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## Forbidden and not recommended books: *il Piccolo emigrante* and its author Arpalice Cuman Pertile

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**Abstract:** A teacher and a writer of children's books, Arpalice Cuman Pertile was born in Marostica, northern Italy, on May 12, 1876, a time when many of her fellow citizens were immigrating to the Americas. She was the first woman from Marostica to earn a College Education degree, in 1898, and became a teacher at the Normal School, where she worked for a certain period, until her speeches in favor of peace and her noncompliance with fascism led to her exclusion from the teaching profession, and her books stopped being recommended. She is the author of numerous children's literature works, including *Il piccolo emigrante*, issued by the renowned G. B. Paravia publisher. Interweaving biographical aspects of the writer and her works, especially *Il piccolo emigrante*, in this analysis, I attempt to reflect on the relationship among Arpalice Cuman Pertile, her works, and the evidence of her defense of peace and freedom, in the Italian historical context of the first half of the XX century. Through a historical documentary analysis of books, letters, photographs, and newspapers, the narrative allows us to have a glimpse into the life story of a writer and teacher who witnessed two great wars and suffered in the midst of fascist totalitarianism. By the end of the 1920s, her children's literature and educational works were no longer recommended due to not being linked to fascist ideals. Even with the imposition of isolation and precarious living conditions, Arpalice echoed in her writings her defense of freedom, justice, peace, and human fraternity. Arpalice died in her hometown on March 30, 1958.

**Keywords:** children's literature; biography; women's history; history of education.

### 1 Introduction

*"Il maestro lo dice sempre: tutto il mondo è paese. E in America si fá fortuna"*  
[My teacher always says: the whole world is a country. And a fortune is made in America] (Cuman Pertile, 1920, p. 7, free translation).

The brief epigraph that opens this article was taken from a manuscript written by Arpalice Cuman Pertile (1920) and mentions a teacher being remembered by little boy Beppi, who was part of a family of 9 people and lived in Cadore, in the province of Belluno, located in Veneto, Italy. His father would regularly emigrate to work abroad. Beppi would go to school and help his family doing small jobs, such as shepherding goats. This is the initial information provided by *Il piccolo emigrante*, a small reading book written by teacher and writer Arpalice Cuman Pertile and issued in 1920 by the G. B. Paravia publisher, which was part of the *Collezione di letture per la Infanzia*



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[Readings collection for childhood]. It is a work full of representations about Italian emigration between the end of the XIX century and the first decades of the XX century. This small book was selected among so many other ones found in the *Comunale Centrale Sormani* Library – in Milan – for research on the history of the Italian school and its materials, including school books in Brazilian lands. More recently, I have investigated and gathered other materials by the author analyzed in this article, the teacher, writer and poet Arpalice Cuman Pertile.

Arpalice Cuman Pertile was born in Marostica – northern Italy – on May 12, 1876, a time when many of her fellow citizens were emigrating towards the Americas. In her surroundings, during her childhood, she certainly witnessed the departure of many emigrants, especially for living in the province of Vicenza, Veneto region, from which so many families emigrated. She was the first woman from Marostica to achieve the condition of earning a higher education degree in 1898 and became a teacher at the Normal School, where she worked for a while, until her speeches in favor of peace and her noncompliance with fascism imposed her exclusion from the teaching profession, and her books, in part, ceased to be recommended. Writer of numerous children's literature pieces of work, including *Il piccolo emigrante* (1920), issued by the renowned G. B. Paravia publisher, she was active in defending peace and remained consistent with her ideals. Interweaving biographical aspects of the author and her works – especially *Il piccolo emigrante* –, in this analysis, I seek to examine the relationship among Arpalice Cuman Pertile, her works, and the evidence of her defense of peace and freedom, in the Italian historical context of the first half of the XX century.

Through a historical documentary analysis of books, correspondences, photographs, and newspapers, as well as through a bibliographic framework, the narrative allows for having a glimpse into the life story of a writer and a teacher who witnessed two great wars and suffered in the midst of fascist totalitarianism. At the end of the 1920s, some of her children's and didactic literature works ceased to be recommended for not being linked to fascist ideals; even with the impositions of isolation, precariousness of living conditions, Arpalice echoed in her writings her defense of freedom, justice, peace, and human fraternity. Arpalice died in her hometown on March 30, 1958. Making a pun with Chartier's expression (1996, p. 160),

Arpalice Cuman Pertile was a woman of letters, engaged, dedicated to studying, reading, and writing.

In this narrative, I search for points of intersection between Arpalice – teacher, author, woman, and other inscriptions with the social, cultural, and political context in which she lived. A “biography [as] a possibility of understanding that which is credible by means of multiple interpretations” (Carneiro, 2018, p. 56) allows for analyzing biographical traits and reflecting on the complexity of an era. Approaching the life, the biographical contours of teacher Arpalice, not to biograph her, but to connect her life to the context of that time, to move the analytical look and to think of her as a children’s book producer and how such books were read and, in some way, banned by the political changes of Italy and its educational conceptions.

This article is organized into three analytical movements. The first presents biographical aspects of the author, situating her in her context and life time. The second elects one of her works to think about Arpalice’s production in the literary and school aspects, showing how she addressed social issues, such as the transoceanic mass migration of Italians to the Americas, and her relationship with a striking social inequality. In the last topic, I analyze Arpalice’s productions and the way they were rejected and forbidden by the Italian State, under the fascist regime, with special attention to the constitution of the single-book policy for all schools in the country. I finish presenting some possible considerations from the analysis undertaken.

## **2 Amid the quill, the books, and life, Arpalice Cuman Pertile, a teacher and a writer**

*Accogli il libro come un amico. Esso ha per te le liete fantasie che ricreano, le parole buone che migliorano, le verità che ami conoscere e che daranno vigore alla tua mente*” [Receive the book as a friend. It has for you the happy fantasies that recreate, the good words that improve, the truths you like to know and which will invigorate your mind] (Cuman Pertile, 1920, p. 2, free translation).

Arpalice Elisabetta Maddalena Cuman was born in Marostica, northern Italy, on May 12, 1876, daughter of Sebastiano and Angelica Cuman. Her father was a locksmith and participated, as a founder, in the *Popolare di Marostica* board. The municipality of Marostica, in the late 1860s, had about 3,300 inhabitants, and, in 1909, reached 5,543. In the commune, a rural economy of small and medium properties

prevailed, with the presence of sharecroppers and tenants (Muraro, 2022). Additional work was done with braids and wheat straw hats, and those who did not obtain enough resources had no choice but to emigrate. And the migratory process to the Americas was one of the most recurring fates for the families of Marostica and of that region<sup>1</sup>. The picture below shows one of the wheat straw hat factories of San Florian Valley, in the end of the XIX century, with women being primarily hired to work between July and October of each year. The presence of some small children is remarkable, and the photograph allows us to think about the socioeconomic context of that period.

Figure 1 – Straw hat factory and female labor, end of the XIX century



Source: Atti [...], 1986, p. 129.

Even after the unification of Italy, few individuals participated in political life; in 1866, only 283 men were on the list of voters. The local administration, of the commune, was reserved for a small group of financially privileged citizens. According to Targhetta (2013), the financial difficulties experienced by Arpalice's family made them move to Torino in 1879. There, Arpalice attended kindergarten (Muraro, 2022). A

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<sup>1</sup> Trento (2022, p. 40) states that "[...] the Veneto component will constitute, for a long time, the most numerous element of our emigration to Brazil", especially to the southern regions of the country. Marostica belongs to the Veneto region.



few years later, they return to Marostica and she continued her studies at the elementary school, completing them in 1889.

At the age of ten, she lost her mother to cholera, and, soon after, her grandmother Elisabetta Cuman also died – both being important figures in Arpalice's life (Targhetta, 2013). She was granted a scholarship at the boarding school of the Verona Normal School, where she remained until 1893. As Perrot states (2005, p. 285-286), women dedicated themselves, when they could have professions, to “Teaching, taking care, watching: this triple mission is the basis of ‘female professions’ that will carry, for a long time, the mark of vocation and volunteering”. Arpalice followed this path, devoting herself to teaching. In Marostica – shortly after her return –, there was a call for the position of teacher, a civil service exam in which Cuman participated, but on which, taking the advice of an uncle named Melchiorre, she gave up, enrolling, instead, at the Firenze Higher Teaching Institute, from which she returned as the first Marostica graduate in 1898 (Targhetta, 2013).

Arpalice started to teach at the Social Theater and to work for the creation of a kindergarten to welcome children, considering that many mothers worked in the rising local manufacturing, especially the one dedicated to the production of straw hats. Cuman felt the need for a place where children could be taken care of while their mothers worked. She understood and valued education as an opportunity to overcome the striking social inequalities of that time. Arpalice Cuman's first concerns and sensitivity to social issues were announced, “*uma sorta di umanesimo Cristiano*” [some sort of Christian humanism], Targhetta states (2013, p. 418, free translation).

In 1898, advised by her uncle Melchiorre, Arpalice started teaching Italian at the *Istituto Nazionale Figlie dei Militari di Torino*, and, in the following year, she passed an exam to teach classes at the normal school of Vicenza (*Scuola Normale di Vicenza*). In 1904, on February 13, Arpalice married Cristiano Pertile, who was a teacher as well and a childhood friend (Targhetta, 2013). With Cristiano, she shared her life and passion for teaching, culture, literature, but also the ideological stance opposing war (First War), and noncompliance with fascism in 1922<sup>2</sup>. The fight for peace and social

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<sup>2</sup> In the extension of this article, it is not possible to delve into Italy's political-economic situation in the interwar period, but the way politics happened underwent significant changes. As Hobsbawm (2014, p. 503-504) stated: “Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928) of Italy, [...] brilliantly successful at 'managing' the Italian politics of the early 1900s: conciliating and taming labour, buying political support, wheeling and dealing, conceding, avoiding confrontations. In the socially revolutionary post-war situation of his

justice marked their union. The image below displays the couple Cristiano and Arpalice Cuman Pertile, with no identified date.

Figure 2 – Cristiano Pertile and Arpalice Cuman Pertile



Source: Pertile family's archives, reproduction by Contin, 2022, p. 121.

Arpalice, in the day-to-day routine with her husband, who was a secretary for the National Federation of High School Teachers and identified with socialist and anticlerical ideals, gradually broadened her reading of the world and expanded her work with classes at the Free Popular School<sup>3</sup>, in the association of teachers, in a collaboration for the implementation of a circular library among workers, and in the development of the first school books. Her husband and herself were penalized by their stances, as she lost the possibility of remaining as a teacher at the normal school due to “*incapacità, una formula intesa a nascondere*” [inability, a formula intended to hide] (Targhetta, 2013, p. free translation) the real reasons, also informed as a decrease in the number of chairs. In January of 1915, she participated in a rally at Odeon cinema,

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country these tactics utterly failed him. The stability of bourgeois society was re-established by means of the armed middle-class gangs of 'nationalists' and fascists, literally waging the class war against a labour movement incapable of itself making a revolution. The (liberal) politicians supported them, vainly hoping to be able to integrate them into their system. In 1922 the fascists took over as government, after which democracy, parliament, parties and the old liberal politicians were eliminated.. [...]. Between 1920 and 1939, parliamentary democratic systems virtually disappeared from most European states, non-communist as well as communist.”

<sup>3</sup> *Scuole Liberi Popolari*, created in 1904, inside the *Società Generale di Mutuo Soccorso*.

in Vicenza, in which she declared to be against the (anti-interventionist) conflict and favorable to peace – which she longed for throughout her life. Such a stance was a strong one and the effects of her speech had repercussions in the following years. The loss of her teaching condition and exile for both made them move to Firenze, Genoa, and Novara. Those were tough times for the couple, but Arpalice remained productive as to book writing.

Attentive to women's emancipation, to workers' rights, and to health, she was a fruitful author. Even though, as a teacher, she did not have the opportunity to work in the following years<sup>4</sup>, as a writer and a poet, in her life, she published more than 90 titles among poems, short stories, dialogue scenes, musical texts, and school works. Gradually, she builds the idea of teaching by enchanting children and, in her works, she sought to effect such an ideal. She writes with a view to promoting an education for enchantment, going through music and recitation as fundamentals.

For Perrot (2007, p. 99), "In the XIX and XX centuries, they [women] conquered literature; the novel, in particular, became the territory of the great female novelists," but not only that. In the case of Arpalice, the *Primi voli* collection was issued in 1909 by the Bemporad publisher, being the most lasting one; despite the persecution difficulties it suffered, it was maintained in the catalog. Also *Per le vie del mondo* for elementary school. She also exchanged letters with students who were readers and users of her books, as Vagliani says (2022). She also wrote using the Della Gioconda pseudonym (Contin, 2022, p. 14). Arpalice and her husband shared ideals and courageous choices, Liliana Contin (2022) states, with her being the expression of a woman of letters and an intellectual of the period, as Perrot acknowledges in her studies.

Primary teachers have been engaged for a long time: for the education of girls [...], for socialism, or even for the revolution [...], they are activists in unionism. They subscribe to feminism. Some take sides in favor of contraception and abortion and face the courts. Primary teachers are the first intellectuals (Perrot, 2007, p. 127).

Arpalice dedicated part of her life to cultural volunteering, being active in the sociocultural field, propagating, in her books, an education for enchantment and

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<sup>4</sup> The impediment, during the fascist period, that prevented teachers who would not subscribe to the regime from doing their teaching job was a reality and, even with a 'silent resistance' from so many, others preferred not to condone. On the subject, see Gabrielli and Montino (2025).

inspiring peace, justice, and freedom. In the winter of 1937, her husband Cristiano dies; she survives longer, until 1958, when she leaves a substantial legacy in her works and ways of taking a stance faced with the context of her life. In the following sub-items, I analyze one of Arpalice's works that shows the way she wrote literature and touched on social issues that were relevant for the Italian context of that time: the transoceanic mass migration and its relationship with social inequalities.

### 3 The sociocultural context and the books written by Arpalice Cuman Pertile

*"Torneremo ricchi, mamma, torneremo coll'oro"* [we will return rich, mom, we will return with gold] (Cuman Pertile, 1920, p. 7, free translation).

The hope of becoming reach, of a better life resulting from the migratory phenomenon, was a theme that surrounded Arpalice's childhood and extended to part of her life. Her sensitivity to the social context and living conditions of many of her compatriots is evoked and echoes in her literary narratives. It is no different in *Il piccolo emigrante*. Furthermore, the extensive work published by Arpalice, which encompassed school books, poems, plays, and reading books for children, has traits of the author's desire for peace, a decent life, and social justice. As Mariela Colin (2012) states, in her small volume publications with verses and "*indiovinelle*" [guesswork], children could expand their vocabulary by having fun. Simple metric forms, easy rhymes were common characteristics in her works, and enchantment was a trait that marked them. All while sensitizing the reader to the hardships that marked the context in which they lived, remembering the differences and inequalities.

In *Il piccolo emigrante*, the narrative is full of representations of the hardships and difficulties that marked the lives of so many families. As mentioned, Arpalice (1920) begins by placing Beppi at the center of the narrative: a boy who lives in the rural area with a large family of nine members. His father was emigrating to work abroad, Beppi was attending school and helped his family doing small jobs. However, upon returning from his temporary emigration, Beppi's father, discouraged by the small gains and the evident hunger that was coming closer, asked his son to write to the Emigration Secretary of Belluno, as he wished to go to America to 'try his luck'. Here, the grievance of the illiterate father and the poverty of the family emerge. Subsequently, Beppi's mother, Rosa, is depicted as the inconsolable one, first trying to convince her husband



not to go, but resigning herself faced with the impossibility of surviving. The son mentions that his teacher said that the world is a country and that, in America, one could make a fortune. Beppi's excitement made his father decide that he would emigrate as well, to collaborate. The idea of enrichment and assured return supports the narrative.

On the day of their departure, just before dawn, Beppi wakes up to start the long trip. They eat *polenta* – the mother with swollen eyes, the brothers frantic – and then depart. His father carries a small bag of clothes on his back, and so does Beppi. In the farewell, Beppi “*si attaccò al collo dela mamma e scoppiò in singhiozzi*” [clung to his mother's neck and began to sob] (Cuman Pertile, 1920, p. 10, free translation). Cuman Pertile (1920) describes that the whole family is overwhelmed, including the father, who had left so many times before. Father and son travel from northern Italy to the Port of Genoa for two days and one night. They saw a doctor as usual and waited for the place to leave in the third class. Cuman Pertile (1920) describes that Beppi observed the increasing number of people who arrived and, in her words:

They were absent-minded men with traces of a suffocating work and of hunger, women worn out by the toil and the difficulties, pale and shabby children. One could hear various dialects and names of villages lost in the mountains, or in the Lombardy and Piemonte rice fields, or along the Maremma, mixed with loved ones left behind perhaps forever<sup>5</sup> (Cuman Pertile, 1920, p. 11, free translation).

Arpalice records in her small book the representation of the Italian social fabric, misery, hunger, the phenomenon of migration and its causes. It is time to leave; the steam ship, *Cristoforo Colombo*, starts receiving the pilgrimage of emigrants departing by the force of misery and the pain of the departure. The author does not fail to mention that those in the first and second classes board as well, in a small number, well dressed. But it is those from the third class who arrive in large numbers and squeeze themselves in a space too small for so many people. The farewell, the controversial feelings, the tears being confused with hope, and days passing between sky and water. Arpalice mentions that two events were distinct in a continuum of sky and sea: the birth of a boy, who was called Colombo in honor of the vessel's name, and the death of an

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<sup>5</sup> Original: “Erano uomini sparuti con le tracce di un lavoro asfissiante e della fame, donne consumate dalle fatiche e dagli stenti, bambini pallidi e cenciosi. Si sentivano vari dialetti e nomi di paeselli sperduti fra i monti, o nelle risaie della Lombardia e del Piemonte, o lungo la Maremma, misti di persone care lasciate forse per sempre” (Cuman Pertile, 1920, p. 11).

elderly man, sadly dropped to the sea. Antagonistic representations of birth and death are present in the narrative. If literature is a process of humanization, as Antonio Candido (2002) argues, Arpalice, in this and other works, places labor, inequality, hunger, pain, and hopes, so common in our humanity, at the center.

The arrival in New York occurred in silence. Two days later, Beppi and his father are transported to the farm to which they were headed, with the father going to work in the care and cultivation of coffee, and the boy, in small tasks on the farm. Here, it is worth mentioning that the choice of the farm and coffee for the narrative does not seem to correspond to what was more common for the labor reality of those who migrated and arrived in New York, but rather for São Paulo, in Brazil. The conditions described there also include the difficulties that the father and Beppi experience; however, they were aware of the protective laws and, one night, both flee from the farm. In a neighboring city, they introduce themselves to the Consul, to whom they ask for help. They describe the situation left behind in Italy and the one they are going through as immigrants. The Consul sends them to Dante Alighieri and they were offered a job for Beppi in a rich Italian family, while the father would work in a coal mine. The work in the mine is described as horrible, but pays money to be sent to the family in Italy. The father becomes increasingly thin, but “Did it matter?”, the author questions. He had sent, in three years, another four thousand *liras* to the family. The letters exchanged with the family in Italy were frequent, with words of encouragement for the children Rino and Maria to continue attending school. Here, we have the representation of immigrants’ remittances of values to Italy and the desire for schooling, as a promise of a better future.

Beppi had risen to the position of a waiter, learned English and Spanish, but continued to read ‘with love’ newspapers and books in Italian. About the gains, Arpalice describes that he was paid one hundred clean *liras* per month:

Poor Beppi! He would give his father seventy to send home, he would kept five for himself, and he would reserve twenty-five to surprise his mother upon returning: he wanted to buy her a cow, so that the family always had a tasty milk. Oh, the return to Italy, to his home, to his mother, was the burning dream of all hours!<sup>6</sup> (Cuman Pertile, 1920, p. 15, free translation).

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<sup>6</sup> Original: “Povero Beppi! Settanta ne dava al suo babbo, perchè le mandasse a casa, cinque l teneva per sè e venticinque le metteva da parte per fare una bella sorpresa alla sua mamma quando fosse tornato: le avrebbe comprato una vaccherella; così la famiglia avrebbe avuto sempre il latte saporito.

The author describes an accident in the mine where the father worked, as well as the anguish, fear, and Beppi's surveillance while waiting for his father to be rescued alive. The rescue efforts, the bodies being pulled out, some living, some dead, and Beppi is called; at first, he does not recognize his father. His body, his face are all dirty, but he calls Beppi and, with one hand raised, in a final gesture, he greets his son. Nothing else can be done, death took him, and Beppi, in despair, says he would return to his family in Italy. He cannot stay so far away in America alone, without seeing his mother and siblings. The bodies were buried. The Consul followed the funeral of so many Italians killed in the mine accident.

In two weeks, Beppi left aboard the *Americo Vesputio*, returning to Italy. On the ship, he found a gentleman who invited him to sing, accompanying him on the piano. Beppi sang to the first-class travelers and, this way, he secured another small amount that helped him continue the trip without spending more from the savings he had kept and by means of which he was expecting to gift his mother and siblings with the purchase of a cow. From Genoa to Belluno, he went by train, then a little by foot, and, after taking a ride, he arrived at his house. It was getting dark. No one was outside, and Beppi is described as someone who trembled faced with the need to tell his mother and siblings about his father's death.

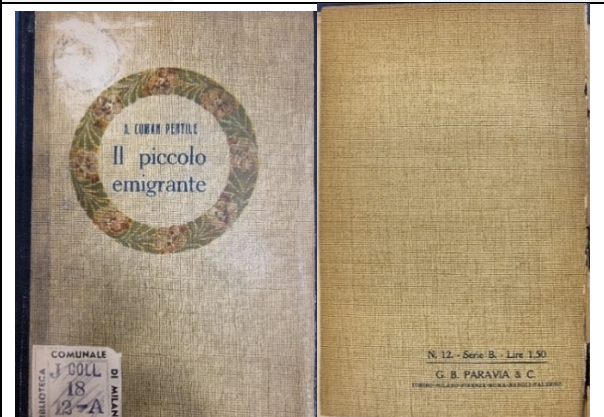
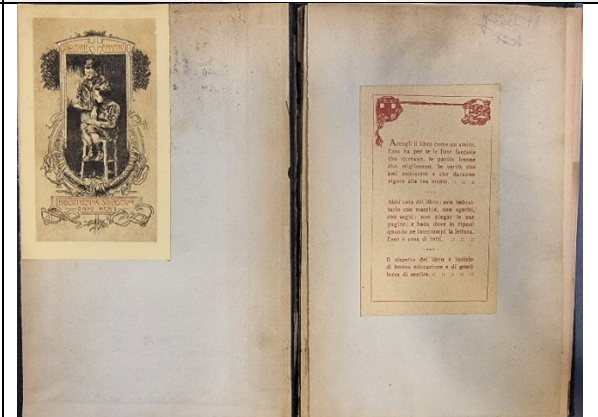
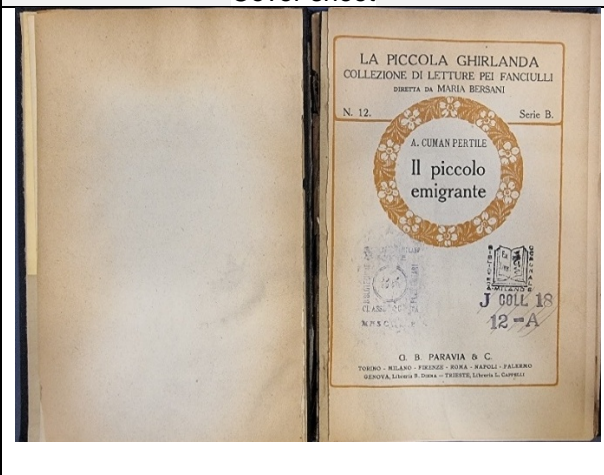
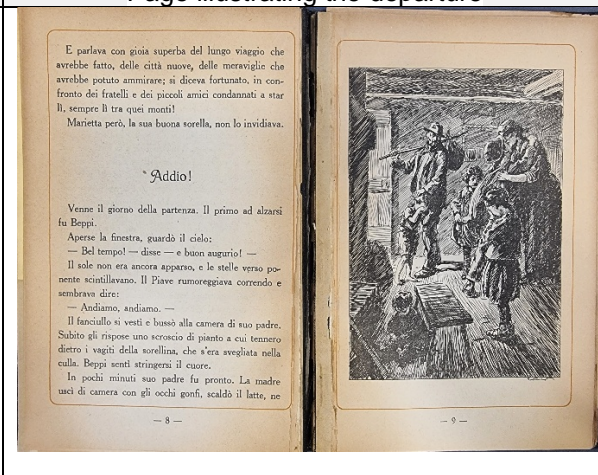
Beppi opened the door and re-encountered his mother; she hugged him and filled him with kisses, but soon asked: "And where is your father?". The cry, the pain, the news. Three months later, Beppi was working, just as his bigger sister, Maria, shepherding goats. He had bought the cow. His mother was called upon to introduce herself to the mayor, who reported that her husband was not dead, he had survived the accident, but was mute. The narrative points to the difficulties for repatriation, the family's dream of meeting the father again, who had finally managed to return to Italy. The sale of goods to rent a wagon and a horse to meet the father at the Belluno train station. The expectation of the meeting, the emotion, the longing, the doubt about how the father, now mute, would react. At the station, they see him as soon as he gets off and hug him. A sound is emitted, '*cari*' (dear), exclaims the father, all surprised [...] but can he speak? The miracle of love, Arpalice concludes, healed him.

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Oh, il ritorno all' Itàlia, alla sua casa, alla mamma sua, era il sogno ardente di tutte le ore!" (Cuman Pertile, 1920, p. 15).

Cuman Pertile portrays the migratory phenomenon, and her work has the sensitivity of perpetuating, on its 37 pages, some of the most significant marks of the experiences lived in that major transoceanic migration during the last decades of the XIX century and first decades of the XX century. As mentioned, the work is the 12<sup>th</sup> in a 30-volume collection and intended for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> elementary grades. The description of its plot allows us to peer a little more into how Arpalice deals, in her books, with Italy's complex, strong, and central social issues in that period. In the following table, I present some evidence of the materiality of her publication:

Table 1 – Presentation of the work *Il piccolo emigrante*

Cover and back cover	Second cover
	
Cover sheet	Page illustrating the departure
	

Source: author's organization.

Simple paper, few illustrations – only three – taking up the whole page inside the book. A publication meant to be read by school children and which addressed an important social problem faced by Italy following the unification. With this presentation, I point to one – among many – of Arpalice's works that was significant for social issues



and the search for justice. The stances contained in it are in line with those defended by the ones who take over power and configure fascism, especially between the 1930s and 1940s.

#### **4 The banning and production of Arpalice Cuman Pertile's books**

In the 1920s, with the affirmation of fascism in Italy, the production and approval of school books recommended for use in public schools became the target of intense debates. As mentioned by Darnton (2016, p. 9), "The repression of books [...] shows how the state confronted literature at street level, in incidents that carry the story into the lives of the daring or disreputable characters who operated beyond the fringe of the law" and reveals moments of "[...] attempts by the state to control communication" (Darnton, 2016, p. 8), with relevance to the understanding of the historical context.

Thus, the processes of suggesting, selecting, choosing, and recommending books for primary school underwent significant and progressive changes in the period of fascism. In 1925, the book selection commission, chaired by Giovanni Vidari, rejected 277 volumes among 1,326 that were analyzed. Vidari was criticized by fascists who wanted for democratic liberal models to be refuted and for an ethics of strength and audacity to be taken on, Galfré (2005) states.

The Bemporad publisher was confirmed as one of the most fruitful ones, with reading, history, geography, and religion courses. Some of Arpalice Cuman Pertile's books published by Bemporad were among the suggested ones. In 1926, with a revision of the criteria and expansion of fascist political-ideological laws, the chair, Balbino Giuliano, "[...] Gentilian intellectual and convinced fascist" (Galfré, 2005, p. 24-25) led the selection of books, identifying that there was a lack of books that emphasized the living feeling of love for Italy and its glories. In 1927, the book selection commission chaired by Michele Romano, for whom "[...] Italianity and subscription to fascism required not only political faith, but an ideal of life" (Galfré, 2005, p. 26, free translation) reiterates the absence of works that reinforced the desired formative sense.

The debate around the national standardization of school books and readings to be carried out, with the affirmation of the proposal of the single text, gained space and consolidated. This outcome would represent a solution to the school book problem



– whether cultural or economic, Galfré (2005) analyzes. Between 1928 and 1929, decrees that required the adequacy of the books were published in order to “[...] *dare al libro non solo la veste ma anche l’anima fascista*” [give books not only fascist clothes, but also a fascist soul] (Galfré, 2005, p. 27, free translation). In January of 1929, the State book is adopted with a unique text.

According to Tarquini (2011, p. 74):

The law provided for a single book for the first two grades of primary school, while for the other three, it introduced different texts; said book should be renewed every three years, published by the State’s Bookstore and distributed in schools through the administrative centers for public education, present in the various provinces. The aesthetics of the book was also carefully followed. In its communication strategy, [...] the regime made an extensive use of images in children’s books, which had to have colorful covers drawn by the best illustrators of the time (author’s free translation).<sup>7</sup>

Arpalice Cuman Pertile’s work, *Primi voli*, printed by Bemporad, “*fu respinto perché ‘non sufficientemente pervaso di spirito nuovo’ malgrado l’autrice lo avesse reso a su dire ‘fascistissimo’*” [was rejected because ‘it was not sufficiently imbued with the new spirit’, although the author made it ‘very fascist’ (Galfré, 2005, p. 28, free translation). In Salviatti’s analysis,

As is well known, after the Gentile reform, a commission was created to examine (accept or reject) the textbooks proposed by publishers for primary schools. The first commission, chaired by educator Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, then Director General of Elementary School, completed its work in August of 1924. Bemporad presented several courses, with highlight to those signed by Arpalice Cuman Pertile, that had been very successful: *Primi voli* (First flights), in particular, had sold very well over almost twenty years and with all revisions made. But the small book, although much appreciated by the masters, was destined to fail in confrontation with politics. The commission, in fact, puts *Primi voli* in section IV, which lists the ‘books considered good in certain aspects, but which, however, cannot remain in schools, not even temporarily, due to certain serious deficiencies: The italics are in the text and say much more than what the few words seem to contain. Nevertheless, the committee allows ‘rejected books [in this first round] to be re-presented within a year, revised, and corrected, for re-evaluation’. Instead, two other Cuman Pertile’s manuals were accepted: *Sillabario* (composed with Viola Musolon) and the four volumes of *Per le vie del mondo*, a book that was also a success and classified as worthy of ‘compliments’, even though, as the commission

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<sup>7</sup> Original: La legge prevedeva un libro unico per le prime due classi della scuola elementare, mentre per altre tre introduceva testi differenziati; doveva essere rinnovato ogni tre anni, pubblicato dalla Libreria dello Stato e distribuito nelle scuole tramite i provveditorati agli studi, presenti nelle varie provincie. Anche l'estetica del libro fu seguita con cura. Nella sua strategia di comunicazione [...] il regime fece ampio uso delle immagini nei libri per l'infanzia che dovevano avere le copertine colorate, disegnate dai migliori illustratori dell'epoca (Tarquini, 2011, p. 74).

observed, 'in some parts, it should be revised as to the programs' and it 'must also be re-presented [...] within a year' (Salviatti, 2022, p. 56).<sup>8</sup>

Ascenzi and Sani (2005) transcribe the documents prepared by the Central commissions for the examination of the textbooks from 1923 to 1928, and Arpalice's works are mentioned at different times. At times recommended, at times not. Two evaluations from different years of the work *Per le vie del mondo* – reading book for the 5<sup>th</sup> boys' and girls' classes – can provide an example. As shown in the table below:

Table 2 – Book evaluation commissions, 1925 and 1926

Selection commission	1925 – Vidari commission	1926 – Giuliano commission
Work's reference	CUMAN PERTILE, Arpalice. <i>Per le vie del mondo. Letture per la 5ª classe maschile e femminile</i> . Editore R. Bemporad. Firenze, 1924.	CUMAN PERTILE, Arpalice. <i>Per le vie del mondo. Letture per la 5ª classe elementare</i> . Editore R. Bemporad. Firenze, 1926.
Received evaluation	"Il volume per la quinta di questo corso di letture è nuovo. Esso há molti pregi di forma e di sostanza, la lingua vi è scorrevole, il dialogo brioso e ben adattato ai ragazzi, lo stile caldo, spontaneo, personale. Si riscontra però un certo difetto nella parte dedicata all' educazione del sentimento patriottico, parte che invece, in relazione ai programmi, dovrebbe averre letture per la quinta più ampio e pieno sviluppo".	"Edizione decorosa. Il volume ha oggi forma migliore di quella per cui non fu approvato nel 1925. Sia per la struttura, sia per la sostanza questo libro oggi risponde alle esigenze didattiche della classe, alla quale è destinato."
Author's free translation	"The volume for the fifth grade of this reading course is new. It has many merits as to form and substance, its language is fluent, the dialogues are vibrant and well adapted to children, its style is warm, spontaneous, and personal. There is, however, a certain	"Decent edition. The volume is in better condition today than the one for which it was approved in 1925. Both in terms of structure and content, this book now meets the

<sup>8</sup> Original: "Come è noto, a ruota della riforma Gentile, viene istituita una commissione per esaminare (ammettere o respingere) i manuali proposti dall'editoria per la scuola elementare. La prima commissione, presieduta dal pedagogo Giuseppe Lombardo Radice allora direttore generale dell'Istruzione elementare, conclude o lavori nell'agosto del 1924. Bemporad ha presentato diversi corsi, e la punta di diamante sono quelli firmati da Aspalice Cuman Pertile che avevano avuto grande fortuna: Primi voli, in particolare, in quasi vent'anni e con tutte le revisioni apportate, aveva venduto benissimo. Ma il piccolo libro, seppure tanto apprezzato dai maestri, è destinato ad infrangersi nello scontro con la politica. La commissione, infatti, inserisce Primi voli nella sezione IV, dove sono elencati i 'libri giudicati per qualche rispetto buoni ma che, ciò malgrado, non possono restare nelle scuole, nemmeno in via transitoria, a cauda di talune gravi lacune': il corsivo è nel testo e dice molto di più di quanto le poche parole sembrano contenere. La commissione consente tuttavia che i "libri rispinti [in quella prima tornata] possano essere ripresentati entro un anno riveduti e corretti, a nuovo esame. Vengono invece ammessi due altri manuali della Cuman Pertile: Sillabario (composto con Viola Musolon) e i quattro tomi de *Per le vie del mondo*, libro – anch'esso – di buon successo e valutato degno di 'lode' seppure,, annota la commissione, 'in qualche parte da rivedere in rapporto ai programmi' e anch'esso 'da ripresentare [...] dentro un anno' (Salviatti, 2022, p. 56).

	defect in the part dedicated to the education of the patriotic sentiment, a part which, in relation to the study program, should have a broader and more complete development in the readings for the fifth grade.”	teaching requirements of the intended grade. “
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Source: adapted from Ascenzi and Sani, 2005, p. 500, 501, and 590.

The assessments denoted, not only in Arpalice's works, but in those by other authors, that the demands of patriotic feeling were gradually gaining different meanings. It makes one think “[...] how the State evaluated the threats to its monopoly of power and how it attempted to counteract such threats” (Darnton, 2016, p. 8). Moreover, as Galfré states “[...] *la scuola diveninva così uno dei mezzi per orientare il futuro lettore, all’ interno di un disegno volto a espandere e riunire settori tradizionalmente separati, che si dispiegherà negli anni Trenta*” [“the school thus became one of the means of guiding the future reader, within a project aimed at expanding and unifying traditionally separate sectors, a project which would develop in the 1930s”] (Galfré, 2005, p. 63, free translation). Among the senses, the affirmation of a ‘new man’, the one who would correspond to the ‘new’ times signaled by fascist Italy. Thus, the analysis by the “[...] state kept watch over words, permitting or forbidding them to appear in print and suppressing them according to reasons of state when they began to circulate as books” (Darnton, 2016, p. 8). Bosworth, in a biography of Mussolini, states that

[...] Meanwhile the Fascist regime moved more aggressively than in the past to control education of both girls and boys. In December 1925 the use of the ‘Roman’ salute was made compulsory in schools and, from October 1926, the Minister of Education, Pietro Fedele, officially proclaimed the anniversary of the March on Rome a day of national rejoicing. In 1928 it was decreed that textbooks were to be placed under strict state control (although the actual commission charged to supervise this process did not properly meet until 1939). (Bosworth, 2023, p. 283-284).

For Arpalice and – certainly – for other authors, the conditions of selection and denial brought about difficulties, including financial ones. Galfré (2005) transcribes a stretch of a letter from Arpalice to Bemporad on October 22, 1925:

Many times I had to think, formed by experience, that the Bemporad House has been publishing too many authors and books, even good ones, in recent years, perhaps due to editorial needs that I cannot know and, much less, discuss, and therefore, the fight against it and its more schematically dear

authors is and must be increasingly fierce to reach the threatened and sometimes even desired State book<sup>9</sup> (Galfré, 2005, p. 63, free translation).

The exchange of correspondences was frequent; the difficulties pointed out by the author, common. The need to pay for the authorship work of productions was evidenced in the exchange of letters. It is worth acknowledging that disputes the publishers themselves were significant, since the sale of school books was a significant part, if not a preponderant one, of the business resources. Mondadori and Bemporad were – certainly – the authors who most affirmed themselves in that period, not without movements from the Vallardi, Paravia, and Sandron publishers, as stated and exemplified by Galfré (2005): “*Nel 1924 Sandron cerco di strappare Primi voli di Cuman Pertile alla Bemporad e l’anno successivo, non essendogli riuscita l’operazione, ne impedì le adozioni con mezzi non troppo leali*” [In 1924, Sandron tried to take Cuman Pertile’s *Primi voli* from Bemporad; the following year, having been unsuccessful, it prevented its adoption by not very fair means] (Galfré, 2005, p. 65, free translation).

The power of the printed word and the control over its circulation, especially in texts that would be distributed to schools, evidences the intention that by “Developing an educational system which would mix sport and the positive inheritance of the war, Fascist teaching would now forge a ‘new ruling class’” (Bosworth, 2023, p. 285). In the case of Arpalice, as Colin (2012, p. 440) said

The effects of school fascistization and of didactic production extended to other fields of child culture, where the State used its powers to the fullest to silence unacceptable voices and restrict the content and circulation of works. In fact, no anti-fascist text was published, and socialist writers stopped writing (such as Virgilio Brocchi) or followed their instincts as to the subjects to be avoided and took refuge in writing fairy tales for the younger ones (such as Arpalice Cuman Pertile).<sup>10</sup>



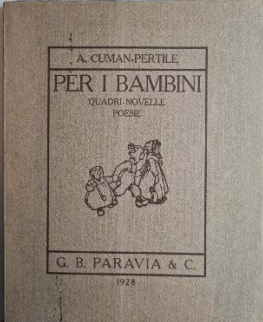
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<sup>9</sup> Original: “Molte volte ho dovuto pensare, ammaestrata dall’esperienza che la Casa Bemporad sia andata pubblicando, in questi ultimi anni, forse per necessità editoriali che io non posso conoscere e molto meno discutere, troppi autori e troppi libri anche buoni e che perciò la lotta contro di lei e de’ suoi autori più schettamente amati si faccia e si debba fare sempre più accanita per giungere al minacciato e talvolta quassù perfino auspicato libro di Stato” (Galfré, 2005, p. 63).

<sup>10</sup> “Gli effetti prodotti dalla fascistizzazione della scuola e della produzione didattica si riversano sugli altri campi della cultura dell’infanzia, dove lo Stato utilizzò fino in fondo i propri poteri per ridurre al silenzio le voci inaccettabili e per contrare il contenuto e la circolazione delle opere. Non è stato infatti pubblicato nessun testo antifascista, e gli strittori socialisti hanno smesso di scrivere (come Virgilio Brocchi), oppure hanno seguito il loro istinto circa i soggetti da evitare e si sono rifugiati nella scrittura di fiabe per i più piccini (come Arpalice Cuman Pertile)”. (Colin, 2012, p. 440).

Cuman Pertile continued producing other works and publishing them, without her contribution to school books ceasing – necessarily – to exist. The literary works that were possible during the 1930s and following years deal with tales, poetry, diverse narratives, even those intended for theater or religiosity. In the presentation of the following table, I gather a small selection of Arpalice's publications that could circulate between the late 1920s and early 1940s. Among the selected ones, all had more than two editions and are a small part of what Arpalice wrote in that period.

Table 3 – Some of Arpalice Cuman Pertile's works between 1920 and 1940

Publication's cover	Reference	Notes
	Piccoli viaggiatori del cielo, della terra e del mare, edited by the Editrice Paravia House (Torino), in 1936.	Publication with 150 pages, issued in a 21cm x 27.5 cm size, with colored cover and illustrations inside in black and white. Illustrations by Elida Cenni. Publication with poems and tales that tells about trips, presenting, through the narrative, the fauna, flora, and customs of Italy, and of many other places in the world – by diverse means of locomotion – by land, in the sea, and in the air, as the title mentions.
	I Racconti di Nonno Proverbio, with first edition published in 1925, and second edition published in 1944, also by the Editrice Paravia House (Torino).	Publication with 102 pages, colored cover and whole-page illustrations inside by Pinochi, probably Enrico Mauro Pinochi, who, in the 1940s, immigrated to Argentina. The book is dedicated to tales narrated by the character Proverbio, a grandpa who was the son of Wisdom and grandson of Experience, as it is told at the beginning of the book.
	Per i bambini, quadri, novelle, poesie, published by the Editrice Paravia House (Torino) in three editions -1928, 1931, and 1937.	In the 1928 edition, the cover features a simple, small illustration without color. In later editions, its graphic design received improvements, with the use of colors and higher-quality paper. Book dedicated to poetry and short stories.



	<p>La Storia Più bela narrata ai fanciulli nel paese di Gesu, published in 1930, with second edition published in 1933. Edited by the Editrice S. E. I. House, Torino.</p>	<p>Publication that had 155 pages. It was later edited at different times. In this work and others published by Arpalice through the Editrice S.E.I. House, the religious theme is approached with a simple and accessible narrative aimed at children. Biblical stories are retold by the author.</p>
	<p>Il teatro di Bengodi, dialoghi e commedie per la recitazione dei fanciulli e per le feste scolastiche, 1926, edited by the Editrice Mondadori House, Milano.</p>	<p>Publication with 276 pages, issued by one of the most important houses, Mondadori. Illustrated by E. Pinochi, G. Rivolo and A. Gabrielli, this work circulated and was an important reference for school activities. It brings together small dialogues, funny stories, poems, and texts for skits.</p>

Source: organized by the author from Atti [...], 1986.

Arpalice's books reveal the versatility of the writer, her vast knowledge, and her dedication to writing. In general, beyond her love of knowledge, her messages in the name of peace, freedom, social justice are reflected in the tales and short stories she narrated. After the end of World War II, Arpalice resumed the publishing of her school books, especially the *Primi voli* collection. In addition to writing, she dedicated her last years of life to private education as well, teaching a few students.

## 5 Further considerations

*"[...] femininity, not as a fact of nature, but as a product of culture and history"*  
(Perrot, 2007, p. 100).

The life of the writer, poet, teacher, intellectual, and 'woman of letters' Arpalice Cuman Pertile cannot be reduced to these pages, and this was not the intention. Small fragments of her life make an appearance to allow for thinking about the context in which she lived, in the midst of a time of profound transformations that allowed her to access the university and work as a writer. Times between the struggles for female emancipation, on the one hand, and the curtailments of freedom, on the other, when she suffered retaliations for her political-ideological stance. Arpalice, in her life history,

represents an intellectual engaged in the context of her era, dedicated to children's education, whether as a teacher or as a writer. She fought for peace and freedom, making her social criticism against poverty shine through her works, such as *Il piccolo emigrante* (1920). I also highlight her contribution to writing works aimed at enchanting children, with music and recitation as foundation.

Fruitful as a teacher and writer, Arpalice narrates, in *Il piccolo emigrante*, the misadventures of little boy Beppi, his father, and his family as a whole, which represents so many others that dreamed of the opportunity for a better life and decided to emigrate. Emigration generated as a necessity derived from poverty and hunger, the sadness of the farewell, and the promise of a better life for all. The protagonist, Beppi – the boy who also emigrates –, drops out of school and goes through the intensities of an experience narrated with sensitivity by Arpalice. In the narrative, there is a return, but, in history, most of those who went to America (and other even more distant destinations, such as Australia) did not return to Italy. The reading of this work among Italian children, touching on a theme that was silenced, but which pointed to intense social inequalities, is an example, among many, of what Arpalice built as literary narratives merged with the struggles against inequality. Arpalice herself was subjected to the interdictions, due to her political positions and defense of peace and democracy.

Today, the work of Arpalice Cuman Pertile is recognized through the granting of the National Award for Childhood Literature, the *Marostica citta di Fiabe* – Arpalice Cuman Pertile: a biannual contest open for all those who want to present unpublished texts in the Italian language, on free themes for children and youths from three to 11 years. Such award was instituted in 1988, thought of and proposed by Licia Toniolo Serafini, and as a tribute for and recognition of Arpalice Cuman Pertile's work. It is a form of recognizing a writer who, in her will, left her rights of authorship to the *Comune de Marostica*, requesting that the annual sales percentage of her books be returned to the best students from the elementary classes, who would receive one of her books with a dedication that encouraged them to study, work, and be kind (Contin, 2022, p. 19).

The search for peace, freedom, social justice, and the flag of education motivated Arpalice's existence and echoed in a time when Italy was experiencing intense social, political, economic, and cultural transformations. Her desires and her fight reached the overseas, as her books also circulated in Brazilian lands. Arpalice

Cuman Pertile left an extensive work as legacy and her story inspires one to think also about the interdictions suffered, on the importance of democracy, on peace, and on human compassion.

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