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VENITIAN THRESHOLDS

(2000 words)

by Albert Russo

Synopsis: The story is recounted as a monologue, with flashbacks between Germany, during the Second World War and Venice, in the nineteen-eighties. Professor Hans reminisces. What has become of Aldo, the young Italian Jew he had met once in his uncle's attic and whose face will forever haunt him?

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Venice, 1984. Fleeting sentinels, a pair of seagulls glide past the stretch of milky sky whilst down in the campo two ragazzi play at calcio. "Goal!" exclaims the eldest prematurely. as he strikes the ball with all his might. "And missed again," counters a strident voice. Except for the two young boys, the square is desolate and the tall somber buildings huddling around it look on with their closed shutters impervious to the scene.

1944, a small town in the Black Forest. Hans has, just turned 10.

I went to Onkel Ludwig's attic but found the door locked. Something was moving inside and I figured, it must be a mouse. Then I heard a noise that sounded like somebody breathing. I looked through the keyhole and gasped. There was a girl sitting on the plankbed. I could only see her face and the collar of her blouse. She had very black hair, cut like that of a page, and huge beautiful eyes, but with such sadness in them.

I stayed awake most of the night trying to figure out who she might be. A distant relative? No one in the family had black hair, dark brown yes, but not black. I don't know whether I was already dreaming but the girl kept begging me, "let me out, let

me out." it can't be true. Onkel Ludwig is too gentle a man to want to harm a child. But then why is she locked up?

1984. Every stone in this city speaks to my heart as if I'd lived here for centuries. I feel as Venetian as these two young lads playing calcio. Yet, will I ever be able to cross the threshold of that Rest Home?

1944. I climbed the stairs ever so softly and pressed my eye against the keyhole. The girl was shaking her head in a pleading way. Then I recognized the large hand of Onkel Ludwig with the signet ring he wears on his little finger. "Mein Liebling," he whispered, stroking her cheek, "I won't hurt you." I became dizzy all of a sudden and then I got terribly scared and I ran outside.

1984. My God, to be so near. But here comes a party of tourists. The visit starts in about fifteen minutes. So few people ever get to see the place. It disturbs their tranquillity. There are only five of them.

"May I join you?" I ask. The bearded young man with the rucksack answers almost jovially, "Please." One of the middle-aged ladies, a Canadian, having detected my accent, addresses me in Yiddish. She turns livid as soon as she realizes her mistake. In her look I read fear, fear mixed with anger and hatred. I want to shout it so loud the booming of my voice would shatter all the windows of the campo, "I'm sorry, sorry six million times ... I was but a teenager." Henceforth the Canadian lady won't say another word to me.

1944. Onkel Ludwig notices how agitated I am. "What is it, Hanslein?" he says with his kindly frown. I'm choking and the on gesture I'm capable of is point at the attic. The long, interminable silence that follows is suffocating like a thousand blazing tongues licking my face.

He puts his arm around my shoulders. "It's a secret, Hanslein," he says at last. in a voice that seems to be someone else's. "You'll be the only one to know." Before he goes on, as if taking my cue from him, I hear myself mumble: "I swear on Mutti's life I shan't repeat it, not even to her." Onkel Ludwig kisses the top of my head then leads me to the attic. He takes a key out of the breastpocket of his uniform jacket and unlocks the door. Standing next to the plank-bed the girl stares at me with amazement, her long eyelashes blinking like a doll's. She's a little taller than me and wears boys' clothes. It's only when Onkel Ludwig introduces us that I learn that she is a he. I'm dumbfounded. What a princely looking ... boy!

"Aldo will remain with me until the war is over," Onkel Ludwig explains. "he is in great danger, that is why I've taken him under mv protection." He then says something to the boy in broken Italian and we part.

1984. Showing us into the German synagogue wherein lies the museum, our pretty guide gives us a brief history of the ghetto. She tells us that the word ghetto has its origins right here and is derived from 'gettare,' for this used to be the site of a foundry in which projectiles were cast.

"Until the sixteenth century Venetian Jews lived scattered all over the city. Then an edict confined them to the sestiere di Canareggio where we now stand, so that the authorities could keep them under close scrutiny. This is why the buildings here are among the tallest in the city. As many as 5,000 Jews resided in this area. To identify

themselves, those working outside the ghetto had to wear a yellow hat. In spite of the constraints and uncountable vexations the community managed to prosper and to establish in the Canareggio one of Europe's most flourishing centers of Jewish learning. They were so heavily taxed, however, that they gradually left Venice, and by the time Napoleon conquered the city - he was responsible for breaking down the ghetto gates and for granting equal rights to the Jews - the community numbered some one thousand inhabitants."

"And now?" asks the Canadian lady, "how many are there?"

"Much, much less, Madam," the guide says, adding, "I myself am a Catholic." This is the only other moment the Canadian lady turns around to face me and her glare pierces my whole being.

1944. I'm burning to see Aldo again and await impatiently in Onkel Ludwig's lounge. He promised he'd be back around six this evening. It's already ten past the hour. I've always felt gemütlich in this cottage, maybe that's the reason I'm pushing aside the evil thoughts that keep sneaking into my mind during my sleep. But why should Aldo be in danger? Aren't the Italians our allies? I'm sure Aldo and I will become friends: I saw it in his eyes when I greeted him goodbye.

Really, Onkel Ludwid. what are you doing? It's a quarter to seven. I'll go and have a look upstairs.

My God! The door of the attic is open and Aldo has gone. There's a note on the plankbed, it's for me. "Hanslein. I've been called to the Front and I shall have to stay away for quite a while. Don't worry about our little mascot, I'm taking care of him. I'll write to you as soon as possible. Remember, though, the promise you made. I know I can trust my beloved nephew. Your Onkel Ludwig."

1984. "Of the five schole or synagogues in the campo only one is used for prayers," the guide informs us. We visit the Spanish and Levantine schole which have been restored to their original splendor. "With its wood paneling, plaster decorations and gilt ornaments, the latter is a perfect example of Baroque architecture. " The guide also tells us that the Committee for the Safeguard of Venice has awarded its 1983 prize to the Jewish Community for its exceptional contribution to the restoration of the schole and of the Old Hospital which has been converted into a rest home for the elderly. The Rest Home ... that's where she is.

1944. it's four months since Onkel Ludwig and Aldo left. And still no news. Mutti gave me the keys of the cottage - she keeps them during Onkel Ludwig's absence. Of course, Mutti doesn't know about Aldo.

Opening the lid of the plankbed in the attic this morning I found, amid my toys, my very first drawing pad - I was still in kindergarten. I turned the pages and what did I discover? A letter by Aldo in pencil, very tightly written. It's in Italian, of course, so I can't understand it. But on the bottom of the page there's an address in Venice with his full name: Aldo Levi.

1984. The visit comes to a close and we bid each other farewell. The two lads are no longer playing soccer. The campo is filled with ghosts, peaceful ghosts but also those that have returned from their forced exile. I walk over to the bas-relief commemorating the Holocaust. It is large and bleak and chills the spine. This is

where the ghosts of the persecuted congregate. I can feel them in my bones. The question which will forever remain unanswered harks back, "How could my people, that highly civilized people who gave the world Beethoven and Goethe and yes, Karl Marx, commit the abomination of all time? How could we, Christians, suffer from such collective amnesia, forgetting that our own God was a Jew, that Mary and Joseph, his parents, were Jews? INRI. I'd better go back to the pensione. This place is driving me mad.

1945. The war is over. Onkel Ludwig's cottage has been destroyed during the last air raid. He will never come back to us. Mutti and I have cried a lot. Onkel Ludwig was such a good man. What has happened to Aldo? It is strange but I mourn for him alone, as if he were a brother, and every morning when I get up I have this ache in the chest. Yet I still pray the Lord in the hope that he may have been spared. Maybe he was lucky and is back in Venice with his parents. Oh, how I'd like to see him again! If only I could speak to Mutti about Aldo. I'd feel less pain. But no, I must remain loyal to Onkel Ludwig. I've hidden my drawing-pad with Aldo's letter. When I go to the Gymnasium I will learn Italian.

1955. Bonn. The months of research, the paper work, all that red tape! I thought I'd never see the end of it. The Ministry has finally released some information concerning Aldo's family. It's meager, but it's more than I had hoped for.

A couple of years ago a Franca Levi applied to the Ministry for war reparations. She is the sole survivor of a family of four. Her husband Davide and both their children Aldo and Liliana perished in Germany. Franca Levi couldn't afford to maintain their home, so she had to move to a much smaller place. Even with the allowance she now receives she has to do odd jobs to make ends meet. In the evening and on weekends she works as a seamstress. Aldo is my obsession, my whole life revolves around it. Our too brief encounter was enough to determine the course of my existence. Why else would I have taken up history and comparative religion and study Italian?

Aldo, angel-prince. To think that I could have once loved Onkel Ludwig makes me shudder. He saved you temporarily from their claws to better use you and satisfy his base instincts. How futile is my revolt!

1984. The pomp and the glory of Sunday mass at San Marco. You might have stood next to me right now if ... if ... and we certainly would have never met. Listen to the seraphic voices. Aren't these rituals mankind's most magnificent tribute to their creator? I have lost faith in Him, Aldo, the moment I set eyes on you.

1958. Bonn. Now that I hold a professorship at Heidelberg University and though my stipend is still modest, I've arranged with the ministry that part of it be added on a regular basis to the allowance it sends Franca Levi - with the proviso that my contribution will remain anonymous.

1984 Waiting at the entrance of the Rest Home. I've waited forty years for this moment. In my perfect Italian, concealing any trace of emotions, I shall tell her, "Signora Levi, you probably won't remember me, I used to live in the sestiere de Dorseduro behind the campo della Carità. I was a friend of Aldo's and ..."