

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

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

Pugliese's discussion of the post World War II political situation in Italy is quite interesting as the Christian Democratic, the Socialist, and the Communist Parties vied for political power. From October 1944 until February 1950, there were public protests and eventually two riots in which blood was shed with the peasants in Silone's birthplace of Pescina. The peasants demanded a redistribution of the lands to those who tilled the soil. Pietro Nenni (1891-1980), leader of the Socialist Party, proposed unifying the Socialist and Communist Parties, a movement that Silone considered unwise and did not support. When Italians voted in June 1946 to reject the monarchy and become a republic, Silone wrote, "Italian society has liberated itself from a parasitic superstructure of feudal origins and has liberated itself..." (Quoted by Pugliese, p. 191).

In 1950, Richard Crossman published a collection of essays entitled "The God That Failed." The essays were written by former Communists who denounced their once fervent beliefs. The group included Arthur Koestler, Richard Wright, Andre Gide, Louis Fisher, Stephen Spender, and Ignazio Silone. Silone's essay was entitled "Emergency Exit" and used an epigraph from Dante's "Divine Comedy", i.e. "Non vi si pensa, quanto sangue costa" (They don't think how great is the cost of blood). Togliatti, the head of the Italian Communist Party, enraged by the book, launched a vicious counterattack against Silone and other Italian intellectuals including Benedetto Croce, Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, and Cesare Pavese (pp, 199-200).

At the meeting of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) in Brussels in November, 1950, Silone delivered one of his most powerful speeches entitled "Habeas animam" which championed the right of each individual to own his/her own soul and not submit to the totalitarianism of a repressive ideology. It attacked Fascism and the forced labor camps in Siberia. Stalin's slaughter of political enemies was for Silone the "tragic degeneration" of the Russian Revolution (p. 204).

In 1953, Silone lost his seat in the Italian Chamber of Deputies to a member of the Communist Party from his hometown of Pescina. Silone, jeered in public, had received only one third of the votes that he had in 1946 that sent him to the Chamber. Ironically, the winning Communist candidate came from a party cell named in the memory of his brother Romolo Tranquilli. He left Italian politics after this defeat, his wife Darina convincing him that he was a writer and not a politician (p. 210).

Pugliese notes that if the writer Cesare Pavese praised the freedom of democracy in America by translating the works of Dos Passos, Hemingway, Walt Whitman, and Sherwood Anderson; Silone, on the other hand, found it "was decidedly an ambivalent and contradictory place" (p. 212). Silone, who prided himself with a flawless command of the French language and his passable use of German, refused to learn English even after the urging of his wife, Darina. In 1940, Eleanor Roosevelt, acting through Sumner Wells, offered Silone a visa to the United States. Silone refused. Because of Silone's strong position on Civil Rights in the U.S. and his equally strong denunciation of Senator Joe McCarthy's anti-Communist campaign, Silone was placed as "undesirable" on the U.S. State Department lists of visitors (p. 217). The Civil Rights Movement achieved fruition after the long struggles of Martin Luther King, his followers, and the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. After repeated urgings from his wife, Darina, Silone visited the U.S. in 1963. Introduced by the philosopher Sidney Hook at Columbia University, Silone extolled the freedom of the mind in not accepting totalitarian dogma, whether

of the right or of the left. In 1969, Silone made his second trip to America to attend the fourth annual PEN Conference where he defended the rights of Soviet writers in their struggle for freedom of expression. Several years later in an interview concerning the role of the writer, Silone stated, "I think a writer must never place himself in the service of a state, nor an ideology, but must remain faithful to the humbled and the oppressed" (Quoted in Pugliese, p. 285).

In October of 1977, Silone was admitted to a Roman medical facility, where doctors failed to diagnose properly a kidney disease that would eventually cause his death on August 22, 1978. Before and after his death, there has been much debate concerning his convoluted life and his beliefs. He has been accused of spying for Communist Russians, for the Italian Fascists, for the American OSS and the CIA, and for British Intelligence. The twisting and circulative debate concerning Silone's political, religious, and personal beliefs are too complicated and extensive to review here. In his biography, Pugliese has steered a steady and objective course in the roiled seas of these complicated matters. He has produced an absorbing and fascinating biography of Ignazio Silone. Indeed, a life in the hands of a competent team could produce an outstanding film.