

BEFORE THE ITALIAN MIRACLE by Milton Gendel

My life in Italy started when I came to Rome from New York City on a Fulbright grant in December 1949, which, of course, was only a few years after the end of World War II. My first impression was that it was like moving to the suburbs, as if I'd found myself in Yonkers or someplace just out of town. Rome at the time had less than half the population it does now. In 1950, there must have been a million and a half people — it's now three to four million. There was very little traffic in the streets. I managed to buy myself a rattletrap, a wonderful little car, really — a midnight blue 1935 Fiat roadster with a rumble seat. As it was one of the few cars on the road, I could drive down the main drag, the Corso, park in front of the bank, do my business and drive away — something that sounds incredible today.

First I lived in the Via dei Foraggi, just off the Roman Forum. I moved successively to the Via Monserrato, which leads out of Piazza Farnese, then, over the decades, to Piazza Campitelli, the Island on the Tiber and Piazza Mattei — of the Tortoise Fountain.

I hadn't planned to stay. Originally, I had a Fulbright to go to China, which packed up on account of Mao and the Communist takeover. The State Department wrote me an earnest letter saying, "You now hold three Fulbright grants, kindly relinquish two." When China was no longer possible, they had given me Hong Kong, and while I was thinking that over they asked whether I had another choice. I said "Italy," as I had been there briefly in 1939 on the eve of the war. My project was to study the changes in the main Italian cities after the unification of the nation, completed in 1870. That was when the capital of Italy moved from Florence to Rome after the Pope was forced to give up most of his temporal power, the States of the Church, and was confined to Vatican City.

When I arrived in Rome the dollar was very strong, and Americans, who consequently had semi-colonial privileges, were riding high. Italy under Mussolini had lost the war and Fascism seemed obsolete. We were popular, on the whole, and, in any case, were there for Italian culture, meaning its past, really, at least up to the Risorgimento.

Not to speak of Benedetto Croce, Arturo Toscanini, a number of opera singers, Luigi Pirandello and Giorgio de Chirico.

Rome, Florence and most of the country were somewhat bedraggled after the war years and the lack of maintenance. The great collections, however, like the Uffizi, Brera and the Venice Accademia, were pretty much as they had been for generations. But the hotels and pensioni were run-down, with tattered red wall hangings and a leftover look.

There were always tourists and a constant flow of Americans, which became consistent during the course of the fifties. I didn't go in for our compatriots very much because I figured I could have stayed home for that. But notables came through, like the writers Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, Mary McCarthy and Sybille Bedford. Also painters: Willem de

Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, Philip Guston.

As for American women visitors, it would not have been unusual for a mother and daughter to be traveling without a man at the time. There were stringent laws concerning public morality, though. If you happened to stop and kiss somebody in a doorway, a cop could appear and caution and fine you. Condoms were not sold anywhere, as the Church objected to their use. That remained so for decades.

Something that struck me in particular about Rome then was that, aside from professionals like doctors, dentists, lawyers and notary publics — who are high professionals here, not tobacconists with a stamping device — there wasn't much of a middle class. People were either workers or upper-class. It would certainly not have been unusual for an Italian to marry an American. But for a shopkeeper to marry a rich American girl at the time — or any time — would have been a real coup. A good number of the aristocracy had married Americans with dowries over the generations. So the story in *The Light in the Piazza* is perhaps a working-class version of what the aristocrats had been doing for years.

My Fulbright lasted a year. And then I ran through my car and various assets. One day, the architectural historian with whom I had been working, Bruno Zevi, came to lunch. I had learned Italian partly by translating his fundamental treatise, titled *Saper vedere l'architettura*, which was published in English as *Architecture as Space*. I thought I was living in some style, as I had a big apartment in the Via Monserrato and a servant, an old Eritrean soldier, an ascaro named Kidamè Amharai. As the ascaro served us lunch, Zevi looked around at the ramshackle furniture and said, "You live like this?" I could only admit that I did, and added jovially, "We are lunching off the fender of my car, which I was obliged to sell the other day."

The next day I got a call from Adriano Olivetti, the head of the business-machine company. Zevi had come to my rescue by arranging for him to employ me as cultural and editorial consultant for his community movement, publishing house and magazines. So I stayed on in Rome. There was no anti-Americanism, except during the Korean War. Then some acquaintances who happened to belong to the Communist Party stopped greeting me. After a while, they resumed their civilities.

By the late fifties and early sixties, Italy bounded back and was on its feet again. A shot in the arm was the Marshall Plan money. In Rome, money was suddenly going into the creation of new hotels, movie houses, restaurants and bars. If you went to Sicily and around the country, the effects were more substantial, with extensive new housing, roads and dams. Industry revived, and the phenomenon was known as the Italian Miracle. As the money flowed, people who had been huddling with their families got their own apartments and moved out — a lateral population explosion.

All the little neighborhood enclaves broke up. People used to say that Romans were rooted to their city blocks, but the minute they could afford four wheels away they went. And nowadays, with wings, every holiday sees them in the Maldives, New York, the Arctic, everywhere around the globe.

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