

“Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone” by Stanislao Pugliese

Reading in Retirement by Dr. Charles S. Grippi

In the summer of 1957, I taught basic English to a group of fifteen Italian labor union leaders at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. These officials were involved in an intensive four month study of the labor union movement in the United States that was to be followed by another four months of visiting U.S. industries to speak with both management and labor union officials to get a better understanding of collective bargaining in our country.

At that time, Italy had the largest Communist Party outside of Russia. With the "Cold War Period" of U.S./Russian relations, our State Department wisely supported programs of this type to reveal how labor unions effectively operate in a democracy to earn their fair share of the industrial pie. In the fall of 1957 I was quite fortunate to begin a two-year teaching Fulbright Grant at the University of Rome and at the University of Trieste. My two-year stay in Italy taught me the bitterly dire economic straits that Italy suffered in the aftermath of World War II. At the same time, however, it involved a myriad of highly enriching cultural experiences to me as an Italo-American.

To give to the visiting Italian labor leaders an appreciation of an Italo-American family in St. Louis, my parents (Sicilian born father who came to the States before WWI and my St. Louis born mother of Sicilian born parents) agreed to invite them to a dinner of homemade ravioli, meatballs, sausage, and Sicilian brasciole. In our rather modest sized home, we had to disassemble my parents' bedroom to accommodate them. My father delighted relating stories of his boyhood in the Phoenician founded hill town of Carini, Sicily and the labor leaders brought him up to date with stories of WWII and the years following it. After a forty-five year gap of Italian idiomatic expressions of my father's language and that of the labor leaders, there was much humorous discussion.

Galiano Tranquilli, one of the labor leaders, came from the highly impoverished region of Italy, located on a direct parallel of Rome east to the coast of the Adriatic Sea to the town Pescara. At the time, the name Tranquilli did not register any significance that it was to have later. The beginning months of my exciting Fulbright Teaching Grant filled me with delight. I was sumptuously ensconced in a furnished one-bedroom apartment for a rather meager monthly rent. Located on the Via Flaminia, opposite the Olympic Stadium. The apartment came with original works of art: Etruscan pieces, a Modigliani, a Carot, a Picasso, and assorted Roman pieces. An adventurous bus ride South on Via Flaminia passed a number of Roman decorative spigots fed by the ancient Roman aqueducts around the clock, down to the Piazza Colonna, to the interestingly carved column depicting the battles of the 1st century AD Emperor Trajan, to the Victor Emmanuel Monument, which the Romans derisively called "The Birthday Cake" believing the Fascist endeavor shamefully detracted from the glories of the nearby Roman Coliseum. Here I descended from the bus and began my walk pass the Capitoline Hill, the political center of ancient Rome to the 17th century baroque Palazzo Antici Mattei where my English classes were held. In the center of Piazza Mattei is the magnificent gem of the 16th century Fountain of the Tortoises. On the base of the fountain are four huge shells that support four bronze elfin-like youths with one arm stretched downward feeding dolphins below and the other stretched upward toward the upper bowl rim where four turtles are poised to jump into the pool. Spouts of water abound throughout the fountain. The sight of the play of water jets in this most imaginatively playful water fountain always boasted my spirits. What a way to begin teaching. I was in my glory.

It was within the first few months of teaching that I received an invitation to the wedding reception of my former English student, Galiano Tranquilli, to be held there in Rome. What an astonishing surprise occurred when I arrived at the wedding reception after having greeted and congratulated the bride and groom. Galiano took me over to meet his uncle, whom I would sit next to during dinner—Ignazio Silone (who was born Secondino Tranquilli. Silone was one of the several aliases he had used during his turbulent life). Galiano informed me that his uncle spoke no English, and I immediately pondered about the one-month intensive language training in Italian given to all of the Fulbright grantees at the University of Perugia and whether my Sicilian dialect would obscure our communication. I began by complimenting Silone's two novels that I had read. "Fontamara" and "Bread and Wine" and how deeply engrossed I was in the vividly dire situations of his characters. Rather than receive a direct reply from him, I thought I heard a grunting sound not knowing whether it was approbation or not. I then tried to elicit a response from him by relating the "miseria" (extreme poverty) that my father suffered in Sicily during the prewar period of WWI, a "miseria" that drove him to

immigrate to the States and periodically to send money back home to his family in Sicily even after he had married in St. Louis and had five children living in a Sicilian-American ghetto in downtown St. Louis of the 1920's and 1930's. This sending money to Sicily during those depression years was a point of contention with my parents. This attempt to tie in my father's experience with "miseria" with that which Silone suffered in his youth in Abruzzi failed to get a response. Not even a grunt. I was stumped. I decided to try another tact by questioning possible tag name symbolism of some of his characters and his use of humanistic Christian symbolism in his supposedly major theme of social and political justice for the illiterate poor. My attempts were fruitless in trying for a response from him. I was greatly troubled by his obstinate silence, and I ruminated for the rest of the period of time that I sat next to him. It has been a rumination that has last from 1957 until several months ago when I read Professor Stanislao Pugliese's brilliant biography "Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. (To be continued)