

## **"Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone" by Stanislao G. Pugliese**

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

Early in his biography, Pugliese sharply notes the close relationship of Silone with his character Pietro Spina in his novels "Bread and Wine" and "The Seed Beneath the Snow." Accentuating his point Silone is quoted, "Read my books...only in them do I recognize myself" (Quoted on p. 4). "Pietro" (Peter and rock) echoes St. Peter, the foundation rock of Roman Catholicism and Spina (thorn), the ardent Communist activist in bettering the cause of the dispossessed poor. Spina disguises himself as a priest and takes the name of Don Paolo (Father Paul, i.e. St. Paul) Spada (sword). There seems to be no doubt that as a young man Silone began an almost holy crusade as he sought to redress the tremendous suffering of the poor of his native Abruzzi region. Pugliese avers, "Like an ancient Hebrew prophet or one of the early persecuted Christians, Silone insisted on a moral vision of the world," and continues by stating that Silone defined himself as "a Socialist without a party, a Christian without a church" ( pp. 6-7).

In January of 1921, Palmiro Togliatti (1893-1964), Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), and Silone (1900-1978) among others founded the Italian Communist Party. About that time, Silone had his first encounter in Moscow with Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924). The experience was ironic. Silone's initial palpable excitement over meeting the revered revolutionary soon turned to doubt. Silone noted Lenin's rush to judgment concerning the Italian Communist Party without considering the contributions of the Italian Communists who were present. When Lenin criticized the Italians, Silone responded in French defending his colleagues. Silone observed, "even in truly exceptional personalities like Lenin and Trotsky was an absolute incapacity to discuss with fairness any opinion contrary to their own" (Quoted on p. 72). When Lenin died in 1924 and Joseph Stalin took over the leadership of the Communist Party, Stalin's deadly strong-armed tactics became apparent to Togliatti and Silone. At a May, 1927 meeting in Moscow, the two Italians were asked to sign a resolution denouncing Trotsky and banishing him from the Communist Party, a resolution that neither of them was given the chance to read. Togliatti and Silone refused to sign the resolution. On their return trip to Berlin, they read in the newspaper that the Communist International had "unanimously condemned Trotsky for betrayal" (p. 92). Stalin's agents eventually caught up with Trotsky in Mexico and murdered him in 1940.

Silone's disenchantment with Russian Communism as a panacea for advancing the disenfranchised and poverty-stricken peoples of the world became apparent when he was expelled from the party in 1931. There can be no doubt certainly that Silone's physical and emotional stress must have been greatly heightened when he was sought by the Italian Fascist police for being a Communist and now by the agents of Stalin. His younger brother Romolo was arrested by the Fascist police in 1928 for being a member of the Italian Communist Party and was accused of being a member of a plot to assassinate King Vittorio Emanuele III. Given a death sentence by the Mussolini government, the charge was reduced to a twelve-year sentence when it was determined that Romolo was innocent of that charge. In October of 1932, suffering the torture and beatings in prison and coughing blood from pulmonary lesions, Romolo died. Silone was then the sole surviving member of his immediate family. His self imposed and necessary exile from Italy took him to various European countries where he sought out fellow idealistic Communists in Spain, France, and Switzerland. Britain refused him an entrance visa and France expelled him. He had spent time in prison in France, where he was confined in the same prison that had held Marie Antoinette in 1792. He was also jailed in Spain where he

adopted the name of Ignazio Silone. Broken in physical health and highly stressed in emotional turmoil, Silone settled in Zurich in 1929, even there occasionally harassed by the police. There he was treated for neurosis and suicidal depression, some critics maintain by Carl Jung. He is reported to have established friendships with Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, and Leonhard Ragaz. It was in Switzerland that he began to write his "exile trilogy" of "Fontamara," "Bread and Wine," and "The Seed Beneath the Snow" that restored Silone to "physical and mental health" (p. 111).

It was also in Switzerland that Silone secretly violated his status as a political refugee in which he promised not to engage in any political activities that might incur the powerful wrath of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Here Silone met and worked clandestinely with the American Allen Dulles of OSS (Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA) as an adviser concerning the political situation in Italy (p. 143). Some of Silone's reports reached the desk of FDR in the White House (p. 172).

In December 1941 in Switzerland, Silone met the voraciously attractive and socially outgoing Irish native Darina Laracy, who was attracted to Silone after having read his Abruzzi trilogy. They eventually married in a civil ceremony in 1944. She believed he married her to find happiness, but that eventually "he was not capable of finding happiness" and that he was not only suffering from depression but also perhaps from schizophrenia and that even when not depressed "he had no talents for human relationships", (Quoted in Pugliese, p. 174). The marriage produced no children, and in it, Silone was rather casual about extra marital affairs, which hurt his wife.

With the allied victory over Fascist Italy, Silone and Darina were flown into Italy on a military plane in October 1944. Pugliese's interviews with Darina, who had been a friend of Indira Gandhi and Martin Buber, revealed that she was an important collaborator in Silone's works. She denied that Silone had been a patient of Carl Jung. She stated that she translated Silone's first play "Ed Egli Si Nascose" (And He Hid Himself) into English and that she had translated other works into English and into French. She confessed that she who perhaps "knew Silone best, could never fully plumb the mystery of his identity" and that he often would seek refuge from a difficult situation by claiming to be ill, and then he would really become sick" (Quoted in Pugliese, p .177). Darina survived Silone for about twenty-five years and died in 2003. (To be continued)