

THE ORDER HAS BEEN CARRIED OUT

HISTORY, MEMORY, AND MEANING
OF A NAZI MASSACRE IN ROME

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Unidentified speaker (name withheld by request), custodian at the Fosse Ardeatine monument; November 8, 1997.

Francesco Vincenti, concierge, folk poet; Bassiano (Rome), July 18, 1977.

Sergio Volponi (1934), office manager; son of Guido Volponi, killed at the Fosse Ardeatine; May 25, 1998.

Vera Yaria (n.d.), high school teacher; born and raised in via Rasella; April 6, 1998.

Matteo Zapparoli (1977), university student; September 6, 1997.

Maria Zevi (1917–1999), professor of architecture; partisan; November 19, 1997.

Giovanni Zuccheretti (1931), butcher; twin of Piero Zuccheretti, killed by the explosion of the bomb in via Rasella; December 15, 1997.

C H A P T E R I

INTRODUCTION

Pàdre celeste Dio di tanto amore
Dona forza a mia Musa o gran
sovrano
Un fatto orrendo che mi strappa il
cuore
E mentre scrivo me trema la mano.
Roma, giardino di rose e di fiori
Sei dominata da un popolo strano
Per dominar la nostra capitale
No' spera bene chi ci portò il male.

Heavenly Father, ever loving God
Give power to my Muse, almighty
king.
An awful deed that tears my heart in
two
And my hand shakes as I write.
Rome, garden of flowers and roses,
Is dominated by a strange people
Who dominate our capital.
But evil mongers should expect no
good.

—Egidio Cristini, 1957¹

I. There Was No Request

On March 25, 1944, the newspapers in Rome published a release from the state news agency. It was issued by the German Command of the city at 10:55 P.M. the night before:

During the afternoon of March 23, 1944 criminal elements carried out an attack, by throwing bombs at a German Police column which was passing along the via Rasella. In consequence of this attack, 32 German policemen were killed and several wounded. This vile ambush was carried out by Badoglio-Communist elements. Investigation is still being carried out to clarify up to which point this criminal act is to be attributed to Anglo-American incitement.

The German Command is firmly determined to put an end to the activity of these heartless bandits. No one shall sabotage unpunished the renewed Italo-German cooperation. The German Command, therefore, has given orders that for every German killed, ten Badoglio-Communist criminals will be shot. This order has already been carried out."²

Vanda Perretta. A flash. The three of us, very small, with my mother, facing a wall. And my mother reading aloud, half aloud, the posted bill that ended: "the order—has been—carried out." "The order has been carried out" is a phrase that has stayed in my mind, concerning the Fosse Ardeatine.³

On March 23, 1944, during the Nazi occupation of Rome, a unit of the Gruppi di Azione Patriottica (GAP), an underground Resistance group linked to the Communist Party, attacked a unit of German police, causing thirty-three German casualties. Less than twenty-four hours later, the Germans retaliated by killing three hundred thirty-five prisoners in an abandoned quarry on the via Ardeatina that came to be known as the Fosse Ardeatine. The next day, the official newspaper of the Vatican, the *Osservatore Romano*, carried the German press release, along with an editorial comment: "When facing such events, any honest soul is deeply pained in the name of humanity and of Christian sentiments. On one hand, thirty-two victims; on the other, three hundred and twenty persons sacrificed for the culprits who have escaped arrest [. . .] Standing apart from and above the contention [. . .] we invoke from these irresponsible parties the respect for human life, which they have no right ever to sacrifice; and the respect for innocence, which is fatally the victim; from those in positions of responsibility, we ask that they be conscious of their responsibility toward themselves, toward the lives they are to safeguard, and toward history and civilization."

These events and the struggle over their memory and meaning illuminate the history and identity of Rome, the contradictions and conflicts of Italian democracy, the ethics of armed resistance. This book deals with the events of those twenty-four hours by covering over a century of history and memory.

The fearful symmetry of action and reaction, attack and retaliation, crime and punishment was to dominate the memory of these events—as if the case had been opened and closed in the space of two paragraphs, as if nothing had happened before and nothing afterward, as if the sequence from the attack in via Rasella to the massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine was a self-contained and inevitable cycle. Once "the order has been carried out" and order has been restored, there is nothing left to say—we may as well bury the whole thing, as the Nazis buried the bodies under a pile of dark sand from the crumbling caves and a heap of garbage to disguise the smell.

Popular belief and political distortions of memory, perpetrated by the popular press, the media, the Church, and conservative political forces, have generated a widely believed narrative according to which the Germans asked the partisans to deliver themselves; and only after the partisans failed to do so did they proceed to retaliation. This belief has bred, in turn, a great deal of defamation of the partisans involved and of the anti-Fascist struggle as a whole. The above-quoted German press release, however, proclaims a simple truth, which the Nazi commanders would reluctantly confirm in their postwar trials: the retaliation was carried out less than twenty four hours after the attack and was announced only after it was already accomplished. There was no request made to the partisans to turn themselves in, there was no opportunity for them to do so—not was there any real search for "the culprits."

All this has been a matter of public record in archives and publications for half a century. Yet these events have been obfuscated by popular beliefs and narratives drenched in ignorance and misinformation that turn responsibility around and do not so much accuse the Germans of perpetrating the massacre as accuse the partisans of causing it by an "irresponsible" act and by not turning themselves in to prevent the retaliation. This narrative is hard to resist, because it possesses the appeal of a nonconformist counternarrative, an alternative to the official story of the Resistance as the foundation of the republic, and yet it avails itself of the institutional power of agencies, parties, and media, which are far from marginal or subaltern in the nation's public life. All is welded together by the commonsense belief that one does not take revenge on three hundred thirty-five innocents before even trying to find the perpetrators.

The *Osservatore Romano* editorial is exemplary in this sense. It describes the partisan attack as a criminal act, with "victims" (the Germans) and "culprits" (the partisans), while the men killed in the Fosse Ardeatine are merely "sacrificed." Such a religiously loaded term can hardly be used by the newspaper of the Catholic Church in a neutral, incidental fashion. A "sacrifice," the act of making sacred, is a reparation for guilt, a necessary purification and atonement after a crime. Unwittingly perhaps, yet significantly, the Church's organ seems to suggest that what happened at the Fosse Ardeatine was some kind of liturgical event.

The *Osservatore Romano* editorial also gives the impression that the Germans tried to arrest the culprits before they resolved to commit the massacre. The Germans did not—but I'm not aware of any corrections or revisions from Church sources. This is the beginning of the shift of guilt from the Nazi executioners to the "cowardly" and "irresponsible" partisans. Along with the political Right, media and sources close to the Church and the Catholic world were to play a major part in perpetuating this version over the years, allowing it to seep

into the veins of public imagination and thus contributing to poisoning the memory of the event, and along with it the memory of the Resistance and the identity and origins of the Republic. Herein lies the real, long-term success of the Nazi retaliation.

On the day I began to think of writing this book, I mentioned the Fosse Ardeatine to a friend: a very intelligent; highly educated woman with a lifetime of Left activism. She reacted: "Look, I'm asking you this *in camera caritatis* [confidentially] and would not say it elsewhere: why didn't they turn themselves in?" My friend did not know that the news of the attack and the retaliation was released only after the massacre had taken place and that therefore there was no request to surrender nor any opportunity to do so. She did not know that in a 1950s court case the partisans who participated in the attack were declared not responsible for the German retaliation (the Supreme Court rendered a similar verdict in the spring of 1999; so long has this accusation been kept in circulation).⁴

The fact is that I didn't really know it either—at least, not until the controversy flared up again after one of the Nazi executioners, the former SS captain Erich Priebke, was identified in Argentina, extradited to Italy in 1994, and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1998. I had never subscribed to the theory of the partisans' guilt, yet the origin of this book is due in part to my surprise at discovering to what extent I, too, had been subject to this false belief, so deeply rooted in commonsense.

One Saturday morning, November 1997, in the crypt in which the graves of the victims are laid at the Fosse Ardeatine, I overheard a conversation between a group of elderly ladies. They had been on a religious visit to the Divino Amore (the Shrine of Divine Love), a popular holy site nearby, and then came to the Fosse. They were deeply moved. Yet they were convinced that the Nazis were only "following orders," and were resentful of the partisans: "And then they awarded a gold medal to the one who planted the bomb in via Rasella, but he's the one I would have shot. Because if he was such a hero, he might have come out and said: 'Instead of killing all these people, here I am, I'm the one who did it.'"

In my office at the University of Rome, a student, Sara Leoni, told me a fantastic tale: "My grandmother took in, in her home, one of the people who threw the bomb in via Rasella—Carla Capponi. And they all kept telling her, you have to confess, or else they'll kill two hundred people. And she decided she wouldn't confess." It's a mythic tale—like many others whose function is to reinforce the narrators' personal involvement in an important event in history—and it's far from being the only wrong narrative about the actions of the partisans after

via Rasella (incidentally, the bomb was not "thrown"). Later, Sara Leoni's aunt explained that the person who had stayed with her parents before and after via Rasella was actually Carla Capponi's mother. Yet she, too, thinks she remembers heated discussions on the need for the partisans to turn themselves in.

Gianfranco Fini, secretary of the post-Fascist Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) party, the initiator of a process of formal disentanglement of the Italian Right from its Fascist origins and identity, vice-prime minister in the Berlusconi government, explained: "The military action as such was considered—even by the old men who had fought in the Repubblica Sociale [Mussolini's Fascist Italian Social Republic of 1943–45, supported by the Nazis], who had remained Fascists to the end—it was considered legitimate. What was considered cowardly was the fact that they didn't turn themselves in, although everyone was aware of the consequences because everyone knew about the law of retaliation." Mario Fiorentini, a member of the underground partisan Gruppi di Azione Patriottica (GAP) and one of the organizers of the attack in via Rasella, commented: "In Rome, if you ask ten persons about via Rasella, maybe three uphold the point of view of the GAP, two don't know what to say, and five are against it." This state of public opinion is based on a few widespread assumptions: that the retaliation was automatic, and therefore that the partisans ought to have expected it; that all would have been avoided had the partisans turned themselves in; and that the executioners were not responsible for the massacre because they were merely carrying out orders. The German soldiers killed in via Rasella and the men killed at the Fosse Ardeatine thus all appear equally as victims of the partisans.

The story of via Rasella and the Fosse Ardeatine is perhaps the one ground on which the discourse of the most extreme Right has merged seamlessly with middle-of-the-road commonsense, a convergence that makes the prevalent and false narratives on the Fosse Ardeatine so deeply disturbing. I remember the shocked surprise of many historians and anthropologists at a 1994 conference on Nazi massacres in Europe when they discovered the "divided memory" of Civitella Val di Chiana and other communities.⁵ If only they had read what conservative and moderate media had been writing for years, or listened to the conversations of common people in bars and barbershops and trains, they would have been better prepared. Unfortunately, these levels of discourse have apparently been considered below the dignity of politicians, historians, and anthropologists. The anti-partisan literature is, indeed, often professionally despicable; and the delusion of a general anti-Fascist consensus, fostered by politicians and intellectuals, led to the belief that Fascism was beyond the pale of credibility in democratic, Resistance-born Italy. For these reasons, the intellectual and political Left did not feel compelled to take notice of such

narratives and popular beliefs—until it found itself suddenly staring them in the face, aggressive and arrogant, in the years of historical revisionism and negationism.

2. The Sense of History in Rome

Via Romagna, via Tasso principale
ventitre marzo fu la ricorrenza
di chi ci fe' passa' tempi brutali

Li tedeschi la presero avvertenza

Misero gran pattuglia ogni viale
Chi s'ha da vendica' no' ha più
pazienza

chi bomb'a mano chi co' rivoltella

tedeschi morti pe' la via Rasella

Via Romagna, via Tasso was the place;
March 23 was the anniversary
Of those who made us live us such
brutal times.⁶

The Germans were well upon their
guard,

They placed patrols on every avenue.
The patience of the avengers has run
out:

Some with grenades, some with gun
in hand,

And Germans lie dead along the via
Rasella.

—Egidio Cristini, 1957

It is no wonder that folk poets should sing of via Rasella, of the Fosse Ardeatine, of via Romagna, where the men and women of the Resistance were tortured by the Fascists, or of via Tasso, where they were held and tortured by the SS, under the command of Albert Kappler and his subaltern Erich Priebke. Because of the sheer numbers of the victims and of the endless controversies surrounding their memory, the Fosse Ardeatine has become an open wound in the memory and feelings of Rome. One has only to scratch the surface of memory and the stories gush out. Rome is filled with them; in one way or another, they touch all Romans. I hardly had to step out of my office to collect from students and colleagues any number of stories not unlike Sara Leoni's family myth. As for me, only when this book was all but finished did I find out that Pilo Albertelli, one of the most illustrious victims, had been my mother's philosophy teacher; that two other victims, Mario and Alfredo Capecci, as children used to run and play in the fields where my house was later built; that a student whose thesis I advised was the grandson of another victim; and that, according to my cousin, a friend of my father's was among those who were arrested and held briefly after via Rasella.

Many of the stories I heard from colleagues and students, and later in the city at large, are family narratives that combine the appropriation of the historical

event ("I was there" or "My father was there") with classic tales of escape from danger: "In my family this narrative was always handed down: Dad talked about how that day he had passed by via Rasella just before or just after; he heard screams, he didn't know what was going on, he realized only later. A lot of people he knows kept replaying this movie: 'You see, that man was walking maybe twenty steps ahead of me and he was taken when they closed the street, it's a miracle I'm alive'" (Antonietta Saracino).

Other stories are about memory, names, places, rituals: "I, too, have a personal recollection. A girl in my class, a friend of mine, her grandfather died at the Fosse Ardeatine, and there's a square near where I live in which there's a plaque; it says that he died at the Fosse Ardeatine, and she used to tell me about it. So this was my first impact with this episode that I hardly knew anything about, so it was very direct. His name was Zicconi. But I don't know his first name" (Neelam Srivastava); "[My parents] were in the Partito d'Azione [the Party of Action, a democratic Left, anti-Fascist organization], and they used to tell me about those times, and about the Fosse Ardeatine in particular. They were close friends with two people killed at the Fosse Ardeatine—Pilo Albertelli, and another whose name was Pierantoni" (Carla Gabrieli).

Vanda Perretta—When they opened up the Fosse Ardeatine, my mother grabbed us three little girls by the hand and took us there, to the Fosse Ardeatine. Which weren't as they are today, and it has always stayed in my memory as something very soft, because the ground was soft, because of the sand, you walked on soft ground, as if on a big carpet. And there was this soft smell of the tuberoses, which since then I can no longer bear around me. Because I thought I recognized in the tuberoses the smell of death that was inside the Fosse Ardeatine.

Finally, other narratives described a relationship with the urban space: "One may not have a specific knowledge of what happened, but one knows anyway because living in Rome, living in that neighborhood, every year there are ceremonies or something, it is always commemorated, it's not a thing that sinks into oblivion. I live [nearby] at Eur, so one often goes by the Fosse, on the via Ardeatina. I also remember that, as a child, it was natural to ask what it was. I remember that I was taken there, I was rather small, and I was shaken, truly, by this frightening image of this expanse of, let's say, graves" (Alessia Salvatori).

Three hundred and thirty-five people mean three generations of as many families, both close and distant relations; for each person killed and each survivor

there are friends, coworkers, party and union comrades, schoolmates, church relations, and neighbors. The story of the Fosse Ardeatine is a sequence of concentric circles that widen until they cover the entire city. Only among young people in the periphery whose families immigrated to Rome one generation after the war did I find that this story was not known or was only a dim detail out of history books in school. To speak of the Fosse Ardeatine and its memory, in other words, is to speak of Rome.

Antonio Pappagallo, who came from the same small southern town as his uncle Father Pietro Pappagallo and his friend and mentor Gioacchino Gesmundo, both killed at the Fosse Ardeatine, says:

Many times they invited me to a school down in Terlizzi, which I don't like; I don't know how to speak in public. The principal says, "Speak, say something." He left me out there on the podium, and I had to, I made an effort, and said: "Children, let me give you one example and that's all. Take Gesmundo and Don Pietro, who are from your town, and imagine a funnel; and they are dropped in it, this mixture of two opposites—in theory: my uncle, Catholic, a priest; and Gesmundo, a free thinker—the Communist that he was. How is it that, after these two persons go through the funnel, you can no longer tell which is Don Pietro and which is Gesmundo, because their identities merge, and we couldn't say that one is more of a priest than the other or that the other is more of a Communist, if by Communist we mean altruism toward one's neighbor."

"At the Fosse Ardeatine, you'll find my father [an Air Force general], but you'll also find a fourteen-year-old child, you'll find priests, you'll find workers, you'll find clerks, the military, *carabinieri* [army police]—you were right perhaps when you said a while ago that the Fosse Ardeatine is the symbol of Italy's tragedy as a whole, because that's where everything is gathered, all are represented, it was but the symbol of what was happening everywhere, in the streets of Rome" (Vera Simoni). The men killed in the Fosse Ardeatine were Catholics, Jews, atheists; some had no politics, most came from the whole range of political ideals: Communists of many stripes, Socialists, Liberals, members of the Partito d'Azione, Christian Democrats, and monarchists. There are military men and civilians; aristocrats, peddlers, manual workers, merchants, lawyers. Some were active participants in the Resistance and had staked their lives on the struggle; others were just rounded up at random, in the wrong place at the wrong time, still others were included to fill a quota or for not renouncing their Jewish identity and faith. "When I think of the Ardeatine," writes Vittorio Foa, one of the "founding fathers" of Italian democracy, "inspirations are almost naturalistic: the unification, the convergence of life lines . . . They killed Jews because they were Jews, not because of what they thought or did; they killed anti-Fascists for what they thought or did; they killed men that had nothing to do with the Resistance, only because they were numbers,

needed to fill a quota."⁷ The men who died at the Fosse Ardeatine came from every neighborhood, suburb, slum (*quartiere, rione, borgata*) in Rome—Trastevere and Montesacro, Torpignattara and Trionfale, Portico d'Ottavia and Centocelle, Testaccio and La Storta. Many were born in the city; but Rome is a place to which people come from many places, and the Fosse Ardeatine saw the end of lives begun in other parts of Italy—in Abruzzi, in Puglia, in Turin, in the Roman hills—and in foreign countries—in Luxemburg, Hungary, Turkey, and Ukraine.

In Rome, history wears a capital H, and its burden seems to frustrate and annihilate the work of memory or to make it seem irrelevant. Too often, history is a faraway sphere, distant from the daily lives of its people or a crushing, annihilating weight upon them. This is why the relationship between Rome and the Fosse Ardeatine is so important. As I worked on this book, I relearned the streets and the buildings of "my hometown." I saw St. Peter's and the Coliseum, but I also discovered other sites of history, other monuments of my Rome: not so much the mausoleum of the Fosse Ardeatine as some of those huge popular housing projects, as big and teeming as cities and as beautiful: in Trionfale, where Cencio Baldazzi raised a generation of anti-Fascists into the Partito d'Azione; in Testaccio, where the tenants placed a stone in the middle of the courtyard in memory of their neighbors killed at the Fosse Ardeatine and at Auschwitz; in Val Melaina, a tenement building once called Stalingrad, and even today a bulwark of class consciousness, again with a plaque on the main gate to commemorate neighbors killed at the Fosse Ardeatine.

The Fosse Ardeatine was not the only, and by no means the worst, Nazi massacre in Italy, or in Europe. But it was the only "metropolitan" massacre, the only cold-blooded mass execution perpetrated in the space of a big city, in which the variety of the victims synthesized the complex stratification of life stories in a metropolis. This is why it has such a powerful hold on memory and identity. The only thing the dead have in common is their gender: they are all men. But this fact underscores the role of women in surviving and remembering.

The Fosse Ardeatine is the symbolic maelstrom in which the space of the city and a century of its stories come together, so that to speak about it is to speak of the whole history of Rome in the twentieth century, the history of "this rebel city that was never tamed," as the old Communist song proclaims, a city so different from the clichés and stereotypes, a city that resisted the Nazis actively and passively, intensely and diffusely, and for this paid such a terrible price.

3. Context and Background

Rome is an ancient city but a relatively recent capital, just as Italy is an ancient country but a relatively young nation and an even younger democracy. Until

1870, Rome was the capital of the pope's temporal domain, which covered most of central Italy. The rest of the country was broken into small states and foreign possessions and became united and independent only in 1861 under the former king of Sardinia. Only in 1870 did the Italian army enter Rome. The Church did not recognize the new state of things until 1929, when it reached an agreement with Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime; since then, and especially after World War II, it has systematically interfered in Italian politics.

The growth of a modern and democratic Italy, in the midst of social conflict, colonial wars in Ethiopia and Libya, and the traumatic experience of World War I, took a dramatic detour with the rise of Fascism in 1922. While it continued and accelerated the modernization of certain aspects of Italian life, the Fascist regime jailed and exiled political opponents, abolished freedom of speech and of the press, destroyed working-class organizations, and made living and working conditions worse for the popular classes, at the same time that it sought and at times achieved consent with demagogic and paternalistic policies and by creating the illusion of Italy as a great power that revived the glories of the Roman Empire. Throughout this time, an anti-Fascist underground was active both in the country and in exile: Communists, Socialists, and Partito d'Azione (a radical-liberal group with Socialist influences) were the most organized opposition, but Liberals and some Catholics also kept dissent alive. Support for the regime peaked after the occupation of Ethiopia, but it began to ebb after the alliance with Hitler's Nazi Germany and the racist laws discriminating against Jewish citizens in 1938.

After Italy joined the war in 1940, defeats in North Africa, the Italian army's disastrous participation in the Russian campaign, the Allied landings in Sicily and Salerno, the impact of the war on living conditions, and the stepping up of repression dissolved popular faith in the regime. The air raid on Rome on July 19, 1943 brought the Fascist regime to an end. Mussolini was removed from power; General Pietro Badoglio's new government signed an armistice with the Allies on September 8, 1943 (Italy joined the war on the Allied side a few months later); on the same day, the Germans occupied Rome and began taking control over the central and northern parts of the country. Under German supervision, Mussolini established the so-called Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI).

Resistance to the German occupation and to Mussolini's puppet government began immediately upon the Germans' takeover. The battle fought by Roman military and civilians at the city gate of Porta San Paolo soon after September 8 was the beginning of a mass struggle that lasted, in the cities and the hills, until liberation was proclaimed on April 25, 1945. The Resistance was coordinated by a Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (CLN), which included most of the anti-Fascist political parties: Communists, Socialists, Partito d'Azione, Christian

Democrats, Liberals, Labor Democrats, and other smaller groups. Military personnel loyal to the king and to Badoglio's government (therefore labeled as "badogliani") participated in the Resistance through the Fronte Militare clandestino, the underground military front; dissenting Communists and Leftists created the Movimento Comunista d'Italia-Bandiera Rossa (Red Flag). While political leadership was shared in the CLN, the actual fighting was conducted predominately by units organized by the Communist Party and the Partito d'Azione (named, respectively, Brigate Garibaldi and Giustizia e Libertà). As the historian Claudio Pavone has shown, the Resistance was a combination of three wars; partly distinct and partly overlapping: a war of national liberation from German occupation; a class war against capitalism; and a "civil war" between anti-Fascists and Italian supporters of Hitler and Mussolini.⁸

The German occupation of Rome lasted nine months, from September 8, 1943 to July 4, 1944. It was a time of hunger, fear, Allied bombardments, repression, and mass deportations, which culminated in the deportation of the Jews (beginning on October 16, 1943) and the massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine. Throughout this time, the partisan movement struck the Germans at every opportunity, especially through the Gruppi di Azione Patriottica (GAP), a small underground unit organized by the Communist Party. The GAP's most successful action was the attack on a Nazi police unit at via Rasella, in the center of Rome, on March 23, 1944, resulting in thirty-three German casualties. The next day, the Germans retaliated at the Fosse Ardeatine.

After the war, Italy's government consisted of a coalition of the CLN parties that had led the Resistance. A 1946 referendum ended the monarchy and established a republic; in 1948, the new constitution was approved. It is one of the most democratically advanced constitutions in the West, based on a concept of participatory and egalitarian democracy founded on the experience of the Resistance. Meanwhile, however, U.S. influence had caused the ousting of the Communists and Socialists from the government coalition. After the Left's defeat in the 1948 elections, the Christian Democrat party stayed in power until 1992, when it dissolved after charges of corruption. The anti-Fascist foundations of the written constitution were largely overshadowed by the Cold War and by the influence of the Church: many of its provisions were never enforced.

Throughout the 1950s, it was the Left that kept the memory of Resistance alive, both because the Left subscribed to its democratic ethos and because the Resistance legitimized Communists and Socialists as co-founders of the democratic republic. The narrative of the Resistance as foundation of the state was retrieved by the Center-Left governments (a coalition of Christian Democrats and Socialists) after the 1960s. By then, however, the memory of the Resistance was too often a patriotic ritual emptied of its radical and participatory message. Indeed,

the belief that Italian institutions were too democratic to allow for effective government became widespread also in progressive and Left opinion. When the Right-wing coalition headed by Silvio Berlusconi, including the neo-Fascists of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (later renamed Alleanza Nazionale), won the 1994 elections, the drive to change the constitution was supported by a historical revisionism that challenged the meaning of the Resistance as the foundation of the Italian state. In 2002, the Berlusconi government has announced a drive to purge history textbooks of anti-Fascist "bias."

This context accentuates the historical and political meaning of the Fosse Ardeatine. On the one hand, the massacre is remembered as the most dramatic war crime perpetrated in the country's capital, the most symbolically powerful event of the brutality of Nazi occupation. On the other hand, the mythic narrative that blamed the Resistance for bringing it about and not stopping it is a powerful element in the anti-partisan, anti-anti-Fascist discourse of today's dominant ideology.

4. Where Stories Begin and End

If you look up "Fosse Ardeatine" on the Internet, you will hit a tourist information site with a page in English on the monument and its history. It begins: "23 March 1944 a bomb exploded in Via Rasella killing thirty-two German troops. In retaliation the Germans decided to kill ten Italians for each man that was killed."⁹

Stories, says the anthropologist Bruce Jackson, generate their own boundaries of acceptable reality: nothing worth mentioning happens before the stories begin, and nothing happens after they end.¹⁰ A narrative beginning disturbs the order, an ending restores it. While the bulk of historical literature on via Rasella and the Fosse Ardeatine treats them as a single, self-enclosed event, the purpose of this book is to question this approach. In the first place, I will try to demonstrate that the partisan action in via Rasella and the Nazi massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine are not *one* event but *two*, bound by a relationship that is undeniable but nevertheless problematic. In the second place, I will try to show that they are part of a sequence of events that did not begin with the explosion in via Rasella and did not end with the explosion triggered by the SS to close the caves over the bodies of the victims.

The story does not begin there, in the first place, because that is not where the stories of the victims begin, and because while via Rasella was indeed the most dramatic partisan action in Rome, contrary to popular belief it was not the first, and not even the first that resulted in German casualties. Yet none of the previous attacks triggered an automatic retaliation.

And it does not end there, either, because the Fosse Ardeatine was not the only—nor the last—Nazi massacre in Rome. It was preceded and followed by the execution of seventy-two political prisoners at Forte Bravetta, ten men at Pietralata on October 23, 1943, ten women guilty of taking bread from a bakery at Ostiense, fourteen prisoners murdered by retreating Germans on June 4, 1944, the day of Rome's liberation, at La Storta. In no case was there any partisan "provocation" to motivate or "justify" the crime. And we should not forget the mass deportations and the thousands of deaths they entailed: twelve hundred Jews arrested and deported on October 16, 1943, and eight hundred arrested and deported in the following months, only a handful surviving; hundreds of *carabinieri* deported; thousands of able-bodied men taken off the streets and pressed into forced labor in Germany and at the front; seven hundred men arrested and deported from the working-class neighborhood of Quadraro in April of 1944. And all the other faces of war: air raids, hunger, deserters and dodgers from the Fascist draft in hiding, refugees camping out, curfews.

The story does not end there, with order restored after the massacre, most of all because the Fosse Ardeatine is not only the place where so many stories lead but is also the place from which countless other stories emerge and branch out. There is the story of the public struggle over meaning and memory that is still being waged in the media and the courts, as well as over symbols, plaques, inscriptions, and ceremonies: over this "ugly story" trials and court cases go on more than half a century later, and people are still literally coming to blows. Much more painful, almost always silent and unheard, are the burdens and the tensions that pervade the lives and feelings of those who were left behind—parents, wives, children, grandchildren, sisters and brothers of the murdered. To write the history of public mourning over the massacre is to re-read the mutations of political climate over half a century, from the Cold War to the 1960s to the current age of revision and negation; to write the story of private mourning is to try to understand how it has been possible to carry on afterward. The history of the Fosse Ardeatine is truly, as in the title of Robert Katz's pioneering 1965 book, the history of *Death in Rome*, but in a broader sense, because it is the history of how the city—its institutions and its inhabitants—elaborated, sometimes in agreement, often in conflict or in mutual disregard, the sense of this mass death that yet was the absurd, violent, cruel death of individuals.

Ada Pignotti was twenty-three and had been married only a few months when her husband and three other relatives were killed at the Fosse Ardeatine. None of them was known to have been involved in the Resistance but they all happened to be near via Rasella on the day of the attack. She says:

In those days, after it happened, in 'forty-four—you didn't talk about it, there was no way you could talk about it. I worked for forty years, and even at the office, most of the time, whenever they asked me, I wouldn't say a thing—because they always reacted: oh well, blame it on the one who placed the bomb. I acted like I didn't hear them, because it was always the same reaction: oh, it wasn't the Germans' fault; the fault was of the one who set the bomb. They'd say, because if he had turned himself in, they wouldn't have killed them. But where does it say so, where is that written? When did they say so? When? They didn't say a word, they didn't post any bills—they did it later, after they had already killed the 335. Because we followed it day by day, the whole tragedy; and as I said, when we read it in the paper, my sister-in-law and I, I nearly fainted and she along with me. There was no way to talk about it, it was always the same: what, are you defending those who set the bomb? I'm not defending anyone, but this is the way things are, there's no way you can turn them around.

The alibi of the partisans' guilt exorcises the experience of these women who by their very presence disturb the peace of pacified consciences. For each of them, it was difficult and painful to come to terms with the reasons and the causes of what befell them, and not all of them reached the same conclusions. The same is true for the partisans who took part in the attack at via Rasella and in other actions in which they had to kill. "The act of giving death, of destroying, is something that destroys you in turn, it cuts off a piece of you each time," says Carla Capponi. For them, too, coming to terms with these events was a long and complex effort, with differing conclusions, leading some to an active struggle for memory and others to silence, some to a life of political activity and others to a turn away from politics and toward professional or intellectual work.

5. Oral Sources

The word for *revenge* is "report a crime" or "report to five families."
The revenge is the story."

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*¹¹

One of the differences between oral and written sources is that the latter are documents while the former are always acts. Oral sources are not to be thought of in terms of nouns and objects but in terms of verbs and processes; not the memory and the tale but the remembering and the telling. Oral sources are never anonymous or impersonal, as written documents may often be. The tale and the memory may include materials shared with others, but the rememberer and the teller are always individual persons who take on the task of remembering and the responsibility of telling. Settimia Spizzichino, the only woman survivor among the Jews deported on October 16, 1944, said: "I made a promise when

I was in the camp, I made a solemn promise to my companions, who were being picked out [to be killed] or dying from disease and abuse. I rebelled, I didn't know whether to curse God or pray to Him, and repeated over and over, Lord save me, save me, because I must go back and tell."

However, to tell—as many extermination camp survivors were dramatically to discover—requires the presence of someone who will listen. One of the things that make oral sources different is that they are the achievement of a shared labor between the narrators and the researcher who seeks them out, listens, and interrogates.

I, too, felt a personal responsibility toward this story. I first felt the impulse to "report a crime" on a summer day in 1994, a few months after the Right-wing coalition headed by Silvio Berlusconi won the elections, when for the first time in postwar Europe a party harking openly back to Fascism (the Movimento Sociale Italiano, which later changed its name to Alleanza Nazionale) returned to state power. That day, I discovered a big black swastika painted over the stone, across the street from where I live, that commemorates the fourteen men murdered by the Nazis on June 4, 1944 at La Storta. As I watched the neighborhood artisans discuss the best means to erase the outrage from the monument, I felt that it was my duty, as a citizen, to respond to this revival of Fascism with all the means at my disposal—that is, with the tools of my trade.

Yet, this story was calling me not only for reasons of civil morality but because it was a unique intellectual, methodological challenge and opportunity for the practice and theory of oral history. Oral history is basically the process of creating relationships: between narrators and narratees, between events in the past and dialogic narratives in the present. The historian must work on both the factual and the narrative planes, the referent and the signifier, the past and the present, and, most of all, on the space between all of them. But it was not only I as researcher and the narrators who spoke to me who thought of this work as something that had to be done. Many of those who helped me transcribe the interviews made a gift of their work; others, who could not afford to, accepted payment that was all but symbolic. They did this not for my sake but for the sake of the story that needed to be told.

Now, the Fosse Ardeatine is both an event that actually happened and one that is intensely remembered and conflictually narrated. It has generated such a large and heterogeneous bibliography that we might be tempted to say, in the words of Washington Irving, that it has been made unknowable by a surfeit of historians.¹² I do not intend to join their number, so this book contains no new factual revelations or discoveries. As far as the material sequence of events goes, I rely on the skepticism and conclusions of existing scholarship. Aside from a few personal documents made available by the interviewees, my documentary

sources are books, essays, news items, and court records that were all previously published and available. I use them mainly to establish a problematic but plausible framework of events, against which the creative work of memory and narrative can be measured and tested.

Thus, I do not make "history with oral sources only," as the saying goes. Yet, oral sources are what interest me. In the first place, the personal and private feelings and stories they tell have operated below the level of attention of most historians, cultural institutions, and official media, overly concerned with a narrow definition of what constitutes "fact" and remaining all but unaware of the lives that came before and, most of all, after—until they rediscovered them, as if frozen in time, during the Priebke trial. Through these narratives, we fill this temporal gap and follow the transformations of the meaning of the Fosse Ardeatine for the persons involved and for the city of Rome. These stories function as the tool that allows us to reconstruct the struggle over memory, to explore the relation between material facts and personal subjectivity, and to perceive the multiple, mutable ways of elaborating on and facing death.

In the second place, I am specifically fascinated by the pervasiveness of erroneous tales, myths, legends, and silences, such as those that have been woven around these events. Though oral history is careful to distinguish between events and narratives, history and memory, it does so in order to treat narratives and memory as historical facts. When an incorrect reconstruction of history becomes popular belief, we are not called on only to rectify the facts but also to interrogate ourselves on how and why this commonsense took shape and on its meanings and uses. This is where the specific reliability of oral sources arises: even when they do not tell the events as they occurred, the discrepancies and the errors are themselves events, clues for the work of desire and pain over time, for the painful search for meaning.

This is all the more necessary at a time like this, when the struggle over memory not only concerns the debates among historians or factional recriminations over the past but becomes the ground on which the very identity of our Republic and our democracy, born out of those events, stands or falls.

6. Creation and Use of Sources

A few technical notes on the creation and treatment of the oral sources. This book is based on about two hundred interviews, of different length (a few, especially with young people, from ten to thirty minutes; one was over twelve hours long; most go from one and a half to three hours). Some of the narrators were interviewed more than once. In some cases, I recorded group interviews, ad hoc meetings in schools, public debates, ceremonies, and commemorations. All the interviews were taped by me between July 1997 and February 1999. I

also used some earlier recordings, made by myself or—in three or four cases—by others but for projects in which I participated. I transcribed about 30 percent of the interviews myself, and parceled out the others. I had verbal authorization (usually on tape) from the narrators to use the interviews for this book; most of them were shown the passages of the manuscript in which they were quoted and suggested changes and clarifications.

The choice of interviewees was based on the following criteria:

- relatives of the persons killed at the Fosse Ardeatine were chosen in order to seek a balance between those who were noted for their participation in public struggle for memory, and others who had been less visible or more silent and sometimes had a more ambivalent attitude toward the events. The families' association (ANFIM) gave me all the help I asked for, but I also went outside the organized circle of relatives;
- partisans: the members of the GAP (Gruppi di Azione Patriottica), the underground unit that conducted the attack in via Rasella, as well as those who were members of other organizations or had been active in other parts of the city, were interviewed to provide a sense of the context in which the events in via Rasella took place;
- the areas in the city where those who were killed lived, and those in which the partisans had acted: Trastevere, Testaccio, Trionfale, Val Melaina, the Ghetto, Quadraro, Torpignattara, and others. In order to document these spaces, I also interviewed persons who were not directly involved but were helpful in recreating the context;
- bearers of Right-wing memory, especially young people, not just in the name of some abstract notion of pluralism, but because they have information and experiences that I could not have tapped otherwise, and because a battle over memory cannot be waged by pretending that the other side does not exist;
- people who were not directly involved, generationally and socially diverse, but who were important for their relationship to the city and its memory or who helped me to understand the impact of the events beyond the circle of those personally affected;
- many young people, ages fifteen to twenty five, friends of my sons, students in my department and in other schools, to find out what they knew and to investigate the generational change in the meaning and perception of the Fosse Ardeatine as an event and as a place.

I constructed the book as a multivoiced narrative, a montage of fragments of varying lengths, because it was impossible to use all of the thousands of pages of

transcript and because oral history is not just the collection of stories but also their interpretation and representation. The interpretation begins with the selection of sources, continues in the researcher's active role in the interview, and culminates in the open comments of the authorial voice and the meanings implicit in editing and montage. The explicit and implicit interpretive dimension of this book is, of course, my responsibility, which is why it appears under my name.

The quotations are reported as verbatim as possible, because the meanings implicit in the narrators' linguistic choices and narrative strategies cannot be extracted without destroying them. Yet, for reasons of space and readability I have made frequent internal cuts, montage, and transpositions. I wanted the printed words to retain the same *quality* as the oral performance: I do not believe in the "objectivity" and "fidelity" of a literal transcription that reproduces a gripping oral discourse as a boring written text. My editorial interventions vary in proportion to the factuality of each quotation: there is more editing if the factual function prevails, less if I am attempting to draw attention to the quality of the speech. Also, I took into account the desired self-fashioning of the interviewees, some of whom preferred not to be quoted in the colloquial, often vernacular language that we used spontaneously in most interviews (a good deal of which is inevitably lost in translation). I have tried to retain the dialogic, conversational context in which the narratives took shape. Finally, the only objective criterion is that I do not attribute to my interviewees a single word that they did not actually say.

I kept all the interviews in mind in the course of my work, but I did not have the space to quote them in full. As I wove the narrators' voices into one another and into my own, I felt that I was running the risk of fragmenting the wholeness of each personal narrative. I made up for this limitation by opening each chapter with installments of one story, which is thus reported almost in its entirety; and by closing each chapter with longer excerpts from individual stories. I hope this will allow readers to know in depth at least one person and to obtain a fuller sense of the rhythm of the narratives. I did not have the time and the energy to conduct the many interviews I should have. I must therefore render both my apologies and thanks to the persons I interviewed and who are not mentioned in the book, or who are quoted only in fragments, and to the persons who are not in the book because I did not seek them out or find them, or because they no longer wished to speak about these things.

7. The Time of Names

Late October 2000. In a room of the former Nazi prison at via Tasso in Rome, now a museum, a young actor, Ascanio Celestini, performs a one-man mono-

logue based on the first edition of this book. With all the tenderness it takes to tell a terrible story, he goes over the events and the feelings, weaving the stories in this book with his own personal and family narratives. The stories that Ada Pignotti and Gabriella Polli told me are now his, and through him they are returned to a community of listeners.

December 2002. Giovanna Marini, Italy's greatest musician, sits in my living room and sings for the first time the long ballad she has composed after reading this book. It has taken her three agonizing years to boil it down to ten minutes. She was a child at the time, and she remembered the discussions at home, the names of the killed. "This story needs to be told," she says.

The function of a book made of stories is to generate other stories, to feed the engine of remembering and telling. Thus, once the book was finished, I was unable to close it. It was constantly reopened by its readers' need and desire to tell, recall, and discuss. The story kept calling to me, even louder than at the beginning.

November 15, 2000, at the City Council Hall in Rome's Capitol: the launching of Carla Capponi's autobiography, *Con cuore di donna*—with a woman's heart. Carla is one of the protagonists of the Resistance and of this book. As I look over the room, I see many beautiful gray haired faces, a generation gathering around one of its living symbols. Of the speakers on the platform, I am the only one who is not from that generation, and I wonder why I have been included. Then Carla generously mentions my book, and I understand. So many times, in allusions, suggestions, and fragments, the members of the generation of the Resistance and the relatives of the killed at the Fosse Ardeatine have asked me: "Who will tell this story after we are gone?"

Much of my oral history work stems from the experience of reading William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* In that book, young Quentin Compson wonders why old Miss Rosa Caulfield is telling her life story to him, of all people. Then he understands: she is telling him the story because he already knows it, so that—weaving it with other stories and passions—he will be able to keep telling it. Carla Capponi and Ada Pignotti did not "choose" me the way Miss Rosa chose Quentin; it was I who sought them out. But because I listened to their stories and wrote them down, I am bound to keep telling them.

I knew then in practice what I had known in theory. A tradition is a process in which even mere repetition is a crucial, a necessary task; every silence an irreparable tear in the delicate lace of memory. It is not only in Africa that, as Jomo Kenyatta once said, each time an old person dies a library is burned. In our world, also, when an anti-Fascist is silent, a piece of liberty is burned. Carla Capponi died two weeks after her book was released. But she had told her story, and helped me tell mine.

Over the years, I have attended many ceremonies and rites in commemoration of the massacre of the Fosse Ardeatine. I would like this book to be, like all ceremonies, a narrative of history and memory, but also an active intervention in history (and today memory itself has become a crucial historical *fact*). Because, as Primo Levi said, "it happened, so it can happen again." The use of rituals, if they have one, is to stand against such returns.

Of all the rituals and ceremonies I have witnessed at the Fosse Ardeatine, the most moving moment for me is the simple, endless roll call of the names of the dead. Some of the relatives, who have been listening to it for half a century, are weary even of this: "always the same thing, the list of names, you stand there for three hours, listening to all the names. They ought to do a little more, say a little more, and all they do is they set up a nice wreath, call these names, and go out to lunch" (Gabriella Polli). Others are still moved: "Listen, each year, when they name them, when they read the list of all the people, all the names, one really feels the life of each of them, of these very different people" (Adriana Montezemolo). For me, to whom it was new, it was another demonstration of how "the three hundred and thirty-five" are both a symbolic collective entity and three hundred and thirty-five concrete, distinct individuals. And if it takes so long to call their names, it must have taken a very long time to kill them. How slow, how long was this death!

So let us begin: Ferdinando Agnini, Antonio Ajroldi, Teodato Albanese, Pilo Albertelli, Ivano Amoretti, Aldo Angelai, Virgilio Angeli, Paolo Angelini, Giovanni Angelucci, Bruno Annarummi, Lazzaro Anticoli . . .

PART I

ROME