Haaretz: Mussolini’s Jewish Lover Who Crafted Italian Fascism

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Margherita Sarfatti wasn’t just the dictator’s most erudite paramour; she was his secret adviser and ideologue. The English version of her memoirs is finally out.

On November 14, 1938, shortly after the Italian Racial Laws were passed, Margherita Sarfatti slipped out of her home near Lake Como, got into her car and asked her chauffeur to drive her to the nearby Swiss border.

Among the few belongings the Jewish socialite and art critic had stuck in her two suitcases were 1,272 letters she had received from Benito Mussolini over their 20-year romantic and ideological relationship — a sort of insurance policy. Sarfatti, 58 at the time, would return to Italy only in 1947 after living in exile in France, Argentina and Uruguay.

In addition to art essays she wrote for local newspapers during her exile, Sarfatti published in 1945, shortly after Mussolini’s death, a series of articles in the Argentine paper Crítica in which she revealed details about her relationship with Il Duce. Scholars believe she waited until he no longer had the chance to harm the family members she had left behind in Rome.

Today, 70 years later, these articles have been published in the English-language book “My Fault: Mussolini As I Knew Him.” Dubbed by Enigma as “the unpublished memoir of Mussolini’s longtime lover,” the book’s 18 chapters come edited and annotated by historian Brian R. Sullivan, whose commentary is informed by three decades of research in Italy, France, Switzerland, Britain and the United States.

Just as the story of the long, intimate relationship between Sarfatti and Mussolini lay forgotten in archives for years until Philip V. Cannistraro and Sullivan published their 1993 work “Il Duce’s Other Woman,” Sarfatti’s memoirs remained abandoned in the shadows of history for decades.

Indeed, Sarfatti wasn’t just one of Mussolini’s hundreds of lovers. The aristocratic, intellectual and ambitious wife of wealthy Zionist lawyer Cesare Sarfatti, and mother of their three children, did not only share her bed with Il Duce. She also helped him forge and implement the fascist idea; she contributed advice — and Sullivan says, money — to help organize the 1922 March on Rome in

which Mussolini seized power.

During those 20 years she was his eminence grise and unofficial ambassador, glorifying him in her 1925 biography that was translated into 18 languages.

Il Duce's many frailties

It was Clara Petacci who has gone down in history as Mussolini's most famous lover. In April 1945, Italian partisans shot her and Il Duce and hung their bodies upside down in Milan's Piazzale Loreto. But after their intense 20-year personal and political relationship, Sarfatti was apparently the one who knew him best — maybe even better than his lawful wife, Rachele Guidi.

"Mussolini and Sarfatti had shown each other their souls," Sullivan writes in the book's long introduction. "She had listened to his secrets she knew most everything about Mussolini's hidden weaknesses, his human frailties, his crude behavior, his superstitions, his ignorant misunderstandings about so many scientific and medical matters, and about his syphilis."

But according to Sullivan, as much as Mussolini feared that Sarfatti would expose details on their sex life, he feared even more that she would reveal other shortcomings — and destroy the demigod image he had worked so hard to create.

Although Sarfatti's 1955 Italian-language autobiography "Acqua Passata" ("Water Under the Bridge") does not mention her relationship with Il Duce, her memoirs make up for it. She recounts a raft of personal and political anecdotes, provides quotes from Mussolini and talks about his sex addiction and cocaine use. But she never slides into bedroom gossip.

From her descriptions Mussolini comes across as a brilliant, charismatic statesman — but also an egocentric one ridden by inferiority complexes, fears and superstitions. He was also an unbridled womanizer, not to mention a manipulator who didn't hesitate in his youth to threaten suicide in a letter to his mother "if she failed to send him some money for food."

Sarfatti, meanwhile, comes across as a haughty, self-confident woman who often boasts of her good judgment, intuition and wisdom in both political and personal affairs.

Despite the book's title "My Fault," chosen by Sarfatti decades ago for the memoirs, she expresses no regret over her relationship with Mussolini, who was responsible for the deaths of her sister and brother-in-law on their way to Auschwitz, the destruction of Italian democracy and the establishment of a dictatorship. On the contrary, Sarfatti evades responsibility, putting all the blame on Mussolini.

Pesky Pact of Steel

Sarfatti maintains that fascism began as a positive idea that was distorted over the years. She claims that even Mussolini underwent a complete change. "After less than a decade in power, Mussolini seemed to me to have become someone else," she writes. "He began to deny even the right to interior freedom and to subject the very souls of his people to the power of the state."

As Sarfatti puts it, Mussolini's alliance with Nazi Germany, which she opposed, was the main cause of his downfall. "But the Duce did not form the Rome–Berlin Axis or the Pact of Steel with the Führer by accident. Mussolini harbored within him a number of defects that attracted him to the Germans of his time. Thus he succumbed to the illness of power, to the madness of the Caesars."

About one matter, though, she does accept the blame. "I cannot hide behind my work as an art critic. I must accept my responsibilities. I believed in Fascism and fought for it in the beginnings," she writes.

"Worse, I wrote a book read by many that interpreted the goals of Fascism in a favorable light and proclaimed to the entire world that Mussolini was a hero of historic proportions. That was my fault …. It is my duty to declare that Mussolini fell because of his complete moral bankruptcy."

Lamenting the failure of her "final, desperate attempt to guide Mussolini," she adds: "Meanwhile, we discovered that behind the mask of Fascism lay an abyss of corruption, nepotism, favoritism and arbitrary lawlessness."

Like most Italians, Sarfatti saw Mussolini as the embodiment of the "good tyrant," adding that she had hoped he would turn out wiser, more level-headed and more just than the leaders produced by the ballot box.

Sullivan lambastes Sarfatti's attempt to put all the blame on Il Duce. He writes that since it was Sarfatti, more than Mussolini, who crafted the ideological and philosophical basis of fascism between 1913 and 1919, she can't evade responsibility for what others did based on her views. He adds that the original manuscript contains inaccuracies and spelling mistakes.

In his copious comments and remarks — often more comprehensive than the original text — Sullivan contends that after Sarfatti fled Italy, she agreed with Mussolini not to reveal details about their relationship. In exchange, no harm would befall her family still in Rome, among them her daughter Fiametta, her son-in-law and their three children.

But history lost out, Sullivan concludes, in that the book was not published in the late 1940s. Sarfatti possessed priceless photographs, letters and documents in Mussolini's own hand.

"At least some of that historically precious material might have become available to scholars over sixty years ago," Sullivan writes. "Instead, it passed into the possession of Sarfatti's heirs after her death. They have refused permission to anyone to study those valuable records. Indeed, they have consistently denied their very existence. One can only hope they will have a change of mind."

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