

SAMPLE PAGES:

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PASSAGE TWO (IN FLORENCE: BUYING A NEW BIKE, DISCOVERING THE TRUTH ABOUT THE GERMAN OCCUPATION IN WW II, DISCOVERING MOVIES ON ITALY IN WWII) pp. 56-60

PASSAGE THREE (IN FLORENCE, THEN SIENA: TAKING BEL CANTO LESSONS WITH SIGNORA DEL VIVO, VISIT TO SIENA, CLIMBING THE TORRE DEL MANGIA, VISIT TO THE MAIN ART GALLERY) pp. 174-178

Introduction

THE SOURCES OF THIS BOOK AND HOW IT CAME TO BE

The material in this book comes from a bundle of about fifty letters written in 1960-61 when I was studying in Florence thanks to a scholarship from the Italian government. The letters were written to my fiancée who stayed in Vancouver to pursue her studies at UBC (the University of British Columbia). During the first few months in Italy I missed her badly and tried to persuade her to join me. To my chagrin these efforts were in vain. Nevertheless I kept sending her detailed letters of my life in Italy. My purpose was to keep the flame of love alive; it was also to record my experiences and reflect on them. I returned to Vancouver to discover that she had found a new love but that's another story and not mine for the telling. I respect her privacy and won't give her name; I have also omitted all passages of a very private nature.

Around November of 1960 my fiancée got the bright idea of culling highlights from my letters, typing them up, and circulating them among friends and professors with whom we had studied. Dr. Grant, the professor of Latin whom I write fondly about in my letters was one of them. Dr. Rachel Giese of the Italian department was another. When I realized who was reading my letters I took extra care with them. According to my fiancée they enjoyed reading of my

adventures. This got me thinking: Hmm, maybe one day, with lots of revision, they could be made into a book. I could even add photos to make it more interesting.

Many years passed by. I got involved in my career. I took early retirement (1995) and started a new career as a writer and publisher. I wrote *Great songs for the English Classroom*, *Hot tips for real estate investors*, *Italian for the Opera*, *Operatic Italian* and *Love songs in Spanish for Enjoyment and learning*. I also published two books by my great-uncle, George Godwin (1889-1974): *The Eternal Forest* and *Why stay we here?* (a memoir about World War I). The next book on my agenda was this one on my year in Italy. I would have been astounded if anyone in 1960-1 had told me that I would publish it in 2017, fifty-six years later.

As for the graphics in this book, I am glad that I kept photos of most of the people I got to know in Italy. You will find them throughout the book. I have also included photos to illustrate many of the things that impressed me: cities, buildings, paintings, sculpture, movies, books and landscapes. Many of the photos I have taken from a handsome tome called *Il Paesaggio italico nella Divina Commedia* (Italian Landscape in the Divine Comedy). Written about 1910, its stark black and white photos reflect well the old Italy that I was getting to know in 1960-1.

Several things in this book were added in 2017: most of the photos, some comments in the text (these have been highlighted with brackets) and the copious footnotes. The footnotes often contain lengthy reflections on issues raised in the original letters.

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impressed with the Parmigianino, of which I sent you a copy. Like the Palazzo Pitti gallery in Florence, the Villa Borghese is crammed with Roman and Greek statues and Renaissance paintings in no apparent order. On the ceiling are frescoes of biblical scenes. I was touched by a statue to Lord Byron with a quotation (with which I agree heartily) chiselled in the stone:

*Italy, the garden of the world and the heart of all that art
can offer.*

Thence to the zoo, where I walked for miles and saw all kinds of strange animals. I fed a giraffe by hand, and as I did so felt the end of his tongue swoop down onto the back of my hand. Its tongue must be a foot and a half long. Weird. *Strano!* At the entrance they had two lion cubs and you could get your photo taken with them. I was very tempted but it cost too much. They were darlings. Other things of interest: eagles, cobras, pythons, crocodiles, strange baboons, camels—about every animal you can name, some four thousand varieties.

What I am going to say might sound really weird but here goes! Before I came to Italy (or Britain too) I think at some obscure, unidentifiable level I was not entirely one hundred per cent convinced that the ancient world actually had existed. In my mind it seemed a bit academic, unreal, and unconvincing. Oh, I had read about it and it *seemed* real but not *absolutely* real beyond any doubts or misgivings. I would never have admitted this to anyone because it sounds a bit loopy but I think it represents the truth of how I saw things. Maybe it has something to do with

having spent my whole life up to now in a pretty remote, relatively recently settled corner of North America. What I am trying to get at here is that in Italy I have experienced things at a gut level, with real physical contact: I have walked in the Colosseum and touched its walls, I have pushed the great door of the Pantheon open with little more than a tap, I have walked the Via Sacra along which Julius Caesar rode in triumph to celebrate his conquest of Gaul. I see myself a little like “Doubting Thomas” who could only be convinced of Christ’s wounds by touching them with his fingers. At the moment I harbor no doubts whatever about the reality of these ancient civilizations. I have changed and it has come about through real physical contact. My experiences in Italy are confirming everything I ever read about her ancient past.



*Dr. Leonard Grant,
professor of Latin,
UBC*

I am so glad that we took those two years of Latin with Professor Grant. As I wander around Rome I think from time to time of the things he spoke of: how the slingers from the Balearics carved insults in the lead projectiles that they slung at their enemy; how graffiti by illiterates gives us an important clue as to how Latin was probably pronounced; his detailed description of the swords, spears, armor, etc. used by Roman soldiers; how Caesar in Spain almost had a mutiny on his hands when he ran out of pasta for his troops.

Dr. Grant is easily the best teacher I have been lucky enough to study with, ever. For me he represents the high degree of learning and the clear kind of presentation that I want to achieve. Maybe it's significant that he taught Latin in high schools before teaching at UBC. I especially appreciate the way he spent five minutes or so at the beginning of each class reviewing the previous day's lesson. It kept everything fresh in my mind. [9]

Here in Rome what has impressed me the most is the Pantheon, a colossal Pagan temple. It's located in a congested part of the city, with narrow streets and few, if any, wide vistas. So you are walking along one of these narrow streets and all of a sudden, Wham! you see the Pantheon. What surprises you is that it appears intact, as opposed to most buildings from ancient Rome which are more or less in ruins. To enter it you push an enormous steel door (twenty feet high? twelve inches thick?) but you don't have to push hard. Just a few fingers will do. This is *really* impressive. What kind of architects were these ancient Romans that they could make this possible? Then you go inside and you look up at the round aperture and through it pours a river of daylight which illuminates the many statues, pagan and Christian, which are located around the inside perimeter. How wise of the Romans to choose a name that no god (except the Jewish and Christian one) could take offense at. Now there's the practical mind at work: the safe approach. More than anything I've seen (with the possible exception of the Colosseum) the Pantheon gives you a feeling of what Rome was like at its peak: its beauty, its grandeur, its mystery.



The Pantheon

Rome's modern history is also interesting. Natch! I had seen photographs and film footage of Mussolini standing on the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia and orating to hundreds of thousands of Italians on the square below him. The other day I stood in that gigantic square, looked up at the balcony and imagined what it must have been like to be there in June 1940 when he pledged to fight alongside Germany. I could almost hear him. It gave me a strange feeling.

Yesterday I spent several hours reading CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation] news reports at the Canadian Consulate. I wonder if one can subscribe to them. They are quite informative. The vice-consul was a French-Canadian, a very nice guy and easy to talk to. It is strange how my thinking about Canada seems to have changed now that I am in Italy. From here Canada seems somehow more unified, whole, and not a series of regions

spread out from coast to coast who don't really know each other well. Also, and I don't know why this is, I think I am now far prouder of my country than I used to be. I am convinced that a deep love of our native land is not just a tradition which we are brainwashed with but a vital, worthwhile emotion which is like blood for our heart. The next time I hear "Oh, Canada!" played I will sing it with love and pride. I miss Canada at times: big things like having my own car and little things like the White Spot Triple O hamburgers and being able to take a good long hot shower whenever you like. [10] But there's a vitality in Italian life that is missing in Canada. You sense it walking down the street, in the proud way that people walk, the care and style with which they dress, the way they tend to express openly their emotions. Then there's the colors of the market, the book stalls—even little things like walking along a back street and hearing through an open window some music lover practicing the piano or violin. I shall miss these things when I am back in Canada. I am leaving for Florence in the morning. I plan to find suitable digs and enroll at the university.

for only fifty lire (eight cents) each. The libretto Italian is often very antiquated and hard to follow, especially the one to *Il Trovatore*. [13]



World War II. Italian partisans fighting in San Frediano

The other day I bought a much better bike. Thank God! The old one was a real clunker. This one is a real racing bike and painted a lovely robin's egg blue. It just flies! Three gears! And only 12,500 Lire (\$20.) I bought it from Ede's niece's husband, Signor Sgherzi, a friendly guy who makes fine furniture in his big workshop on the Lungarno a mile or so down the river from me. He specializes in *genuine* eighteenth century French furniture.

When I went to pick the bike up at his shop I noticed some scary photos on the wall. These showed a group of Italians, (men, women and children) with hands up and

frightened faces being herded by very tough-looking, armed German soldiers towards a ditch where they will all be shot. This happened near here out in the countryside somewhere. You get a horrible feeling of helplessness and terror looking at photos like this but it's the reality of what happened in 1943 when Italy capitulated and the Germans took over. These photos were framed and they were up on that wall to honor the dead. No hiding the horrors of the war for these people! They lost friends and family. Maybe the most terrifying thing about those days is that people often couldn't tell whether they were talking with an anti-fascist partisan or a Fascist. I have heard that to avenge themselves for one German soldier killed the Germans would kill twenty or more people, often chosen at random. Twenty Italians would be rousted out of their homes then herded off somewhere, shot and left to rot in large hole in the ground. The brilliant Florentine, Machiavelli, would have seen the logic to it: if you can't rule by love, use terror. I have found an excellent magazine with authentic photos of the civil war in Florence (1943-44) and will show it to you when I come home. It's hard to imagine that these horrible things happened just sixteen years ago. I looked carefully at Signor Sgherzi's photos but didn't comment or pry because I thought it might be something personal that he definitely would not want to talk about with a stranger.

This spring I hope to take many trips with this bike into the Tuscan countryside. So many little hamlets and green valleys to explore!

[A note from 2017: The photo below is similar to the one I saw in Signor Sgherzi's workshop. The sign says *Sono*

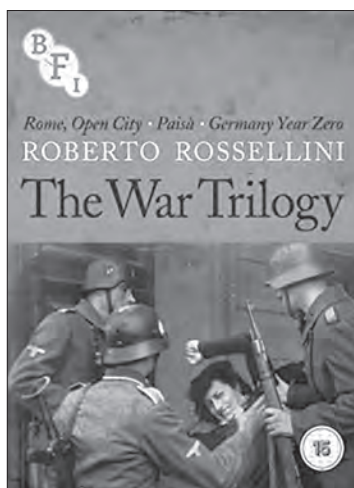
questi i liberatori d'Italia oppure sono i banditi? (Are these the liberators of Italy or are they bandits?) Some of these young men were probably partisans, some deserters from the Italian armed forces.] [14]



Italians being led out of town to be shot

I have seen two powerful movies on Italy in World War II and they are both 'musts'. The first is *Roma, Città Aperta* which gives a good idea of how the Nazis operated, especially how their agents weasled information out of naive Italians by pretending to be their friends, or simply had them tortured. The title is ironic: the city is not open in any sense; it is entirely under the Germans' brutal control. The second movie is *Paisà*, a series of six stories (or better, vignettes), of the allied army as it makes its way up the peninsula: the south coast of Sicily, Naples, Rome, Florence, a monastery somewhere in the mountains, and finally the marshy area of the lower Po River. The segment that takes place in Florence really fascinated me because it

was shot right here during the war. This is one of the things that makes the Italian “neo-realist” movies so powerful—much of the footage was filmed under the very nose of the German army. Anyway, see them if you can! The director of both is Roberto Rossellini who was once married to Ingrid Bergman.



I enjoyed your last letter. Strange that you should suggest we try thought exchanges from a distance. I thought of this same idea just the other day. Let's experiment with this as soon as I find out the exact time difference. I think it might be eight hours.

Thanks so much for typing up extracts from these letters and showing them to a few of our friends, including several university professors (Yikes!). I simply have not had much time to write anyone other than you. In times to come these letters will serve as a reminder of my year in Italy and, who knows? maybe they will become the source of a book. I wonder if there are other students who have chronicled their year's stay in another country.

Right now I can hear Gino practicing scales on his violin at breakneck speed. Very impressive. The training at the Naples Conservatory must be very intense.

March 22, 1961

Hello, my Love,

The singing lessons are so much fun. The Maestra was telling me that she had a student once (a bass) who had only one good note, but it was a wonderful note and she could see what it might become. So they worked on exercises for a few years and at the end of that time he had the voice of a real opera singer, a good one, and his range was a couple of octaves. Yesterday I arrived a bit early for a lesson and she was just finishing a lesson with her nephew who is in his mid-twenties, tall and slim, with a goatee. He's a real basso and they were going through the part of Ramfis, the high priest in *Aida*. So powerful is his voice that with certain phrases the whole apartment shook and glasses rattled in the cupboard (my hair just about stood on end, and my eyes bulged out of their sockets!).

Si, corre voce che l'Etiopie ardisca sfidarci ancora,
*Yes, the rumor is circulating that the Ethiopian is daring to
challenge us again,*

E del Nilo la valle, e Tebe minacciar.
And threaten the valley of the Nile and Thebes.

Talk about attentive and exacting! I am allowed to get away with *niente, nothing*. Not one incorrect note. She also has a great imagination (with humor) and will say (We always speak in Italian) things like. "Roberto, sing it again

and this time look out the window and pretend that your voice must carry across the Arno to Piazzale Michelangelo!” Or she’ll say, “Roberto, fetch that silver plate and we’ll use it as a mirror.” Then she proceeds to point out something amiss in my breathing or pronunciation. We get along famously. She is such a classic Florentine: articulate, quick-witted, and a bit blunt and satirical. Her language is spiced up with imagery and colorful slang. These lessons are not cheap, but I am really fortunate to have found a teacher of her caliber.

On Saturday I took the train to Siena as part of my “Get to know Tuscany” series. As we headed south to Siena I could see far to the east the fourteen towers of San Gimignano. They look mysterious and beckoning. I haven’t visited San Gimignano yet but I will. From the train window I saw three peasants dressed in black walking along, one with flowers, looking like phantoms from another century, characters out of *I Promessi Sposi*. How I’d like to stay and work with a peasant family for a few weeks before coming home! They look so industrious and contented in their work. The Tuscan countryside is incredibly beautiful. I could see a few trees already in blossom and it’s getting warm.

On Saturday night I went to a recital of a German soprano at the Chigiana Music Academy, which is apparently famous. Segovia teaches guitar there in the summer. The Siena cathedral is imposing and unusual: gothic with contrasting black and white blocks of marble. I read somewhere that it inspired Wagner’s *Parsifal*. There is a library attached to the cathedral and its walls are frescoed by Pinturicchio. What a beautiful way to decorate a library!



Siena as seen from the north-east

A little old lady with a shawl on her head showed me Ghiberti's and Donatello's works in the baptistry. When I first looked at her I thought that she might be a *contadina* and that I might have a hard time understanding her dialect. To my surprise, when she opened her mouth to speak her Italian was crystal clear and like something out of a textbook. Maybe it's for good reason that I have heard people say that the Senesi speak the purest Italian. She was so thankful when I gave her a one hundred lira tip. I was glad to give it to her.



Siena: Piazza del Campo and the Torre del Mangia

Sunday I climbed the three hundred fifty foot *Torre del Mangia* (part of the Palazzo Pubblico or town hall) in the center of the city. The tower dwarfs any I have seen in Italy. I went up hundreds of winding, worn, and slippery steps, craning and dodging to avoid knocking my noggin against protruding parts of the staircase, stooping for low passageways, and every once in a while catching sudden

and unexpected glimpses of the countryside though small holes in the thick walls. Then, finally, air! Sweet, fresh, and spring-like. What a view! I could see all the medieval city with its winding, narrow streets and, in the distance, the green Chianti hills.

The next morning I went to the main gallery which is very rich in thirteenth and fourteenth century painting and a very strange thing happened. As I looked at Lorenzetti's Madonna I suddenly turned aside and saw the city's roofs through the window. The morning was clear and fresh and as the cathedral bells tolled morning mass and birds chirped at the window ledge I looked at the painting again, heard the wind roar and felt as if it had blown away those six centuries and I was standing there in the thirteenth century, gazing at contemporary art. I had such a feeling of the power of nature in that sudden gust of wind and it tied in so mysteriously with the powerful expression of human faith in the painting and the bells tolling mass that it sent shivers down my spine, I tell you.

Siena was Florence's rival for many years and there were horrendous battles between the two cities. To me they seem poles apart: Florence is lively and business-oriented and has markets and stalls all over the place; Siena is quiet and the streets relatively deserted. Maybe it's got something to do with the railway: Florence is located on the main north-south railroad line, Siena isn't. I find the Senesi friendly and accessible.

I've finished reading *Le Petit Prince*. It's a charming book and its wisdom is presented in such an imaginative way. Thanks for suggesting it.