

"Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone" by Stanislao Pugliese

Reading in Retirement by Dr. Charles S. Grippi Part II

What a veritable enigma it was for me in Rome in the fall of 1957 at the wedding of my former student Galiano Tranquilli, seated next to his famous uncle Ignazio Silone, my trying to engage him in conversation without a modicum of success. That enigma lasted until recently when I read Professor Pugliese's captivating biography. Quite early in the biography, Pugliese states that by nature Silone was "silent, meditative, and melancholy" belying "the stereotype of the gregarious, outgoing, extroverted Southern Italian" (p. 8). Indeed, Pugliese continues by stating that he was "painfully shy, uncomfortable in the public light, and perpetually doubtful of himself. Silone never had any qualities necessary for a successful political career. He was a difficult husband, an exasperating friend, a mediocre politician, an aloof acquaintance, a morose presence in public, a distant and cool relative, often manic-depressive, sometimes suicidal" (p. 9). However, on the same page, Pugliese highlighting Silone's stature proclaims that Silone "crafted a body of work that testifies to a searing political and spiritual crisis and still bears fruitful reading." What an amalgam of seemingly disparate qualities, but Pugliese's trenchant examination of Silone's life brings into sharp focus those self same disparate qualities that are most revealing in understanding Silone's complex personality. My enigma was solved.

William Faulkner claimed that during his lifetime, Ignazio Silone was the greatest Italian writer alive. Agreeing with that appraisal were such great worldwide intellectuals as Albert Camus, Thomas Mann, Graham Greene, and Edmund Wilson. When Camus went to Stockholm in 1957 to receive his Nobel Prize in Literature, he stated that the prize should have gone to Silone and not to him (p. 253). Silone's Abruzzi Trilogy consisting of his first three novels: "Fontamara" (1933) literally meaning "Bitter Spring," "Bread and Wine" (1936), and "The Seed Beneath the Snow" (1941) chronicle the excruciatingly difficult lives of the dire poor of Silone's childhood in the Abruzzi region. Pugliese declares that "Fontamara" is the "most powerful and influential work of anti-Fascist literature of the 1930's" (p. 112). The book was translated into twenty-seven languages and sold over two million copies by the year 2000. For the Russian revolutionary figure Leon Trotsky, it was "not only a book of passionately political accusation; for in it revolutionary passion is raised to such a height that it becomes a true work of art" (Quoted by Pugliese p. 121). For Graham Greene, the novel is "the most moving account of Fascist barbarity that I have ever read" (Quoted in Pugliese, pp. 121-122).

In America, Silone was lauded in articles that appeared in "Partisan Review," "The Nation," and "Dissent" and by such American intellectuals as Alfred Kazin, Mary McCarthy, Clement Greenburg, and Irvin Howe. Further adding to Silone's adulation was the fact that he was twice nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature (p. 269). Pugliese in probing what shaped the intellectual growth and internal turmoil in Silone presents a statement by Carlo Levi, a northern Italian Jewish intellectual and writer who was banished by the Fascists because of his political beliefs to the southern province of impoverished Matera which Levi describes as "the other part of the world, hedged in by custom and sorrow, cut off from History and the State, eternally patient" a place where people "without comfort or solace, where the peasant lives out his motionless civilization on the barren ground in remote poverty, and in the presence of death" (p. 23). Indeed, Silone declaimed that his hometown of Pescina in Abruzzi was not in Italy; it was "outside of time and space,

forgotten by God and man." Then paraphrasing Levi's most famous book "Christ Stopped At Eboli," Silone continued, "Christ did not arrive at Pescina" (p. 23).

Silone was born with the name of Secondino Tranquilli in Pescina. Ignazio Silone was one many names that he used in exile from Italy as he tried to escape persecution and /or assassination for his political beliefs. He grew up with notions of primitive Christianity and socialistic ideas of revolutionary change to aid the dire poor. His father died of tuberculosis when was eleven years old. Five of his six siblings died during his childhood. Early in the morning of January 13, 1915, a devastating earthquake destroyed Pescina, leveling practically every building and almost decimated its population by killing 3,500 of the town's 5,000 inhabitants. Fourteen-year-old Silone literally clawed through the rubble searching for his missing mother, only to discover her dead body. He was obviously stunned and emotionally frozen by the tragic situation. He could shed no tears, and his neighbors thought him cold and heartless. Death had stalked and taken his father, five of his siblings and now he had to confront the numbing trauma of the loss of his loving mother who gave him life. For those of us who have witnessed the death of a mother under, certainly less tragic circumstances, we can well imagine the turmoil of Silone's intellectual and emotional equilibrium. Silone's only remaining sibling, eleven year Romolo was missing in the rubble. Romolo was found five days later, alive, with only a broken shoulder. A half a century later, in a politically ironic truism Silone wrote, "An earthquake accomplishes what words and laws promise and never achieve: the equality of all" (Quoted in Pugliese, p. 44). The maternal grandmother took in the two homeless boys. Several days after the earthquake, a disheveled, dust covered Roman Catholic priest Don Luigi Orione (1872-1940) went rummaging through the town in search of a flock of children orphaned by the earthquake. Father Orione had founded the Piccola Opera della Divina Provvidenza (Small Work of the Divine Providence), a group of clerics, nuns, and lay individuals dedicated to the education and care of orphans. They eventually established a number of schools throughout Italy. Young Silone and his brother, Romolo were sent to these schools in Rome, San Remo, and Tortona. For Father Orione's indefatigable life's work for orphaned children, Pope John Paul II began the process of sainthood for Father Orione in 1980, which was finally completed in May, 2004. (To be continued)