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MY FRIENDS THE MARIANIS

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

I have some hesitation in writing about the Marianis. In the first place, they are my oldest friends and most frequent hosts in Italy, and one feels somehow slightly indiscreet talking about them behind their backs, so to speak. Then, although their name is not really Mariani, they will be easily recognizable to any of their friends or almost-as-numerous English and American relatives who happen to read these letters (one, I know, does), and who are very likely to discover some errors of fact in what I shall write.

On the other hand, nothing I could say about the Marianis would be uncomplimentary, and if I confess the possibility of factual errors beforehand - the facts, after all, have been gleaned from bits of conversation covering eight years of acquaintanceship - I may perhaps be forgiven them. And I do feel that it is appropriate to write about them. It was in one of their homes in 1956 (I remember the date because it was the month the Hungarian revolution began, and I was on leave from the Sixth Fleet), listening to anecdotes from the Fascist years and reading the headlines from Budapest, that I began to think about the problem to which I am now seeking some of the answers, here and up in the South Tyrol. So it seems to me that the Marianis belong in what I am trying to do, in a real if indirect way.

More immediately relevant, of course, is the fact that I stopped to spend a weekend with them on the way here from Rome, our first meeting in nearly five years. And today, deep in the dust of the archives of what used to be Italian Pola, I ran across a link with my present work: two letters concerning the expulsion from Italian-occupied territory in 1919 of Yugoslav agitators, signed by the husband of one of my Marianis. He was the admiral who retired in 1920 and who, an old and ailing man, asked to be taken back on active service when war began for Italy in 1940. That was shortly before his wife's cousin, a well-known anti-Fascist, was arrested on the trumped-up charge that he was a British spy.

Donatello would have suffered more for this if his brother-in-law, a General and Fascist mayor, had not intervened for him. Four years later the Mayor's home near Como was a link in the underground railway smuggling Italian Jews into Switzerland in defiance of Fascist law.

These incidents represent personal dilemmas and crises of conscience familiar to thousands of Central Europeans. Are they comprehensible to Americans? It would have been easier for our grandparents, the generation of the War Between the States.

Perhaps the place to begin is the town where I visited the Marianis again last month. Despite the changes that have been coming to northern Italy so rapidly in the past decade, Fermo is much as it was when I first saw it in 1954 - a sleepy provincial town of 28,000 inhabitants, perched atop a conspicuous hill looking toward the Adriatic some five miles away. Most of it is still contained within the medieval walls, but four small modern suburbs have sprawled beyond, inconspicuously, in four directions. Except for these and an atrocity of a multi-colored modern hotel erected half way up the hillside since my last visit, Fermo's streets of old houses and palaces, uniformly built of local brick and stone of an unusually pleasant ruddy brown, remain ideal places to discover the amazing artistry of simple doorway and courtyard in an obscure corner of Italy.

Around the little city are the deeply eroded foothills of the Apennines, advancing in parallel ridges toward the featureless, sandy, harbourless western shore of the Adriatic. This is the Marche, an amazingly untouristed region of Italy south of the Romagna, north of Abruzzi and east of Latium; to the southwest on a clear day one can see the Gran Sasso d'Italia, highest bit of the Apennines, from the windows of the Mariani guestroom. The district is backward, lacking much industry and much Communism, although the handsome little tractors that are a Fiat specialty for Italy's minuscule farms - and the ubiquitous motor-scooter - have made a noisy large-scale appearance. I remember, on the occasion of my first visit, being taken out to lunch with "some of our peasants" (a phrase that shocks American sensibilities!) nearby. This was apparently a sort of annual special occasion, and we feasted royally on a little farmhouse terrace overlooking the barnyard, devouring huge platters of the local pasta (an ultra-fine sort of spaghetti with a tomato sauce, the best I have eaten anywhere in the country) and roast chicken and artichoke salad, while the head of the family told me proudly that his direct ancestors had worked that bit of land for the Mariani family since the fifteenth century. I wondered how long it would be before a Communist organizer came to the Marche to suggest to this peasant's sons that after five centuries of paying a third or more of their production to the local squires the farm really must be theirs, and not the squire's. And would he be wrong? But may one also

have a twinge of regret for this eventual fact-facing? In any case, the Marche was and remains an old-fashioned land. The peasants still touch their forelocks to the Count in 1961, and they come every morning with their problems and their produce to see Countess Bona.

Fermo's present unimportance - the prefecture is an hour's drive away at Ascoli Piceno - is only a century old. Before that, for at least two millenia, it was a place of strategic and political significance, first for the Sabines, then for the Romans, and afterward for successive masters of the Marche, the east-coast alternative to Rome for passing from Northern Italy to the South. The defenseless western shore of the Adriatic did not much interest Venice, but the popes came to exercise patronage and power over the local city states from the early middle ages, and among these Fermo long remained one of the most important and independent. The Cathedral that crowns the hill, spoiled, except for the splendid Gothic facade, by Baroque remodeling, was and is the seat of a Metropolitan Archbishop. Only after Oliverotto da Fermo and his fellow conspirators were strangled by Cesare Borgia at the famous banquet in Senigallia - the incident that so impressed the Florentine Ambassador Nicolo Macchiavelli - did the city become a permanent part of the States of the Church. After that there were popular uprisings at irregular intervals, but until Napoleon's descent into Italy the Apostolic Delegates continued to reign in what had been called the "Marka Firmana" since the tenth century.

The Marianis were established in Fermo before the time of Oliverotto and the Borgia Pope: an inscription with an early fifteenth century date on one of the doors of the church of S.Michele Arcangelo bears the name of a Conte Mariani as donor. What these early Marianis thought of Oliverotto or of the Borgias, or of successive popes, I do not know, nor do the present members of the family. The only story I have heard of pre-Napoleonic times is one of a complicated lawsuit early in the eighteenth century, which ended with the Marianis being ousted from their palazzo (which my guidebook describes as "of grandiose proportions, with an atrium supported on Doric columns...") by their cousins the Vinci-Marianis and moving to the more modest quarters across the street which they still occupy.

With Napoleon came new hopes and the revival of the dream of a united Italy free of domination by popes and foreigners. Fermo was part of the Republic of Rome in 1797 and of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy in 1808, and the seat of a Prefecture. When the Apostolic Delegate was restored by Austrian bayonets in 1815, the dream was kept alive by events like the visit of the refugee Girolamo Bonaparte, ex-king of Westphalia, who came from Trieste in 1827 to live for two years in Fermo, holding a sort of court there which the liberal Ferman aristocracy liked to frequent.

Among these may well have been the young Giambattista Mariani whose interest in civic affairs led him to be sent to Bologna a decade later to enlist the services of a famous English singer, then appearing in the Emilia, for the Fermo opera season. She came to the Marche (as Renata Tebaldi was doing this month, by the way), and remained to become Giambattista's wife, a fervent Italian patriot of the first generation of the Risorgimento, and the grandmother of my Marianis. When her husband was driven into exile in Nice (then still a Piedmontese city) after the abortive revolution of 1848, she went with him taking their two-year-old son Mario; when Giambattista's estates were confiscated by the Bourbons or kept untouchable by the Pope, she returned to her singing career, the stage (like the china service they had made in England) defiantly decorated with the forbidden red-white-green of Liberal Italy.

Mario Maraini (1846-1936) belonged to the second generation of the Risorgimento, the generation of triumph and disillusionment. When he was three, his family had to flee the wrath of the restored papal government; when he was fourteen the Italian Kingdom was proclaimed, without Venice or Rome, but including papal territories in the Marche and Romagna, leading to the restoration of his father's confiscated properties. As a boy of nineteen, he volunteered for the war that was to liberate Venetia, and four years later he saw the destruction of the temporal power of the popes and the movement of the Italian Government at last to Rome. The ideas he had learned from his parents, the apparent triumph of which he had watched in his formative years, remained with him all his life and were passed intact to his children: Whiggish-Liberalism lightly salted with Mazzinian radicalism, nationalism, anti-clericalism, affection for Gladstone's England and the virtues of the British squirearchy, distrust of Bismarck's Germany and the sort of legislation that threatens freedom of thought and expression; a belief above all in modern Italy - in the justice of the Libyan war, of neutrality in 1914 and of intervention with England and against Austria in 1915.

The children to whom these ideas were passed were three in number: Nerina, Bona and Donatello. The first and last of these married late in life, the middle one never; there is no new generation of Marianis. Nerino married a younger son of one of the most ancient and distinguished families of Lombardy - tracing its titles back to the time of Charlemagne - and a General whose greatest pride was that he had been military tutor to the Duca d'Aosta; her interest in the arts is reflected in at least one book published under her name in England. Donatello married an Englishwoman who had spent most of her life in Italy, in a villa near Genoa. Father Mario, meanwhile, had established himself in Florence, in a house designed to his own specifications in the new quarter of the city that had grown up north of the old wall after the unification of Italy. With Bona to preside over this household, the Florentine establishment became the family center of gravity in the years that followed the first war.

These were turbulent years for Italy. Socialist-sponsored sitdown strikes paralyzed industry, and large segments of the population were convinced that red revolution was also at hand. Fascist violence paralyzed the streets, and was used by a hesitant and timid government to quell the Socialists. The Blackshirts were highly disagreeable people who did very nasty things, but they had the virtue of being on the side of Italy, of the existing social order, and even of the House of Savoy, all at a time when Parliament was manifestly unable to create a Government that could cope with the forces of nationalist and socialist extremism generated during the war years. Nerina's husband, whose idol the Duca d'Aosta seems to have been planning a military coup of his own in 1919-20 against the feebleness of the Parliamentary regime, was sufficiently impressed by the nationalist and royalist loyalty of the Fascist hierarchs to join them, and serve as Fascist podesta of his Lombard home town. Old Mario Mariani held aloof, dismayed; his son, who had come to know the great anti-Fascist liberal historian Gaetano Salvemini in his student days, became "an anti-Fascist from the first hour" (the phrase of his English wife). He preferred to go on taking his morning coffee, as he still does in 1961, from the last cup of that red-white-green service his grandfather had ordered made in exile, and to deny that Mussolini was in any way the heir to this tradition in which his father and grandfather had helped to create Italy.

Liberalism and nationalism had reached the parting of the ways for Italians. There is nothing at all unusual about my Marianis choosing the former, while in-laws and cousins chose the latter; divided families existed everywhere, in all classes. What interests me is the question of why some individuals went one way, while friends and relations of similar backgrounds went the other. Why was dislike of arbitrary government and sanctioned hooliganism decisive in one case, and fear of disorder decisive in another? Why, for one son of the Risorgimento, did Italy's pride lie in her unity under (relatively) free institutions, while for his brother Italy's pride must be in her prosperity and efficiency and the honor men of other nations paid to her flag? The first Italian was ashamed when his Government ordered the priests of Istria to stop preaching to their flock in the Slav language because they were all Italians now and must speak Italian; the latter was ashamed when an earlier Government abandoned the Italian claim to Slav-inhabited Dalmatia, which had been Venetian for half a millenium, in the face of foreign pressures and the principle of national self-determination.

What I am concerned with is not the question of whether or not the mass of Italians ever supported Fascism, nor the question of the personal motivation of the politically ambitious and active minority, who either became Fascist hierarchs or active opponents of the Regime. These are also interesting and important subjects, but what interests me here is the different question of the reaction of ordinary members of the upper-class intelligentsia, on the fringe of the ruling class, to the crisis

of their times. A twentieth century Italian version, if you like, of the similar problem that Pasternak was concerned with in Doctor Zhivago, or that Lampedusa was concerned with in Il Gattopardo. And in this case, too, I suspect that it is a novelist who should undertake the task, not a journalist or an historian, and a native of the country, not a foreigner. The most I can suggest here, really, is that a family like my Marianis, in a setting like Fermo, would not be a bad place to begin. There is nothing sensational here, no shame and no great heroism. No Fascist relative of the Marianis became an important hierarch, or committed crimes in the name of the Third Rome; no anti-Fascist Mariani was a fighter in the Resistance. Conte Donatello Mariani was an anti-Fascist and suffered in Fascist prisons, but he says he was not guilty of the crime with which he was charged - sending information to British submarines from his wife's Riviera villa. The most passionate disagreement with the Regime could not lead this loyal son of the Risorgimento to betray his country in wartime.

Many Italians who chose the path of Liberalism did not do so until 1925-6 when, after the Matteotti affair, it became clear that Fascism was irretrievably committed to autocracy and a police state, and not merely to strong government and bureaucratic efficiency; others who chose nationalism-cum-Fascism in those years also did so with reservations and misgivings, and most of these men eventually reached a point beyond which too much was demanded of their consciences, and there they parted company with the Regime. For deeply patriotic men to whom the Monarchy and the Italian State were inseparable concepts, the way was made easy: as long as the Monarchy supported Fascism, so might they. Donna Nerina's husband belonged in this category, and until July, 1943, he buried his misgivings and administered his little town in the name of both King and Duce.

Then the King deposed the Duce, and two months later the hated Germans rescued the Duce from the King's men and established him in the North as head of an Italian Fascist Republic. The old General's loyalty was to the King, and therefore to Badoglio, but it was Mussolini, with German bayonets, who ruled in Lombardy. The General's first thought, therefore, was to resign as Mayor, refusing to serve what he regarded as an illegal government. But the citizens of his town came to him and pointed out that, with all men of integrity reacting as he was doing, the neo-Fascist regime at Salò was being left in the hands of incompetents and adventurers (many of them, in fact, middle-aged men who as young roughnecks just home from the trenches had been the first Fascists in 1919, handier with castor oil and handgrenades than with administrative problems). What would become of the town if left to such people? The old General - at least this was the story after the war, when I knew him - was persuaded to stay on.

But the new administration, a German puppet state in fact, now hastened to enact many new laws in imitation of those of its Nazi masters, presenting officials like the old General with new dilemmas: trained from birth to respect and enforce the laws of the State, as the only guarantor of order against chaos (the very reason he had once become a Fascist), he was now called upon to uphold laws - most conspicuously those concerning "the purity of the race", condemning Italian Jewry to the same fate that Jews of German-occupied Europe already knew - that were contrary to his most basic beliefs, and which were being administered by a Government he considered illegal, although he was technically one of its servants.

This last dilemma was resolved by the one clear decision of the old General's public career - whether on his own initiative, or through the influence of his Mariani wife and in-laws, I have never known. The Mayor's house, secluded in its wooded park facing the distant Alps and politically above suspicions of nearby German garrisons, became a way-station in an underground railroad organized to smuggle threatened Milanese Jews north into Switzerland in 1944. In 1945, virtue had its reward: the local Committee of National Liberation, dominated by Communists and Socialists, instead of arresting the ex-Fascist Mayor and son of a Marquis, asked him to stay on in office after the end of the war. Was it in anticipation of this that he had made his decision eighteen months earlier? In this case, knowing the people involved, I do not believe so. The dilemma had been real, the decision difficult; as for Wellington, Hindenburg or Eisenhower before and after him, the one fixed point for this lesser general had always been Duty to Country.

Nino, the old General, died some two or three years ago. My chief and most pleasant memory of him is sitting in a wicker chair in the big window of the house in Fermo in the cool of the evening, looking toward the Gran Sasso d'Italia, a marvelously lovable little man (he was about 5'4" tall) in his early 90's, the only fierce thing about him his carefully waxed white moustache, nursing his gouty right foot by resting it on a cushion, and talking about the Duca d'Aosta. This visit I missed him there, when we gathered in the evening (Donna Nerina, the widow, was also absent, but I could hope to see her later in Lombardy, on my way to or from Bolzano). The rest were astonishingly unaltered. Bona, as handsome as ever, the easiest of hostesses, the wisest of counselors. Cousin Beatrice, widow of the Pola Admiral, telling me I must go from Trieste to Pola the first time by sea among the islands of Istria, absolutely ageless, the terror of younger female cousins with her all-seeing and all-disapproving Victorian eyes. Dot, Donatello's wife, become a little hard of hearing, working diligently to turn the Mariani's Fermo garden into a facsimile of an English one in defiance of the Adriatic sun, remarkably left-wing in her views on socialism and the social problems of the day.

And Donatello himself, ailing - his health has not been good since the Fascists let him out of prison after his brother-in-law's intervention - and older than his years, but when he is feeling better and a little talkative, the words about liberty, and the Church, and religion and man, are those of the Risorgimento, almost undiluted by the Twentieth Century. What Party can such a man belong to in contemporary Italy? The Christian Democrats are of course far too much the agents of the old enemy, the Church as a would-be secular power, and are too deeply imbedded in the mire of bureaucracy and corruption; the Socialists are too dogmatic; most of the other constitutional parties too backward in their economic views. Donatello says he is disinterested in contemporary politics; perhaps he means there is no intelligent choice.

There is a curious and pleasant ante-bellum air about the Mariani household in Fermo. Perhaps it is because there is no younger generation, perhaps because Fermo itself is a bit ante-bellum, perhaps simply because it is the only place I have ever stayed where I have been specifically told that we would not dress for dinner - as if it might ever occur to one of my generation that we would. The Marianis and their way of life are equally childless, belonging to a society in which the share-cropping agricultural system of the Marche might still have been appropriate. Gracious, infinitely attractive if one were lucky in his birth, outdated. Perhaps the political dilemmas and crises faced by different members of the Mariani family are also ante-bellum, as anachronous as their titles in republican Italy. But this I am not ready to concede. And as I talk this week with Croat intellectuals of a later generation, who were members of the pre-war Yugoslav Communist Party and war-time Partisans, and who have destroyed (or believe they have destroyed) hopes of successful careers by leaving the Party along the way, I am quite sure that I am bringing a readier understanding to their line of thought because I have known the Marianis.

That is one additional reason why I recommend this story to a first-class novelist, if you have one to suggest.

Yours sincerely,



Dennison I Rusinow

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