FOUR DOGS FIGHTING FOR THE SAME BONE

On October 4, Professor Lustri-Pungiglioni[1] passed away. He taught language, literature and Italian civilization at Brander College.[2] For many years he went by the sole name Lustri [luster], a name that fit him perfectly, by the way. He fell in love with the historical figure of Princess Pungiglioni,[3] a star of Italian *Rinascimento* so important that to this very day scholars are tracking down the lists of her dirty laundry and the recipes of famous dishes prepared by her cook. Since he wrote a book about her, Professor Lustri convinced himself that he had become a member of the family. He thus appealed to a judge to have the name Pungiglioni added to his own, explaining that he could not live without it. He couldn't add the title of prince because American law does not recognize such titles. However, he could change his name. American law allows even a street sweeper to call himself Washington or Lincoln even though these names belong to the national patrimony. With foreign names they are even more lax, even if one chooses Bonaparte[4] or Pungiglioni. Back in Italy, the real Prince Pungiglioni protested but he could do nothing against an American decree that has validity only in America. There is no patent to protect the name Pungiglioni: his ancestors forgot to apply for one in Washington, D.C. And, incidentally, Washington, D.C. did not exist in those days.

The news of his impending demise leaked out of the family circle and trickled into the little world that occupies itself with Italian studies; and, most of all, occupies all the college teaching positions in Italian—which have not changed at all for the last twenty years. Here some curious phenomena begin to appear. Since there are no new university positions in Italian, whenever someone leaves by resignation, retirement or death, the event is immediately object of intense interest; like what happens in the army when a general retires. As the news of

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1 Clearly a fictitious name. *Lustri* suggests *illustre* [illustrious]. *Pungiglioni* means bee stingers.

2 Fictitious.

3 Fictitious name.

4 Last name of Napoleon.

his imminent demise spread, secret meetings were scheduled. Letters were written. Telephones rang off the hook. Discreet visits took place. Some individuals, who had not talked to each other in a long time, had lunch together. College presidents received as gifts volumes from people they had never heard from before. Even the cardinal was quietly told that, after a brief stop in purgatory, a new soul would be soon on his way to heaven; and that, in the meantime, a chair would be available right away for a Catholic professor.

Comforted by the fervid prayers of the aspiring candidates, wrapped in veils of sighs and sorrow, Professor Lustri-Pungiglioni finally became a "dear departed."

As soon as the city newspaper published the obituary with a biography prepared by the family, the phenomena increased in intensity and relevance.

Meanwhile, in Orlando, Florida, the author of the *History of Italian Teaching in the United States* and other Italophile essays, was counting the years before the age for a full pension after teaching Italian grammar without ever teaching his student to speak Italian. These students were the children of lucky farmers of orange groves. He taught them for more or less sixty semesters, always using the same identical textbook since the beginning of his academic career, which happened to be just after he dropped out of medical school in Naples. The news of Lustri-Pungiglioni's death arrived by means of the local Italian language newspaper he was using in class; despite the fact that the periodical is written in *lingua cafonica*,[5] namely a mixture of sentences in the dialect of Abruzzi translated into Italian and mixed together with local terms derived from English. The short news item was originally a wire sent from New York to Italy by the agency ANSA and published in an Italian newspaper. With a few translation mistakes and typos picked up along the way it finally landed in Florida. Here it sparked in him a sudden burst of enthusiasm, something that had never happened before. He decided that this time he would give it a shot. Up until now, he had never applied for a position that would finally reward his labor as historian of Italian culture. The position was

5 *Lingua cafonica*. Approximately "cafonic" language. Brilliant neologism that mixes *cafone* and *fonica* [phonic].

in New York, with those great libraries, archives, and the possibility to give lectures to a knowledgeable public. Finally he could get out of his *borgo selvaggio*[6] [hick hamlet]. (That's how, in his literary jargon, he would call that beautiful city nested among citrus groves—but only in the secrecy of his own mind, never in public, to avoid creating conflicts.) He could not miss the chance. So, certain of his entitlement he started gathering his credentials.

In Boston, on the eastern hill, where many unremarkable Italian families live, lights were shining in Ms. Bonuzzi's parlor. Her husband was a teacher of Italian in one of the city's middle schools. But because there were very few students of Italian, he had to refresh his Latin studies from the time when he was a young lad. He was also teaching Spanish, which he had learned in summer school in intensive programs administered with huge injections of forty-day courses. The lady of the house had always dreamed of living in New York where her family also lived and would scold her husband for not being smart enough to get a job there. When she heard the news on the radio, a torrent of images flooded her mind. Weekends with her family… Strolls along Fifth Avenue… As soon as her husband walked in the door with a bundle of papers to grade under his arm, she gave him one of her usual lectures. It was urgent for him to go to New York as soon as possible and see that college's president. But first he should ask his Boston colleagues for letters of recommendation; collect all the book reviews he had written for professional journals; all the radio interviews; and even that rare congratulation note from the Italian consul. He should wear his best winter coat, new shirt etc. etc. It was an endless flow of instructions, one on top of the other, so chaotic and rambling that if he had followed these he wouldn't be able to follow those and vice versa.

From a country in central Europe, where she was teaching in a finishing school for rich young ladies, a girl[7] sent a telegram to the college president: "Profoundly sorry death adored teacher, eager to continue splendid tradition." To tell the truth, to those of us who knew both the deceased and the candidate, that note sounded a bit off-key.

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6 *Natìo borgo selvaggio* [native uncivilized hamlet]. It is one of the most famous citations from the poem *Le Ricordanze* by Giacomo Leopardi, composed in 1829.

7 *Ragazza* in the original.

Many times we heard the young candidate wonder how such a vane individual, enamored only of himself and his own eloquence, ever managed to become a professor of Italian literature in a prestigious college. And, on the other hand, many times we heard the teacher joke about the critical theories of the girl he himself had promoted with top grades. To him her criticism was just a bunch of foolishness, typical of today's youth perverted by critics like Benedetto Croce[8] and De Sanctis about whom the only thing he knew were the names.

Marquise Boninsegni[9] had just disembarked from the ocean liner *Cristoforo Colombo* when, on the pier, she ran into a friend, a teacher, who was surprised to see her in New York. The first thing the teacher told her was that the professor had suddenly died and his position was vacant. Marquise Boninsegni wasn't really a marquise. She was the daughter of a marquis but she wasn't the oldest child.[10] Moreover, she was married to an American commoner whom she had met during WWII, stuffed in an U.S. Army officer's uniform, with an automobile, and tons of chocolates in his pockets. So she married him. Once she got to New York she must have been a bit disappointed when she found herself doing house chores with her husband who had a modest job working in a bank. When she heard about the position she started hoping she could make use of the *laurea*[11] she had been awarded in Italy several years earlier. It was a nice *laurea* that showed that the marquise, a beautiful lady who knew how to dress beautifully, had studied Latin and Ancient Greek with a final grade of 80/100.[12] Her thesis was on a *canzoniere*[13] of the 15th century. The marquis in all those years had not given a single thought to Italian literature. First it was because of the war; then the marriage; then the need to learn English

8 Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). Philosopher, historian and literary critic. He was one of the most influential thinkers of twentieth century's Italy.

9 Fictitious.

10 Normally, aristocratic titles are inherited only by the first born, although different traditions exist in various parts of Europe, with numerous exceptions and special privileges.

11 Italian college degree equivalent to a baccalaureate.

12 Equivalent to a C average.

13 Collection of poems.

so she could communicate with her husband's family that looked at her askance when she tried to pronounce the *th* sound that always came out like a *t* from her splendid set of teeth. All these things had kept her mental abilities and time totally busy. On top of this let's not forget to add that she had achieved a rather solid position thanks to her canasta-playing skills. Now, the idea that she could take advantage of the degree she had in the drawer went straight to her head. "An Italian *laurea*.... It must be worth a lot." When she realized that the marquise was interested in the position, her friend—who wouldn't have minded the position for herself—suddenly turned cold. Her friend told the marquise that in New York City only private schools can hire people with foreign degrees. Public schools demand an American degree, plus a dozen courses on pedagogy that teach people how to teach so that they end up knowing absolutely nothing about the subject they are going to teach. And, finally, she said, it was more important to have the correct English accent than a native Italian accent, even if the position was in Italian. The students, she hinted, would laugh at a teacher with an accent and the school's prestige would plummet. The marquise was crushed. At dinner that night she took it out on her husband: "What kind of country is this America of yours... A bunch of barbarians... They don't even recognize the value of an Italian *laurea*... Do they even know who Professor Vandàli was?"[14] To tell the truth, the marquise attended only two lectures by Vandàli, either because she skipped his classes or because Vandàli was always away on some kind of academic business and barely lectured at all. Her husband, who kept hearing that name, at a certain point sought out information whether the two of them had something going, but he got back excellent reassurance: Vandàli was an old, harmless man in a good state of preservation. No danger loomed.

In a university in a western state there was a young professor of Italian who never read Italian newspapers and knew he wouldn't learn a thing from the Italian-language newspaper published in his town. Indeed, he prohibited his students from reading it. He preferred reading the classics, critical essays and erudite journals. He was passionate

14 Professor Vandàli (whatever his real name was) must have been the marquise's (whatever her real name was) thesis advisor.

about new studies that tried to reconstruct the context of literary works through the investigation of paintings, sculptures and architectural works. He followed Berenson and Heinrich Wölflin.[15] For him Italian literature, even contemporary literature, was dead literature to be studied like those of the Aztecs and the Babylonians. Much of what he talked about was way over the heads of his students who, from previous studies, had learned about *heritage*, *environment*, *religion* and *race*. Some of them managed to learn the new language made of *structure*, *engagement*, *models* and *sensibility*. He would ask, for instance, if the *Divine Comedy* was a drama or a narrative. He was up-to-date with new critical trends and his writings were very involved, alluding to a profundity that wasn't there. He spoke agile words and conducted subtle analyses with a rich English vocabulary. His taste led him to poets of turbulent and dark periods, complicated and ambiguous. Here he could practice his critical skills that consisted more in inventions than discoveries. He too was caught by the frenzy to send his publications to the college president.

In a few days the table of the college president was flooded with dozens of diplomas, piles of books, newspaper clips, abstracts from academic journals, letters of support and recommendation. He received applications from two full professor, four assistant professors, some twenty lecturers, a couple of unemployed journalists and more. Suddenly a rumor started circulating from north to south and from east to west. The successor had already been selected. Before the search had even begun.

New York, December 23, 1956

15 Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945). Swiss art historian.

THE FAKE AMERICAN

Ms. Sofia Chiochi, the daughter of Italian immigrants, was taught by her parents that in order to *fare l'americana* [look/act like an American] she always had to appear optimistic and happy with the world. And she learned her lesson well. Her mouth constantly sprays praise and enthusiasm, gushing sugared fluids and sticky jam. Saccharine pills tumble out of her lips in every occasion and in every moment of her life. Every single sermon she listens to in church is *magnificent*. The dances she attends are *splendid*. The lectures she goes to are *extraordinary*. Not to speak of the receptions! At the end she runs to the hostess, grabs her hand with both of hers, or, if she is closer, throws herself on her and kisses her on both cheeks: "Just *marvelous*"; "I have never had such a *great time*"; "It takes *you* to do things *that well*"; "A total *success*." She rests her voice on "*wonderful*"; sings again and again "*Thank you*"; stretches on purpose "*how much I enjoyed it*" to make it last longer. Then she cocks her little cute head to the side, pouts her lips and appears to be in a constant state of exhilaration; like a child who was just given a piece of candy. Her face becomes even redder than the makeup she wears because her blood goes straight to her head when she slobbers that way.

In her family nobody is ever sick. Even if someone is delirious with fever, she would always say that everything is fine. She uses Italian suffixes for endearment to an excess and she revels in them, in a Tuscan accent that is completely unnatural in a woman from southern Italy. Often she asks one of the Italian teachers she knows if they are willing to go to her house to lead a conversation or to give a *conferenzina* [tiny little lecture] to a bunch of girls she is tutoring in Italian. I also was asked, and I accepted. As soon as I finished she jumped all over me and almost ate me alive with compliments. "Nobody, nobody has ever spoken so well…" "Your erudition is scary..." "I read all your works and I owe you everything I know in this life…"

In that moment of sullen depression, while I was keeping my glance low to avoid those ridiculous effusions, I noticed the big toe that was sticking out of her sandal, nail painted deep red, covered with the thin nylon net of modern stockings. I didn't say a word, but I placed my

thick shoe sole on the toe and started pressing with deliberate cruelty, as if it were the button of the escape hatch of a submarine about to sink. I thought she would scream "*Murderer!*" and throw me out of her house. Nothing happened, except a terrifying smirk of pain that lowered my blood pressure. I had to stand there and listen that my conversation was the *nicest* she ever heard in her life....and that I was a real poet. Then, limping, she walked me to the door.

New York, April 13, 1956

PORTRAIT OF CARLO PATERNO

The majority of Italian immigrants who have achieved great success in America have been builders or contractors. This is what I evinced from thousands of obituaries I have been collecting for over fifteen years. These were people, Americans of Italian descent, whose names were sufficiently important at the time of their death to appear in the pages of the *New York Times* or the *Herald Tribune*. The data I collected is a very rich source of information that maybe some day will be useful to sociologists interested in a serious analysis of the power, wealth and determination of Italians in America—something more serious than the usual blather that is regularly published.

I got to know only one of these *contrattori* (the English word is contractor) from up close: Mr. Carlo Paterno.[1] He is the biggest of them all: the biggest by the size of the fortune he made, even in American terms; and the biggest in terms of personality. Whenever I think back about him, the first thing I remember are his lively eyes, sparkling with intelligence and energy. They flashed like beams of light and gave his Italian American and Anglo-Italian speech a deeper meaning, enriching his words with nuances and allusions. Under the lower lip there was a birthmark that matched the shape of his face with his curling Spanish-style mustache. I can still see him moving around with flair and a pleasant and willful smile. I always perceived in him a superior form of power that emanated not from money but from a faun-like vitality connected with the eminent functions of life. There was no conversation with him that didn't leave me with an internal tickle, like an electric charge; and the impulse to take some initiative, to do something. Paterno didn't trade in high concepts or moral exhortations; nor would he tell particularly compelling stories. It was something that came directly from his own persona. He was short, stocky, a bit plump, and would look at people straight in the eye. He had a slightly hoarse voice, probably his only annoying trait. I met him for business reasons. When I was director of *Casa Italiana*

1 Charles Paterno (1876-1946). He graduated from Cornell Medical School in 1899 but never practiced medicine. He became a very successful contractor with many large projects to his credit in New York.

he donated a library of twenty thousand volumes—a collection that by now has grown to approximately thirty thousand volumes. In addition to the classics, the most important texts of criticism and all the general reference works needed by scholars of Italian; the updated collection contains books and periodicals on modern Italy going back to 1861.

His brothers were also contractors, although they weren't as smart or as successful as he was. They also gave a great contribution to the library, donating the construction of the physical building; while he, with better insight, took upon himself the onus of financing the library. This, in the end, turned out to be actually less expensive than the contributions by his brothers and brother-in-law, and his name will also live for ever in the collection that was named in his honor. With this initiative he had become the perfect American-style patron of the arts.

I ran into him in several circumstances. He had the same great quality I noticed in most successful business people: he knew his own limits. Thus, for the selection of the books he trusted the advice of a competent person, Doctor Henry Furst[2] (at that time I was still living in Italy,) and never interfered or disagreed with him. He just wanted the budget to come out right with the books properly bound and correctly placed on the shelves. His great satisfaction came from the fact that the library was used by a growing number of grateful scholars. Whenever he came to visit he was always on time, dressed comfortably and appropriately, without ostentation, just as one would expect from a man his age and station. The flower in the lapel wasn't affectation. He genuinely loved flowers and for his entire life cultivated this passion. Once he had become wealthy, he scratched an itch he had since he was a boy and built for himself a manor on the left bank of the Hudson. This was a dream he had all his life, since the time when, as a young boy, he pushed his little rowboat upstream on the Hudson River, the river that Verrazzano thought was a sea channel.

In a castle's annex he built spacious green houses, each equipped for a specific purpose, with different levels of temperature and humidity for the various types of plants and flowers he was growing. He

2 Henry Furst (1893-1967). Polyglot and Italophile. He worked as correspondent for the *New York Times Book Review*.

employed several gardeners who took his orders and recommendations meticulously. He would talk with them for hours about his favorite subject and shared with them ideas about techniques and observations, always respectful of their knowledge and respected by them for his. It was a great pleasure to see him whirl from one plant to the next, from a seed bed to the next, looking around with his sparkly eyes and pointing to the successes and the progresses of this and that flower or plant. He created hybrids and tested grafts of all sorts. All the people who fall in love with nature end up playing with it, trying to compete with it and its creations. And so did he.

Doctor Paterno was born in Castelmezzano in the province of Potenza in 1878 [sic]. By chance events, he was pushed on the road that took him and his family this far. His father, a brick layer and small contractor in Naples, went bankrupt after the earthquake of 1883 and decided at that point to leave the city and emigrate to America. In New York he picked up the old profession but took care to develop a special expertise, as is basically required by the industrial production model of this country. His specialty was erecting foundations for buildings. After he finished building the underground perimeter walls of a building, he would leave the rest of the job to someone else and move on to the next contract. That's how he was described to me by an architect who got to know him: He was a tough man who used to slap around his children. Like all the old immigrants of that time, he was pressured by the need to earn money as fast as possible and to save every penny he could. He never turned down a job and, even after he could afford it, was never able to fully relax and enjoy life. Whoever will write the history of European immigration to America should bear in mind the pressure they felt and the effects of this mindset, even after they had achieved security and material comfort.

An anecdote of those days tells us about little Carlo on a Sunday, carrying a bunch of newspapers on his back, on his way to sell them. To save the price of the ticket he didn't use the tramway. At a certain point he stopped to rest on a bench in a park and fell soundly asleep. He was so tired that he didn't wake up even when someone stole all the newspapers—and even his shoes. When he woke up he was terrified. There was no way he could go home in that state, so he started

wandering about. Suddenly in a flower shop he saw a help-wanted sign. He inquired and was hired immediately. As the day-salary could not cover the loss of the stolen newspapers and shoes, he decided to raise the price of each bouquet and pocket the difference. This way he was able to cover his losses.

His ambition was to be a doctor but he didn't have the money for the tuition. His creativity and business sense came to the rescue. When he was younger he had invented a tool to curve the tip of gas-light burners resulting in brighter light and lower consumption. He had tried without success to show his invention to the chairman of a gas company. One day he read in the newspaper that the company's chairman had died. He showed up at his office and, with an air of despair, he claimed he had an appointment with him, made by phone. He managed to be received by the vice-chairman who decided to give the invention a try and test it in the stations of a subway line for a month. Paterno was sure his contraption could save at least ten percent. However, to be sure, he had the ingenuity and the patience to go every day to the stations and turn down the valve of each lamp just a tiny bit, and then return in the morning to set them back so that nobody would discover his trick. At the end of the trial period he got a call from the now-chairman who informed him the savings were even higher than predicted and wanted to buy his patent. He received a sum of money (his son told me it was $500) that he used to pay for tuition at Cornell Medical School, one of the best in the country, thus achieving his goal.

Destiny interfered and steered him in the direction of the construction business. He wanted to practice as a doctor, but his father, who in the meantime had become a full-fledged general contractor, died suddenly while in the middle of a major project. Doctor Paterno and his brothers decided to take over and finish the job. At the end he had enough money to finance the construction of a larger building. He soon realized that this activity was more remunerative than being a doctor and decided to invest in this industry and in real estate. In the first two years he was able to set aside $22,000. No doctor at the beginning of the career could ever make that kind of money. He never used his medical degree but he was very proud of it. When World

War II started, he was gratified when he received a draft card calling him up to serve as a *doctor*. He dusted off the briefcase with all the tools and reported to the recruitment center. Here it was discovered that there had been a mistake and that the draft card was destined to a different Doctor Paterno. This was a major disappointment for him.

At first he worked with his brothers. None of them was a creative architect: they didn't create new forms nor did they think too hard about the ancient ones. In their buildings nothing is reminiscent of Italy. They made American buildings typical of that particular era, which means functional structures with veneer facades slapped onto hard skeletons. They were the first to come up with the idea to build apartment buildings higher than six floors.[3] They were masters at juggling the building code with its more and more stringent regulations concerning elevators, furnaces, water heaters, trash compactors and running water in addition to the technical aspects of materials and building techniques. The times were also very favorable. Banks were eager to lend and the government threaded light on taxes. One of Dr. Paterno's suppliers, with a mixture of anger and admiration, once told me: "You see, that man can barely sign his own name (he was wrong about this) but if you ask him how much steel; how many miles of tubing; how many thousands of bricks you need to build a forty-two-storey building; he can tell you in a second." In his office I remember seeing autographed photos of some of America's most important steel tycoons with notes of friendship and admiration. The signature of this immigrant to them was as good as their own. The Paternos knew how to build, and he knew where to build. As New York kept growing, their imagination expanded ahead of the city. It was actually their imagination that guided the city expansion, along the Hudson River, for instance; where they built the first edifices at 280, 285, 290 Riverside Drive. Their company was called *Skybeam Realty Corporation*. They were Americanized and left it to Italian wine merchants to use evocative names of Italian cities or past glories. *Skybeam*, not *Roma*. They also speculated on land and buildings, and were relentless in their negotiations on the price of construction materials. Doctor

3 New York building code required residential buildings with more than six floors to be equipped with elevators.

Paterno built his castle on a piece of land valued at $200,000. He bought it for $50,000. When he thought that the real estate tax was too high, about $30,000 a year, he razed the castle and on the land built a garden city made of large buildings of various heights. Each apartment had at least one window overlooking the river. He rented them out at reasonable prices and filled them all up quickly, despite the hard times (1939).

The true sign of his personal greatness was his strategic thinking during the economic crisis of 1930. Here, Doctor Paterno rose above the other members of his family as well as the majority of builders and developers in New York. When the crisis hit, every single developer and builder was tangled up in land speculations, with dozens of new projects on the way. In order to sail upwind, he understood that it was necessary to change tack and he turned out to be the only one who knew how to do it. Instead of burning money to finish buildings that were destined to remain vacant, he had the intuition that it was crucial to save cash, as much cash as possible. To restore the confidence of small depositors, President Roosevelt had recently passed a law insuring bank deposits up to $5,000.[4] Paterno told me that he had all his relatives open small accounts in all the insured banks in the city, thus squirreling away the cash he had on hand. Instead of saying "This building is worth two million: I will invest half a million more and save it." He would sell it and lose money. In some cases he accepted to be foreclosed by his major lender, the Metropolitan Insurance Co. He lost a dozen buildings this way and abandoned several more halfway and paid contractual penalties. As he was telling me those stories, his eyes were shining with a certain kind of faun-like and Mephistophelian glee.

In those terrible days of fear and economic distress, our conversations always ended up on the only topic that mattered: the Great Depression and its effects on America. He mentioned he had liquidated loans worth five million at six percent interest for $30,000. He also sold 270 Park Avenue for half a million dollar, the same building he had refused to sell for nine million dollar just a few months earlier. At a certain point, after a moment of silence, he added: "Look, if I can get

4 Today's Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.

out of this crisis still standing, I will be much richer than before." His relatives didn't take his advice and reacted differently. He had warned them: "Get out of it. Pay the penalties. It doesn't matter. Don't stay in. Sell everything." I still remember the enormity one of them told me while he was sitting, or, better, sinking, in an armchair, almost chocking on his words: "Can you imagine, Dr. Prezzolini? All I have left are two million..." A friend of mine who was also present and I exchanged glances, winking: "Maybe we should lend him a dime to take the subway home..."

I liked the attitude of the risk-taker in Dr. Paterno. He could handle a bad day with the same happy face as a good one. He would talk about liquidations as if he were talking about purchases. And, in fact, in the end, he was still standing and had enough time to build another city before dying. On another occasion he confessed: "I have brick fever. Even when I am in the country relaxing, I can't stop building walls..." He knew how to gain the affection of people who were working for him. An architect told me that the subcontractors that worked for him knew they could always get a loan without going to the banks. And his suppliers knew that while he wasn't generous, which would have been foolish, he was intelligent and understood difficult situations. He understood the world and knew how to take advantage of opportunities. Once he told me about a nit-picking inspector whose ruling could cost him several thousands of dollars without any real benefit to anybody. He understood that in order to get rid of him he had to give money to a third party. Unlike the majority of contractors and landlords, he never gave much fodder to lawyers and was never dragged into litigations and scandals by the local press. My relationship with him was cordial without being too close because I was really paranoid that he would think I was eyeing his money. I always treated him with the respect he deserved for the generous gift that is at the heart of *Casa Italiana*. But I never buttered him up, or, at least not too much. I was invited to his castle once and there I caught an aspect of his personality that I would have never imagined. I knew his love for flowers but I didn't know about his kindness toward animals. It was winter time and I noticed that in one of the castle's large, heated rooms, a little window, up high, was

left open. He explained that on one occasion when the window was open two pigeons had flown in and nested on a ledge. He gave order to leave it open so that they could go in and out as they wished.

Some time later, spontaneously, he donated to the library of *Casa Italiana* a sum of money whose interest could be used for maintenance and other basic needs. It was a kind thought. To thank him for the gift we organized a nice ceremony with a speech by Columbia's president, Nicholas Butler.[5] The *Casa* that day was filled with rare plants and flowers brought in from his green houses. On that occasion I had a chance to speak with his gardeners. One of them told me: "You probably can't believe it, but for all his millions he is an unhappy man." The gardener ignored he was talking to a person who had no problem believing him. Every time I have been able to penetrate the intimate life of someone who appears to be fortunate, I have always discovered unhappiness. I don't think that even millions of dollars could change this rule. Paterno was a mixture of boldness, spirit of initiative and imagination. In 1922 he started planting one and a half million conifers in a large tract of land in Bedford Hills. He bought the saplings for a penny each and ten years later sold them as Christmas trees for a dollar and a half. Each little tree carried a note that more or less said: "Dear child, I am your Christmas tree. Take care of me because if you do, I will grow bigger and stronger, just like you." After selling thousands of them, many more were left because they were too big. He had the idea to transplant about 200,000 of them along the avenues of Windmill Manor, one of his properties, and a favorite location for horseback riders. He advertised the place exalting the clean air, the absence of mosquitoes, horse flies and gnats, repelled by the resins of the trees. He called it *The Sportsmen's Paradise*, with a great golf club, airplane hangars and a lake filled with 50,000 trout. He brought in deer to populate the woods that in winter could be visited on horse-drawn sleighs.

His first wife, Minnie Middaugh, a widow with a child, had died at age 74 in 1943. She was an educated woman, a college graduate, a musician and concert player. A member of the Christian Science

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5 Nicholas Butler (1862-1947). Nobel Peace Prize laureate of 1931. He was Columbia's president from 1902 to 1947.

sect, she loved horses and horseback riding. In October of the same year he married his second wife, Anna Blome of White Plains. Death took him by surprise on the golf course on May 31, 1946. His son, Carlo M. Paterno, took over his business and in 1947 opened a new garden-city with luxury houses immersed in the woods.

I don't think he ever participated in political activities, or that he belonged to any political party. I never saw his name in the events of the Italian American community. Fiorello La Guardia was not fond of him. However, being the mayor of New York, he had to be present when he inaugurated Castle City at its opening in 1939.

From the magazine "L'Europeo," 1955

THE CORSI AFFAIR

This case has become a sore spot in the relations between the United States and Italy. Unintentionally, John Foster Dulles[1] acted in a way that Italians consider offensive. In truth, it is just a blunder, a foolish act, but in politics appearances count more than reality. Edward Corsi is one of today's most respected Italian Americans. He was born in Italy to a well-to-do family, the son of a far-left party congressman from Abruzzi. He was still a child when his father died and his widowed mother married a man of modest means. Due to financial difficulties, the family left Italy for the United States and settled in the same district where Fiorello La Guardia and Vito Marcantonio[2] also lived. Here, little Edward had to start from the bottom, both in terms of education and social status. Corsi is a simple and quiet man, with common sense and good judgment. He is very honest, highly educated, with an artistic talent as a painter. He is also a realist when it comes to confronting political problems; but, despite this, he never cynically accepted the status quo and corruption of our times; and always stayed true to a deep compassion for the human condition. Thanks to this combination of sensibilities, he never took on airs of importance and arrogance, something that many Italian Americans typically do as soon as they achieve success in business or in politics. I have often said that Corsi is one of the best products of American influence on the Italian character: when an Italian immigrant manages to avoid becoming a criminal; ending up in an insane asylum; or swelling up into a *prominent*, that means he really is a good man. There are many of them, but unfortunately Italy doesn't know they exist: Italian authorities who visit the United States—the likes of Mario Scelba, Gaetano Martino, Pietro Parini or, as happened most recently, Amintore Fanfani;[3] never

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1 John Foster Dulles (1888 1959). Secretary of state in the Eisenhower administration from 1953 to 1959.

2 Vito Marcantonio (1902–1954). Lawyer and politician. He replaced Fiorello La Guardia when he resigned his position as House representative to run for mayor of New York City.

3 Gaetano Martino (1900-1967). Statesman and politician. He was Minister of Foreign affairs from 1954 to 1957.

get the chance to meet any of them (they always end up meeting with Fortune Pope instead).

Social solidarity is not particularly strong among Italians or Italian Americans, as demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that they contribute very little to public charities. It is thus rather impressive to see how Corsi became involved in public life; working with the activists who were helping new immigrants who had recently settled in the tuberculosis-infested, dirt-poor and very dangerous East Harlem neighborhood; in the same hovels where Italians used to live before Blacks and Puerto Ricans moved in.[4]

The first time we met he was still a modest social worker who toiled around the clock for a meager salary in a social welfare center located in a predominantly Italian neighborhood. The former Harlem House, now called La Guardia House,[5] is an institution devoted to assisting new immigrants in need of basic guidance and support. It is not a charity like a soup kitchen for the unemployed; rather it is a community center where newly arrived immigrants, especially those who do not speak English, can find intelligent and generous advice and aid, free of charge. Today it organizes sports activities for youngsters, tours for the elderly and support groups for young mothers. The center also offers art courses, lectures and other events that keep children off the streets where they could get involved in racial confrontations and fights. The old economic problems of yore have been replaced by new social conflicts and crises. At the time when I first met him, Corsi had to fulfill the roles of lawyer, adviser, peacemaker and judge. He knew everybody by name and attended every baptism and wedding. These are not easy tasks, and the only compensation he received was respect and some influence. Corsi was well known but he was too

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• Pietro Parini (1894- 1993). Navy officer, government functionary and diplomat.

• Amintore Fanfani (1908-1999). He was prime minister of Italy five times between 1954 and 1987. He was also minister of foreign affairs from 1958-1959.

4 East Harlem was the largest Italian neighborhood in New York for two decades around 1930. What is now Spanish Harlem in those days was called *Italian Harlem*.

5 Located on 116th Street, between First and Second Avenue in Manhattan, it was established as Haarlem [sic] House in 1919 and renamed La Guardia Memorial House in 1956.

honest and too non-political to take advantage of his popularity. He never enjoyed great name recognition beyond his circle. He also had too much integrity to compete with demagogues and wheeler-dealers who only knew how to promote themselves. When he entered political contests, he didn't get as many votes as other colorful characters who had much less substance but were much more brazen with promises. Moreover, he was a member of the Republican Party, a party that in New York never had a majority. He started his political journey with La Guardia, and then became a trusted adviser to Dewey for labor relations in the state of New York. In the last elections the Republicans lost the governorship of the state and Corsi left his position as labor commissary.

His golden period, in the moral, not financial sense, was the time when President Herbert Hoover[6] appointed him commissary of Ellis Island. The institution closed down in 1954, but in its heydays that name meant sheer terror for millions of people. It was the entry gate for immigrants and those who were refused entrance would end up spending weeks or months in those sad rooms, like in a prison. It really struck a chord when the son of immigrants was chosen to run the place. Corsi acquitted himself with humanity and firmness in this job and wrote a book about his experience: *In the Shadow of Liberty*.[7] The book is full of episodes, portraits, anecdotes and observations packed with color and humanity. It's too bad a book like this was never translated into Italian, instead of all the junk from America that is treated as if it were the apotheosis of the human spirit.

After he left his position as labor commissary for the state of New York, the Republican Party, to express its appreciation for his work, sent him to Washington as assistant for immigration affairs in Dulles's department. Here he was put in charge of a delicate and complex issue. In 1953 President Eisenhower had signed into law a bill sponsored by House Representative Francis Walter and Senator

6 Herbert Hoover (1874–1964). President of the United States from 1929 to 1933.

7 *In the shadow of liberty: The Chronicle of Ellis Island*. New York, Macmillan, 1935.

Patrick McCarran[8] giving special immigration rights to a group of about 240,000 displaced Europeans who, after World War II, had been persecuted for political reasons and were practically without a country.[9] About sixty thousand of them were Italians, mostly from the north eastern regions that had been lost to the Yugoslavian forces.[10] This humanitarian initiative was meant to show to the world the generosity of the United States. Instead, it turned out to be a bureaucratic farce and an exercise in hypocrisy. From the very beginning I predicted that it would be impossible to reach the preordained quota by the stated deadline of 1956. The number of applicants processed by the United States immigration authorities in those countries turned out to be so low that it caused the indignation of European politicians who were concerned with the presence of large groups of displaced persons, housed in temporary camps, in their countries. Appointed and welcomed by Dulles as a personal friend, Corsi was sent to Italy and Germany to try to figure out first-hand why there had been such long delays in processing the applications. When he returned to Washington and outlined a number of proposals to solve the logjam, he ran into opposition inside the state department and Congress. One of the co-sponsors of the law, Walter, denounced him for having been

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8 *Immigration and Nationality Act* (Pub.L. 82–414, 66 Stat. 163, enacted June 27, 1952); also known as the *McCarran-Walter Act* from the names of the two congressional sponsors.

• Francis Walter (1894-1963). House representative from Pennsylvania. He was the sponsor of the bill in the House. From 1951 through 1963 he served as chair of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

• Patrick McCarran (1876-1954). Senator from Nevada from 1933 to 1954. He was a staunch anti-communist.

9 The problem of displaced people was still very acute in Europe in the aftermath of WWII, due to the new borders that forced entire populations from native regions into refugee camps or areas under U.S. military administration. In some cases, this situation lasted for decades after the war.

10 The area involved the city of Trieste and neighboring territory in what today are the border areas of Slovenia and Croatia. As per international law, Trieste legally was a Free Territory divided into two areas, named respectively Zone A and B. Officially under military administration by the Allied Forces, they were de-facto annexed respectively by Italy and Yugoslavia. This temporary situation lasted until 1975 when the Italian and Yugoslavian governments signed the Osimo Treaty accepting a partition that reflected the state-of-fact on the ground.

a member of associations that the attorney general[11] had labeled as subversive. Corsi denied any involvement. On one occasion Walter was forced to recognize that his accusation against Corsi was wrong. In another case, Corsi stated he never allowed his signature to be used.[12] It is notorious that pro-communist groups in those days often arbitrarily used the names of people who were considered sympathizers. Corsi was a life-long Republican but belonged to the liberal wing of the party and had good relations with the labor unions. Most likely he had frequent contacts with people who were secretly communist. The state department understood this was a pretext and, at first, it looked as if it did not consider Corsi to be a traveling salesman of subversion. The investigation was not yet complete when suddenly rumors started circulating that Corsi's position was not a permanent one but, rather, a ninety-day temporary assignment. After three months in this post, Corsi was offered a different position, a rather vague one, in charge of recruiting immigrants for South American countries. It was a nasty trick. Maybe another man would have accepted the gold-coated poison pill, but Corsi resented this treatment. He spoke with Dulles and the truth came out: the state department didn't want any trouble with Congress and decided to throw Corsi overboard. Later, when asked, Dulles denied it was true, although Corsi still confirms everything and calls him a liar to this day. In truth, Corsi is simply guilty of having tried to make a hypocritical law work, a law nobody wants to implement and that was scheduled to expire in 1956 anyway.

Dulles's trick was so transparently obvious that the press unanimously sided with Corsi. Even some Democrats jumped on it with the goal of embarrassing Dulles. Republican organizations of New York state even requested that the president fix Dulles's error and honor the commitment the president himself had made to the law that was supposed to show the world how generous the United States is toward the unfortunates without a country...

New York, April 22, 1955

11 It isn't clear if by *procuratore generale dello stato* the author meant the United States attorney general or the attorney general of New York State.

12 Presumably the reference is to some kind of petition or open letter.

COMMENDATORE NACCHERINO[1]

This little man is everywhere. Thanks to his pint-size body, he squeezes into tight spots; slides under tables to emerge the other side; filters into any room; jumps out from a corridor without warnings and manages to get everybody's attention. He is a propaganda master of Italian culture abroad. He is the champion of winning causes and conquered admiration. He always travels first class, for free, and sits at the captain's table where he charms everyone with his conversation, literary or legal, depending on the circumstances. He is always busy arguing the thesis that Beatrice was a virgin, that Amerigo Vespucci[2] was a man of impeccable honor and he has an at-the-ready list of initiatives: a Dante theater, a Petrarch library; a new monument to commemorate Garibaldi or another statue to Christopher Columbus who, as he claims, based on the documents in his possession, was certainly Italian. All he asks for himself, besides the monuments, is a little office with a tiny room to sleep in and some travel funds. He is not asking too much. His self-appointed missions are vacuous but studded with speeches. He is only happy when he is sent on a mission somewhere in the world, preferably America. He tries to become member of executive committees only in order to fulfill this ambition. He brags about his friends in high places in Italy, his many acquaintances abroad, his commemorative publications and the number of languages he claims he can speak (approximately). He is the bane of consuls who are sick and tired of being forced to give him a room and find him a public for his lectures who put everyone to sleep, even those most used to these kinds of official tortures. Italian Americans got to know him well and they are less concerned because they can make him happy with a meal, a cigar and a few promises that everybody knows will

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1 Most likely this is the caricature portrayal of a real person whose name has been changed. In Tuscan dialect *naccherino* means cute and lively boy.

2 Dante's muse.

• Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512). Navigator and cartographer. He was the first explorer to recognize that the Americas are a distinct and separate continent, a fact that he first represented in his maps. Consequently, as a shorthand convention, the "new continent" was named after him.

not be kept. From the time he graduated from university in Italy he hasn't studied anything anymore. He believes in the authenticity of Dante's house in Florence and Torquato Tasso's prison in Ferrara; in Francesco Ferrucci's patriotism and in Fabrizio Maramaldo's betrayal; and that Flavio Gioia invented the compass. Moreover, he is willing to be held personally accountable for the claims of Italianness of William Paca, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and Francesco Vigo,[3] the alleged (by him) discoverer of the headwaters of the Mississippi river. He gets all flustered when people express doubts or questions about his claims and calls them "melancholic souls." He believes he has a constructive temperament and in fact some of his expeditions as missionary of Italian culture leave behind in the square those excrescences commonly called monuments.

New York, January 27, 1956

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3 Francesco Ferrucci (1489-1530). Captain in the Florentine army.

• Fabrizio Maramaldo (1494-1552). Italian *condottiero* (leader of a mercenary army). Legend has it that, contrary to every rule of chivalry, Maramaldo killed Ferrucci in cold blood after disarming him. Ferrucci's last alleged words were: "Coward, you are killing a dead man." *Maramaldo* in Italian is metonym for treachery and infamy.

• Flavio Gioia da Amalfi is a purely fictional thirteenth century navigator and explorer. He is the mythical inventor of the compass, which, in reality, was invented by the Chinese; and whose principles, according to some, may have been introduced to Europe by Marco Polo.

• William Paca (1740–1799). Signatory of the Declaration of Independence as representative of Maryland.

• Francis Vigo born Francesco (1747-1836). Founder of a public university in Vincennes, Indiana.

TONY LOFURBO

On a train approaching Chicago, in one of the many suburbs that surround the city, travelers can notice a tower as high as the YMCA or the buildings of local banks. On the tower a sign glows: *Tony Lofurbo Ware House* [sic]. Lofurbo[1] arrived here when he was three years old. Thanks to his father's hard work and the help of the American system, he received the kind of education that in Italy he couldn't have even dreamt about. His natural intelligence allowed him to discover that without an education in America one cannot go very far. He also understood that Americans have a migratory instinct and move easily from place to place, from neighborhood to neighborhood, chasing opportunities. He thus concluded that a warehouse where people could store their stuff temporarily would be a good way to make money. He did it the right way because he also understood that in this country, in order to make money, you have to do things well. And, in fact, his warehouse can store anything safely and is well protected from humidity and thieves: from furniture to merchandise to a grandmother's jewels to a wardrobe. He has a fleet of vans to move all the various items in and out; and a small army of certified, experienced movers that can be trusted with anything; all with a clean record.

Never has one of his trucks been hijacked and the merchandise stolen. Lofurbo is a really talented man, with lots of nice relationships with organized-crime figures. To use an American expression, *he is worth a million dollars*. Often it happens that people who move away stop paying rent or don't retrieve their stuff from the warehouse when the contract expires. Then, thanks to a contract clause prepared by his astute lawyers, all the abandoned goods become his possession. Tony Lofurbo has a good reputation: he befriended a local senator; congressmen visit with him and he has lunch with the mayor once a week. He is strong and stocky, with oily skin and pale lips. In his dark eyes lurks the mark of a tremendous will that knows how to command respect and fear. Yet, he is always happy to help whenever he can. Indeed, the greatest pleasure of his life is to show and use his

1 Tony Lofurbo literally means Tony-the-Sly.

influence and power. If you got a ticket and want to have it fixed, most likely he can take care of it. And if he can do it, he will show that he is happy to do it and he will love you more after he took care of it for you.

Since he has become a rich person he has learned that in America a prominent social position comes with obligations toward society. He supports Catholic charities at the direction of the bishop who honors him with spiritual guidance and who celebrated his daughter's marriage in the biggest Madonna-of-Pompeii-style church in town. He also founded a small *Casa della Cultura Italiana* in a building in his neighborhood with a large room for parties and gatherings. He is always invited to baptisms, weddings, twenty-five-year wedding anniversaries or birthdays by barbers, contractors, restaurant owners, shipping agents, bankers, storekeepers, doctors, lawyers and other people from all professions that distinguish the Italian community. In the main room of the *Casa* are the portraits of Dante, Puccini, Marconi and Lofurbo. Sometimes the *Casa* organizes cultural meetings, sandwiched between a girl who sings Neapolitan and Hollywood songs and a pianist who takes a chance with Béla Bartók.[2]

Two forces exist in Tony Lofurbo's mind: great gratitude for America for the opportunity it gave him to become what he has become; and great admiration for Italy, about which he ignores practically everything but that, as he sort of understands; represents something honorable in America. For people like him, it is like a certificate of noble origins.

New York, January 27, 1956.

2 Béla Bartók (1881–1945). Hungarian composer and pianist, he is considered one of the founders of ethnomusicology.

A TUSCAN IMMIGRANT BUILDS A CITY IN ARIZONA

I spent so little time in the gorgeous state of Arizona that my memories only consist of a few, memorable images. The first is that of a church I saw emerging from the desert in the morning light and I admired for two hours until the sun was high in the sky. Dedicated to San Xavier del Bac, it is Arizona's most important and certainly most ancient church. It was conceived by the Italian Jesuit Eusebio Kino [1] and materially built by Spanish Franciscan friars with the labor of Indians. I also admired another kind of monument: this is not a church but a shopping center, namely the central market of a new city near Tucson. The builder is Sam Nannini [sic]. Everybody in Tucson, in Arizona and in Montecatini[2] knows him. It began at the local post office where I went to mail a certified letter. "Are you from Italy? Do you know Sam Nanini?" Then I went to the bank to cash a check: "Do you know Sam Nanini?" Even the barber who gave me a shave, a Mexican, asked me: "*Usted es italiano*.... Do you know Sam Nanini?" By the end I was ashamed I didn't know him. So I asked a common acquaintance if he could try to contact him at my behest. I found out there had been some miscommunication: he had invited me to lunch for the day before but somehow the message hadn't reached me. "We waited for you for three hours yesterday," said his wife. "And it took me three hours to find you," I replied. Everybody knows him but finding him is a different story...

He owns enough land to build an entire city, land he bought when the desert still cost peanuts. He is now building houses on it, two to three thousand feet from each other, all clustered along Nanini Street or something else named Nanini. In each one of these neighborhoods

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1 Saint Francis Xavier (1506-1552). Spanish Catholic priest and missionary. He was one of the co-founders of the Jesuit order.
• Father Eusebio Kino (1645-1711). He was the founder of the San Xavier del Bac Mission in 1692. The mission is located ten miles south of Tucson, Az.

2 Sam Nanini (1889-1978). Real estate developer and builder.
• Montecatini Terme. Italian town in the province of Pistoia in Tuscany. It is famous for its spa and mineral waters.

(or maybe they should be called *farborhoods*) things are named after him. After we entered the development my driver, who, he had assured me, knew Nanini, could not find his house. Finally, after knocking on several doors of houses built by him and sold by him, we arrived at the shopping center. Right across the street, in a cute, nice, super-modern doll's house we found him by the main door. He looked like a tenant more than the landlord. When we asked where Mr. Nanini lived, he answered with great simplicity that it was he, *the* Nanini, as if he were standing in front of a house in some small town in Italy. Nanini is a bit like those Tuscan farmers I used to see in Piazza della Signoria[3] in Florence on market days. The same sun-baked face, a little hat cocked to one side, a simple but good-quality suit, the same calm demeanor. I wasn't there to negotiate a deal with him and maybe when it comes to business he is a different person, but, all in all, America has such a sedative influence on businesspeople that even a Tuscan must subject himself to it. After lunch he took his wife's car and drove me around to visit "his town," despite the fact that we could have walked, for it was so close.

This man, who, I guess, must have left Montecatini, or more precisely Borgo a Buggiano, some forty years ago in search for a better life, must have a lot of money and a wealth of perspectives. For sure he owes something to luck (after all, he could have died as soon as he arrived.) But when one thinks of the vastness of the country where he landed penniless; of the vastness of forces that must have opposed him, including the competition of people like him from every corner of the globe motivated by the same drive and goals; of the huge efforts and caution and patience needed to succeed; then Nanini's life is definitely something to be saluted tipping one's hat. I didn't tell him that and maybe he will be surprised when he reads it, but the more I think about it, the more extraordinary this seems. Apparently he made money in Chicago building houses, god-only-knows how many and how horrible. But here, in Arizona, the local traditions and the freedom afforded to him by his wealth generated in him the ambition to create something more graceful or, as he says, more intimate. I didn't challenge him on this word: Nanini is a cautious man, and

3 The main square in the center of Florence, where Palazzo Vecchio is located.

understood that before you can build houses you need stores. This is the latest trend in America: those who can afford it are fleeing the cities, in a phenomenon called *suburbanization*.[4] Now, all *suburbia* [sic] are clustered around a *shopping center*. He just finished building one that already houses a bank, a beauty salon, a *market*,[5] a jeweler that sells junk and a restaurant with a room for banquets. In short, all the amenities that American middle class expects are there. At that time, construction was under way for a huge parking lot. I imagine the entire area will be lined with palm trees. I was particularly struck by two factors: the gorgeous location, with mountain views in the day, and, at night the view of city lights; and the happiness of the people he was running into. His workers came up to him with questions about a lock or a window or whatever: he knew everything and was an expert at everything, implicitly sending out the message that nobody could fool him. A real Tuscan-farm foreman, I can assure you, not just with four pairs of oxen and a tractor, but in a city that was growing under his eyes. A city. Now his ambition is to be a Florentine (and, to an extent, he is succeeding): from the corners of his buildings hang street lights in the shape of those that adorn Palazzo Strozzi.[6] The overall style, though, has gone through the treatment of local architects and reflects a Spanish or Mexican influence. I liked the low walls of bare bricks without plaster, the low roofs on the low slung houses—although I just don't think it is either intimate or particularly Florentine. The worst are the sculptures spread here and there, reminiscent of Via dei Fossi.[7] I don't think he was aware of it and I fear that this man, so much on the defensive against the dangers of America, left himself vulnerable to those of Lucca and Florence. But maybe I am wrong. I am not an art expert and maybe these are authentic sculptures that go

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4 In the original the word is *suburbanismo*, a neologism created ad-hoc but never recorded in Italian dictionaries.

5 Shopping center; market: in English in the original.

6 One of the most magnificent palaces in Florence, build by the Strozzi family, fierce adversary of the Medici. Construction started in 1489 and was completed in 1538.

7 Via dei Fossi is a narrow street near the center of Florence where a large number of antique stores, dealers and restoration shops are (still) located.

back to the time of the war of Pisa against Lucca. In Tucson Nanini is unanimously considered an honest man and, obviously, a pleasant man. It is a pleasure to find this kind of Italian.

Tucson, January 29, 1961

AN UNHAPPY IMMIGRANT

When he was still a boy, Angelo M. Pellegrini[1] emigrated with his family from the province of Lucca, in Tuscany, and settled in a remote part of the northern United States, the state of Washington, by the Pacific Ocean. He did a variety of jobs and thanks to his intelligence, his family's sacrifices and the opportunities afforded to him by the American educational system, he pursued his studies until he became professor of English literature at the University of Washington in Seattle. In 1949-1950 he won the prestigious scholarship awarded by the Guggenheim Foundation. His project was to study "the contribution of Italian immigration" to the United States. Once he arrived in Italy he decided, instead, to focus on something different. The book he wrote, *Immigrant's Return*[2] was accepted for publication by the publisher Macmillan, one of the major American houses. It was received with positive reviews and, I imagine, good success. The theme of the book is the disappointment suffered by an American of Italian origin who returns to his ancestral homeland. Here, he realizes that he is not at all Italian: he understands he is fully American. Italy was not a good fit for him. We are not talking about the Italy of arts, literature and landscape, and in fact the book has very few references to these aspects. It's the Italy of Italians, the Italy of the public habits and the Italy of politics. This immigrant returned believing he would feel in himself a surge of his Italian soul. Yet, he was taken aback by everything, or almost everything, he saw. Everything seemed foreign to his cultural and personal structure. What he missed most of all in Italy was the sense of *democracy*. This may displease my readers and trigger irritation, condescending smiles and objections. However, it is an important testimony: based on my experience, many of the observations are common to many Italian Americans who may not express them out of reticence; or because they don't have the stomach; or the guts or the possibility to talk openly about their feelings. Pellegrini's book may displease and certainly will displease many; however, his testimony is

1 Angelo Pellegrini (1904–1991). Author.

2 *Immigrant's Return*. New York, Macmillan, 1951.

a reality that we must take into account. We could analyze what the book misses and I am sure we would find lots of things. However, his perspective is sincere (maybe a bit narrow); his words are fluid albeit not artistic; and facts appear to be true or verisimilar even when they are stripped of their historical and concrete context. Now let's see what he has to say.

Pellegrini's book is an autobiography, therefore a rare and important document. The overwhelming majority of Italians who immigrated to the United States never had the time to write true autobiographies. The only traces they left were dry statistics: how many came; how many children they had; how many died; how many ended up in prison; how many ended up in insane asylums; how many went back to Italy in defeat; how many became rich. The reality of their sufferings and triumphs remains, however, without history. The few narrative works produced by their descendants, written in a new language, never succeeded in creating an artistic rendition of those lives. Those truly are *lost generations*.

Pellegrini had the good luck of positive circumstances. His family migrated to a state far from the big cities; in the middle of the woods; with lots of space and surrounded almost exclusively by Americans. He didn't end up in the Little Italies where vice and crimes festered and where the immigrants got stuck, kept there by the contemptuous attitude of the Anglo-Saxon ruling class. The Pellegrini family, instead, lived among simple lumberjacks and the dominant impressions he recorded as a boy were two: abundance and equality. When Pellegrini writes lyrically about the American breakfast and or about mass education, it is easy to understand that he did not live like the great majority of Italian immigrants. This is enough to shift the entire paradigm of comparisons in the rest of his book; for the simple reason that he does not take into account that his is an almost unique perspective and definitely a relative one. His book would have been profoundly different had he lived on MacDougal Street[3] in New York; or in the neighborhoods on the other side of the tracks in Chicago; or many other American cities populated mostly by poor people. Edward

3 McDougal Street is located in Greenwich Village. This neighborhood at the time of Prezzolini's writing still had a large population of Italians.

Corsi, who came to America in the same period, around 1915, in his autobiography wrote about boys who scavenged along the railroads picking up pieces of coal that fell off the trains to heat their houses in winter.[4] This American professor doesn't look like much of a professor. By that I mean that he doesn't seem to have much critical spirit: the first condition to validate an experience is to distinguish between personal facts and general facts.

When Professor Pellegrini, educated in America, went to Italy, his mind was stuffed with a bunch of clichés about the differences between Americans and Italians. Among them, for instance, was the cliché whereby Americans chase dollars while Italians are idealist; that Italian cuisine is better than the American; that Italian films are better and so forth. Step after step, all these delusions fell apart in his mind. In his journey though Italy, Pellegrini discovered a country he didn't know.

He begins the story with the ship that should have maintained a certain speed but couldn't because of problems with a piston. In every trip a piston breaks down. And if one piston does not break down, it is because three or four pistons break down. Food on board is decent but not as good as often described by other accounts. Wine is fake, "phony." The waiters are helpful but they gather around the table "like chickens" and don't give him enough space to enjoy peace and quiet. Once he arrives in Italy, the vaunted Italian slow-going for Pellegrini is one of the worst disappointments, in comparison to the stigmatized American frenzy. The Italians he sees are breakneck nuts who drive cars and motorcycles faster than Americans; and everybody is rushing trying to grab public transportation with a kind of ferociousness that amply surpasses the Americans'. When he goes to the movies, he doesn't find films by Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica but *Forever Amber*.[5] Every theater screens American movies. He looks for wine and finds that Italians drink Coca-Cola. He thinks he will be able to smell the aroma of oleanders, but he only picks up the stench of public urinals. Obviously, he is scammed in a restaurant where a soup he did not

4 Coincidentally, this very activity is described in most vivid terms by Mario Puzo in the novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (New York, Lancer Books, 1964).

5 *Forever Amber*. Dir. Otto Preminger. Distr. 20th Century Fox, 1947.

order nor eat was added to the check. About money; his travel mate, the typical representative of a particular segment of the crass Italian middle class, arrogant and full of itself; tells him that "Americans are only about business and dollars." However, Pellegrini's "first and last" impression is that "Italians are even crazier than Americans about money."

When he arrives to his native hamlet, Casabianca,[6] near Montecatini, nothing has changed in the last forty years: same poverty; same resignations to calamities; same passive acceptance of fecal filth and related flies that inevitably come with it. With it, he also sees their fears: fear of losing whatever little they have; fear of hunger; of being swindled by their neighbors; the kind of fear that makes people harvest grapes before they are ripe, so that the wine in the end will end up lousy. They dress in rags, they age prematurely, and they are envious. Later, in Montecatini, Pellegrini encounters maids and waiters: they are the best in this world, but they are servile. And, as a counterpoint, he depicts the clients of the famous spa with swollen bellies; who demand to be addressed as *cavaliere* and *commendatore*. The portraits of resignation are immediately followed by those of cynicism.

It doesn't seem that Professor Pellegrini is particularly well prepared to express a judgment on whether "spiritual values" are stronger in Italy than in America or, as he decides at the end of the book, stronger in America than in Italy. His artistic taste, just to mention one aspect, is defined by a belief he shares with the American philosopher John Dewey.[7] His thesis is that the value of a work of art is determined by the *ideas* it presents. It is a fairly clear criterion. However, the direct consequence would be that *Cabiria*[8] is D'Annunzio's best work and

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6 Small town in the province of Pistoia, in Tuscany.

7 John Dewey (1859-1952). Philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer.

8 *Cabiria*. Silent movie directed by Giovanni Pastrone, screenplay by Gabriele D'Annunzio (1914).

• Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*. Boston, J.P. Jewett and company; Cleveland, Jewett, Proctor, and Worthington, 1853.

• Victor Hugo (1802-1885). French novelist and poet. His most famous work is *Les Misérables* (1862).

• Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). French writer and one of the fathers of the modern short story.

that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of the most important texts of the nineteenth century; that the *Canzoniere* by Petrarch is no big deal; and that Victor Hugo is more artistic than Guy de Maupassant. Pellegrini apparently does not know Italian writers other than Carlo Levi and Ignazio Silone. And he is really stunned when some critics tell him that Silone is a bad writer. After all, how could it be, since he is one of the only four foreign members of the American Academy? To him this is sufficient proof. In Italy he talked to people from different social strata. However, it seems that the only group of intellectuals he has had exchanges with is the group of Carlo Levi, Gaetano Salvemini and Pietro Calamandrei.[9] The only Italian writer from the past he quotes is Giuseppe Giusti,[10] maybe because the peasants from Montecatini and surrounding areas are familiar with him.

Now, someone should submit to Professor Pellegrini a few issues he has not thought about. First of all, he didn't ask himself why that land full of poverty and degradation "where no man or woman in America would accept to live," has generated for centuries so much intellectual and artistic light; and, in the broadest terms, has created an organization like Catholicism that has been sufficient to respond to the spiritual needs of millions of people, good Americans included. He didn't ask himself whether the social life of peoples, over the centuries, isn't like that of human organisms; where you can change a part without destroying the whole; and if in history we aren't forced to accept some accidents in exchange for certain kinds of benefits. In Italy, the result of these socio-historical factors resulted in the formation of an aristocratic civilization. Pellegrini protests against this in the name of America's democratic civilization. By the same token an Italian professor could go to America and protest against democracy, which was the initial and heroic feat that created America, imposed by a minority. By the

• Carlo Levi (1902-1975). Painter, writer, anti-Fascist activist. His most famous book is *Christ Stopped in Eboli*. Torino, Einaudi, 1945.

• Ignazio Silone (1900). Writer and public intellectual.

9 Piero Calamandrei (1889-1956). Writer and jurist. The list contains only the names of notorious pro-socialist anti-Fascists, representing an ideological bent very much in contrast with Prezzolini's inclinations.

10 Giuseppe Giusti (1809-1850). Satirical poet who targeted tyranny.

same token one could complain that girls in certain countries have blue eyes instead of dark; or blonde hair instead of black.

Pellegrini tells the truth when he acknowledges that he is American. He is American particularly in the characteristic way of the majority of American tourists and scholars who have *no sense of historical depth*. Suffice it to say that they have actually looked for "spiritual values" as if they could find them. And it doesn't matter whether they looked in Italy or in America. These are questions for American professors. Italian spiritual values are in Italy, American spiritual values are in America.

One more question, more embarrassing, would be: why is it that many Americans, who are not dumb and ignorant; indeed some of whom are highly educated while others are natural and simplistic but intuitive, such as the majority of artists and American writers whose list would be too long; why, I was asking, did they feel relieved in going from America to Italy? This has happened not just at the time of Horatio Greenough and Samuel Morse, but it is still happening today, at the time of Alfred Hayes, Truman Capote and Ernest Hemingway.[11]

Take Samuel Morse. Before inventing the telegraph, he was an accomplished painter. He went to Italy to study and lamented that Americans don't care about art the same way Italians do. He wrote: "I, in general proud of my compatriots' spirit, recognize that they care little about fine arts and about men of taste and science. Here [in America] men are judged by their wallets.... A beautiful painting or a marble statue is very rare in the houses of the rich people of this city...." Thusly wrote Morse, who was a ferociously anti-Catholic Anglo-Saxon.

Professor Pellegrini did not invent the telegraph, as we would say

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11 Horatio Greenough (1805-1852). Sculptor. He lived in Florence.

• Samuel Morse (1791-1872). Painter turned inventor. He invented the telegraph and co-developed the Morse code.

• Alfred Hayes (1911-1985). Writer and novelist, he wrote screenplays for Italian Neo-Realism films.

• Truman Capote, born Truman Streckfus Persons (1924-1984). One of the greatest 20th century's American writers, inventor of the genre known as "nonfiction novel."

• Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961). Novelist and Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954.

in Italy. He discovered that there is no democracy in Italy. It isn't a discovery. It's old hat, at least if by democracy he means the American kind. If he means something else, I can assure Professor Pellegrini that in the region where he was born, and where I was educated, there is much a more natural and humane form of democracy than in the Deep South of the United States.

New York, January 16, 1952