

Luciana Castellina, *The discovery of the world*

*(La scoperta del mondo)*

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English sample translation by Isobel Butters

(pp. 19-30)

Riccione. 25 July 1943

It must have been about seven in the evening. At that time in July it was still day, although the shadows of the pine wood surrounding the tennis courts had started to lengthen. I recall that the court was shadowy as Anna Maria and I knocked inexpert balls back and forth to one another across the net. To compound matters she had had polo as a child and ran poorly.

That was when the plainclothes guard came to call her and our rally stopped hastily, without any explanation.

She simply said: "I have got to go right away" and disappeared behind the policeman who had always been minder to her and her brother Romano.

Anna Maria was Anna Maria Mussolini, daughter of Benito and Rachele, my classmate at primary school and the first two years of middle school: '40-'41, '41-'42. Not in the third year, '42-'43, because I had had to move to Verona. But we had met up again there in Riccione, where our game was interrupted. It was the evening of 25 July 1943 and her father had been arrested in Rome earlier that day. "Held at the Podgora police station, in Trastevere" ("to protect him", it was said later, almost in apology).

I only realized late that night what had been behind that unexplainably sudden leave-taking. Our group used to meet in front of the Hotel Vienna because of the ping-pong table in the garden. Most of them were friends of my cousin Paoletta and so almost all quite a lot older than me. I was not yet even fourteen and they used hardly to talk to me, but that time they listened when I told them about Villa Mussolini. I had realized there had to be an explanation for that hastily-ended game of tennis.

It was already night by the time the EIAR (the state-controlled radio broadcasting service) announced the arrest of the Duce.

The following day at sea lots of cutters, the small sailing boats in fashion at the time, were decked out in flags. "To celebrate," the older ones told me. On the *bragozzi* tied up at sea parties of holiday makers sang nothing less than the Italian national anthem and First World War songs. To celebrate. And at lunch time, the *pensione* unexpectedly served tagliatelle made with white flour. "To celebrate," the Romagnola waitress repeated knowingly in a discreet whisper.

This is how, aged fourteen, I was initiated into politics. It was an important discovery and on that very day – 26 July 1943 – I began keeping a "political diary", as I wrote on the frontispiece.

I used the back of an old school exercise book (Class III middle school, Collegio degli Angeli, Verona, the city where I was forced to live for a year for family reasons). It had served previously for the “news reports” designed then to practice our Italian. One of these a few months earlier was entitled “The Alpini are coming home”. It talks about the Julia alpine troops who “fought bravely in Russia and marched extensively through the snow-covered steppe and are now parading with their flags and standards torn and dirty, evidence of the fury of the enemy and courage of the Italians. Our hands are stretched out in the Roman salute”.

It is with the help of this diary, written until the autumn of '47 (a pile of thickly written exercise books), that I shall attempt to reconstruct the stages of my political initiation, a part of the history of a part of my generation, born between the end of the twenties and beginning of the thirties.

26 July 1943

I discover a lot of things on the first day of Post-Fascism.

First of all, bewilderment: the Fascist regime is what I find when I reach the age of reason; it is the only one available. I have no other, nobody has shown me any, other than telling me that the war which that summer had already crossed half the world will lead Italy to disaster. Like all my contemporaries, I am disorientated.

I also discover a patriotic spirit, no less. I say it is awakening, because “*it had become dormant in all those Italians who had seen their Homeland*” (always with a capital H) “*ruled by a man who led it to ruin*”. In fact I report, “*since I am and was an antifascist, I hoped, reluctantly, that the British would come to Italy and free us from the Germans, in other words, that we would lose the war*”. Now I decide instead that the war should be won, “*because now we are fighting for the Savoia*”. I even add “*Viva l'Italia*”.

So the war needs to be won, but I am unhappy when I discover peace has not broken out.

“*The 26th is a Monday and there are no newspapers. So we still do not know much. But at one o'clock*”, I write, “*we all ran to the radio. What would they say? Here we are: The News...*

*Bulletin 1157... Supreme Command... In Sicily...*

*A few superficial changes but the substance remains the same. And then, the proclamation by Badoglio: firmness above all and no excitement or inappropriate exhibitions, out of place at this time when all the nation's forces need to be spent on victory*”. “*Italy – continues the announcement for the benefit of the public – is keeping its word, careful guardian of its age-old tradition*”. “*End of broadcast*”,

I note dispiritedly in the diary after recording the text of the declaration. (Later, under the sun canopy on the beach came word that senator Morgagni –

president, I am told, of Agenzia Stefani, Italy's news agency – has shot himself)

“*We are all rather discouraged. No peace on the way, the Germans still in our backyard*”. In fact, now the war will go on even longer, because “*if the two Italian divisions that surrendered in Sicily without fighting had known that Mussolini would no longer have been head of the government the next day, they would have let themselves be tortured rather than giving in*”. “*Because*”, I add, “*I am Italian and I know the Italians*”.

27 July 1943

On 27 July, still in Riccione, I come across militant anti-fascism for the first time. I encounter it in the centre of town, far away from the beach area, where I have gone to carry out reconnaissance on my bicycle. There are a lot of people gathered in front of the Casa del Fascio (House of the Fasces), cheering others who have climbed up onto the building and are using picks to demolish their decorative fasces. There is great tension and I note that “*I do not think their intentions were good*”.

The next day the newspapers announce that “*all demonstrations will be dispersed without forewarning; under fire*”. The circular sent out by general Roatta, head of Staff, declares that ‘*ringleaders and troublemakers caught in the act will certainly be shot and any ‘soldiers caught sympathizing with them will be executed*’. *What will happen to the people I saw climbing up onto the Casa del Fascio in Riccione?*”

Riccione the seaside resort remains quiet, though. Under the canopy we talk a lot about the Homeland and its relationship with the war going on. Yet in the evening we go and see the film *Il figlio del corsaro rosso*, with Luisa Ferida.

We are on holiday, after all, and even in ’43, and despite the war and the bombings it is still holiday time. Albeit, for me anyway, in this new way - without my family, just me and my elder cousin. No longer at the Venice Lido where I have been going every summer since I was born, but in Riccione, this unheard of place. A place I immediately find more interesting than I had expected, a modern seaside resort a thousand miles away from the *ancien régime* of Des Bains. There are no cabins on the beach, just striped canopies. Further along, a new institution: the *colonie*, with very thin children from the impoverished hinterlands that the rural areas of Emilia then represented.

Right near our canopy is a group of boys from Rome and I fall in love with them at once. With everything about them. I am not yet fourteen and I look twelve, so none of them so much as glances at me, but I am happy just to be around them.

Among them are the rather arrogant Zurlini brothers, who look at us with that certain sense of pity of someone who knows so much more than you. Sixteen years later, when I saw the film *L'estate violenta*, I realized that the director,

Valerio Zurlini, was the boy from the canopy next to ours; and the film is, even in its details, the story of that summer and his love – whispered about – for a much older, war widow.

My cousin and I were caught up in the bombing, described in the film, of Bologna station on 29 July, which finds Trintignant (Valerio) and Eleonora Rossi Drago (the war widow) running away, and causes her to return suddenly to Riccione to her daughter.

After the fall of Mussolini, our parents had ordered us to interrupt our holiday immediately and, reluctantly, convinced their apprehension was exaggerated, we had obeyed. Ending up, amid blaring sirens and people shouting and crying, stuck in the carriage of a train among the maze of tracks at the country’s major railway junction. We too were escaping, without knowing where to take refuge.

The 30s

Until that 25 July 1943, my political background had been developing along two contradictory lines which had managed to run parallel to one another without creating friction: my primary school, Riccardo Grazioli Lante della Rovere, in via Tevere in Rome, and my family.

My wonderful super-Fascist school teacher, signora Giralda Giraldi Caricati, had made us decorate the walls of our classroom with large frescoes of coloured chalk depicting the glories of the regime: the conquest of the Empire, reclamation of the Paludi Pontine marshes, the Kingdom of Albania. The dates on the exercise books I write my “compositions” in always have an A (for Anno/ year), followed by the Roman numerals that denote the age of the Fascist era, shortened to the letters

EF (“Era Fascista”). On 18 October 1939 A XVII EF – my last year of primary school – I write that “on 28 October 1922 an army of Black Shirts marched on Rome under orders from the Duce. After this event the Fascist Government, saviour of Italy, vigorously boosted agriculture by reclaiming the Agro Pontino”.

The question of marshes returns a few days later as well: “the Duce has opened a new Comune: Pomezia”. While, thanks to “the valour of our great Leader, another 1800 families are leaving to work the fertile lands of Libya”. On the 31st I give thanks for another “entirely Fascist innovation, created by Arnaldo Mussolini: economy, the day of which is celebrated”. On 8.11.1939 A XVII EF I praise the agreeableness of our school director “who came to talk to us about the famous latifundia of the Romans, who did not cultivate the fields, therefore leaving the plebs without work. But now Fascism has put a stop to this misery”. (I would never have thought that the Premio Strega 2010 would go to a book that talks about that now remote business, *Canale Mussolini*).

The big news my “compositions” talk about constantly is the school radio – a sort of loudspeaker mounted high up on the wall above the teacher’s desk – which comes up with something new every day: 17th November is the fourth anniversary of the iniquitous sanctions that “fifty-two nations united against Italy” have inflicted on us; the 18th commemorates “the war against the Negus empire”, and I write that the Abyssinians are “ferocious soldiers but the Italian soldiers were heroic and fearless because they held before them the example of the Duce, which was a guarantee of certainty”; the 10th February is the turn of the Conciliation, brought about “through the work of two brilliant minds, Pius XI and Mussolini”; the 8th April was, instead, the anniversary of the victory over Albania where Italy, “as everywhere, brought civilization”. “Being washed by the Mediterranean, which as the Duce said, should once again be named Mare Nostrum, Albania was to be reunited with mother Italy”.

These compositions brought me top marks on my report: praiseworthy. On the cover was a map of the Empire dominated by a large M and the number of my Italian Youth of the Littorio (GIL) membership card (125008).

And so it is that the following year, '40-'41, I am enrolled, along with almost all my old primary school companions in class I A of the Torquato Tasso middle school.

Meanwhile the Bottai reform has been introduced and marks have been replaced by “appreciations”, divided into two categories: academic performance and “notes on enrolment and activities in the GIL”. And in the first trimester it says I am not “a very assiduous attendee at the Littorio meetings”.

It cannot have been a symptom of budding anti-Fascism, though, as during the second trimester “my activities at the meetings” have already improved. It is that in the meanwhile, from the normal division of “piccole italiane” I have passed to the far more elite “marinarette”, a special corps automatically open to anyone attending the gymnastics school Caio Duilio (a beautiful gym in the “Parioli” area, on Lungotevere Flaminio). I had even been made “marinaretta tamburina”, and I remember that I really enjoyed it (I still play the tambourine very well).

After the long absence caused by her polio, Anna Maria Mussolini was always in our class. And it was everybody’s ambition to be among those invited to Villa Torlonia to play there in the afternoon. I was among the privileged and once I even caught a glimpse of the Duce at the entrance to the house. We hardly ever went in and in any event I thought it was horrendously furnished.

We stayed in the garden, where donna Rachele sometimes made an appearance. There was everything a child could desire: platforms in the trees, huts in the woods, games of all kinds. Anna only had to ask and crowds of keepers would jump to satisfy her requests. The only thing we did not get was any tea: at five o’clock the policemen who acted as minders brought food to Anna Maria and Romano, but not to the guests. My mother was reluctant

to believe the family of the Duce could be so ill-mannered. Besides, weren't the Romagnoli known for their generosity? I still do not understand. The children were in the care of the policemen who had evidently received orders to bring them a sandwich. We were not contemplated.

We did enjoy the cinema, though: in fact I discovered the cinema, there, at Villa Torlonia. At the extreme end of the park, near via Spallanzani, there was a projection room where they showed the films of the Istituto Luce. It was where Mussolini used to watch films. Cinecittà and the Centro Sperimentale had just been created and the cinema was part and parcel of the regime.

That annex, where I was initiated into the seventh art, was also home to the Istituto Internazionale del Cinema Educativo – a great honour for our country to have obtained the privilege of hosting the institute (later swept up by the League of Nations), under whose aegis it came. The institute continued to function, telling European citizens, including the democracies, what education should be about even after the unfortunate forerunner of the UN had imposed sanctions on Italy. We did not know that within the folds of those institutions and the magazine *Cinema* –run by Vittorio, the elder brother of my playmate – many future communists were taking their first steps.

We were too small and could not understand that there was an ambiguity in Fascism, and therefore a certain attraction, and this was represented by its modern, even anti-bourgeois approach, of which Futurism was an expression. Indeed, this sense of “revolutionaries in black shirts” rippled through the intellectuals associated with Bottai's magazine *Primato*. Certainly not through our classrooms, where the rhetoric was more provincial.

The misapprehension did not last long for the adults either, however. As they would later say, their eyes were opened when general Franco disembarked in Spain and Mussolini ran straight to his aid.