

ter, munching on a sinner. To his left, a grimacing, horned demon drags the naked figure of Muhammad down to the underworld. The Unione claims that the fresco compromised relations between Catholics and Muslims, arguing that it is far more offensive than Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Muslims, the Unione said, had never depicted Jesus or the Virgin Mary naked on the walls of a mosque. (They failed to note, however, that they consider depicting any human being in an image on the wall of a Mosque—or anywhere, for that matter—idolatry, and it is forbidden.)

The Unione, headquartered in the outskirts of Rome, has announced it will hold demonstrations outside the capital's mosque—the largest in Europe—despite the fact that the head of the local Islamic Cultural Center said that not all Muslims in Bologna agreed that the fresco should be removed. So far, no such demonstration has taken place. The *International Herald Tribune's Italy Daily* supplement may have been right to describe the Unione as a "tiny Muslim organization."

Still, the social and cultural implications of the controversy could be enormous, since the Unione contends that the problem started in the Middle Ages with Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Italy's national poet, who, in Canto 28 of the *Inferno*, placed Muhammad in the ninth circle of Hell alongside other idolators and schismatics. The fresco was based on this literary masterpiece, written 100 years earlier. The Unione also demands that the teaching of Dante be suspended in Italian schools in immigrant areas since, in their words, "nothing against the prophet Jesus is studied in our schools."

The World Muslim League, which operates out of the mosque in Rome, said the request was "pure madness" and called the petition "more than silly." But Roberto de Mattei, the president of a Rome-based think tank, Centro Culturale Lepanto (named after the 1571 battle that saw a huge Muslim fleet routed by the Christian forces), was of a somewhat different opinion. "The demand exposes the aggressive nature of Islamic fundamentalism, which never has renounced its goal to dominate Europe one day," he told the *Asian Wall Street Journal* (July 13-15, 2001). "What other explanation is there for attempts to destroy Italy's cultural heritage?"

The fact that the controversy erupted in Bologna may not be coincidental. In September 2000, Giacomo Cardinal Bif-

fi set off a tempest when he issued a pastoral letter on Muslim immigration to Italy and the dangers posed by Islamic proselytizing. He stated that it would be best if Italy changed its immigration policy to favor immigrants who were Catholic, rather than Muslim, in order to "save the nation's identity." In his opinion, economic and social criteria alone should not be the guidelines for allowing immigrants to adopt Italy as their home. Cardinal Biffi repeatedly stressed the incompatibility of certain aspects of Muslim culture and religion with the traditions of Italy: different eating habits, family rights, a different weekly holy day, the concept of the role of women in society, polygamy, and a fundamentalist view of public life in which religion is one with politics. "Europe must either become Christian again or it will become Muslim," he argued, and he rejected accusations that his suggestion amounts to discrimination on the basis of religion. "There is no right to invasion!" the cardinal said. "A country can let whom it wants into its house." Anti-Muslim feelings were further fueled by the Northern League, now part of the center-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi, which has campaigned on an anti-immigration platform and called for the defense of Christian society against outside influences. Berlusconi has also held marches to protest the building of mosques in Italy.

The spokesman for the Bologna curia confirmed that, even if the cardinal wanted to modify or erase the fresco, he would not be able to. In Italy, all public monuments, including the Bologna basilica, are state property, and the approval of the Ministry of Culture is needed to move even a single stone. The same applies to Dante's poetry: In Italy, school syllabi are determined by the Ministry of Public Education, and it is highly unlikely that the new center-right government would ever consider, let alone accede to, such a request.

After all, why should others change their cultural patterns to please the Muslims, who would never change theirs for the sake of others? What if Catholics started asking that insults and threats to Christians be removed from the decorations in many mosques and from the Koran itself?

Alberto Carosa is the editor of Famiglia Domani Flash, a pro-family newsletter published in Rome.

Letter From Texas

by Wayne Allensworth

The Trees of Autumn



It is a warm night for November, even in Texas. Thanksgiving is a few days away, and the warm weather, interrupted by a cool snap, has returned, reimposing itself like an unwelcome guest on an autumn background of falling leaves and brown, seemingly endless prairie stretching north to distant Canada. Southeast from Waco, along Highway 6 to Bryan and the Gulf Coast beyond, Santa has made his first appearance, starring in a light show ("Santa's Wonderland") staked out in a cow pasture bordered by barbed wire and the cracked pavement of the highway. I turn on the air conditioner to cool the stuffy car interior. My wife shakes her head. "Welcome back to Texas and eighty degrees at Thanksgiving." I need a Dr. Pepper.

Welcome back, indeed. Sitting on the porch of my parent's home in Houston, I'm watching a grey squirrel bury a pecan amongst the leaves and bare roots of a massive live oak and trying to imagine the yard as it was 35 years ago, before all the roads were paved, before city water, before the crawdads and water moccasins disappeared from the creek and the ubiquitous horny toads vanished. In those days, my brothers and I could roam the adjacent fields unmolested. We kept a pet raccoon for a time. My younger brother once brought home a copperhead for my mother's inspection and was quite upset when Daddy whacked its head off with a hoe. Out near Bear Creek, the farmers and stockmen hung the corpses of slain predators on a fence at a place we called "Wolf Corners." We used to go out there on Sunday afternoons to inspect the week's kill.

The air has that smoky look it takes on this time of year, and the shadows are encroaching on the house even at midday. The squirrel finishes his work and dashes up the live oak, grown thick and battered since its early days. The magnolia is still there, its bright green, waxy foliage standing out against the fallen brown leaves of the neighboring sycamore. The twin mimosas are gone. I remember climbing the thick limbs of the larger one that

stretched over the driveway, the pinks and greens of the serrated leaves lending an illusory tropical air to the yard. The century plant, prehistoric and fearsome in appearance, bloomed and died when I was in high school.

The kids want to collect pecans, so we take buckets from Daddy's toolshed and head for the backyard. A recent storm has brought down the last of them, and some are still covered in the green pods that encase the shell and the oily, sweet-tasting meat. The pine near the fence is dying, looking for all the world like the sailless mast of a shipwreck. The huge elm, its ponderous limbs leaning on the roof of the house, the pecan trees, full of squirrels' nests, the hackberry, and the towering sycamore remain.

Was the sycamore always so big? Maybe my memory is playing tricks on me. Or was it the scale of boyhood adventures that made all trees seem mighty beanstalks stretching to the sky and giants and treasures beyond? My younger brother once climbed to its top, as the tree swayed in a stiff wind. My mother tells me I was nonchalantly munching on a snack when I informed her he was clinging to the swaying treetop and couldn't get down. I can't remember just how he did get down, only that the tree seemed so invulnerable, even then. Not even a tornado I once watched dance only a few yards away from it disturbed the invincible sycamore of my memory.

It seems like an act of defiance to allow kids to climb trees these days. Maybe that's why the sight of my son dangling from the limbs of the live oak gladdens my heart. Or maybe it is something else.

We pick up the pecans, crushing some beneath our heels to snack on. The noise stirs some doves near the fenceline to flight, and I notice the grapevine still clinging to the fence. We used to make homemade wine with its fruit.

Daddy and I sit out on the porch to watch the rest of the day go by, and I ask him about the trees. He claims he planted too damn many of them. The trees, some of them dying, now surround the house, leaving mountains of dead leaves to clean up and causing no end of trouble. Even so, he remembers where he got each one—this one from the property of friends, that one from a relative—and when he planted them in this little patch of coastal grassland where he built a house and raised a family.

That was nearly 50 years ago.

We talk of my parents moving. The

city swallowed our little oasis decades ago. Apart from this island of memory and attachment, what was home is no longer a pleasant place to live. I wonder aloud if we could move the house. But a voice in my head whispers, "What of the trees?"

Wayne Allensworth lives in Keller, Texas.

Letter From London

by Andrei Navrozov

Tea With Trotsky



A few months ago, when word of an article of mine about the events of September 11 went round the Russian community in London, I received a telephone call inviting me to a private meeting with Boris Berezovsky. (A relevant question to ponder is whether those Westerners who are unfamiliar with the name have somehow missed out, since it may well be argued that many people who quietly went about their business in the 1930's without bothering to ask who Trotsky was, and why he was ever so cross with Stalin, were emotionally better prepared for the paradox of an approaching world war that would align the West with Soviet Russia. To the writer, to the historian, and to every other species of freethinking pest that troubles our society, however, the perfect emotional equilibrium of a man shoved into the cattle car that bears him to an unspecified destination has not always been the consummate ideal. This worrisome, often lonely, unshaven or bespectacled human-type wants to ferret out the very worst of what there is to learn of his epoch, and what I write here is addressed to him.)

At home, Berezovsky is vilified as an "oligarch" by the secret-police *junta* that has borne President Vladimir Putin, which means that the label is intentionally misleading and can be discarded. I have previously written in this space that setting up these bigwigs was an early initiative of that selfsame *junta*, with the objective of staging a pantomime of free enterprise attractive to Western investment not unlike the simulacrum of constitutional liberty embodied by the Duma and other democratist institutions in

post-*perestroika* Russia. Of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, who had been chosen almost at random to receive the bounteous rewards of various privatizations and shareouts, only a couple—Berezovsky most prominently—went bad in the end and began biting the hand that fed them. At present, there is an order for his arrest, and those who sympathize with his plight will not be surprised to hear of the man's imminent extradition to Russia, nor, for that matter, of his tragic death in a car crash.

In the West, Berezovsky has been called an entrepreneur, a tycoon, a billionaire, and a mafioso. The last appellation was given him by *Forbes*, whereupon he successfully sued the magazine for slander in Britain, where he resides, in a case that went all the way up to the House of Lords. But whatever the label, it is evidently less political than it is prosaic, leading one to ask why on earth anybody so described should be touted as the Trotsky of our time. A flippant answer is that we live in prosaic times. A more substantive reply would acknowledge that, in the 21st century, as George Orwell foresaw back in 1948, big books, big words, big ideas, and all the rest of the romantic *mise-en-scène* of political rebellion that endured until Trotsky's day, count for nothing or next to nothing. Big money, on the other hand—that is to say, money measured in hundreds of billions of dollars—is, if anything, more politically pivotal and historically momentous than ever before. A crucial caveat to this last, however, is that while modern money is certainly mightier than the modern pen, the modern sword is still the mightiest thing on earth, and those who suppose that world dominion can be bought with paper money are quite as deluded as the many ordinary Americans who will happily tell you that their planet is safe for democracy so long as its denizens drink Coke and watch CNN.

Jumping ahead to the conclusion of our chat over tea with biscuits, I must say that Berezovsky's inability to accept that crucial caveat is one of his most notable intellectual limitations: "Verily, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle," I kept thinking during the three hours of conversation, "than it is for a billionaire to admit that economics is not the answer to everything." So, in his own day, it was quite impossible for Trotsky to accept the notion that his own cultural capital—his education, his oratory, his knowledge of foreign languages, or, for