

Accounts

In the dozen or so years I lived and worked in Italy, I heard many nostalgia narratives that made reference to the positive conditions of childhood: innocence, emotional security, warmth, simplicity. These I unthinkingly classified as a 'normal' in a society often considered unworkable by its own citizens. Among older people, though, I recorded other accounts, where narratives appeared to evoke nostalgic imagery, but its normal, expected parameters were notably absent, especially a longing to return to a secure past. Instead, people seemed to link everyday tropes and events to a distant Other. This desire was underscored by the eagerness and spontaneity with which people offered these accounts, qualities that were particularly noteworthy in the context of talking about the war, which is very often a touchy subject in Italy.

The taxi driver: Mid-1990s, in a taxi from the airport to downtown Rome. The ride is about a half an hour, sometimes more. I remember there was a lot of morning traffic on the ring road, the *anulare* that surrounds Rome, and the going was slow. The taxi driver started talking politics almost as soon as I got in the cab. Roman taxi drivers used to be well known for this; it was considered part of the service. Most were notoriously leftist. The driver, whose name I did not catch, was about 45 years old. I was tired after the flight and so told him that as a foreigner I did not get mixed up in Italian politics. That was a mistake. The conversation switched from current affairs to a history lesson. He said that undoubtedly, as a foreigner, I was unaware of Mussolini's huge contribution to creating Italy, his fundamental role in single-handedly bringing the country into the modern era. I replied that I knew something about Mussolini, hoping to cut him off. "Well," he said, "I bet you don't know *this*." He suddenly pulled over on the emergency shoulder, stopped the car, got out and went to the trunk. He signalled me to do the same. Half curious, half wary that I was being kidnapped by a madman, I got out and went around the back. He reached underneath my suitcase and took out a large portfolio, the kind artists use. He opened it. It contained many engineering drawings. He took out a large pastel and ink drawing of a streamlined, futurist-inspired locomotive from the 1930s, which I had seen still in use on some

backwater lines. By now old, dented and outdated, they seemed even shabbier because of the olive drab colour with which they all seemed to be painted. “Mussolini designed this! Isn't that a great piece of machinery?” I was now convinced I was with an escapee from some asylum where they keep people who think it is still 1933. Why hadn't I seen his eyeballs spinning around in his eye sockets when I got in the cab? I must have been too tired from the overnight flight to notice. “I didn't know Mussolini had an engineering degree too. That's, uh, interesting.” I wasn't sure whether I should get back in the cab or grab my bag and make a run for it. We were surrounded by cars. It was a sunny morning. I *thought* I was safe, but you never know. He decided for me by putting away the portfolio and putting my bag back in the trunk. “Mussolini was a great man. A genius. No one understands today how great he really was. We need another one like him now. Today's politicians” He let the sentence hang, but I could see it was all he could do not to spit. I assured him that no doubt Mussolini had certainly been an important man for the history of the country.¹ I wasn't quite sure what else to say. The conversation continued until I got to my destination, but in a lower key. It seemed showing me the locomotive had satisfied whatever sense of urgency that had gripped him.

Sergio was a 77 year old man in 1992.² I met him in a peculiar shop in Pescara, near the waterfront, run by an old Sicilian who made traditional, intricate almond-paste figurines. Behind the single, glass topped counter were dozens of shelves filled with hundreds of exquisitely decorated figurines that no one seemed to buy, and a couple of old tables and chairs. The owner served coffee and amaro. Sergio was a regular client that I often saw in the evenings smoking a cigarette and nursing a small glass of bitters. We would nod to each other, and after a few nights we began a conversation.

“You're a Canadian? I knew some Canadians in the war.”³ One of them had a name like yours.” He pronounced the name with the correct French accent. “I liked him. He was a very funny man. He was a prisoner assigned to work at the base where I was. We got to know each

other pretty well, because the work was light, and the prisoners, well, they were airmen like us before they were prisoners. Besides, they never tried to escape.”

I saw Sergio was wearing a pin in the lapel of his baggy, dark blue suit jacket. He kept up standards; he always wore a suit and a tie. The pin looked like a small medal of some sort. I wanted to ask about his war adventures, but people were sometimes leery about recounting war stories. Listening to discussions of history and politics I sometimes got the idea that there had been no Fascists in Italy and that it had all been a huge mistake, as if thirty million people motivated by the highest feelings of liberty and democracy had entered the wrong room at a hotel wedding reception. By some accounts, everyone had been in the Resistance fighting the Germans, only through some organisational oversight there had been a shortage of uniforms and some had had to make do with black shirts. Only a few people admitted openly to having been fascists.

“I was commanding officer of the air force base here and we were given a few prisoners to work around the base. That’s how I got to know these Canadians. The detachment we were given, maybe twenty men, most were Canadians who had flown with the British before being shot down. I got to know them and we would swap stories and play cards in the evenings. We even brought in local girls for them!” He chuckled. “They were okay. Their work was light. Just cleaning, mostly, so they didn’t create any problems. They had it cushy compared to a lot of other prisoners and they knew it. The air force always had plenty of food and other things compared to the army. We were the elite.” The pride in his voice was apparent.

“What did you do after the war?” Normally this was not a question I would have asked, but something in the man’s proud wearing of his former insignia and telling of his position gave me confidence.

“Hah! You can imagine. As a former fascist I was of course expelled from the air force and not allowed to have any government jobs, such as flying for the government or for Alitalia, so I decided to travel. I’m not trying to excuse myself, mind you, but I wasn’t a real fascist. I didn’t believe all the propaganda shit (*stronzate*). I joined because I loved to fly. Anyway, I went

to Africa. Before the war I had been with the air force in Abyssinia. I loved Africa and I got to know some of the Ethiopians we were supposed to civilise with our bombs. I got to know some of the locals because, well, we had local women. They were beautiful. I started regretting the fighting, but lucky for me the other war,” in Europe, he meant, “broke out just in time. I was promoted to base commander and from this base we flew missions over Yugoslavia. Anyway, that was all over after the war, and I decided to go back to Africa. I couldn’t go back to Abyssinia, obviously, so I decided to try my chances in West Africa, just to see what it was like. I was a pilot, no longer a good one since I had mostly organised things for years and did little flying, but I still had my engineering background and thought there must be work for someone like me over there. But when I got to Nigeria, I liked the name, it sounds almost Italian,” the laugh lines around his mouth seemed to deepen slightly, “so that’s where I decided to stay. But there was no work for even a second-rate pilot so I got a job doing some surveying for an English oil exploration company.”

Sergio led an eventful life in West Africa, judging by one elaborate story he told, of his being mistaken by strangers for the ghost of a murdered Englishman. Eventually, he came back to the area where he had been happiest, Pescara, site of the former air force base he had commanded. There he found an old friend, Armando, the owner of the shop and master of decorative figurines, who had been his cook on the base during the war.

Pietro was in his late sixties when I first met him in 1988 (this conversation took place in 2000). Over the years we knew each other, he talked enthusiastically about two things: his prize bulls and the war. At first, I was not so impressed by his war stories since I dismissed them as another example of an old man reliving his glory years. Pietro, however, was a happy, active man. He was a rich and successful landowner who managed his estates well. He had a law degree but never practised. He had even been a mayor of the small town outside Rome where he now spent more and more time. In his heart, he was still a monarchist who believed that Italy had been

better off before the war when a king had embodied the hierarchy of privilege in which he believed because of his elite family background and education. In fact, I understood that in the zealous climate of post-War anti-fascism, his was an unpopular position for a lawyer practising in the institutional culture of the nation but a valid stance for someone claiming high status in the *patria*, the moral community.

“I remember during the war when I was courting Luisa [his wife, an heiress from an old landowning family]. She and her parents had left Rome to come and live here in the countryside because conditions were better. There was always some food available from the peasants. I stayed in Rome to take care of my parents, who were too old to move, and also because I was still finishing my studies [at the university]. Conditions were tough, I guess, but not so much for us since we had money and could always buy stuff from the black market [chuckles]. If you had money, you could always get something, everything; there was always meat, eggs, oil, bread. Poor people had to make do with ration coupons, and there was never enough food, especially near the end [1943-4] when the Germans were taking nearly everything for themselves. We used to buy more than we needed to give it to some friends and neighbours who were facing tough times, to help out. Luisa’s family lived in the same neighbourhood [Prati, an upper middle class area built after Unification] so that’s how we met. Our families were friends.”⁴

“Obviously, there were no trains or buses to San Giovanni [a fictional name] where Luisa was staying. There was a [local] train, you know the line, it’s no longer used, but you needed a military pass to take it. Basically, there was no civilian travel. I wasn’t in the army because, well, at that point, there was almost no army left, and I had a student deferment. By the time I was eligible to be called up [1944], the Germans were gone and the country was collapsing.

[During the German occupation in the latter part of 1943 till summer 1944], you could move around in the city – there were still trams and a few buses – but no way of going to see Luisa on the weekends. At first, I rode a bicycle to see her. Sixty kilometres! It took me the better part of a day just to get here. You know it’s mostly uphill, and the roads were bad and full of

[German] army trucks and checkpoints, because the Resistance was ambushing them, cutting the telephone wires, planting bombs in the road. In fact, that first time, I never made it! I was stopped by a German checkpoint just 2 kilometres outside the town. I didn't argue, because I didn't want to get in trouble. I just rode back to Rome and barely made it before the curfew. I tried again next weekend and the weekend after that. This time, at the same checkpoint, there happened to be a Lieutenant with the enlisted men. When they stopped me, I gave them my papers and explained I was going to see my *fidanzata*. Luckily, the Lieutenant had a few words of Italian, and I spoke some German, so he understood. I told him I was in love, what could I do? I had to see my fiancée! He smiled. I guess I got on his good side by mentioning love. Anyway, from that point on, I got a pass that got me by the checkpoint. I forgot to mention that the Germans had set up a small military base at San Giovanni to protect the highway going north. As it turned out he [the German] knew Luisa's family, because they were prominent, so I guess he believed my story, especially since the bicycle convinced him I was truly in love! He gave me some cigarettes, and we smoked together. Then, later, he even gave me a pass that got me onto an army truck from Rome, so I could come up and see Luisa whenever I wanted. I would get in the back with the soldiers or the cargo or whatever, and just jump out when they got to the village. I would go to the checkpoint when I wanted to go back to Rome, and the soldiers would flag down a truck and get me a lift. I would talk to the soldiers. They were glad to talk to an Italian who spoke German, some, anyway. They were okay. They didn't hate us. Most of them had no idea why they were here; they had to obey orders like everyone else."

Pietro was clearly relishing this story. "We would smoke and chat. You know, now the trip only takes less than an hour from Rome, but back then the roads were bad, and sometimes there was lots of traffic from the army trucks, and we stopped every few kilometres for a checkpoint. It would take two or maybe three hours, so we'd talk and smoke in the back.

"What did you talk about?"

“Everything! Those boys were only soldiers, about my age, but they were much better educated than most of Italian boys of the same age. At first, because I was ‘the *fidanzato*’ the guy going to see his girlfriend, we talked about girls. They missed their girlfriends, too. Some were married and showed me pictures of their wives and children back home. You know, those photos were like pictures you carry around in your wallet here. They’re always the same; the girl in front of a house with maybe a baby in her arms, or sometimes in a park with a pond in the background. Believe it or not, we would also talk about art and music. Most of them adored classical music and museums. They weren’t allowed to visit the museums in Rome, because soldiers weren’t supposed to fraternise. Officers, they could go anywhere. They missed their weekly symphonies in Germany, so we would talk about the lives of the great composers, German composers, of course, but they listened when I told them about Italians like Verdi and Puccini. A few of them knew Italian music, but they had been taught that it was inferior. Well, it certainly wasn’t as majestic as Beethoven, say, but it was good. Our music was about love and sun! I never got to get them to listen to some [Italian music] because in those days we only had those huge phonographs. They were good boys.”

This same Lieutenant who had given Pietro his pass, it turned out, had had two young locals shot when they were caught cutting telephone wires at night. I had heard this story from other sources. I asked Pietro about the incident. His tone changed. He seemed less jocular, even mad. “These two, they were *disgraziati* [a euphemism for poor, uneducated and unlucky]. I knew them. Two peasant boys. They were too simple to have come up with this plan [to cut the wires]. They were put up to it by some local member of the resistance, who played on their naivety [*ingenuità*], promising them they’d get in with the bigshots [in the resistance] if they could prove themselves.”

“Did you try to speak to the Lieutenant to see if they could be released?”

“No. It was useless. They were caught red-handed. He [the Lieutenant] later told me later that he had no choice, there were standing orders about that sort of thing. The Germans had put

up posters everywhere warning people there would be reprisals for sabotage, but you know, those boys probably couldn't even read. It would have made no difference. [angry tone:] Those resistance people, they got those boys shot. What did they think they would accomplish? Cut telephone wires happened all the time, the Germans repaired the lines quickly. It was only a minor inconvenience for them. They had radios in any case. And besides, there were no real military operations in this area. It was just transport from Rome to Germany, to the north in any case. [jocular tone:] That Lieutenant, he was a good man, kind. Once I gave him a record with some opera. He would give me some bread or chocolate, 'for your *fidanzata*', he would say! I got through the war seeing Luisa and finishing my studies. One day, the Germans left [in early June 1944] and went North. I never saw him again. Didn't have a chance to say goodbye. And now, we've been married for 50 years!"

Vittorio was a retired university professor who I met through his son, also a professor. Vittorio was still sometimes quoted in the press; his speciality was sociology. In the 1990s, he still wrote, though he had retired from the university.

"You know, I was a prisoner of war in Germany. They were supposed to be our allies, the Germans, but after 1943 [the Armistice, 8 September 1943] my unit was disarmed and shipped off to Germany, to work in the camps. Every last one of us! They asked us to join them, but everyone in my unit refused, probably not for ideological reasons but because most of the boys were lonely and scared and wanted to return to their families. They treated us badly. I ended up in a camp near Wolfsberg, in Austria. I wasn't so badly off, I guess, because I was an officer. I was separated from my men. I protested, but it did no good. I felt guilty for the rest of the war because I got better treatment than my men. I don't know where they ended up, but it couldn't have been a good place. The Germans exploited Italians; well, everybody: Poles, Russians, they were slaves. You know, the Germans really thought of them as inferior and worked them to death. We Italians got off relatively lightly because they thought we were buffoons, but not so bad as the Slavs.

Where I was, the work was light. We sewed new uniforms and patched old ones. Yes, that's how bad the war was, even Germans took the uniforms off their dead soldiers to give them to young recruits. In my camp, there were mostly Americans and a few Canadians. Mostly airmen, because in 1943 the American army still hadn't landed in [mainland] Italy. Well, I'll never forget. I was given a bunk, like everyone else. That camp had been there since the '30s, for the Poles, then the French and British. I'll never forget that bunk. Someone had scratched the wood in French, "Oh! Que je rêve la neige du Canada" [Oh, how I dream of the snows of Canada]. Obviously, some French Canadian had occupied the bunk before me. I often wondered what had happened to him. Maybe he died, because once you were in a camp, you didn't get transferred, and people died all the time, from dysentery and other illnesses. We were cold and hungry all the time. There was little food. Most of the time we had just some watery soup, and if you were lucky you got a piece of rotten potato or some hunk of gristle in your bowl, and sometimes a piece of bread. It wasn't very good, too. I think they were putting sawdust in the flour at that point [*Ersatzbrot* made with potato starch and sawdust became well known after the war as a symbol of the prisoners' lot]. We got up early, we worked throughout the day, there were roll calls every few hours, we didn't know when we'd be called, and we had to line up in the cold outside [this was the winter of 1944-5]. Sometimes the Germans took their time calling out the names, just to make us suffer. But the cold made me think of that saying. I always remembered it, and whenever I was cold and depressed and missing my family, I would think of the snows of Canada! I never visited Canada till the 1970s, so I imagined the fresh, virgin white snow like a blanket, hiding and protecting everything. I could see snowbound villages in my head, with smoke curling out of the chimneys against the steel-blue sky, with the roofs all covered in a thick layer of snow. I could even hear crows cawing in my mind, and a forest in the distance with snow covered pine trees. Christmas! It was always Christmas in my mind! Whenever I looked around at the grey slush and mud that surrounded us, I would think of that saying and cheer up. Even after the war, I was nostalgic [in Italian: 'I had nostalgia'] for Canada and for snow. It took me years to visit, for a conference, and

when I got there, I was disappointed because of course it wasn't winter, it was late summer, and there was no snow, and in any case it was a big city, not a small village, as you can imagine! You know, here in Rome it doesn't really snow, maybe once in a lifetime, so I would always miss snow, my whole life. Strange, come to think about it, I never took up skiing as a young man!"

Domenico was only a child during the war. He lived in a village about 25 kilometres north of San Giovanni, where Pietro and Luisa had their estates. I met him in the late 1980s, and sporadically ran into him in the 1990s. Unlike the highly educated Sergio (engineer and pilot), and upper-class Pietro (lawyer) and Vittorio (university professor), Domenico was uneducated and barely able to read. His Italian was punctuated with dialect, mispronounced and even invented words. He was unmarried and lived with his aged mother and younger sister, who he had had declared mentally unfit by a local doctor so she could stay at home with a small government disability pension and take care of the family, meaning him. Domenico was a master mason, a great stonecutter and builder, and he had done some work for the doctor, probably for a discount or for free, so the doctor was happy to oblige and transform the sister into an indentured servant. It happened at least 30 years before I met him, so I got the stories second hand, although Domenico didn't mind at all talking about how the doctor declared his sister to be mentally unfit so she had to stay home (and get a government pension). Though we saw each other sporadically for many years, Domenico and I talked a lot over a three week period when I stayed with him as an apprentice mason in 1989. At first, I was surprised by Domenico's chattiness about other subjects and by his silence whenever I asked a technical question. Part of being an apprentice is to listen to the *maestro's* stories to pick up any piece of useful knowledge by observation and by copying, because masters are notoriously stingy with their knowledge, expecting the successful apprentice to 'steal' it from him as proof of their 'quality'. This practice provides a protective blanket if the apprentice later becomes as well-known and knowledgeable as his master, who can then brag about 'his' apprentice's skills while retaining his superiority as a master who was

‘robbed’ of his knowledge; hence, the former apprentice’s talents are seen as an inferior imitation of the master’s tradecraft or at least an outgrowth of the ‘stolen’ knowledge.⁵

Domenico was rarely nostalgic about the past. Of course, as a poor peasant in wartime Italy, he probably had fewer positive memories with which to feed the nostalgia machine. However, once when we were sitting and smoking on a pile of stones on a break, he started to speak, unprompted, about his childhood. “You know, my very first taste of chocolate was from a piece a German soldier gave me. I had never tasted chocolate before. I was 8 or 9, I forget, but we were so poor that I didn’t even know that such a thing existed. It was delicious. He [the German] smiled at me. In those days, I was really skinny [after years of dayling stones, he was now robust]. There was no food during the war, and my family didn’t have much land. I was just hanging around the street playing ball with my friends, except the ball was a bundle of straw tied up with an old shirt and string, because we didn’t have a real ball. Maybe he felt sorry for me. He looked at us for a minute or two and called us over. We didn’t speak German, but I knew what *kommen* meant. My friends ran away, but I went. That’s when he gave me the chocolate. He smiled, and I ran away and ate it for hours, hidden in the cellar in the basement⁶ so I wouldn’t have to share.”

Maria was a woman in her thirties when I met her in the late 1980s. She had been born in the 1950s. Her family was well off and, as Romans say, genteel (*perbene*). Her father had been an important architect, and she had become a well-regarded university professor of Classical Studies. She had not known the war, and her family had not suffered greatly, it seemed. True, her father lost contracts and his position because of his disdain for the fascists, but the family had land and important contacts with the Vatican that were not affected by fascist policies. “We always had lots of food during the war, because my father had money for black market goods, and we had sources in the Vatican that gave us access to the store there, where there’s always food at excellent prices. You never see skinny priests!”

At first, I thought that her stories about the war were just desultory tea-time conversation. Romans often talk about the past. Then, I realised that of course these wartime stories were not memories. This was not nostalgia for happier times. She was a privileged child of the 1960s. She had not been born at the time of the events she recounted. Nonetheless, her stories about her own life were always framed by references to the war and to the *ventennio*.

“How do you know so much about the war?”

“My parents always talked about it. In fact, everybody in that generation talked about it for years, even now. My godfather in particular is a real treasure trove of information! It’s sort of odd, really, because although he was my father’s best friend, his family had murky [*oscura*] origins. They were poor working class originally, but his mother had the good luck,” this was said in an ironic tone, “to have I think it was 13 children. Or at least to have 13 survive. So she was regarded as a heroine of the nation [by the Fascist government], and the family was given land in the countryside. In fact, it was an estate not far from ours [near San Giovanni] that the fascists had confiscated from the original owners, who were royalists. They gave it to *Dottor San Filippo*’s family [the godfather’s name; Maria never referred to him by his first name, and used the formal title *dottore* to indicate that he had a university degree and, as it turned out, to distance herself from the man while indicating closeness; only intimates can call each other by their family name], so my father and him got to know each other. You know, in the countryside, the rules are more relaxed [than in Rome]. Whenever we visited our estates in San Giovanni, we [she and her brothers and sisters] always played with the peasant children. The San Filippo’s weren’t peasants as such, but normally in Rome we wouldn’t have known them; different circles. But here we could. So my father and San Filippo used to hunt together when they were spending summers here, and they became friends, and so he became my godfather.” The godfather link is particularly strong in Italy, especially among traditional bourgeois families such as Maria’s.

“I grew up with all sorts of stories from San Filippo. You know, after the war, he worked as head of a major government office, but before that he bought a hotel with money he made

during the war, don't ask me how, and had it completely renovated. My father got the contract. You know, that hotel became the basis of his power. Instead of chasing away the whores like other high class hotels did, he would send out his busboys with coffee for them. He would invite them in for a drink at the bar if they had no clients so they could relax and take their shoes off. He would even buy them fine clothes so they could seem like classy guests out for a stroll. Obviously, he got to know them and plied them for gossip. He learned who their clients were. He knew where all the skeletons were buried! He would approach a politician and say hello to him in a slightly familiar tone, like, "Oh, good morning Dottor X". It's the 'oh' that always did it, as if he was recognising an old acquaintance. Naturally, the politician would say, sorry, I don't think we've met. "Oh," he would reply, "I thought I saw you at my hotel last night", or whenever. "Obviously, I'm mistaken. My apologies." Of course, the person had been there, even though San Filippo hadn't seen him personally, but the whores had. So he [the politician] knew he was caught, and doors would open. He [San Filippo] got a lot of government contracts that way, including his position as head of X [an important government office]. Later, he gave me my first job. So, he was my godfather and my boss and my father's best friend. Our families are neighbours in San Giovanni [though not in Rome]. I heard stories all the time. During the war, it was a special time. People helped one another. San Filippo himself hid Jews in his house. I asked him about it once. You know, I vote Left, and San Filippo, well, he's a fascist. He doesn't care about anyone except his family and us. He'd vote for Stalin if he could profit from it. So I was surprised when he mentioned about hiding Jews because he never hid his sympathy for the fascists. You know what he said? "Yes, I don't like Jews." Imagine! [*figuriamoci*, 'go figure']. He said that. "But they were *our* Jews, and they were my friends, and no Germans were going to tell us what to do with our Jews." Maria was now smiling broadly.

Obviously, Maria is not referring directly to the war, but the stories of her happy childhood and lucky first job relate directly to someone whose initial fortunes were made during the war and whose post-War power was firmly entrenched in the State-sponsored culture of

corruption. Maria's memories are framed by San Filippo's fascist outlook, and his family's rise to power and riches was due to fascist policies that gave him the means, eventually, to squeeze politicians by blackmail. Maria was clearly tickled by her indirect brush with San Filippo's shady dealings. Her nostalgic reminiscing about her own happy childhood playing with peasant children while in the countryside on her family's estates was framed by San Filippo's accidental presence in the same countryside that became a family tie, a semiotic leap to his greasy urban manoeuvres, which normally would be anathema to her and to her Left-leaning socialist sympathies and genteel upbringing.

Francesco, a high school math teacher, was born in wartime, in 1944 during the German occupation of Rome, but of course had no memories of the war. He is a dapper, elfin man, with steel-blue eyes and now with snow-white hair. "When I was young, I was blond. My hair was always very light, and I have blue eyes. I'm the only one in my family. All the rest, my brother and two sisters, have brown eyes and brown hair. I remember when I was 4 or 5, my uncle teased my mother at a family gathering, that I had blond hair and blue eyes because the Germans [*Tedeschi*] were in Rome when I was conceived. I remember everyone laughed. It became a family joke, that I was the son of a *Tedesco* [German], that I was blond because the *Tedeschi* had been in Rome. I was always singled out, so of course I loved the attention, even though I didn't understand any of it, Germans or conception or anything, but I was the centre of attention! Well, one day when my mother was taking me somewhere by tram, some woman cried out, 'Isn't he cute! So blond! Why are you so blond?' It was obviously a rhetorical question, but I was only 6 or 7, so I yelled out, '*Perche c'erano i Tedechi!*' [Because the 'Joymans' were here!].⁷ Can you imagine the reaction? Remember, this was about 1950 or so, the war hadn't been that long ago. No one laughed. My mother stared out the window. We got out at the next stop and took the next tram. Later, she told me never to repeat this again. I didn't understand, but she was mad! I think she was ready to slap me, but she didn't. When I think about it, that little missing 'S' [in

Tedeschi] made all the difference, because people figured I had overheard some whispered family gossip that I was too young to interpret, so I must be blurting out the truth. When I was older, I learned that one of my great-grandfathers was a tall northerner, from the Alpine region, and I inherited my blond hair and blue eyes from him. Not his height, though! [laughs] Anyway, that tram story became more popular than my uncle's teasing, and people started to laugh at the 'Tedechi' in family meetings for years. It took my mother a long time to laugh about my 'Tedechi'! Fifty years later, people still ask me if I know any 'Joymans'! I named my son Federico, and some of my friends call him 'Tederico'!"

¹ On the cult of Mussolini as *ubermensch*, see Falasca-Zamponi (1997:64-88).

² The names are fictitious, and some details have been modified or hidden.

³ Although a seaside town, Abruzzo's mountains are not far from the coast. During the war, the region had been liberated by Canadian troops. To this day, small bottles of beer are called *canadesi*.

⁴ It is Luisa's well-heeled family who in fact had access to black market goods, which Pietro does not mention.

⁵ Michael Herzfeld describes the same practice in a Cretan village in *The Body Impolitic* (2003). Over the years, we have had several conversations about the subject; I am deeply indebted to him for sharing his wisdom.

⁶ This was a cantina, where wine is made and stored. In the village, many have been dug into the live rock over many generations, and some extend well beyond the confines of the house, which can sometimes lead to property disputes between neighbours. They are indivisible and cannot be sold apart from the house, while houses can be sold without the *cantina*. They are symbols of permanency and wealth. Dominico's was very big; in fact, his family was poor during the war because his father had died and there was no one to work the land. Otherwise, Dominico's family were rich peasants, and he had reputedly accumulated a fortune over the years, especially since he never married.

⁷ "Tedechi" means nothing in Italian; it is merely a childish mispronunciation of *Tedeschi*.