CHAPTER 8


Italian anthroposophists faced unique choices and challenges during the Fascist era. While their German counterparts confronted a regime fully committed to a racist program from the beginning, Steiner’s Italian followers found themselves in a more mercurial situation. Unlike National Socialism, which professed racial antisemitism as one of its core principles, Italian Fascism developed toward an antisemitic policy over a long period of time through a series of uncertain stages. It was not until 1938, a decade and a half after coming to power, that Mussolini promulgated the racial laws aimed against Italy’s Jews. In the complex evolution of government-sanctioned Fascist antisemitism, several Italian anthroposophists came to play a conspicuous role as promoters of “spiritual racism.” This occult version of racist thought eventually included practical involvement in the implementation of Italian racial policy. It was in Fascist Italy rather than Nazi Germany that esoteric ideas about the spiritual nature of race came to fruition and influenced concrete measures adopted by the state.

The anthroposophist contribution to spiritual racism in theory and in practice yields new insights into the nature of the Fascist racial campaign between 1938 and 1945. Spiritual racists touted a synthesis of biological and spiritual forms of racial discrimination centered on a radicalized antisemitism. Their emphasis on Italian racial character was readily compatible with an outspokenly pro-Nazi stance. Spiritual racism was no mere theoretical construct, but demanded ruthless practical enforcement. It cast its claims far beyond the borders of Italy, insisting that its strictures applied to the whole world. The neglected history of anthroposophist participation in Fascism’s racist turn reveals a harder edge to seemingly softer forms of esoteric racial discourse, as anthroposophists attempted to put their own doctrines into practice in administering Fascist race policy under Mussolini’s regime.

Fascist racial legislation imposed severe restrictions on Jewish life in Italy. Beginning in September 1938, Italy’s small Jewish community of fewer than 50,000 people faced official persecution. The “Laws for Defense of the Race” deprived Italian Jews of civil rights, expelled foreign Jews, barred Jews from educational institutions and government service, prohibited marriage between Jews and non-Jews, restricted Jewish employment and ownership of property,
expropriated their assets, and established a variety of other onerous sanctions. By 1942 Jews were conscripted into forced labor. Italian Jews were not deported to extermination camps, however, until the German occupation of Italy starting in September 1943. The Fascist racial laws were accompanied by a propaganda campaign aimed at inciting antisemitic sentiment, a factor which until 1938 had ebbed and flowed according to the vicissitudes of Mussolini’s own shifting stance on the ‘Jewish question’ and the competition of rival factions within the regime.¹

Assessing the impact of spiritual racism requires engaging a series of contentious debates in the developing scholarship on Fascist racial policy. According to one long-established interpretation, the race laws of 1938 were primarily a product of Italy’s alliance with Nazi Germany, while the Italian components of Fascist racial thought were fundamentally different from and incompatible with the biological orientation of Nazi racism. A popular corollary of this idea, associated with the pioneering work of Renzo De Felice, holds that Italian antisemitism and its spiritual form of racism were milder and more benign than their German correlates.² Newer research has challenged this account, focusing on internal Fascist dynamics and Italian racial ideologies rather than Nazi pressure. Recent historical analyses emphasize that racism and antisemitism were neither marginal nor external to Italian Fascism. Nor did they first arise
