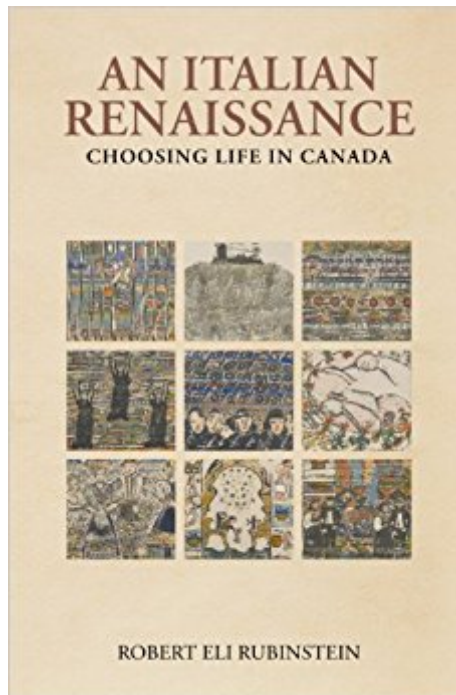


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# An Italian Renaissance: Choosing Life In Canada



## Synopsis

After the end of World War II, Holocaust survivors Bela and Judit Rubinstein, their families having been murdered by the Nazis, returned to Hungary. This chronicle follows them first there, and then to a refugee camp in northern Italy, the only haven for homeless Jews in postwar Europe. The account also describes the unexpected opportunity for the Rubinsteins to immigrate to Canada, and narrates their life there—the home that they establish, the family they raise, and their social and professional integration into the Toronto community. Along the way, Bela and Judit reclaim their ravished ancestral faith, an act that imbues their lives with meaning and purpose. Written with sensitivity and eloquence by their son, this biography breaks with the tradition of tragic Holocaust literature to present a story of the astounding process of healing and recovery undergone by so many survivors, who had to overcome unspeakable personal trauma to build successful new lives. The universal message of hope that emanates from this book will inspire a broad range of readers. Winner of: 2011 Canadian Jewish Book Award, Holocaust Literature Recent decades have seen an outpouring of literature about the tragic destruction of European Jewry during the Second World War. Yet virtually nothing has been published about the astounding process of healing and recovery undergone by many survivors of the Holocaust, who had to overcome unspeakable personal trauma to build successful new lives. The present book, written with sensitivity and eloquence by the loving son of two such people, breaks important new ground in describing and shedding light on this remarkable phenomenon. The story follows Bela and Judit Rubinstein as they return from the camps at the end of the War, their families having been murdered by the Nazis. Seeing no future in the land of their birth, they flee Hungary and end up trapped in a refugee camp in northern Italy, because homeless Jews are welcome nowhere in the world. Finally, an unforeseen opportunity arises to immigrate to Canada. The Rubinsteins establish a new home, raise a family, and integrate into the Toronto community. Achieving unimagined material success, they remain warm, decent, unassuming people. Along the way, they reclaim their ravaged ancestral faith, and this imbues their lives with meaning and purpose. The book's universal message of hope is sure to inspire a broad range of readers.

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## Customer Reviews

WINNER of the 2011 Canadian Jewish Book Award, in the category of Holocaust Literature This book will be an important addition to our contemporary sacred literature, and may well be among the top ten accounts of survivors' lives after the war. It is a remarkable act of piety and of love all the more powerful because of its nuances, its honesty, and its feeling for the complexity and the ambiguity of life. I found the book to be consistently touching, quietly inspiring, and too compelling to put down. --Rabbi Dr. Irving Greenberg, Founding President, Jewish Life Network; Past Chairman, United States Holocaust Memorial Council

Eli Rubinstein's "An Italian Renaissance" is a triply extraordinary book. As history, it breaks important new ground in telling the story of the Grugliasco refugee camp; the author's painstaking research, coupled with his insight regarding the camp's Jewish residents and the Italians in nearby Torino, enable him to provide fresh perspective to scholars and laymen alike. As a memoir about Rubinstein's parents, the book provides a compelling portrait of people who displayed genuine, quiet heroism -- in how they overcame unspeakable tragedy, raised a family and helped build a new community while rebuilding their own lives. Precisely because he depicts them as 'regular' people, rather than larger-than-life figures, readers will find their example accessible and inspirational -- as I did. Finally, Rubinstein's respect and admiration for his parents render him a shining example of how adult children should relate to those who not only gave them life, but provided a model to guide their lives. --Dr. Daniel Polisar, President, The Shalem Center, Jerusalem

I read and discussed "An Italian Renaissance" with my husband. We were impressed by your love and respect for your parents who saw a world destroyed, and yet remained resourceful and resilient. This document is an important link in our understanding of how survivors rebuilt their lives after enduring horrible tragedy. Your description of your parents' regeneration has, I am sure, comforted you, but it has also enriched others. May it be cherished by your children's children, so that they, in turn, pass down an understanding of the courage and fortitude that is their heritage. We feel privileged that you were willing to share this

family story with us. --Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein, Alon Shvut, Israel

Robert Eli Rubinstein is a businessman and communal leader. He lives in Toronto.

Review by Rabbi Hillel Goldberg in the Intermountain Jewish News, Dec. 20, 2010  
Dear Robert Eli Rubinstein, I have reviewed countless books, but never in the form of a letter to the author. Then again, never have I read a book quite like yours. Were we to classify your book for the Library of Congress, it would, no doubt, fall under standard categories. 1. Holocaust. 2. Memoir. 3. *B'nei HaChel* (Dov), Judit, Robert Rubinstein. Save for the family names, thousands of other books could be classified the same way. Yours, however, is different. Yes, you tell the story of your parents. Each was taken by the Nazis in Hungary in 1944, then subjected to great suffering, not least the loss of most of their families. They met after the war, married and built a new life in Canada. Your retelling of this trajectory is different -- first, in your somewhat incongruous title, *Italian Renaissance*. It alerted me to something beautiful between your parents' Nazi period and Canadian period. With your subtitle, "Choosing Life in Canada," it was clear that your book had nothing to do with the historical Renaissance; rather, it turns out, with a small town near Torino in northern Italy, Grugliasco. Grugliasco became the site of your parents' "renaissance." To get the hint, I had to read quite far into your book. But even before that, I saw your book was different for a more important reason: You do not round the edges. Of course, in any Holocaust memoir, one expects rough edges, but only about the Nazis and what they did, or forced Jews to do. Your rough edges open up a more subtle landscape, by turns difficult and rewarding. You probe the inconvenient truths about what some survivors did to themselves, and other truths, quite beautiful, about how others refashioned themselves. You probe what your parents, each in a different way, told themselves in order to survive their survival. Most admirably, you probe yourself. You not only collect the incidents and stories and stray documents and slices of conversation that enable you to piece together your parents' history, you subject them to a critique. I must confess, I stand in awe of the unfailing and uncompromised honor you pay your parents, alongside your relentless pursuit of the truth. Quite a combination! You love the story they wove for you, and never flinch from searching for corroborating evidence, which you do not always find. Sometimes, you find the opposite, disproving evidence. I must further confess, you mystify me. Whence did you summon all of your scholarly skills? How did you learn to suspect, identify, and explain a perhaps subconscious move by your mother to embellish one of her most moving, indeed wrenching, tales of survival? Although you do not say precisely what it is you do for a living, you clearly are in business. I assume you followed in the

footsteps of your parents' successful real estate business. How did you acquire the training of a scholar -- the scepticism, the thoroughness, the instincts, the literary grace? You bring an overwhelming empathy to all of your sources -- both human and documentary -- without diluting your capacity for dispassionate evaluation. When the subject is one's own parents, this is doubly remarkable. I had to write you directly to express my admiration. When I first read in your introduction -- "To the extent that my insistence on candor may upset certain people, I express regret, but I offer no apology" -- I didn't get it. Having completed your embracing yet unflinching effort at biography, memoir, history, self-scrutiny, and piety, I am impressed. Grugliasco held a former all-female psychiatric hospital, converted into a Displaced Persons camp for Holocaust survivors, run by the UN. Your parents were eternally grateful for the shelter and meals they received, gratis, in Grugliasco. Their gratitude, as you point out, itself was predicated upon a level of healing. Not everyone healed. Your rough edges are unvarnished. You write: Your mother was proposed to by her uncle. He was about as old as her father (dead in Auschwitz). It was all very simple for your uncle. He needed a spouse, your mother needed a spouse, so why not marry? Your mother, alone, bereft, broken, had the courage to say no. Her uncle never spoke to her again. You write: Eva, a friend of your mother, lost her husband in Maidanek, so she remarried. Her husband was much older than she, and they had almost nothing in common. One fine day, Eva's first husband, Marek, showed up -- unbelievably, he had survived the gas chamber. She abandoned her second husband and two children, exultant. "Alas, Marek was no longer the person she had known and loved. His harrowing concentration camp experiences had thoroughly traumatized him, rendering him manic depressive and abusive. In truth, Eva was not the same person she had been six years earlier, either." In two weeks, she was back in Grugliasco with her new family. Rough edges. Two friends, separated during the war, enjoyed an emotional reunion in Grugliasco. She became pregnant. The anticipation was overwhelming. But she died in childbirth, the baby survived, the father collapsed emotionally, the baby's aunt took him to France to raise him. You write: "Every person in the camp felt the agony of the disconsolate father." You make it clear: As much as it was love, or in many cases less than love, marriage was an imperative in order to procreate, to defeat Hitler, to recreate the Jewish people. Pregnancy, however, was easier to achieve than happiness, not to mention normalness. Still, you make clear, Grugliasco was, for most of the 3,000 displaced persons there, a healing center. Paradoxically, this was in part because of the enforced idleness. Your parents and their fellow Holocaust survivors wanted to return to normal life, to be productive, to work, to do something. They hated doing nothing, but in the economically devastated post-war Italy, they were forbidden to seek jobs. The way you read it, your parents' involuntary and extended vacation was

really an opportunity to allow them to return, gradually, to normal routines, to get past their demons to some degree, at least. You write -- again, I quote you, because, you see it and say it better than anyone else: "My mother has often remarked that she is not sure how well the members of the group would have managed had they been given the opportunity to return to living a normal life right away. At the time, all they could think about was how irritated they were to be trapped in such a dreadful place after the torments they had just recently endured. In retrospect, it proved a great blessing that the survivors were granted this transitional breathing space before having to readjust to life in the outside world." An Italian renaissance. And G-d? How did your parents square their fate with their faith? About your father, you tell us little, because he spoke little, in fact almost never, about the Holocaust. Your mother was just the opposite. In my mind, your father was the Ben Doliner of my experience, and your mother was the Fred Englard of my experience. Doliner, a survivor, never said one word, yet after he died his basement was found stocked to the gills with canned food, lest he need to barricade himself again. This time, he would be prepared. Englard who, like your mother, was a survivor of Auschwitz, never stopped talking about the Holocaust in virtually every conversation I had with him over the course of a quarter of a century. Your mother was gripped by a "deep spiritual malaise." Her "instinctive reaction" to it, you tell us, "was to yearn for the stability and contentment she had known in her parents' traditional Jewish home." After marrying Bela, she decided to focus on taharas hamishpachah, literally 'purity of the family.' Jewish law required a married woman to immerse herself in a mikvah, a ritual bath, every month following her menstrual cycle. If Sabbath observance was rare after the War, adherence to taharas hamishpachah was virtually non-existent . . . Each month, she took the lonely train ride from Grugliasco to Milano, to the mikvah located in the Jewish communal building at Via Unione 5. "As Jewish law permitted immersion in the mikvah only after nightfall, it was invariably too late to take the train back. Judit often spent the night sleeping on the floor with the latest group of refugee arrivals . . . and returned to Grugliasco the following morning." Your delineation of the radical difference between deed and word in your mother's life highlights her anguish and your honesty. Right after the war, on the first occasion to say Yizkor -- the memorial prayer for the dead -- your mother "found herself overwhelmed by anguish. It was still too fresh, too raw. Objectively speaking, she knew the tragic facts [of her parents' end in the crematoria], but something within her recoiled at the thought of reciting the same prayer as countless generations of bereaved Jews before her." Less than a year earlier in Schwerin, when the girls who had survived Auschwitz lit the Shavuot candles in defiance of the curfew, Judit was still hoping that her family had somehow remained alive. By now, there was no longer any warrant for optimism. She simply could not bring herself to participate in the Yizkor

service, and she turned away."And when she went for Yizkor for the first time in Toronto, she was turned away. "The only person who seemed to take notice of her presence there was the gabbai, the sexton, who gave her an icy stare. 'Hey, lady!' he sneered. 'Don't you know it is forbidden to bring babies into the shul? They make a racket and disturb the worshippers!' Mortified, my mother left the building in silence."But at home, you, Mr. Rubinstein, tell us, "she was seized by a terrible loneliness, and she focused with all her might on praying for the souls of her parents. She was astonished that she had it in her, and even more astonished when she felt as if a heavy burden was being lifted from her."In Grugliasco, and later as "greeners" in Toronto, for whom not coming in for work on Saturday meant not coming in on Monday, either, your mother and father clung to the Sabbath. If, as you tell us, your mother and her friends kept track of Shabbos and festivals by scratching a Jewish calendar on the wall in a dark corner of their barracks, and commemorated these special days by devising ersatz candles of margarine and string, then, even if your mother's Auschwitz observance was part of her strategy to maintain the will to live, and to persuade herself that her own family must also have escaped death, the "aching solitude" of your parents' commitment to Jewish observance would sustain itself after the war. Nonetheless, your fearlessness of rough edges also leads you to tell us that decades later, when your father was in his late nineties and declining badly, Shabbos ironically, painfully, reversed itself. Precisely because of his immense physical deterioration and loss of independence, needing to depend on full time caregivers, "his sense of dread mounted day by day as Shabbos approached. This day is unlike any other in its character and rhythms, normally enabling it to be a source of profound inner peace for the observant Jew, an anchor of stability in a tempestuous world. In my father's case, Shabbos was transformed into an oppressive master . . . By Friday afternoon, he would be in a state of full-blown panic: How would he get dressed in his Shabbos clothes? Would the timer controlling the lights work properly? Would he remember the words to the prayers? Would there be enough wine for the Kiddush, and would he be able to recite it?"Yet, on the last Shabbos of your father's 99-year existence, you sat with him at the third Shabbos meal and sang, "Prepare the feast of perfect faith, the joy of the Holy King. Prepare the feast of the King," in the "same melody he learned from his own father very long ago in Szentistvárfőn, and which has been passed down through innumerable generations of his family. For the moment, my father is transfixed by an extraordinary calmness. He clasps my hand with both of his own. . . . I feel an intense closeness to him, yet I know he is in a far-away dimension, one that I can never hope to enter."Dear Mr. Rubinstein, alas, at this point, I must bring this review to an end and merely refer those who would read your book to its countless other moments of pain and triumph and insight, and to its other memorable characters, most notably

Sara VinĀfÆ'Ā Āson, the young woman from northern Italy who "had felt deeply, for reasons she herself could not fathom, that it was her destiny to be a Jew," and who ended up producing a history of Grugliasco as a DP camp. I found your summary of what you learned in your decades-long conversations with your mother and in your other research better than any I could summon:"Now older and wiser, I have learned that the reality is far more nuanced than my wishful fantasy. It seems that just as victims of persecution and degradation in search of healing sometimes impose helpful mythologies upon the objective facts, so do their children who yearn to understand them."I hope I do not intrude or show disrespect, but, given your correction of some of your mother's versions of events, please permit me one final question:Has your mother read your book?Copyright ĀfĀ Ā Ā© 2011 by the Intermountain Jewish

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I have just finished this book and cannot stop talking and raving about it. It is wonderful. Although I read parts through a veil of tears, I could not put it down and completed it in one afternoon. Most of my father's family perished in the Holocaust and as I read the very personal memories of Eli Rubenstein, I was able to relate to them on so many levels. Subjectively, it might have been the story of my grandmother, my uncles, my aunts, or my cousins, whom I never had the opportunity to know. Objectively, it is a view of 20th century history and the power of individual strength and redemption. The beauty of the prose, the depth of Eli's feeling for his past and the strong love of a young man for his family make this story an emotional and rewarding experience. I am buying copies for my children and grandchildren as well as friends. Reading this book has renewed my sense of gratitude for the life I lead and for my beloved family. Thank you, Robert Eli Rubenstein for your gift of sharing this part of your life with us.

Wonderful testament to the courage of survivors choosing to live a fulfilling life.

Let me begin by guiltily confessing that I generally shy away from Holocaust literature. I recognize how important it is, but I simply find the accounts so emotionally painful that I am often overwhelmed. Nevertheless, I was immediately attracted to Eli Rubinstein's book about his family's experiences in an Italian refugee camp. The events being chronicled took place a mere 150 kilometres from where my father and his mother spent the war, and where my grandfather later worked with countless refugees in DP camps as a Jewish Community Official. Stories of wartime and post-war Northern Italy were the stuff of my upbringing, and, tempted by the possibility of



catching a glimpse of the cast of characters I knew so well, my curiosity got the better of my reticence. *An Italian Renaissance: Choosing Life in Canada* disguises itself, at first glance, as a biographical account of the Rubinstein family's lives from pre-World War II Europe to present day Canada. However, the book's narrative and thematic focus from the outset is the UN refugee camp in Grugliasco near Torino (Turin) Italy, where the author's family begins the process of healing and spiritual rebuilding after the war. Rubinstein richly weaves the original experiences of his family members in the camp with the story of his own return to Grugliasco as an adult, and the efforts of himself and others to faithfully reconstruct the history of the refugee experience there. The book centres on post-war rebirth and rehabilitation, areas that in Rubinstein's words have "received scant attention despite [their] clear importance." The historical narration is reason enough in its own right to recommend the book. Rubinstein seems to find just the right balance of moods and tone. He tells his parents' story with the proper respect and sobriety, but never becomes too heavy-handed or depressing. The events depicted range from the tragic deaths of family members, to the heroic accounts of those who saved the lives of others, to the humorous descriptions of his newly-Canadian family's early attempts at earning a living in unfamiliar trades. What makes the book even more compelling, however, is that the story is as much about the author's own self-discovery as it is about his family. Rubinstein's visits to Hungary and Italy, and his considerable research into Grugliasco's history (particularly where the history diverges from his mother's recollections) grant him considerable insight into the world of his parents, and ultimately into himself. By sharing his own spiritual journey, Rubinstein makes the account intensely touching and personal. Equally poignant is the author's obvious devotion to his parents that informs the entire narrative. While Rubinstein confesses that his thinking style is very cerebral and introspective, we cannot help but be emotionally engaged by his deep affection and respect for his parents and their story. I would recommend *An Italian Renaissance: Choosing Life in Canada* both to the reader with an interest in Holocaust literature, and to the general reader alike.

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