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Jetta's Story

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JETTA'S STORY



MARTHA COUNIHAN, O.S.U.

Two

JETTA "SPILLS HER BEANS"

The people were gathering quietly in the elegant room, seemingly waiting for someone or something to begin. Jetta was feeling increasingly anxious. She noticed a number of priests in their long black garb and a few dressed in purple whispering to one another. What to do next? Having read the *Divine Comedy*, she knew that the brightly dressed priests were important and that crimson and purple were reserved for them. Afraid that a speech would be made or a ceremony would begin or that she would miss an opportunity to get help, she knew she had to act — now. Gathering all of her courage, she approached a priest who wore a purple-trimmed cassock and who had a kind expression. She spoke in French, which she knew well.

"Reverend Father, I need help." The words were out of her mouth, and she was unable to control her tears. Sobs interrupted her shaking voice as the words tumbled out: "Reverend Father, I am Jewish. You know that we Jews are all in terrible danger. A few weeks ago, I had to leave my home in Yugoslavia, and now I

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am here in Rovigo, near Venice. I know the Nazis are trying to round up all Jews, even here in Italy. I don't know what has happened to my parents. I was sent to someone here in Rome who I hoped would help me, but the family is away on vacation. I am so frightened. Please help me."

The astounded men looked at the sobbing girl. The man she approached had been an official in the Vatican for years and probably never had anything to do with children or teenagers, especially girls. He was amazed that anyone would ever talk to him with such desperation and emotion. Some people would have become annoyed by such a strong emotional outburst from a stranger, but here was a sweet-looking girl. He was moved.

"Of course I will help you. I can send you to my colleague who is in charge of refugees here in Italy. I will have my secretary take you to his office, and this shall be sorted out. My colleague is called a 'nuncio', and his responsibility is to assist people and foreigners in Italy. Dry your tears. We can help you; we *will* help you."

He summoned a young cleric nearby and told him to take the young woman to the office of the papal nuncio for Italy on Via Nomentana. The bishop motioned for her to follow the young priest. Jetta looked back at the smiling bishop as she followed the young man out of the reception hall to a bus in the colonnade. She would never know the name of that compassionate cleric who set her on the path to reach her goal: to find sanctuary, to be safe.

She scarcely noticed the ancient Castel Sant'Angelo as the bus moved over the Tiber River and up Via Nazionale, and passed through Porta Pia and onto a wide thoroughfare, Via Nomentana. Slowly, Jetta began to feel better. The wide tree-lined avenue was not busy or noisy. Lovely villas had walls topped

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with flowering vines, and tall trees cast their afternoon shadows onto the street.

Further up the broad Via Nomentana, her guide said, “Over there on the right, that is Mussolini’s villa, Villa Torlonia.” Jetta felt a shiver of apprehension at seeing all the Italian police, *carabinieri*, and armed guards outside. A short time later, she was led off the bus through tall wrought-iron gates to a lovely old palace. She was told it was the home and offices of the archbishop, the nuncio.

Entering through heavy wooden doors, she immediately felt cooler in the wide marble-floored hall. The elegant rooms had gilded coffered ceilings, large paintings, and frescoed walls. They were filled with typewriters on desks and blackout curtains over the windows. Several nuns in one room were typing away. Jetta was led to a small parlor and told to wait. She was famished and a servant kindly brought her a meal.

Shortly afterward, a priest wearing a black cassock with purple piping came to the parlor. A phone call from his colleague had advised him about the unusual encounter with the girl. He introduced himself. “My name Monsignore Francesco Borgongina-Duca, and I am an archbishop and the nuncio for Italy. My responsibility is for the needs of non-Italians residing in Italy — people like you. What is your name, and how may I help you?” Jetta recounted her story to the archbishop, and he listened attentively. When she finished, he declared: “Young lady, I will do my best to help you. As an apostolic nuncio in charge of the Catholic Church in Italy, I am taking care of the many refugees trying to escape persecution. This is among my many responsibilities. I am the Vatican’s ambassador to Italy. I am very aware of what the Germans are doing with your people. Sadly, I have heard accounts like yours too often in the past few years.

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“At the Vatican, some of us speak about it among ourselves, but we have to be discreet. Not everyone agrees on politics. I will see what I can do to help you, and I will contact my colleague, the papal delegate in Zagreb, and see if he can do something for your parents. What are their names, and where are they staying now? We can send mail in a diplomatic pouch that the civil or military authorities will not open. While it is true that Italy is not deporting Jews now, your situation is precarious. We don't know how long Jews in Italy can be safe.”

The kindly archbishop was astute. He had helped craft the 1929 Lateran Treaty with Italy that created the neutral Vatican State. He had arranged for Vatican diplomats from enemy countries such as Britain, France, and Poland to move out of their Roman homes into space within Vatican City. Being politically neutral protected the Vatican from interference from the Italian fascist government and the Nazis who later governed Rome. This neutrality helped save thousands of lives of “enemies” such as Jews, political dissidents, and escaped war prisoners. Funds were provided secretly to many not in favor of the fascist government. The “bag” was the protected diplomatic pouch of correspondence, money transfers, and other documents that supported many who were penniless or in hiding. Monsignore Borgongina-Duca was among the Vatican officials who were sympathetic to the Allies. Some other Vatican officials supported Adolf Hitler. That was why he referred to the need for discretion. Several times during the war years, the nuncio interceded with the Italian fascist government to protect Italian Jews in Split and the Jews in the Italian zone of southern France. Like his nuncio colleague in Turkey, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli (later Pope John XXIII), Monsignore Borgongina-Duca worked with Jewish agencies. When war was declared, he asked his multilingual neighbor

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Ursulines to help with a task he had been assigned: to look out for and list — report — the “enemy” religious women and men residing in Rome whose governments were at war with Italy. He was using the skills of several “enemies” — Ursulines — as translators and secretaries.

“Now, I am going to send you to stay with the Ursulines whose motherhouse is just up this street. Some of those nuns you see in these offices are Ursulines who work here translating and helping with our refugee work. Mother Stanislaus, who is a Pole, has been working closely with the Holy Father helping the many young people who fled when Germany took over Poland in 1939. The Nazis were committing the same atrocities to young people as you describe with the Jewish young men in Yugoslavia. Girls were not safe either. Many are still sheltered in convents, seminaries, and other Catholic institutions in Rome. Rest here for a while. When the Ursulines leave for the day, you can go and stay with them.”

Jetta sat back on the tiny rococo settee and tried to sort out her feelings. She heard typing, phones ringing, and footsteps both loud and soft on the marble floors and carpets.

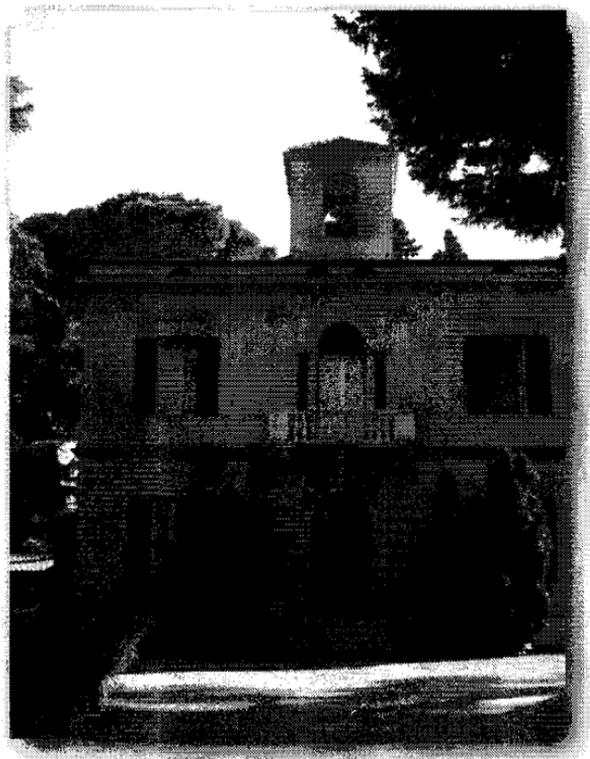
When the nuns were ready to leave, Jetta met them: Mother Marie François de Sales Henry (American), Mother Marie Vianney Boschet (French), Mother Mary Patrick O’Riordan (Irish), Mother Marie Stanisalus Polotynska (Polish), and Mother Maria Pierina Piccola, an Italian who served as a liaison with national police and other officials. They came daily to the nuncio’s home/office to translate and respond to his voluminous correspondence. The eyes of these declared “enemies” of the Italian state saw messages that were secret and routine.

This was not her first contact with nuns. Jetta had tuberculosis as a child and was sent to a sanitarium that was staffed by nursing sisters. So she was a bit familiar with these single

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women who were dedicated to God and to doing “good works”. Jetta was more curious than intimidated. She looked at these nuns up close. They wore long black wool serge dresses that were pleated in front. Jetta would learn that the “habit” was what the nuns called the clothes they wore habitually. Each dress had a cincture — a long leather belt that held a crucifix at the waist. A long rosary was wound around the belt. Each nun wore a starched white linen headdress that was attached to a large semicircular starched white collar that almost reached the belt, so only the face showed. A long black veil was draped over the headdress. The sleeves were long and folded back, with another tight sleeve underneath. “*How do they survive in the heat of summer?*” wondered Jetta, who was feeling gritty and damp in her sheer silk dress.

The nuns spoke French among themselves. Each one spent her day translating the many letters and documents written in various languages that arrived at the nuncio's office. Jetta spoke Polish, Serbo-Croatian, French, and some German. Many of the letters were from people begging the nuncio for his intervention. Mother Stanislaus, who spoke to her in Polish, told her where they were headed. It was a short distance to where they lived: a large brick building set back from the street on a rise of land. The nun told her that their *Casa Generaliza* (Generalate) headquarters for Ursuline nuns all over the world was on a large tract of land that stretched from Via Nomentana back to the Roman railroad lines. Opening the gate, they passed the gatekeeper's house and a big old stucco house, the original villa (the Villino), and continued up the gravel drive. It was quiet and cooler. The trees and flowering shrubs were beautiful, and birds twittered as they hopped among the branches. For the first time that day, Jetta felt a wave of relief and peace. Maybe things would be all right.



The "Villino"
Photo by author, 2010

They climbed a wide set of steps and entered the Generalate. A hall led into a wide corridor that wrapped around a courtyard that was barely visible through the blackout paper glued to the tall windows. Mother Stanislaus asked the portress to ring the bell to summon the Prioress of the community. In the cool, dim corridor, Mother Stanislaus introduced Jetta to Mother Magdalen Bellasis, who was the Prioress, in charge of all the nuns. She was English but spoke French well.

She welcomed Jetta in French and told her that the nuns regularly took in lady guests. Some of them were Jewish women