

After a decade of hard work, I sold my first picture book in September of 2014. Viking Children's Books bought RENATO AND THE LION. I was elated, but I knew there was still so much work ahead. My editor acquired a wordless dummy, but the story needed text to clarify the time period and the events connecting Renato to his lion. The editor asked me to wait while her team ushered the next round of books to publication. There was no timeline given, and it ended up being many months. I could have worked on other projects until she was ready for me. But I knew that although I had my plot and characters, there was so much of the actual history I was unsure of. Since the lion statue comes to life in the story, the rules of pure historical fiction didn't seem to apply. Nevertheless, I felt a duty to paint a believable world that children could learn from and historians would accept as accurate.

I began this unstructured time by sketching the characters, trying to get to know them better so I could maintain consistency throughout the illustrations. At the same time, I attended a local SCBWI event in Princeton, NJ, known as the Fall Craft Weekend. This annual event includes intensive workshops for writers and illustrators, as well as panels and workshops led by industry professionals and established book makers. One of the workshops I attended was by Darlene Beck-Jacobson, author of WHEELS OF CHANGE. The theme of the workshop was the research process for historical fiction projects. I dutifully took notes, but as I listened to Darlene, I couldn't believe how thoroughly she researched her book's world. She mentioned calling a museum to ask about which streets were dirt and which were cobble-stoned in the time period of her piece. That blew me away, as her book about a horse-carriage maker would need to know something like that. It occurred to me that the research process was fun for Darlene. I was only accustomed to research projects for school—something I had never enjoyed. But her eyes were bright as she talked about verifying facts and details for her book. That workshop changed the trajectory of RENATO AND THE LION.

Like a sweater with a loose thread, tugging at the facts of the time period unraveled an entire world for me. I started with one request from my editor—to make sure that Renato and his family could have taken a boat from Italy to New York during the height of World War II. I started searching online, then pulling books from the local library. It only took a few days to learn that there was just ONE boat that carried passengers from Naples to New York in 1944. President Roosevelt had authorized a military ship, the U.S.A.T. Henry Gibbins to bring 1000 Jewish refugees to our coast. At first I wondered if this meant Renato had to be Jewish. I wasn't opposed to this, but I wanted the storyline to be true for either a Jewish family fleeing persecution, or a Catholic family that was perhaps anti-fascist. As it turns out, the boat carried 100 non-Jewish refugees. And there were two Renatos and two Renates on board! Research was indeed fun, and I was hooked!

The next big topic I wanted to figure out was whether or not the lion was ever covered. This took a lot longer, with trips to the Princeton University libraries and the help of their researchers. All I had to do was ask, and I was granted permission to see the Penoyer Collection—where I sketched from photos taken from the 1940's. I requested books off site, through their art history library, the Marquand—which was incredible. I felt like a detective, racing to find out if the story I had imagined could actually have existed. My stomach was in knots more than once when I thought I had discovered contradictory information, or a lead fell through. I don't know how it is if someone starts with research before building a story. But for me, researching after the story was assembled, was nerve-wracking.

I got as far as I could get stateside, when I decided to use my book advance for a solo trip to Florence. For ten days in 2015, I wandered around Florence, frantically sketching, taking tours, and trying to learn from people who had lived through the war. I met a bookseller, Enrico Rossi, who was 7-years old in 1944. I hired a local guide to translate while I interviewed him. I learned enough to make a few more books out of his information! Where to stop!? It was dizzyingly exciting. I also found a rare book at the Florence Library that the Marquand had, which I

desperately wanted to own. I asked the library where I could find the book to buy, and one person said I could check the book out and go around the corner to make copies. I appreciated the thought, but I didn't want to do that. Unbelievably, they gave me a library card, and I checked the book out. In the front of the book, I saw that it was published through the Pitti Palace, only a short walk across the Arno River. Excitedly, I ran over to the Pitti Palace. I waited in line with other tourists, who had passes for the gardens. But for some reason, the attendant kept telling them their pass was incorrect, and they would have to go to the office. Having no pass, and speaking terrible Italian, I just showed him the book and the words "Pitti Palace" and gestured towards the gift shop. To my surprise, he waved me in! I took a look in the shop, but realized there were no books like mine there. I slowly walked back to the gate, passing offices along the way. My bravery got the better of me, and I knocked on a random office door. Again, with atrocious Italian, I showed the book and my sketches, and tried to explain I wanted to find a copy. They understood, and asked me to wait. A gentleman made a phone call, then disappeared for awhile. When he came back, he brought two books to me. The one I wanted, and a new one—its companion! I was so excited, and pulled out my wallet to pay. He looked at his co-workers, and waved me away saying not to worry. My eyes got misty at his generosity.

When I left Italy, I only had one carry on bag—filled to the brim with 15 books and loads of sketches and paintings. On the last day, when I checked out of the nunnery where I was staying, I had one last surprise that only a research trip could have brought me. When I tried to pay with my credit card, the nuns explained it was cash only. The bill was about 570Euro. I only had 30 on me. I had put a deposit on my credit card at home, but the nuns explained this was done by a different company. For them, it was cash only. I panicked. They let me leave to see what I could withdraw from the ATM. Thankfully my bank card and my savings card allowed 250Euro to be withdrawn each. But I was still short—plus the added taxes. I was so upset. But then I remembered all my paintings. I gave them the cash, then asked if I could pay the remainder with a painting. The nuns agreed, and I parted with the first night painting I did during my trip. This experience brought home the feeling that I had when making the book—Italians revere art in a way that our culture may or may not. I was embarrassed to leave without paying in full, but in retrospect, I'm happy to tell this story.

Once I was home, and the work with my editor began in earnest, I shared all my research. I collected everything on a webpage, so she could spend time looking at it and referencing outside links. I cleaned up some of the research, and put it up on www.renatoandthelion.com. There you can find Easter eggs of hidden portraits and street names, of war time heroes and real artwork that was covered and protected during the war. And the storyline works whether the reader envisions Renato as a Jewish boy, a Catholic boy, or a boy of mixed descent. For in meeting Enrico Rossi, I learned that his Jewish grandmother lived on the same street as his Catholic family members, and no one cared.

The only mystery I never solved was whether or not the lion was ever covered, even for a day. The great flood in 1966 damaged nearby buildings and destroyed tons of paper documents about what happened to artwork during the war. In the spirit of the book, I choose to believe that although he probably wasn't covered for long, a little boy could have done his part to keep his beloved lion safe.

I am forever grateful to Darlene for turning me on to the power of research. She may not have intended to influence me as much as she did—since my travels had shades of an Indiana Jones adventure. But without her, I wouldn't have had this much fun making my first picture book, RENATO AND THE LION. Grazie, Darlene!

