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Sarah Sullivan FCRH '12
Fordham University, furj06@fordham.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

Sarah Sullivan, FCRH 2012, is from the Bronx, New York. She is a history and Medieval studies major with an Irish studies minor. She is the winner of Fordham University's Institute of Irish Studies Language Scholarship and the Research Assistant of Dr. Rigogne in the history department. After graduation, Sarah plans to pursue history in graduate school.

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Sarah Sullivan, FCRH '12

***"I felt that we Mussolinis were a family at the mercy of the winds in a wretched Italy overwhelmed by war."*¹**

Written by the son of 20th-century dictator Benito Mussolini, this story is of a son's unreserved, blind love for his father—even if his father had been a fascist monster responsible for the slaughter of millions—makes for a complicated and conflicted memoir, which quickly became a bestseller in Italy. *My Father, Il Duce* begins with an introductory essay by Alexander Stille, which can be considered a bold move on the part of the publisher. This essay encourages both readers and historians to research beyond the scope of the memoir and confirms that which deviates from corroborated facts. "While Romano's narration of historical facts, including those of which he was a first- or a second-hand witness, is highly suspect and often flat-out wrong, the feelings of filial affection and love are real and entirely comprehensible."² Although this is a fair statement, instead of being an apologist for fascism and for his father, Romano makes the conscious decision to avoid most of his father's crimes against Italians, Ethiopians, Albanians and others. Romano does not acknowledge, in the entire one hundred and sixty-three-page book, the events designed by his father that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands. It is only when such destruction is directed at the Italian people—as the Allies were bombing the cities—does he mention "the bombing of the big cities that numbered in the thousands."³ The only crimes of his father that Romano does acknowledge are the ones of infidelity against his mother. Only in the context of his familial relations does Romano, faced with the demands of loyalty to his mother, slacken his otherwise-unflinching support for his father.

As the title would suggest, Romano is more effective in documenting his relationship with his father and the events that occurred in his direct purview than accurate historical events themselves. Even if that were

the case, the memories he offers in *My Father, Il Duce* emerge as self-deceptive and perilously disingenuous. Sixty years after his father's death, Romano still holds true to his father's ideals and dreams, as if we were a living testament to the power and strength of Mussolini's cult of personality over the Italians of his day.

Even as Romano sees *Il Duce* as a kind, sensitive, ambitious and self-sacrificing patriarch, it is precisely the role of the *paterfamilias* on which many tenets of fascism were built. He writes that his father "seemed to live more for others than for himself"; no one would have appreciated this statement more than the dedicated sheep of Mussolini's flock.⁴ In addition to the biased nostalgia that influences Romano's memories, he was raised under the powerful notion of an *identità italica*; many followers were blind to Mussolini's murderous mayhem because they felt that a dream would be realized in him. There was never more hope for a truly unified and redeemed Italy than under the fascist regime of Mussolini.

The images that the text offers as textual support present an absurd, inconsistent image of Mussolini, yet one that is not entirely unlike a family album.⁵ The images depict one man's father at work and at play: the playful but firm father carrying his young son on his shoulders on one page and, on the next, Benito delivering a speech in his fascist splendor at a family picnic in the countryside. He is also depicted in photographs with Adolf Hitler, Galeazzo Ciano, and Neville Chamberlain; with his rescuers from the Gran Sasso; and as a corpse with other dead bodies before being hung in the Piazzale Loreto Milan. In choosing these specific photographs, Romano combines both family history and Italian and world history, which leads the reader to believe that he

understands and knows factual history equally well as his family's past. Through these photographs, Romano implies that his mere proximity to the important players of World War II is enough to make him a guarantor of authenticity, which is exactly the strategy he uses in the narration throughout his memoir.

Though his account is flawed in terms of his ceaseless support and blind love for his father, Romano Mussolini is most dangerously misleading when he condescendingly interweaves real historical events with familial ones. When detailing the courtship of his sister to Galeazzo Ciano, he asserts, "Edda and Galeazzo's meeting came about because he was the son of Admiral Costanzo Ciano, one of my father's supporters who was very close to him during the crisis following Giacomo Matteotti's assassination."⁶ This paints the picture in which Mussolini was greatly distressed by the assassination and its effect on the nation, whereas the truth of the situation is that he himself was a suspected conspirator in the death. In the introduction, Stille points out this incongruity and criticizes Romano for offering absurd commentary without citing any official or reliable documents, as is the case again with the analysis of Ida Dalser.

He discusses Ida Dalser—the woman with whom *Il Duce* had an affair and fathered an illegitimate son and who was later committed to a mental institution by Mussolini—and insists, "I never spoke to him about it, but I know that he wasn't insensitive to her suffering."⁷ Stille responds, "The sentence, like many sentences in this book, is worth analyzing for its strategies of deception and self-deception. First, he tells us that he has no direct knowledge of his father's feelings about Ida Dalser, and then he writes with declarative self-assurance that he knows that his father cared about her suffering."⁸ Romano also mentions that his "mother reluctantly remembers these events, as I still do," which is odd considering he would have been two years old when Dalser was confined to an asylum and nine years old when she died.⁹ He is not in a position to comment on Mussolini's feelings about the mother and child that he both abandoned and persecuted, but this does not stop him from making broad generalizations. This account serves as just one model of Romano's narrative that omits various details while also making many assumptions that are ultimately in Mussolini's favor.

Furthermore, Romano not only avoids citing historical documents to support his assertions but also uses rhetorical tricks to deceive the reader, such as in his

encounter with Generalissimo Franco. Romano declares that Franco was to save his father at the end of the war and give him refuge in Spain. He then supports this claim by writing, "I say this because in 1963, in Madrid, I met the then 71-year-old Francisco Franco . . ."¹⁰ However, nothing that follows in this or any of the other following sentences supports his statement. Then, he changes the subject rapidly to a discussion of how Franco both feared and resigned himself to the inevitable change of the communists. On another occasion, he asserts that his parents "found themselves together in the middle of a war that no one wanted and whose catastrophic developments no one expected."¹¹ The rhetoric that Romano employs suggests that World War II was something that Mussolini played no role in creating—something that no one wanted. His work seems laced with "absurdly revisionist accounts of historical events and crazy conspiracy theories aimed at absolving Mussolini."¹² *My Father, Il Duce*, at the very least, is effective in alleviating his heavy responsibility of supporting a series of wars that accounted for more than 55 million deaths from 1935 to 1945.

Furthermore, Romano's sporadic interjections of "what actually occurred" weaken his other statements because such wording insinuates that in other accounts he is not stating what actually occurred. This inconsistency establishes this book as more of a family legend than a historical account. For instance, when he mentions the handling of himself and his family after their arrest, he states, "For the sake of complete historical accuracy, I must say that nothing bad happened to us. The agents assigned to surveillance remained at their posts, and no one threatened or bothered us."¹³ The attention to historical accuracy in this example implies that the rest of his account was inaccurate.

The most emotional parts of Romano's memoirs are the discussions of the death of his brother, Bruno, and the struggles of his mother, Donna Rachele. The motivation for discussing his brother's death as a pilot testing aircrafts for the regime might be to show a compassionate and emotional Mussolini. He testifies, "My brother's loss profoundly affected my father and caused a kind of fracture in his life."¹⁴ Romano also cites his brother, Vittorio, in stating that there was a Mussolini before the death of Bruno, and another Mussolini after it, creating an image of a very sympathetic and sensitive Mussolini.

The mention of Rachele is twofold because she is not only the wife of one of the most infamous fascist dicta-

tors, but she also is cited incessantly, to the point where she becomes the backbone of the memoir. Through Rachele, the reader sees the pain and devotion of a woman who not only tolerated *Il Duce's* affairs but also offered him comfort and counsel. The only section of the memoir in which Romano does not glorify his father is the one in which he discusses his father's mistress, Claretta Petacci: "Clearly, as her [Donna Rachele's] son, I could do nothing but show solidarity with my mother."¹⁵ However, he does show sympathy for Petacci: "I admit that I felt a sort of tenderness for Claretta Petacci . . . I assume there had to have been something of greater consequence between them than physical attraction, in his soul as well as in hers, for she was devoted to him to the point of sacrificing her life for him without any hesitation."¹⁶ Even though he does clarify that he showed solidarity with his mother, Romano still seeks to explain the extramarital affairs of his father. Such an authorial betrayal of so pivotal and sympathetic a character only serves to further highlight the bias of the author. Romano constantly is trying to justify his father's affairs and not to judge his father's choices to the point where it is obvious that he himself finds something wrong with his father's decisions.

If the work were intended to be a history of a relationship, the book would then be historically valuable, for it is rare to be afforded a view of history from the point of view of a dictator's child. However, Romano states his purpose for writing the memoir in the first chapter:

I wanted . . . to help shed light on certain aspects of *Il Duce's* life. Some will wonder whether, after so many years, anything remains to be revealed and whether any unpublished details are worthy of consideration. My answer is 'Yes.' Much history still needs to be written because reconstructions are often tainted by emotion.¹⁷

Romano portrays his father as a sensitive family man, full of dreams and charisma, who altruistically sacrifices himself for the sake of an ungrateful, unappreciative country. However, he is more effective in documenting his relationship than historical events. Even though Romano views his father, Benito Mussolini, as a caring, insightful, and determined father and ruler, it is precisely this function and role of the *paterfamilias* on which many principles of fascism were erected. His memories offered in *My Father, Il Duce* emerge as self-deception and perilously deceitful.

Notes

- ¹ Romano Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce: A Memoir by Mussolini's Son* (Carlsbad, CA: Kales Press, 2006), 115.
- ² Alexander Stille, "introduction" to *My Father, Il Duce: A Memoir by Mussolini's Son*, by Romano Mussolini (Carlsbad, CA: Kales Press, 2006), xi.
- ³ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 55.
- ⁴ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 94.
- ⁵ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 71-87.
- ⁶ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 101.
- ⁷ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 120.
- ⁸ Stille, "introduction," xvi-xvii.
- ⁹ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 119.
- ¹⁰ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 5.
- ¹¹ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 121.
- ¹² Stille, "introduction," xxi.
- ¹³ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 24.
- ¹⁴ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 134.
- ¹⁵ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 52.
- ¹⁶ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 53.
- ¹⁷ Mussolini, *My Father, Il Duce*, 3.