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The Most Feared Man in Italy

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The Most Feared Man in Italy

He crossed the street without trembling. All around, people eyed him sideways or kept their gaze directed at their own shadows. Their mumbled, incoherent apologies to him flew along with the breeze as he sidestepped their quivering bodies. He never once acknowledged their presence.

As he got closer to his destination, he silently regarded how those around him were getting more and more agitated. Some fidgeted their bleak-looking ties as others wrung their hands from within their pants' pockets. The men kept their jaws locked into place as the blood from their already pale faces drained, drop by drop. The women picked at their stubby nails while glancing toward their companions, hoping no one would notice their lipstick fading from constantly licking their dry lips.

To Arturo Bocchini, he was just walking to work.

He had nothing to fear while walking near the Capitoline Hill. His shirt never clung to his back with sweat, and he never had to beg his stomach to keep its contents down in this part of town. Palazzo Venezia, the dreaded medieval-looking building coming up on his right, was what caused those around him to shake with dread. Arturo knew this, and stored everyone's reactions in the back of his mind. He would be able to recall these facts at a moment's notice if his boss ever asked. And, knowing his boss, he sure would be interested in knowing what the average person thought of him.

Palazzo Venezia's beautiful balcony, which overlooked the cobblestone piazza, was something Arturo always liked to admire. It reminded him of his Italy: it watched over its inhabitants day or night, rain or shine. Sometimes, if

the weather permitted, he would enjoy his espresso up on the balcony and let his mind wander, knowing that no one would dare look up.

Any other man who held his job would have smirked with this knowledge. They would chuckle at the poor, sad people around him; people who lived in constant fear of what was going to happen next in Italy. Any other person holding the amount of power Arturo had would stare back into a pair of frightened eyes and soundlessly convey that no, it was not going to be all right.

Arturo did not see it that way.

He was doing his civic duty and keeping the peace. He was being a good citizen and an even better employee. That was all. It wasn't black and white to him. It was just what life was like in fascist Italy.

As his thoughts strayed to such matters, he didn't even realize that he'd arrived at his objective location. His mind whirled with what he wanted to tell his boss first, but he knew Mussolini would want the most urgent updates right away.

It wasn't always easy being the head of the secret police in Italy. But to Arturo Bocchini, someone had to do it—and at this point in his career and life, why not him?

My family likes to talk about Arturo Bocchini, our most famous ancestor. Any dinner at a relative's house somehow always finds its way to him. Whether it's the food on the table, the wine generously being poured, or whatever is on the news that evening, something always reminds someone of Arturo.

He's not in any American history books or stories. If I were to skim a textbook, I would never find his name. I can ask any of my friends who claim to be World War II buffs, and they'll just shrug their shoulders and say, "Never heard of him." Arturo Bocchini is not a recognized figure in America.

But to my family, he is the celebrity of every hour. My dad, grandfather, and uncles love to discuss who he truly was. Was he the man the Italian government portrayed him to be? Or was he the man my family (those who were alive during World War II) knew?

The contradictions are endless, and already his name is slipping away from people's lips. But when I watch my great-uncle Ralph slam his fist down, making the table shake with anger, and say that "the damn bureaucrats don't know a damned thing," it gets me mad, too.

I never knew Arturo, and neither did my dad. Yet, when we talk about him it's as if he's still around, still in the shadows, still walking up and down central Rome with his unflinching eyes.

It was 1922 when Benito Mussolini first became Prime Minister of Italy. World War I left the country in shambles, but Mussolini offered Italy hope.

Italy was still a new country of sorts; unification of the area had only taken place a few years before, and the war cost the nation more money than they had spent in the previous fifty years combined.

The Treaty of Versailles, the treaty that was hypothetically going to settle the disputes of WWI, was supposed to give the country faith that its high unemployment levels and equally high inflation rates would soon be a tale of the past. However, as fate would have it, Italy was left out of most of the treaty, causing resentment to stir between them and the other European nations. Dishonored and disgusted, many Italian citizens blamed the government for not having the balls to stand up to the “Big Three” (America, Britain, and France).

The everyday civilian prayed that Mussolini would change the current government for the better, while the monarchy craved he would stop the disgruntled murmurs from those who were aggravated with their authority. He and the fascist movement promised the nation—and the world—that a new Roman Empire would soon come forth from the ashes. For all that Mussolini promised to his hungry citizens, obliterating representative democracy seemed to be a small price to pay.

What he aspired to was simple: “Italy wants peace and quiet, work and calm. I will give these things with love if possible and with force if necessary.” So the question ran through his mind; how does one lucratively achieve this goal?

Then Benito Mussolini met my relative.

Arturo Bocchini is my great-(great) uncle on my dad’s side. Sometimes when I talk about him I forget to mention one of the “greats,” but I figure people still get the picture. His family branch veered away from ours, with most of his kin still residing in Italy today. My great-great-grandfather moved to America after World War I, and we have all stayed here since.

My great-(just one) uncle Ralph was born in the United States and fought in World War II. He would joke with us around the dinner table that he sometimes wondered if he was flying over Arturo during the war, and if Arturo ever thought of him. The two men never officially met, but through other relatives they kept in touch and were informed about the other’s life.

It’s my great-uncle Ralph who tells me all about Arturo and the “truth.” He shakes his head, and breathes out family lore every time I visit. I love hearing about Arturo, about what made him tick, and want to become such an infamous man.

Arturo Bocchini did not grow up envisioning that *The Milwaukee Journal* would one day dub him the “The Most Feared Man in Italy.” He did,

conversely, dream of becoming a lawyer, and was proud when he finally finished his law degree from the University of Naples in 1903 at the young age of twenty-three. Whether it was because of the economy, family problems, or just sheer curiosity, he took a different turn after graduating and quickly joined the Ministry of Interior under Victor Emmanuel III. Instead of trying to get people out of jail, he was now part of the security force (called Prefects) that threw people into jail.

In 1915, he was personally called to Rome to focus his already well-known efforts on the Fifth Division of Safety, as the General of Public Security. His reputation as a no-nonsense, tough but fair Prefect continued to expand until certain people in power began to wonder if he was the right man for the most laborious of jobs.

His influence spread near and far. Despite never being a member of the National Fascist Party, he was made Prefect of Brescia, Bologna, and Genoa after he finished his duty in Rome. All of his colleagues knew him as the man who could recall any fact or face within seconds, as the man whose voice never altered or stuttered, and as the man whose eyes never gave any emotion away. If Bocchini saw your wife through the window of a tearoom one afternoon, he could recall the exact address and time she was there weeks later.

Mussolini was no fool. He knew the second his hands brushed the intoxicating power he yearned for that certain people would have to go. Some people were kicked out within a fortnight of him stepping up to the plate in Rome. For others, he knew he would have to twiddle his thumbs before he could somehow get them out of the picture.

It took up to four years to completely overturn every government official, officer, and Prefect that might dare to question his authority. But by 1926 Mussolini had successfully morphed the Italian government into an impeccable pool of devout minions who would nod their heads at his every word.

On September 13, 1926 it finally became Bocchini's time to shine. Over the years, everyone who was anyone in fascist Italy had learned that this was not a man to cross. And Mussolini knew this, too. After steadily moving up the ranks, it was time to get the Holy Grail of jobs: Chief of the Secret Police in Italia. This meant he would have almost absolute control over the inner workings of the Italian government—after Mussolini, that was.

During his reign, my great-uncle's pride and joy was the creation of OVRA. The acronym seems to be lost to time, but one twisted tale says that Mussolini's deepest desire was creating a police organization that would snare every single breathing Italian in its giant octopus tentacles. In Italian, *piovra* means octopus, and many wonder if the word somehow comes from that gruesome analogy. One can only shudder at the thought.

OVRA had two main objections. The first and foremost goal was to protect Mussolini. Bocchini was so successful with this task that after he assumed his position in 1926, no hopeful assassin ever came close to grazing Mussolini's balding head. The second aim was to help create an illusion of harmony surrounding the fascist regime.

The men Bocchini recruited had special privileges that no other Prefect or police officer ever got; they were allowed to bypass the usual chain of command to get their job done. Bocchini himself handpicked the men who worked in OVRA—he looked for those who reminded him of himself. The organization was small, but scarily effective.

He asked these trusted men to look around. He asked them to watch the local coffee shops, to ask their wives what town gossip was going around, and to keep their ears open at Sunday Mass. Bocchini wanted to know what (not *if*) underground activities were taking place in the heart of Rome, in the countryside, and on the coast. There had to be people wanting to take down the fascist government, but where were they? Who were they? The neighbors? The teachers? The priests? Those with any suspicions were urged to go to the boss. Just like an octopus hoping to lure in unsuspecting fish, Bocchini knew how to hook his bait.

He had spies in foreign countries poking and prodding around. He tightened border patrol security to make sure no one got in or out. He, and his hissing friends, knew where you were, what you were doing, and what your sighs at night actually meant. No one was truly safe.

But did that mean if you were accused of traitorous behavior that you were immediately put to death? Not necessarily. While the death penalty was reestablished during this time period, only ten people were ever actually sentenced to death. Bocchini was able to keep Mussolini's system in check without truly resorting to the chaotic, violent system of the Nazi SS.

To my great-uncle, it seemed as though his work was sincerely helping the country. That's what my family continuously says. According to them, he thought in his heart of hearts that Mussolini was actually assisting the struggling, fragile country. I can't answer one way or another if up until this moment he agreed with everything the fascist government did, but he loyally did his job. For the fourteen years he served as the head of the secret police, Bocchini was the only person to survive Mussolini's changing of the guard. At one point or another, every other employee was dismissed, fired, killed, or fled. Bocchini was the only one who stayed in power. Perhaps it was because of how discreet he was in keeping his personal life separate from his work. Or maybe it was because of his marvelous administrative skills. Perchance it was just because Mussolini and Bocchini got along famously. All I know is that as

Director of the OVRA, and Chief of the Secret Police, my great-uncle was the second most important man in fascist Italy.

In 1936 Germany and Italy created the Rome-Berlin Axis. On the first of November, Mussolini stood in front of a Milan cathedral and announced his glorious plan to the world. This shocked many, since it was well-known that Hitler and Mussolini did not truly trust one another. Mussolini worried that Germany's territorial takeover would eventually make its way to Italy, but by this point that thought was only lingering—a meddling fly buzzing around. The new agreement meant that if war broke out, Italy would proudly stand beside Germany.

This was the start of Hitler's influence over Mussolini. Little by little, notions that Hitler believed in crept their way into Italy's politics. It is well-known that Germany was supplying Italy with military supplies and equipment, and so many wondered if Mussolini merely entertained Hitler's policies to keep him content. Others wondered if Hitler's dark web was finally just making its meal of Mussolini. Either way, by 1938 the Manifesto of Race was introduced to the public for the first time. The Manifesto of Race eerily resembled the Nazi regime's Nuremberg Laws. It stripped Jews of their Italian citizenship and any position they held in government, made marriage between Jews and non-Jews illegal, forbid them from having any power in the military, and prohibited them from working in factories that hired over one hundred people.

These laws challenged many people's beliefs and principles. Many non-Jews hated this new system and believed that Mussolini had gone too far.

I've asked my dad, my great-uncle Ralph, consulted books and newspaper articles, but I don't know what exactly made Arturo switch sides. They don't know. No one knows what made my relative one day realize that Mussolini wasn't helping the country, but ruining its principles and ideas.

I once had a nightmare about Arturo. I was there with him, but he couldn't hear me. I just sat on a creaky wooden chair and watched him pace back and forth for hours in his little bedroom in central Rome. When I woke up the next morning—very confused—I asked my dad what it could possibly mean.

"Well," he said, sipping his dark coffee. "Maybe you got an exclusive peak into his inner torment? Maybe you got to see what made him change his mind?"

I wish I had. I wish I could know. I imagine it could have been one of these three scenarios:

1. Arturo twisted and turned all night long. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't eat. He didn't want to breathe anymore. Each gasp of air just reminded him of the life force he would soon have to take away from his butcher and friend down the street. These people had never done anything wrong; in fact, they were model citizens whom he praised for following the country's orders passionately.

Pushing back his thin sheets, he dragged his feet out of bed to get a glass of water. Tomorrow, he would call in sick.

2. Arturo inspected his list. The next family he had to round up lived a corner away from him. He shook his head and sighed. It seemed like every person he was ordered to take into custody was someone who knew him, or his family, or his hometown. He couldn't escape the fact that the people he was sending to the camps were people he knew.

Stop it, he scolded himself. These aren't people. If Mussolini thinks they're less than human, then I should too.

He was the Prefect, the second-in-command, and he would not disobey orders today. He—

Across the street ran a screaming girl. Wailing incoherently, she begged the OVRA police officer to take her back to her mother. Smirking, one of Arturo's men yelled that they would be reunited soon enough and tossed her over his shoulder.

Arturo and the girl only made eye contact for a few seconds before he turned away and broke down in soundless sobs.

3. Arturo felt sick to his stomach. He'd just had one of the best lunches of his life, and he knew he had gone too far. He shouldn't have had that extra forkful, but he had to keep going, and he had to eat just a little bit more.

Looking around at the vacant restaurant, he wondered what would happen to the little shop once his men got ahold of its Jewish owner. Would someone else swoop in and take over? Or would it just fall to ruin, like many of the other vacant stores in Rome?

As Arturo was wiping his face, he watched the owner sweep behind the counter. He whistled as his mind wandered, oblivious that Arturo was still even there. Arturo began to smile, just a little bit, when the owner's wife tiptoed in and gave her husband a quick kiss on the cheek. Their eyes were twinkling as they gazed at one another.

Running out of the restaurant, Arturo threw up his entire meal right there onto the pathway. How was he to arrest that old couple in only a few days? How was he to separate them, when they still were so much in love?

How was he going to live with himself the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that...?

I don't know why Arturo changed his mind. I don't know what moment, if any, made him realize that he could no longer go along with Mussolini's fascist ideals. I can't tell you if it was a dramatic flash of light, or if he cried, or if he just always knew that he would have to put a stop to the craziness around him one day. I wish I knew, and I wish I knew him better.

That is what I imagine, because what else could make a man who religiously followed Mussolini's orders snap? The whispers that my family tells are only that: whispers, rumors, hints of a life that is so fascinating to me, but one I cannot access. I have only these murmurs on which to base my story.

I do know that it was around this time that something inside of him snapped. I know that he could no longer look at Mussolini as a colleague—or maybe even a friend—but saw him as a villain.

There are rumors about what Bocchini did from 1938 through 1940. Many Jews never saw concentration camps because he would not allow it. For two years he was able to get by without anyone else suspecting. Perhaps some papers got “lost.” Or maybe that train, for some strange reason, never arrived to take them away. Using his influence, he delayed the deportation of many Jewish families as much as possible.

Yet by 1940, people began to take notice. Bocchini was known for always being organized, for never letting any of his men slip up, and for always getting the job done. So then, why was he slacking now?

He started to openly question Mussolini's laws. With other Italians, he pondered their effectiveness. Criticizing the fascist state in any such way usually meant OVRA would appear on your doorstep, but what does a person do when his boss is the one imparting these treacherous notions?

Word spread, gossip flew from one spider to another, and before long Mussolini himself started to hear about these doubts his friend Arturo was having. Rumors that he questioned Jewish banishment and encumbered their exile swirled around and around in his office.

But this was Arturo Bocchini, his second, his right-hand man! This was his prodigy, the only employee still with him from the very beginning. What was to be done?

There are two versions of what happened on November 20, 1940. Two versions of that same day, that same moment in history. Two accounts that don't fit together and never will. Two stories told from two different sources,

two different types of people. One my family swears by, and one a historian swears by. To this day, there is no definite answer about which is accurate.

A colleague of my dad's (who is well versed in World War II history) once exclaimed that there is a statue of Arturo in a little village somewhere in Italy. It's this that makes me want to close my eyes and imagine staring up into his carved face. Or, at least, try to envision what others think when they pass by the statue on their way to work, to the bank, to the grocery store. What goes through their minds as they gaze up at someone who might have my nose, or my ears? Do they smile as they pass by my relative or sneer?

Arturo Bocchini was lying on his back. The pain seemed to escalate with every breath he sucked in and every twitch of his eyelids. His family quietly prayed and cried around him. He couldn't speak, but he was still conscious enough to realize that he didn't have a lot of time left.

The stroke came out of nowhere, and he knew he would not recover. He knew this was his last day on earth, his last thought, and the last time he would ever see the beautiful blue sky.

He was on the job when it happened, and he never saw it coming. Maybe if he had taken those vacations, or slept longer, or ate healthier, he wouldn't be on his deathbed right then and there.

It was November 20, 1940.

Arturo Bocchini trembled as he crossed the street. Everyone around him seemed so calm, so relaxed, but he couldn't stop his fingers from quivering in his pockets. Each step he took made his heart fall into his bottomless stomach. Why was Benito calling him in on his one day off? Did he suspect anything awry?

Of course not. I've covered all my bases.

Walking up the steps to the Palazzo Venezia, he hoped he wasn't getting fired. Perhaps they finally realized the number of his arrests were down. Perhaps they were about to demote him. Shaking his head, he couldn't accept that after fourteen years as the head of the secret police he might have to start at the beginning.

Numbly, he walked the familiar path to Benito's office. The door to the balcony was coming up on his right, and he longed to go outside, drink a little, laugh a little, and just be someone else, just for today. Instead, he headed to Benito's office. Forgetting to knock, he walked right in and sat across from his boss.

Benito smiled. "Sit down, friend."

Arturo felt beads of sweat along his forehead. "Is everything alr—"

“It’s hot out for November, isn’t it? Have some wine with me to cool off. You look like you’re burning up.” Benito reached to his left and poured two small cups of red wine from the bottle that was sitting on his desk. Sliding the cup over, he raised his own to clink with Arturo’s.

“To fourteen years together, my friend.”

“To fourteen years.” Arturo downed the refreshing drink and then cleared his still-dry throat. “So why did you—”

He coughed. Twice. Three times. His chest was so tight, so tight, he couldn’t see straight. His eyes were bleeding, they must be, everything was red, dark red, black, no colors, no light. All he could hear, over and over again, was: “To fourteen years together. To fourteen years together. To fourteen years...”

It was November 20, 1940.

What do I swear by? I know which truth I believe in. I didn’t know Arturo. I don’t know him, but I believe in his story, his tale, and his goodness of heart. I believe that November 20, 1940 is a day to mourn, not to celebrate.