Introduction

Focusing on the experience of female Italian teachers, this paper examines the educational efforts of Italy’s fascist regime to Italianize the ethnic German population of the northern region of South Tyrol. Until the end of World War I, the territory encompassing Italy’s province of South Tyrol (Südtirol/Alto Adige) was an integrated part of the region Tyrol within the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. The native language was a South German dialect, while the Ladin, a small minority in the Dolomite valleys, spoke a Raeto-Roman idiom. The local customs and the Tyrolean culture were distinct due to the independent character of the region, but they were characterized by Tyrol’s affiliation with the German-speaking area of central Europe. As a consequence of Austrian war reparations to Italy, Tyrol was split, and the area South of the Brenner Pass was annexed to Italy.

Initially, South Tyrol enjoyed a relatively autonomous status as Italy’s liberal government tended to respect the linguistic and cultural differences of the local population. The rise Fascism in 1922, however, initiated a succession of increasingly repressive measures aimed at the Italianization of the ethnic German population. One of the ways in which the regime hoped to bring its recalcitrant German-speaking population into the fold of the fascist Italian nation was by outlawing German schools and purging ethnic German schoolteachers from the local school system. Male and female schoolteachers from across Italy were sent to the recently annexed province in order to educate South Tyrolean children in Italian. The teachers, who are vividly remembered by their former pupils, sought not only to teach the Italian language and culture but also to instill the fascist spirit and an unwavering sense of Italianess. This paper looks at the experience of female Italian teachers and the interaction between schoolchildren, teachers, and the wider social environment. What was the role of female Italian teachers in the regime’s imperative task of constructing a fascist Italian hegemony in South Tyrol? What was the normative understanding of Italianess that these teachers brought to the province as they attempted to turn ethnic German children into fascist Italians? And how did their educational tasks inform the texture of their experiences on the ground?

The Gentile Reform and the Fascist School System

Most research on Italy’s school system under Fascism has focused on the educational reform of 1922, named after its main ideologue Giovanni Gentile, and the administrative regulations
introduced by the Fascist dictatorship. The Lex Gentile has been described by one of its critics as a “strange combination of genuine idealism and humanism with a cloudy and bombastic philosophy.”¹ In fact, Gentile’s reform was highly idealist as well as innovative. It professed to foreground the development of the child, envisioned learning to be achieved by experience rather than memorization, proposed excursions in nature, and emphasized spontaneity and artistic development. The novel objectives and groundbreaking methods were combined with the exaltation of an idealist philosophy and the aspiration to a higher truth. Fascism delineated the parameters and determined the content of the appropriate values and beliefs that were to guide schoolchildren to adulthood. Since character formation replaced formal education as the ultimate educational goal, the school system could be employed for the creation of a fascist collectivity.

The social and political intentions of Gentile’s reform and the administrative facets of the Fascist school system have been studied extensively. However, as James Donald has noted in Sentimental Education,

> The strategies and discourses of governmental apparatuses tell only half the story. It is equally important to look at the unrecorded but resourceful improvisations of everyday life. Here the cultural norms are transgressed and reworked in the very moment they are instituted.²

I will thus attempt to examine the ways in which Fascist educational precepts were put into practice in the specific setting of a linguistically and ethnically foreign region and to analyze the gendered slippages and transformations of educational norms on the ground.

### Teaching—A Female Occupation

In Gentile’s vision, schooling was supposed to bring the young closer to grasping the “life of the spirit.” In order to fulfill this significant task, teachers were obliged to continually renew their “personal culture” and search for the “higher truth.” Yet, Gentile’s idealist philosophy denied women the capacity to comprehend the “life of the spirit” and thus implicitly refuted their educational abilities. In spite of Gentile’s ideals, women were the primary educators in the home as well as in kindergartens and schools. Since teaching was an underpaid and low-status occupation, women overwhelmingly made up the teaching staff of elementary schools. During the school year of 1920/21, the number of students in normal schools and special courses for teachers was 36,562, of whom 33,696 were women.³ Still in 1935, three out of four students at teaching institutes were women.⁴

The Fascist regime thus did not intentionally single out women for the task of educating a fascist collectivity. Instead, the dictatorship attuned its philosophy in order to rationalize and justify women’s occupation as elementary-school teachers. Concurrently, women were denied the capacity and increasingly deprived of the opportunity to instruct students beyond the elementary-school level. As Victoria De Grazia noted in her work,

> The dictatorship fully endorsed the common conviction that the ‘gentle sex’ excelled where ‘there is need for love and refined learning: at children’s schools, in family life, and on hospital floors.’ ‘Woman,’ as the slogan went, ‘is an educator insofar as she is or can be a mother.’⁵

In accordance with traditional beliefs, Fascism attributed to women specific emotional qualities such as love, tenderness, devotion, and dedication. These allegedly innate sentiments classified all women as natural mothers. The motherly education initiated in the home was to be perfected in the public sphere of schools and youth organizations. Since Fascist education, particularly in the elementary-school stage, aimed at character formation rather than formal instruction, women were posited as the ideal elementary-school teachers. As the following excerpt from Carmela Lenner’s classbook illustrates, female teachers thought of themselves as mothers to their pupils:

> “Maybe the kids have already forgotten the mom they left at home and have already understood
that at school they can find another [mom] who will give them all her affection… All coolness melted in the warm wave of sympathy that flows from the heart.” Also, schoolchildren were encouraged to confide with their teachers rather than their parents by recording their innermost thoughts in mandatory school diaries.

While women dominated the teaching staff of elementary schools, all directorial and managerial posts were occupied by men. Men outnumbered women 1,363 to 480 as elementary and middle-school directors. The control of what and how teachers taught thus was in the hands of men. Women were to be the instruments that fulfilled the regime’s educational expectations and visions. Their emotional disposition made them more suitable for the task of educating children. Yet, their work demanded careful male supervision and direction.

The Purge of Ethnic German teachers

In 1923, a decree belonging to the Gentile reform determined that throughout Italy all instruction had to be conducted exclusively in Italian. Starting with the school year 1923/24, all first graders were to be instructed solely in Italian. Up until then, South Tyrolean children had enjoyed public instruction in their native German language. However, within a few years, the South Tyrolean school system was entirely Italianized with the exception of a small number of religious institutions. Most ethnic German teachers were either dismissed or retired. Some chose to take language classes and to undergo stern examinations in order to retain their occupation. Most of the teachers who succeeded in passing the examinations, however, were transferred to other Italian provinces. A small number succeeded to teach in South Tyrol but was prohibited from speaking German to their pupils. As native representatives of the oppressive Fascist state, ethnic German teachers were in a difficult position. They were under the constant surveillance of their Italian colleagues and supervisors and the local Fascist authorities. Moreover, the native population tended to view ethnic German teachers who agreed to teach in Italian as traitors.

A Sense of Mission and Sacrifice

The Italian teachers who replaced the dismissed, retired, and transferred ethnic German teachers tended to approach their teaching assignment in South Tyrol as a mission. A female teacher noted in her classbook early in the school year 1933/34: “The government does a lot, but all is in vain if we do not prepare the Italians. This is the most difficult task. A teacher who does not consider himself on a mission cannot last in Alto Adige. I feel the responsibility I have toward the fatherland and I wish I had greater willpower, activity, and passion.” While pupils were required to explore their deepest feelings and private thoughts in school diaries, teachers were to voice their impressions, ideas, and concerns in their classbooks. Classbook entries were meant to support the improvement of the “personal culture” of the teaching staff. However, the recordings were largely employed to portray one’s character and work in a favorable light, as directors and supervisors controlled the entries regularly. The aforementioned teacher wrote at the end of the same school year: “I have never missed any occasion to educate the pupils in the national sentiment, I have engaged myself above all for the patriotic recovery and the study of history.”

While her patriotic attitude might have been sincere, her words seemed to be directed at an audience appreciative of her efforts.

Classbook entries that describe the teaching assignment in South Tyrol as a mission are recurrent. Both male and female teacher approached their educational task with a sense of mission. “My mission called me to Predoi,” a schoolteacher wrote in 1933/34 upon her reassignment to a small mountain village. And Miss Pedrotti, transferred to a mountain valley for the school year 1928/29, noted:
In the name of the Duce and Italy we silently offer our sacrifices and donate all our best energies to the noble and holy cause that demands a lot from us. It is principally the school, it is us, who bring to these valleys that were already Roman (and the little ones know this) the civilization and the great name of immortal Rome.\textsuperscript{11}

As Miss Pedrotti remarked in her entry, carrying out a Fascist civilizing mission demanded sacrifice and often yielded frustration. Many teachers were sorely disappointed in their expectations to fulfill their mission of Italianization and Fascistization by the diffidence and hostility of the local population. Very few succeeded in winning the trust of their pupils and the respect of the native population. Most capitulated in front of the recalcitrance of their environment. Moreover, the antagonism encountered among the ethnic German population was not the only obstacle to the fulfillment of a civilizing mission. Teachers often felt abandoned by their superiors and the Fascist authorities who failed to provide the necessary infrastructure, money, and moral support. Time and again, teachers complained about the conditions of schools in their classbook entries: \textquoteleft The school is ugly; it is not a school…crumbling and dirty desks, unadorned walls. There is a wooden blackboard that risks falling over as soon as you touch it.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{12} Teachers recorded their recurrent conflicts with the school authorities and the podestà (Fascist mayor) over demands for better schools and more teaching material. Indeed, the relationship between municipal and school authorities was often strained due to the repeated differences over competences and finances.

**Linguistic and Cultural Incomprehension**

One of the main challenges for the newly arrived Italian teachers and their pupils was linguistic incomprehension. Most teachers did not speak German, and if they did, they were not allowed to approach the pupils in their native language. Italian was the only permitted language. One of my interview partners commented: \textquoteleft I had a really nice teacher, but when we asked her to speak German to us, she said: \textquoteleft Non posso. (I am not allowed to.)\textquoteright The other teacher—she was really mean—would always snoop around if the nice teacher was saying a word in German." Teachers thus had a hard time communicating with their pupils who frequently did not understand a word of Italian. Maria Gamper, who was schooled in Italian, recalled,

\begin{quote}
In first, the teacher’s name was Caterina Dalpiaz, a woman from Nonsberg. My fortune was that I had older siblings. My sister Rosl informed my beforehand: When the teacher asks you: \textit{Come ti chiami?} You have to say your name! Which is what I did. But other children did not know that, and they did not know what to do with a question asked in a foreign language. They thus instinctively repeated the teacher’s question. Dalpiaz did not hesitate in such situations and intervened instantly, one on the left and one on the right. She slapped the children so hard that they had swollen cheeks. They started to shake and did not regain themselves anymore.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Teachers could not understand their pupils, and pupils could not understand their teachers. Teachers frequently complained about the linguistic shortcomings and the indifference and hostility of their students. Indeed, the mutual incomprehension was often exacerbated by the reciprocal unwillingness to communicate with each other and to accept each other’s linguistic and cultural differences. Oral history projects have shown that parents often discouraged their children from applying themselves in the Italian school. One of my interview partners remembered her father’s words: \textquoteleft My father would always grumble: \textquoteleft You do not need to study that walsche Geteufle (Italian crap). You do not need to remember these names, they are all traitors.'’ Another interviewee had a similar experience:

\begin{quote}
I did all my mandatory schooling in Italian, but I did not learn much. We were influenced by our parents who kept telling us not to learn anything for the Italian school. We would often ditch class or not go back to class after the break. The teacher was happy when we did not come. He wanted us to stay dumb anyway.
\end{quote}
The socioeconomic background played a significant role in determining attitudes toward the school system. Farming families, for instance, were more likely to ignore the possible benefits of schooling. The opposition to the Fascist Italian school system thus needs to be viewed in relation to the general opposition to school instruction. Already under the Austrian government the relationship between schools and farming families had been tense, primarily due to the use of child labor on farms. The prohibition of German schools under Fascism rendered the already problematic relationship even more difficult. Moreover, the novelty of Gentile’s reform with its insistence on explicating natural processes in a concrete and practical manner contributed to the sense of foreignness and fear of modernity experienced by many parents. In the Ulten valley, mothers publicly and violently demonstrated against the instruction of their children in human anatomy and physiology.14

Interview partners frequently recall the lack of trust between parents and teachers. The diffidence that many homes showed toward the Italian language and culture represented a great obstacle for the goals of Fascist education, which aimed to enter the domestic domain and to modify it according to the necessities of the nation. Character formation could only be accomplished if the influence of the home was synchronized to the efforts of schools and youth organizations. Yet, parents tended to stay away from school festivities and, when possible, prevented their children from participating in activities that bore the imprint of the regime. Miss Bolelli, teacher in Predoi, noted the inaccessibility of the South Tyrolean people:

…for the summer colony nobody said yes. First with the excuse that 10 Lire had to be paid, and then, after the Podestà’s kind proposal that they could go for free, [with the excuse] that they had to tend the sheep and work the fields… Here life is concentrated on the pasture, outside of it nothing exists that could cause attraction…15

Teachers accused parents of not caring about the education of their children (and were not always wrong in their assumption), and parents mistrusted the teachers because they were the representatives of a state that was perceived as foreign, illegitimate, and repressive. Unsurprisingly, attendance at sewing and home economics courses for adults was scarce. “One notices in some [people] a really incomprehensible coldness and stubbornness”; wrote one teacher; “an absolute indifference, even…almost an adversity,” wrote another.16

Children, on the other hand, were not necessarily unresponsive to the Italian school and its fascist contents. The testimonies of my interview partners concur with the oral history accounts I have consulted. Many children were fascinated by the numerous school activities and the novel and unfamiliar offerings of youth organizations. The prospect of action and novelty attracted South Tyrolean children who however had to hide their enthusiasm from their families and find a way of negotiating their interests with their familial loyalties. As Mister Rispoli noted in his classbook on 6.Mai 1936,

Who is not in these mountain villages, where the spirit of the people reveals itself as clearly hostile to every Italian affirmation, will never be able to understand the drama lived through by the teachers and the poor children, who do not know if they should listen more to the teachers or the parents. The latter have won the game and it is not rare that the pupils regard us as liars.17

Yet, parents did not automatically retain control over their children in the competitive “game” between school and home, as assumed by Mister Rispoli. Rather, children learned to navigate the two mutually exclusive environments. “We” at school stood for the Italian nation and the Fascist youth; “we” at home stood for the family, the beleaguered South Tyrolean people, and the German nation.18

Unsurprisingly, the mutual incomprehension between teachers and pupils had deleterious consequences for the latter. While schoolchildren were taught to read and write in Italian, they remained analphabets in their native German language. The following anecdote recounted by one
of my interview partners reveals the most basic, daily implications of lacking reading and writing skills in one’s native tongue: “Once I was so embarrassed. My mother asked me to write a note for a farmer’s wife asking her for some potatoes. I did not know how to write potatoes in German. So I ran all the way to the farmer’s wife and asked her in person because I would have been ashamed to misspell it. I did not have German lessons, so I did not know how to write in German.” Children who did all their schooling during the Fascist period, rarely learned to read and write in German except for those who acquired some rudimentary skills in secret German lessons. On the other hand, the Italian they had learned was often quickly forgotten as the imposed language failed to conquer the private domain of the home.

Likewise, teachers were not immune to the anxiety and frustration caused by the seemingly unbridgeable linguistic and cultural differences. Teachers often felt forlorn and isolated and voiced their feelings in their classbooks. “My heart tightens when I hear… speak a foreign language, I feel forlorn, I have the impression I am abroad,” wrote a distraught female teacher.19 One of her colleagues recorded her sense of alienation:

November 14, 1935: Today was the first didactical conference in Meltina. Several teachers from the nearby villages came together. The director was there and the inspector for religious instruction for the Alto Adige, Monsignor Zambiasi. They came together after a walk to bring their good words and their advice for us who are almost forlorn in these tall mountains in the midst of people we understand neither linguistically nor spiritually and whom with kindness and patience we have to try to bring close to us.”20

The inability to communicate with children and parents alike was aggravated by the difficulties entailed in living far away from family and friends. Moreover, the mostly young and inexperienced Italian teachers came from urban environments and were unprepared for the rural-conservative life-style in South Tyrol’s valleys and mountain villages. The aforementioned teacher was highly surprised about the linguistic incomprehension in spite of repeated warnings to that effect: “It seems to me that they understand very little, I did not believe it really would be like this even though I had been alerted by the director and by many other people.”21 In spite of initial difficulties, this particular teacher succeeded in gaining the sympathy of some of the inhabitants of the mountain village to which she was assigned, or at least so she wrote:

November 27: I have been in Valas for a month now. During the first days it seemed impossible to find a way to adapt and settle in, the people did not even greet me, but now I am comfortable and I am respected by everybody and at times interrogated with a few words to which I always answer even though I know that they understand little.”22

Individual written accounts and oral testimonies diverge extremely regarding the issue of teachers’ adaptation to and acceptance and integration in their social environment. In fact, source materials and interviews seem to suggest that the character and attitude of individual teachers played a crucial role in determining their social standing and education success. How then did female teachers tackle the tasks of Italianization, civilization, and Fascistization? How did they deal with the linguistic and cultural incomprehension? And how did they cope with diffidence and hostility?

Lonely, Indecent, Tormented, and “Other”

“I have left…my bright Po Valley, I have left, lonely and disheartened, the old parents, I have left the joys…of a family, with great pain.”23 Breaking close-knit family ties and moving to a foreign environment seems to have been more problematic for female than for male teachers. In my preliminary research, all accounts of loneliness, isolation, and alienation were written by female teachers. This circumstance does not necessarily indicate women’s greater sensibility, but illustrates that the gendered categories of emotive expression enabled (or lead) women to
experience and articulate their situation in this particular way. Commenting on the impossibility of traveling home for Christmas due to the long and difficult trip, Miss Bolelli did not hesitate to voice her nostalgia in her classbook: “These days spent here in Predoi, far away from my own family were filled with sad hours full of melancholy, hours spent in boredom and sadness.” I have also noticed that female teachers mentioned bringing along their parents or siblings when their teaching assignments led them to South Tyrol. Male teachers did not comment on their familial arrangements in their classbook entries.

Given the hostility of the immediate surroundings and the distance of family and friends, teachers were faced with the difficult task of building a new home for themselves. Sieglinde Hofer, who researched the everyday life of schoolchildren and teachers under Fascism in the various villages of an entire alpine valley, observed that the attitudes of teachers differed considerably depending on whether they were located in a distant outpost or in the valley’s central village. Teachers assigned to remote mountain hamlets expressed their loneliness more frequently and perceived their environment to be more hostile than their colleagues in the valley’s center. The opportunities for interaction and acceptance were certainly bigger in cities and larger villages. There, teachers were more likely to make contact with other Italian teachers, police and military personnel, the local Fascist authorities, and their immigrated families.

Indeed, female teachers were scrutinized and criticized for their interaction with the male representatives of the state time and again. On the other hand, the possibility to enter even a merely friendly relationship with a native man was practically foreclosed by the diffidence and hatred between the Italian and the German ethnic group. The prospects for marriage or social mobility were low, and the only possible partners for romantic liaisons were the Italian service men who had been reassigned to South Tyrol. Claus Gatterer, a renowned journalist and historian remembered:

The new teacher for the first grade was an elderly, pale lady from the Trentino… Nobody knew where the teacher for the third grade came from; like our [teacher], she slept with an officer of the Alpini corps. The mother rumored a great deal; cousin Michl thought that after all the girls had to talk and have fun with somebody.25

The comportment of female Italian teachers was monitored attentively by the village priest. The priest of St. Peter described the young teachers in his parish chronicle as “worldly,” noted that they “had affairs with military and police personnel,” and reported the occurrence of “almost nightly male visits in the school building.” These circumstances, he opined, led teacher to behave negligently toward the children, angered the local population, and intensified the antagonism between Germans and Italians on a daily basis.26 Indeed, the image of the sexually depraved and immoral female teacher was widespread. Female Italian teachers were perceived as a moral danger to children and the population at large, as already evidenced in the example of mothers rebelling against their children’s instruction in the functioning of the human body.

Oral history accounts abound with references to the appearance, clothing, comportment, and liaisons of female teachers. Interview partners employed images of painted fingernails, lipstick, bobbed hair, short skirts, and high heels as symbols and buzzwords for women’s lascivious but also alluringly modern attitude and conduct. Karl Frontull, the former school director of St. Lorenzen who was dismissed in 1927 due to “didactic incompetence,” vented his anger about the “indecent” life-style of female Italian teachers. His testimony shows a slippage in his accusation of female Italian teachers for their denunciation of German teachers and in his disapproval of women’s “indecent” behavior:

They well know how to denunciate German teachers so that the latter are dismissed over night. From a moral point of view they are utterly boisterous. Their clothing is highly irritating for the children… The local population finally had enough of the indecent bustle… And finally after much effort they were dismissed as teachers…towards the end of October 1928.27
Frontull’s diatribe did not elucidate the specific offense committed by the female teachers. Nor did it illustrate why the teachers were eventually dismissed by the school authorities. In fact, the Fascist school authorities and political leaders were quite receptive to the complaints against female teachers’ attire and demeanor. In late March 1928, a circular letter by the provincial superintendent to school inspectors and directors stipulated:

> Albeit refraining from any personal judgment regarding women’s clothing, I wish that all teachers present themselves in class corresponding to the seriousness and dignity of the school. As done by ministerial disposition for the instructors of middle school, the black tunic, without neckline and sufficiently long, could be adopted. It is however in the authority of the SS.VV. to order those dispositions that are deemed most appropriate and that you will want to communicate to me.²⁸

The subsequent circular letter of the school director of Bolzano ordered:

> It is the wish of the superior School Authorities that all Female Teachers present themselves in class dressed in a way that corresponds to the seriousness and dignity of the School. It is thus disposed, and it is ordered, that all Teachers of this District, within the 20th of this month, dress in class in a black apron in “Sateen”, without neckline, with long sleeves, ending between 15 and 20 cm below the knee.²⁹

While the Fascist school authorities were willing to oblige to the objections of the local population regarding women’s clothing, they did not make any concessions toward greater linguistic and cultural freedom.

Because they were viewed as not only foreign but also immoral, female Italian teachers were exposed to a more hostile environment than their male colleagues. The image of the Italian teacher who—with her lascivious conduct and dissolute sexuality—represented a “moral danger” to the children was very popular at the time. The journal “Der Südtiroler,” issued by South Tyrolean emigrants in Innsbruck, repeatedly published articles about Italian teachers who were hanging around with transferred railroad-men and policemen, had affairs with their superiors, and were bustling around with powder and lipstick during school lessons.³⁰ One alarmed writer lamented that “in place of the dismissed German teachers, female teachers, for the most part from southern Italy, with bobbed hair and short skirts, have move into the peasant villages of South Tyrol.”³¹ The opposition against the Fascist campaign of German denationalization was enmeshed with the opposition against modernity and female emancipation.

Notably, most of the accounts claim that the attire and demeanor of female teachers was not only a public nuisance but an offense to children. Yet, my interview partners asserted that the urban and modern clothing of their teachers did not upset them. On the contrary, they envied their teachers for their fine garments. High-heeled shoes for instance were coveted objects: “My sister and I used to clean our teacher’s apartment. When she was not there, we would try on her high-heeled shoes. That teacher was an imperious woman! But my sister and I, we had so much fun!” While children tended to view the unusual attire of their teachers as modern and attractive, parents regarded it as a symbol of the women’s irreligious, dissolute, and foreign character.

However, the appeal of originality, urbanity, and modernity did not prevent school children from playing nasty tricks on their teachers. Indeed, the motive of rebellion surfaces time and again in the memories of former pupils. The tricks and conflicts are generally presented as political in character:

> First the teacher made unmistakably clear to us that she would not tolerate aprons in class. Consequently we wore them rolled up, underneath the jacket. Soon she found out about it and ripped down the aprons. So we made buttons that she was not able to open, but she cut them open with the knife. And so it went on and on.³²

The blue apron was a symbol for South Tyrol’s ethnic German heritage. The tricks and struggles recounted in interviews portray the conflict between the students and their teachers as a conscious
opposition to Italian fascism. Yet, this stance probably springs from today’s universal rejection of fascism rather than representing a child’s deliberate political statement at the time. Probably, tricks and contests were some of the only ways in which children could express not only their helplessness but also their personality in reaction against the incomprehension and foreignness they faced from their teachers. Both male and female teachers were on the receiving end of nasty tricks, but it was women who are generally described as reacting with tears, demonstrating vulnerability and fear, and requiring the assistance of the police or the local priest to control the children.

Conclusion

In the poignant account of his childhood in a small mountain village during Fascism, Claus Gatterer differentiated between “unsere” (“our”) Italians and “andere” (“other”) Italians.33 “Our” Italians were those who had moved to the village from the southern provinces, mainly for economic reasons, and who now lived and worked in the village, spoke German, and interacted with the native population. Their ties to the village were not only economic but also affective. “The tinsmith, Gabriel, and Valentin proved to the people daily that they belonged to them and not to those “high up,” and the people accepted that.”34 The “other” Italians were the “real” Italians, the political elite, administrative staff, and military and police personnel who moved in after South Tyrol’s annexations to Italy and who swelled with the rise of Fascism. Teachers were placed predominantly into the latter category of Italians.

Moving from the category of “other” Italians to the category of “our” Italians was an almost impossible feast considering the hostility toward all representatives of the new state. Also, the sense of mission with which many teachers approached their teaching assignment in South Tyrol inhibited a rapprochement toward the ethnic German population. Moreover, teachers were transferred and reassigned on a constant basis and rarely taught in one place for more than a school year. Yet, some teachers were able to diminish the social distance between themselves and the native population. Interestingly, I have only encountered accounts of female teachers who managed to win the respect of the local people. What made them part of the village and its life was their acquired “local experience.” Claus Gatterer used the term “local inexperience” (lokale Unerfahrenheit) to describe the inability and unwillingness of most teachers to familiarize themselves with the local conditions.35 As a child, he had noticed that his teacher, who naturally sported bobbed hair, could not (or would not) correctly pronounce the names of some of her pupils. For Gatterer, the faulty pronunciation of his friend’s family name indicated the general “local inexperience” of the teacher.

Gaining “local experience,” on the other hand, entailed learning the correct pronunciation of names, choosing the proper attire, attending mass, participating in the work-cycle of the village, and knowing how to talk to people. One of my interview partners recalled: “Our teacher lived with a farmer’s wife. She was very nice. She wanted to help in the fields, but she did not know how to hold a rake. So we taught her. She was lonely and was happy when she could be with other people.” Another teacher dared to approach the fathers of her pupils in the local inn and asked them for money for schoolbooks. She received the money and the men’s approval. One of the books I consulted contained the picture of an Italian teacher, Lucia Magnante, wearing, in 1932, the traditional costume of the village. These examples illustrate that the everyday interaction of female Italian teachers with their social environment was richer and more multifaceted than the antagonistic relationship between ethnic Germans and Italians, between Fascists and Catholics, and between mountain people and city dwellers would lead us to believe. The uproar over the appearance and morality of female Italian teachers points to the greater prejudices women faced over men. However, the possibilities of acceptance and integration might
have been ultimately greater for female than for male teachers. If women showed the willingness to play by the rules of the village and to maintain what was considered a proper demeanor, they were viewed less of threat than their male colleagues for whom it was more difficult to shake off their image as representatives of the loathed Fascist state.

5 Ibid., 196.
6 Carmela Lenner, classbook 1929, St. Lorenzen. In Richard Niedermair, Eine Marktgemeinde und ihre Schule. 100 Jahre Schulhaus Vinzenz Goller (Bruneck: Dipdruck, 2003), 88: “Forse i bimbi hanno già dimenticata la mamma che hanno lasciata a casa e hanno già capito che nella scuola ne possano trovare un’altra che darà loro tutto il suo affetto…”
7 De Grazia, 197.
8 Classbook, St. Lorenzen, 1933/34. Quoted in Niedermair, 95: “Molto fa il governo ma tutto ciò e vano se noi non prepariamo l’italiani. Questo è il compito più difficile. Non può durare in Alto Adige un maestro che non si consideri in missione. Sento la responsabilità che ho davanti alla patria e vorrei possedere maggiore volontà, attività e passione.”
9 Ibid., 95: “Non ho perduto mai alcuna occasione per educare gli alumni al sentimento nazionale, mi sono valsa soprattutto delle ricoverose patriottiche e dello studio della storia…”
11 Bonifizierungskonsortium Gsies/Taisten, Das Gsieser Tal. Ein Südtiroler Hochtal im Spannungsfeld zwischen Tradition und Zukunft (Bozen: Pluristamp, 1997), 121: “In nome del Duce e dell’Italia noi officiamo in silenzio I nostril sacrifice e doniamo tutte le nostre migliori energie alla nobile e santa causa, che da noi molto attende. E’ la scuola principalmente, siamo noi, che riportiamo in queste valli che già furono Romane (e questo I piccolo lo sanno) la civilita e il nome grande di Roma immortale.”
12 Quoted in Hofer, 40: “…la scuola è brutta; non è una scuola…banchi tagliuzzati e sporchi, pareti disadorme. C’è perfino la lavagna di legno che pericola di cadere appena la si tocca.”
15 Miss Bolelli, Prettau/Predoi, 1933/34. Quoted in Hofer, 74: “…per al colonia estiva marina nessuno ha detto di sì. Prima con la scusa che c’erano Lire 10 da pagare poi dopo con una gentile proposta del Signor Podestà che avrebbero potuto andare a gratis, che dovevano pascolare le pecore o lavorare nei campi… Qui la vita si concentra tutta nella malga, all’infuori di questa non esiste nulla che possa attirare…”
16 Hofer, 84: “si nota in alcuni una freddezza e testardaggine proprio incomprensibile”, “una indifferenza assoluta, anzi…quasi una avversità”(84)
Chi non è in questi paesi di montagna dove l’anima della gente si rivela chiaramente ostile ad ogni affermazione italiana, non potrà mai capire il dramma che debbono vivere i maestri e i poveri bambini, i quali non sanno se ascoltare più i maestri o i genitori; questi hanno partita vinta e non è raro che gli scolari ci riguardano come dei bugiardi.


Miss Bertollini, Prettau/Predoi, 1929/30. Quoted in Hofer, 19: “...mi si stringe il cuore sentendo... parlare una lingua straniera, mi sento sperduta, mi sembra di trovarmi all’estero!”


Ibid., 418: “Mi pare capiscano assai poco, io non credevo che fosse proprio così anche se ero stata avvisata dal Signor Direttore e da tante altre persone.”

Ibid., 421: “27 Novembre: Sono da un mese a Valas. I primi giorni mi sembrava impossibile saper adattarmi ed ambientarmi, le persone non salutavano nemmeno, adesso invece mi trovo bene e mi vedo rispettata da tutti e qualche volta interrogate con poche parole alle quali rispondo sempre anche se so che loro capiscono poco.”

Hofer, 19: “…ho lasciato la mia… ridente pianura padana, ho lasciato soli, sconfortati i vecchi genitori, ho lasciato le gioie… della famiglia, con dolore grande…”

Miss Bolelli, Prettau/Predoi, 1932/33. Quoted in Hofer, 21: “…questi giorni passati qui a Predoi, lontani dalla propria famiglia hanno avuto ore tristi e piene di malinconia ore passate nella noia e nella tristezza…”


Hofer, 55.

Karl Frontull, quoted in Niedermair, 87: “Wohl verstehen sie es deutsche Lehrer zu denunzieren, sodass diese über Nacht ehoben werden; in sittlicher Hinsicht sind sie völlig ausgelassen. Ihre Kleidung ist für die Kinder ärgermissgebend in höchstem Masse… das unsittliche Treiben wurde der einheimischen Bevölkerung endlich zu toll… Und endlich nach vielen Bemühungen wurden sie… gegen Ende Okt. 1928 als Lehrerinnen enthoben.”

Circolare del Regio Provveditore di Trento, 29.03.1928, quoted in Cossetto, 413-14: “Pur astraendo da ogni personale apprezzamento circa l’abbigliamento femminile, desidero che tutte le maestre si presentino in classe vestite in modo corrispostente alla serietà e alla dignità della scuola. Potrebbe essere adottata, come si fa per disposizione ministeriale dalle insegnanti di scuola media, la tunica nera, senza scollatura e sufficientemente lunga. È facoltà però delle SS.VV. di dare in merito quelle disposizioni che ritengono più opportune e ch’Esse mi voranno comunicare.”

Circolare del direttore didattico di Bolzano, 8.04.1928, quoted in Cossetto, 414-15: “È desiderio delle Superiori Autorità scolastiche che tutte le Maestre si presentino in classe vestite in modo corrispostente alla serietà e alla dignità della Scuola. Si dispone quindi, e si ordina, che tutte le Sig. Maestre di questo Circolo, entro il 20 c/m, indossino in classe, un grembiule nero di “Saten”, senza scollatura, con maniche lunghe che arrivano dai 15 ai 20 cm sotto il ginocchio.”

Hofer, 58: “An Stelle der enthobenen deutschen Lehrkräfte haben Lehrerinnen, zum überwiegenden Teil aus Südtalien mit Babiköpfen und kurzen Röcken, in die Bauernortschaften Südtirols ihren Einzug gehalten.”

Hillebrand, 37: “Zuerst hat uns die Lehrerin unmissverständlich klar gemacht, sie dulde in der Klasse keine Schürzen. In der Folge trugen wir sie halt eingerollt, mit der Joppe drüber. Bald ist sie dahinter gekommen und hat uns die Schürzen heruntergerissen. Sodann machten wir Knöpfe, die sie nicht aufbringen sollte, aber sie schnitt sie mit dem Messer auf. Uns so ging das in einem fort.”

Gatterer, 113-122.

Ibid., 117: “Der Klemperer, der Gabriel und der Valentin bewiesen den Leuten alltäglich, dass sie zu ihnen gehörten und nicht zu denen “oben”, und die Leute liessen das gelten.”

Ibid., 55.

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