

# WHY MUSSOLINI TURNED ON THE JEWS



He was their friend . . . What is the secret of his sudden change? Here's a surprising, authoritative explanation

BY DONALD FURTHMAN WICKETS

**Y**OU are turning all Germany into a stud farm," Mussolini sarcastically remarked not many months ago to a German statesman. He made no secret of his attitude. Repeatedly in public utterances he repudiated the racial ideology of the Fuehrer. Both his countrymen and the Germans were astonished when he suddenly reversed himself on the Jewish question.

What is the reason for Il Duce's newly acquired anti-Semitism? Why the new laws degrading the Jews of Italy? Why are marriages between Jews and "Aryans" proscribed?

What prompted Mussolini, usually shrewd and far-seeing, to array against Italy the public opinion of all civilized countries not dominated by the Rome-Berlin axis? Is there a personal reason? Hardly. Unlike Hitler, Mussolini has no Jewish complex. All his life he has associated freely and sometimes intimately with Jews. Why are the Jews, upon whom in the past he conferred singular honors, suddenly considered a menace to Italy?

There are hardly 60,000 native-born Jews in all Italy. Many Italians have never laid eyes on a Jew. There was no friction between Jews and non-Jews, although Roman society and the court were not free from prejudice. Anti-Semitism played no part in Italian life until Il Duce determined to banish the Jews into a moral and material ghetto.

Most observers jumped to the conclusion that he did it to please the other end of the Rome-Berlin axis. Italians familiar with the situation deny this. Neither did he, they insist, imitate Hitler. "Mussolini plays second fiddle to no man."

Some shrewd interpreters attribute his move to his desire to encourage the Arabs and to embarrass Great Britain in Palestine. It is possible that this was a factor, but it does not seem likely that he would carry his policy into effect at the very moment when Parliament at last sanctioned his pact with Chamberlain.

What, then, was his reason? To find out, I visited the Ministry of Popular Culture in Rome. That was on the very day on which the Grand Council of the Fascist Party officially adopted the anti-Semitic measures. I talked to clever Signor Agostini Depretis, Minister Plen-



## WHY MUSSOLINI TURNED ON THE JEWS

ipotentiary of His Majesty the King-Emperor, urbane Don Adolfo Caracciolo di Melito, and dynamic Professor Guido Landra, the Ministry's official chief expert on the race problem.

We spoke with the utmost candor. As a democrat and an American, I did not conceal my complete disagreement with the racial doctrine espoused by Berlin and Rome. I was immediately corrected by Professor Landra: "German and Italian anti-Semitism are not the same. German anti-Semitism is religious and philosophic; Italy's, biological and political." The information that was then vouchsafed to me may not fully explain Mussolini's change of heart, but it is the only explanation I could find in all the chancelleries of Europe, and it is the one offered, with the consent of his superiors, by the official expert.

Until Italy became an empire, I was told, there was little danger of miscegenation. When, however, Italy shipped thousands of her citizens to colonize Ethiopia, the danger loomed large. Il Duce saw the unhappy result of uncontrolled mating between different races in the Portuguese colonies and in some South American states. Though often at odds with them, he—like Hitler—admires the British. He contends that they remain masters of one fourth of the globe because they keep their racial strain undiluted. No Englishman would marry a native and beget colored children.

"But," I protested, "the Jews are not a colored race."

"That is not our contention; we merely maintain that they are not Italians. However, we were not alive to this fact until certain events opened our eyes. This happened when Mussolini issued stern decrees, intended to safeguard the purity of the Italian race in the colonies. One factor compelling immediate action was the question of hygiene. Syphilis in a virulent form is highly prevalent among the natives of Abyssinia. Mussolini resolved to combat both miscegenation and disease.

"Much to his surprise, he encountered considerable opposition in Italy. He discovered that it came primarily from Jewish sources. Investigating further, he found that, although the Jews constituted only a fraction of one per cent of our population, they held forty per cent of all cultural and educational positions—"

"That," I interrupted, "does them credit."

"Unfortunately, they abused their positions to impose their alien point of view upon the Italians. They were encouraged in this endeavor by the thousands of Jewish refugees from other countries who had sought an asylum in Italy. Looking at some neighboring states and overseas, Mussolini found Jews in the forefront of every subversive movement."

"That is a hypothesis, not a fact—"

Sweeping aside my argument, the speaker continued: "Fascism was not anti-Jewish, but most Jews were anti-Fascist. Mussolini determined to treat Jews as foreigners. No Jew may edit a newspaper, appear on the stage, or exploit his ideas on the radio or in a classroom. Jews, as in Germany, must go to schools of their own, or into ghetto divisions within the public-school system. Il Duce excepted Jews who had proved their patriotism.\*

"Our race legislation is not essentially anti-Jewish. It forbids intermarriage not only with Jews but with Asiatics—with any foreigner, not excluding the Germans or the Japanese—except by special permission."

Mussolini's definition of a Jew is less stringent than Hitler's. One or even two Jewish grandmothers do not make a person a *Mischling* (the German term for "mixed breed") unless he adopts the Jewish religion, or in certain other specified contingencies. This decision is fortunate for Italy. If Mussolini applied Hitler's test of "Aryanism" to membership in the Fascist Party, he would be compelled to dismiss Marshal Balbo, and, if rumor is right, at least one member of his cabinet. It is also reported that one member of the Grand Council, one Italian ambassador, and others even closer to him have at least a strain of non-Aryan blood.

Unlike the German law, the Italian law makes no reference to casual sex relationship; but it will not countenance marriages contracted hereafter between

\* Since this conversation took place, according to cable dispatches, Mussolini has exempted from his new laws more than 3,000 families, or approximately one quarter of all Jews in Italy.

## WHY MUSSOLINI TURNED ON THE JEWS

Jews and "Aryans." Mussolini's prohibition of such marriages, even if the Jews have become Catholics, is regarded by the Vatican as a violation of the Concordat, and may lead to serious conflicts between the Pope and Il Duce.

Italian race legislation received comparatively little criticism in the press of the world. In Germany, no girl of "Aryan" descent, under a certain age, may serve in a Jewish household. In Italy, no Jew may hire an Italian servant and no member of the Fascist Party may hire a Jewish servant. Foreign Jews residing in Italy must leave by March 12, 1939, or face a fine of 5,000 lire, three months in jail, and expulsion. Many, I am told by a friend familiar with the situation, prefer suicide to deportation.

Foreign Jews cannot establish permanent residence in Italy, in Libya, or in the Dodecanese Islands. The door of Ethiopia is left conditionally open to them.

If Mussolini's decree regarding foreign Jews is enforced, it will exile his biographer, Emil Ludwig, whose book, written in close co-operation with him, is already barred in Italy, I am informed. The decree may affect other writers who have been very close to him.

Like Hitler, Mussolini boldly and baldly proclaims that he regards the Italian Jews as "hostages" for the behavior of their co-racials in other lands. In some respects he is even more thorough than Hitler. Even Hitler did not deprive all Jews of their patents of nobility. In Berlin at this writing (barring new laws foreshadowed by Goering) 65 per cent of all real estate is still Jewish-owned. In Italy such ownership is severely restricted. Jews may not own stocks or bonds in any company connected with the national defense.

I confessed my inability to see the necessity of such measures. "And surely," I said, "the Italians are a mixed race."

"We know," the expert replied, "that the Italians, like the Germans, are a mixed race; but Italy, like Germany, has produced several clearly recognizable national types. The racial compounds achieved are stable. Mussolini does not want to jeopardize this stability."

"Such a policy," I interjected, "would be unthinkable in the United States. America owes its virility and its progress to the free commingling of many racial strains."

"Yet," one of the three men replied, "America has established a precedent for discriminatory race legislation. Many of your states do not permit marriages between the African and the white race. Mussolini well knows that when, some decades ago, your Congress established a quota for immigration, it rigidly excluded the Mongolian race; it cut down the Latin and the eastern European quota to a minimum, while throwing the doors open as wide as possible under the circumstances to immigrants from nations who most closely resemble your dominant racial type.

"You regulate the exact proportion of the various ingredients that enter your melting pot and are unwilling to change the formula materially. Italy has done no more. It can do no less. Italy cannot revive the Roman Empire without that inner stability guaranteed by a common patriotism, a common faith, and a common race."

On my return to America, I saluted the Statue of Liberty with more than usual warmth. It seemed good to be back in the free air of a country where, whatever private prejudices may exist, racial or religious intolerance is not and can never be a national policy.

Let us hope that President Roosevelt's recent appeal and the persuasive powers of Chamberlain will soften Il Duce's hard measures against the Jews, and, joined with the negotiations in Berlin of the Quakers and Mr. Rublee, will bring about some amelioration in Germany.

# Liberty

FEBRUARY 25, 1939

OldMagazineArticles.com