was also one of Mussolini's ghostwriters. That Mussolini was so effusively praised in the foreign press in the 1920s was in great part due to Sarfatti's efforts. Mussolini phoned her several times a day to ask for information and advice; Sarfatti probably saw more of him than his wife Donna Rachele, who stayed in Milan.

A woman of enormous energy and talent, Sarfatti became a great art collector during her time in Rome. There she also promoted the *Novecento italiano*, a movement of avant-garde artists that attempted—in the name of "a modern restoration"—to relink 20th century Italian art to classical and Renaissance traditions. Sarfatti proclaimed that, "an orderly society produced an ordered art." She was able to make it appear that Mussolini had bestowed his seal of approval on the movement by inducing him to give a speech at the inaugural exhibition of *Novecento* art in 1923, which he would later disavow.

In time, though, her ascendancy over the Duce began to wane. In 1932 Mussolini met his soon-to-be mistress Claretta Petacci, who was 32 years younger than Sarfatti. Around the same time Sarfatti's collaboration with *Il Popolo d'Italia* ended, as Sarfatti was attacked by extremist elements in the Fascist Party (with Mussolini's approval) for using the *Novecento* movement to introduce unhealthy foreign influences into the country and for supposedly seeking to advance her own political ambitions.

Beginning in the winter of 1936, anti-Semitic attacks began to appear frequently in the Fascist press. The year 1938 was the turning point. In May, Hitler received an enthusiastic welcome in Italy; in November, Italy enacted racial laws. Shortly afterwards, Sarfatti abandoned her villa in Soldo and took refuge in Switzerland. She then moved on to a gilded exile in South America.

Sullivan's volume offers readers not one book but three. First, it assembles Sarfatti's memoirs—which originally comprised 14 not very extensive articles, broken apart and recomposed by Sullivan into 18 chapters of widely varying lengths. To these articles Sullivan appends copious footnotes (where footnotes should be, on the bottom of the page), which, seemingly designed with the historically illiterate in mind, identify in great detail every political and historical reference of the period, no matter how well known. Finally, Sullivan provides an extensive commentary of his own to what Sarfatti wrote in each chapter. More than three-quarters of this 300-page book is made up of Sullivan's writing, not Sarfatti's. Much of his writing is interesting, but it glosses over the obvious fact: Sarfatti's memoirs are not an historical record of great importance; in addition, as Sullivan himself repeatedly acknowledges, they contain any number of inaccuracies and outright falsehoods. To be sure, Sarfatti was in the inner circle of Fascist leaders for a time. Nevertheless, *My Fault* mostly retails gossip about her enemies and Mussolini himself.

She paints Mussolini's Italy as a robber state and the Fascists as coarse, greedy second-raters. Thus readers will hear a lot about the loose morals of one of Sarfatti's enemies, Petacci, who "was expelled from three different private

schools for—shall we say—experiments in practical biology." Similarly, Mussolini's wife Donna Rachele is dismissed as "a peasant of wild elementary passions." As for another rival, Mussolini's son-in-law and the country's Foreign Secretary, Galeazzo Ciano, to Sarfatti he was "a mere puppet of a man", and his father Costanzo nothing more than "a shameless embezzler and bribe taker."

Her descriptions, however colorful, are warped by envy and spite. Of greater importance, as most historians of fascism realize, it is wrong to dismiss the movement as the mere ascent of venal mediocrities. Instead, fascism redrew the frontiers between private and public, so that an individual had no rights against the community. Regrettably, Sarfatti's memoirs tell us nothing about this. They lack even the slightest political or philosophical depth and do not bear comparison with the penetrating insights to be found in Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen's contemporaneous account, in his *Diary of a Man in Despair*, of the ideological fanatics who ran the Third Reich.

My Fault does provides some insights into Mussolini's character, confirming that he was a hard man, *un animale poco socievole*, as the Duce once defined himself. But much of the time we learn intimate details of no particular value. Sarfatti discusses Mussolini's chronic stomach problems and tiptoes around the subject of his syphilis. She observes that "Mussolini really disliked thin women", instead preferring "Titian-haired young women" (like her). She notes that Mussolini was extremely superstitious and didn't try to conceal it. We also learn that he was a good horseman, "even though his seat was a bit heavy and he looked somewhat awkward in the saddle."

The portrait Sarfatti paints of the Duce confirms what we already knew: At the start of his political career Mussolini was a rather louche and provincial figure. He was the first low-class adventurer to scale the summit of power in a major European country. His boorishness was apparent, as was his lack of style. Fortunately for Mussolini though, with her help, Sarfatti writes, "He learned to choose the right shape of his shirt collars and learned the proper way to knot his tie." In this and other personal respects, Sarfatti admittedly provided important cosmetic assistance to Mussolini at the start of his career, when, to quote Bosworth once more, "he drifted up-market in his patterns of behavior." In Sullivan's words, "She had turned an ignorant boorish *paisano*, unable to use a knife and fork properly and who wiped his mouth with his sleeve, into the semblance of a mannerly gentleman she later introduced into good society."

Even after he assumed power, Sarfatti tells us, Mussolini's sexual habits remained disordered and bohemian, and he may for a time have had a cocaine habit. She says he was also a distant father to his children. Her observations that Mussolini's isolation from others and his egoism deepened as the years passed jibes with what other contemporary accounts have described. From the 1930s on, Sarfatti asserts, Mussolini increasingly rejected human sympathies. He "had no friends. He tolerated only those who acted like lowly servants."

Sarfatti presents Mussolini as a typical tyrant who accepted Darwinian determinism and believed that the strong would prevail over the weak. He became increasingly detached from reality: "More and more, he became convinced that what is not spoken or written about simply does not exist." In the end, becoming "intoxicated by power and taken over by vanity", Mussolini was no longer fully human. Instead, she writes, he succumbed to the illness of power, to "the madness of the Caesars."

Sarfatti's memoirs are regrettably silent on many major issues, such as anti-Semitism. Mussolini had Jewish backers among the industrialists and big landowners who helped finance him at the start of his career. Indeed, about 200 Jews took part in the March on Rome. But the Fascist movement became increasingly anti-Semitic, to the point that Sarfatti's sister and her husband died on the way to Auschwitz. Other relatives also died in the extermination camps. Sarfatti sheds no light on how Mussolini—who had for years mocked Hitler for his anti-Semitism and denied the existence of a Jewish problem in Italy—came to impose anti-Jewish legislation in 1938.

Similarly, Sarfatti casts a passing eye on the ruthlessness of Italian colonial conquest but does not adequately address it. Reading Sarfatti, one would never know that Italy's war against Ethiopia led to the deaths of some 500,000 Ethiopians—or that Mussolini, unlike Hitler, used poison gas. (Perhaps Sarfatti avoids this subject because she herself held racist views about white superiority.)

Sarfatti was an important figure, in that she helped create Mussolini's image and enhance the projection of his charisma. That is not a negligible achievement inasmuch as Italian fascism, as Christopher Duggan convincingly argues in his 2013 book *Fascist Voices*, ultimately rested on the Duce's mystical union with the dreams and "historical destiny" of his people. But it is an achievement that lies exclusively in the realm of public relations and the emotional manipulation of mass society through ritual, rhetoric, and unrelenting propaganda. The book does not show that Sarfatti had a profound effect on Mussolini's intellectual development (for example, how he came to proclaim that fascism would be a regime in which "all would be for the state, nothing outside the state and no one against the state"), or that she influenced his daily tactical political maneuverings once in power.

Nevertheless, Sullivan asserts that "Sarfatti was instrumental in persuading Mussolini . . . to take the route that led him to power in 1922", and that she nudged Mussolini "from the revolutionary left to the nationalist right" and thereby helped "conceptualize Fascism." Remarkably, he even contends that "Sarfatti, more than Mussolini, formulated the ideological and philosophical basis for Fascism in the 1913–19 periods." But nothing in Sarfatti's memoirs comes remotely close to supporting such claims. Sullivan himself recognizes that "throughout her memoir, she . . . avoids mention of her role in crafting Fascism." His rather unconvincing explanation for this is that Sarfatti was following Albert Speer's Nuremberg strategy: "That is, to present a contrite, humble apology for serving an evil regime but to avoid admitting guilt for any offense." A simpler and much more plausible explanation for this glaring lacuna is that she had no role (and understood that she had no role) in crafting Italian fascism.

Sullivan has yet to make his case for Sarfatti's overarching intellectual significance in Mussolini's life. But there is still hope for him. He notes that Mussolini wrote Sarfatti hundreds of letters, "reportedly 1,272." These letters, written over the course of two decades, "have passed into the possession of Sarfatti's heirs. They have refused permission to anyone to study them." If and when the letters become available, Sullivan will surely try to turn them to his advantage.

Mussolini was contemptuous of the Italians, whom he once derided as "a gesticulating, chatterbox, superficial, carnivalesque people." Unfortunately, the Italians by and large did not reciprocate. On the contrary, they mostly welcomed him. Sarfatti correctly observes that Mussolini "was absolutely prescient about feelings that would soon move the masses." In the aftermath of World War I, many Italians were looking for a leader who would end the confusion and uncertainty that prevailed. And they saw Mussolini as that leader.

No dictator gains control over a nation by himself. Instead he must obtain the cooperation

of the decisive social and political agents: the military, the police, the judiciary, senior civil servants, and in Italy's case the Church. Despite the title of her memoirs, Sarfatti cannot principally be blamed for Mussolini's rise to power, for she was but one of the many credulous Italians looking for a "good tyrant" who helped him along his way. Notwithstanding Mussolini's brutality and failure, they are still around, still infatuated with the cult of Il Duce, and still marching in Predappio today.

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