

IGNAZIO SILONE

Literature as the source of new life



Text by

Liliana Biondi, Andrea Paganini and Vincenzo Todisco



Ignazio Silone's roots and native land in his works

by Liliana Biondi *



On page I:
Ignazio Silone in a photo
taken during his exile
in Switzerland (1929-1944).

Left:
Silone in 1968.

This page:
View of Pescina before
the earthquake in 1915.

“While it’s true I’m a citizen of the world, I’m also a man of Abruzzo, and love for one’s native land is something we all carry within us, and it becomes a part of one, wherever one happens to end up living.”

Ignazio Silone

A steep path leads visitors from the centre of Pescina dei Marsi to the grave of Ignazio Silone, which faces south “half way up between the hills and the mountain,” at the foot of the bell tower ruins of the church of San Berardo. His grave is an impressive stone monument with an iron cross standing atop it. An excerpt from Silone’s last will and testament is inscribed on a brass plaque set into the stone: “I would like to be buried at the foot of the old bell tower of San Berardo, in Pescina, with an iron cross atop my grave and with a view of the Fucino Basin in the distance. Ignazio Silone.” Far off is the vast fertile plain of the Fucino Basin, indeed a lovely view.

The “cross,” the Christian symbol of suffering, rebellion and hope; the “old bell tower of San Berardo, in Pescina,” a legendary, religious place in his town of birth; the “Fucino Basin in the distance,” once a lake, drained to become a fertile plain in the Marsica area that the locals all yearned to farm: all simple elements Silone wished to be a part of his final resting place. These elements are symbolic of his deep ties with his native mountainous land and his religious beliefs, founded on a folkloric understanding of Christianity sustained by firm ethical values and a vague, awe-filled hope in an afterlife: “Under the ashes of scepticism, the age-old hope of the Kingdom to come has never died in the hearts of those who suffer; an old belief that charity will one day replace worldly power, the dream of Gioacchino da Fiore, the Spirituals, the Celestines” (*Emergency Exit*).

A final resting place, a place of peace for this man who, while still a teenager, lost his family, his belongings and his home town in the tragic earthquake in Marsica in 1915 and was forced to begin life over again far away. This thus became an existential earthquake for him which was followed by political aftershocks before he finally reached the place that would become his moral homeland, Switzerland. As Silone himself said, “I became a writer in Switzerland, but what is

more important, there I became a man. [...] My moral debt towards this country [...] is so great that I have no hope of ever repaying it. It’s one of those debts that can only be honoured through one’s gratitude, nostalgia and love for the rest of one’s life” (*Memoir from a Swiss Prison*). Ignazio Silone spent his final days and died in Switzerland. All the world now honours his memory, and his reputation and accomplishments have brought fame and prestige to the small town of Pescina, the region of Abruzzo and all of Italy.

Roots

Very few writers are as attached to their native land as Ignazio Silone was to his. In his work it becomes a privileged space for observation and reflection on man’s deeds and abused rights, populated by characters, men and women, who suffer but do not give up, who are down but not out, offended but not without honour – characters always working towards a single goal, whether consciously or not: the liberty to exist as a free, united people. These strong values were instilled in Silone in a rudimentary but unshakable way in his first fifteen years of life.

Silone not only set his stories in the Marsica area, but he also always used the local language and style of narration in his works. His Polish friend and colleague at the *Tempo Presente* paper – the novelist and essayist Gustaw Herling – recalls that Silone once admitted that he “attributed his way of telling stories and writing to his early upbringing. As a boy his mother used to take him with her when she went weaving. He would spend whole days with the women in their weaving room, admiring their weaving skills, one fine thread inserted after another to form a dense, compact cloth. These women didn’t weave in silence: they recounted legends and fables and told stories of life in Abruzzo. Indeed, Silone’s prose has the quality of a piece of woven cloth; it is very sober and concise, yet animated by a narrative vein that he acquired from those women.”

The period to which Herling refers was that of the “monotonous” years, but at the same time they were the serene years of Silone’s childhood. These were the years he spent in Pescina, the mountain town in Abruzzo that looked down over Lake Fucino for centuries until the lake was drained and the land

Pescina inhabitants in emergency tents after the earthquake on 13th January 1915.



reclaimed by the noble Torlonia family, who still owned the reclaimed land when Silone was a child.

Silone was born Secondino Tranquilli in Pescina dei Marsi on the 1st of May 1900 to Paolo Tranquilli (31), a modest landowner, and Marianna Delli Quadri (27), a weaver and cloth dyer – a respectable family with strong socialist convictions and down-to-earth Christian beliefs. Secondino outlived his six siblings: five died in the Abruzzo earthquake, while Romolo, born on the 23rd of May 1904, died in a Fascist prison in 1932. One of Silone's earliest memories, of when he was "only three or four," is that of his weaning from his mother's breast: "I still remember the fear and disgust I felt when I discovered those mysterious stains on my mother's breasts," he wrote in *A Childhood Memory*, where he recounts the "rather devious age-old and highly effective tactic" used by the local women to stop their children breastfeeding. They spread coal dust or some other substance of a repellent colour on their breasts. "That was the first major tragedy in my life," continued the writer. "I was forced to abandon forever those two dear, soft, round, intimate, reliable and sweet things that had until then provided me with easy and wonderful nourishment." His early upbringing was traditional and religious. From his school books, including the "primary textbook," he learned to read. Yet it was the tales told by his elders that he found most interesting, tales told at home, in the squares and at work. The day's news, parables, legends and folktales, as well as talk of

matters too complex for the young child to really grasp: political issues which often aroused his father's "restless" temperament. The young Secondino obviously took after his father, since he was lacking in the qualities of "discretion" and "restraint" which in his day were held in high esteem. As Silone later said, "Even when a young boy, I would hang about in the streets and my best friends were the sons of poor peasants. My tendency to stick my nose in where it wasn't wanted and my ability to strike up spontaneous friendships with the poorest children of my age were bound to get me into trouble."

A good observer of what was going on around him even as a child, the writer later recalled his father's rebellious spirit before an election in the early 1900s in which the winning candidate was a "curious old man" who had come to Pescina from Rome for the sole purpose of reminding people that "a man's vote is secret, but nothing else is." He was strictly honest in his observations, as evidenced in his poignant recounting in the *Visit to a Prisoner* of the time when his father severely rebuked him after he had laughed at the "pitiful yet funny image" of "a small ragged, bare-footed man in handcuffs standing between two Carabinieri," telling him that "one shouldn't laugh at a prisoner, ever, [...] because he can't defend himself. And then he might be innocent. In any case, don't because he is wretched." Silone also noted his father's unwavering solidarity, exemplified by an episode in the same story in which his father and he go to visit the peasant in prison. Refusing all efforts at bargaining, the

prisoner gives Silone a half cigar, the very same that the boy's father had ordered his son to give to the prisoner. Later, at the tender age of only eight, Secondino agreed to write letters to Francesco Zauri, an innocent man wrongly imprisoned, on behalf of the man's mother. This was "the first major event" in his life, as Silone later recalled. He continued to write to the prisoner until the mother's death, who had by then lost all hope of ever seeing her son freed. In his work *Return to Fontamara*, he tells us that each letter took him days to write. His later meeting with the prisoner when a grown man inspired Silone to write his intense and dramatic moral thriller *The Secret of Luca*.

In 1955 in an interview for a French paper, the writer would recall details of the moments immediately following the earthquake: "An old miser, the village money-lender, was sitting on a stone and wrapped in a sheet, much like a shroud. The earthquake had caught him in bed, like so many others. His teeth were chattering with the cold. He was asking people for something to eat. No one helped him. They all said 'Eat your bills of exchange!' And so he died. [...] We witnessed things that turned every aspect of our human condition topsy-turvy. Large families whose only survivor was the idiot son... the once rich man without even a flannel shirt to keep him warm."



Four years after his father's death in 1911, further tragedy struck the family on the 13th of January 1915 when the Avezzano earthquake hit. The violent quake destroyed many towns in the Marsica area, including Pescina, one of the major local towns at the time, and a bishop's seat along with a seminary and grade schools. At the time, Secondino was a student at the lyceum and not quite fifteen years old. His mother died in the earthquake: "She was lying near the fireplace, without any obvious injuries. She was dead." Many hours later, rescuers pulled his brother Romolo out from under the rubble, alive and well. Romolo (11) was the only one of his brothers to survive. The two orphans were taken in by their paternal grandmother, Maria Vincenza – an energetic personality recognisable in characters in some of Silone's early works – and several aunts and uncles.

Writing about the time after the earthquake, Silone addressed some of the absurdities surrounding the reconstruction with great irony in *Emergency Exit* (1965), one of his most barbed works:

"The earthquake managed to create what the law promised, but failed to deliver: equality. Short-lived equality. Once the fear had passed, the general calamity turned into more wide-spread injustice. It's not surprising, therefore, that what took place after the earthquake, i.e. reconstruction by the State, was seen by the poor people as a worse catastrophe than the actual earthquake, owing to the methods adopted and the numerous cases of fraud, extortion and embezzlement. This gave rise to the widely-held conviction that the one time mankind is most likely to lose everything and die is not during an earthquake or war, but in a post-earthquake or post-war period."

Workers and soldiers clearing the rubble after the earthquake (1915).

Don Orione, whom Silone greatly esteemed as a priest and friend, with the orphans after the earthquake.

A short letter Silone wrote after the catastrophe (May 1915) to his brother Romolo in an orphanage gives us a dramatic picture of the situation, free of any narrative or other intentions and thus offering a better idea of the 15-year-old's trauma, fear and bewilderment, after he had been forced to return to Pescina because his seminary in Chieti had been requisitioned by the government as a military hospital:

"Dearest Brother,

It never rains but it pours! The war has followed quick in the wake of the earthquake and the war wants more sacrifice... God only knows how much! Thanks to the war, I've been forced to return to Pescina, seeing as how the government has requisitioned the Chieti seminary for a Military Hospital. Alas! I've come back here to Pescina. I've seen the horrid ruins and rubble with these very eyes. It made me cry. I wandered around the abject huts covered with a few rags: nothing's changed since immediately after the earthquake. It's horrible to see the poor having to live without any distinction made between the sexes, or for age or condition. I also visited our old home, where I once saw the rescuers pull out our mother's wax-like dead body, but I was unable to cry afresh since I'd already spent all my tears. She now rests in her grave, but I imagine I can still hear her voice. Perhaps the spirit of our mother now resides in those ruins, unaware of our fate. It's as if she's calling us to her breast. I've also seen the place where you were lucky enough to be brought out alive. I've seen it all... And now? What am I to do? I can't sit my exams because it means moving to another city and that means money that I haven't got. So where, where can I go? My future is so uncertain and perhaps terrible. I see myself unable to finish my studies, without any material or moral support. Yes, even moral! But I have a gleam of hope: while I was in Chieti, one of H.M. Queen Elena's ladies-in-waiting [came] to visit me and promised to concern herself with my future. This lady was part of an orphans committee set up by Queen Elena and she told me that she'd already been to visit you at San Cuore. I can't remember her name. I need to write to her. If you remember it, can you write and tell me immediately? I just don't know what to do. I try to keep my

hopes up, but then... Whatever happens, I'll accept my fate. If only you knew the suffering here!... Please, if you can do anything to help me, do it! Mention me to any lady who comes to visit you. Talk about me with your Father Superior and send him my humble regards.

Your affectionate brother, Secondo.

P.S. Reply immediately, by return of post! I'm currently shackled up with Uncle Peppino, Grandma, Aunt Maria Luigia and Domenico. Aunt Agata was sent home from the asylum without Uncle Zio Peppino being able to go and meet her. If he'd gone, he'd have visited you somehow. They all send you their love."

A desperate letter, but not written by one who has completely given up hope. We can



feel his bewilderment about the present state of things, his worries about his future, his consternation at the squalor in his town a few months after the earthquake, his heartache when he remembers his mother, the relief he felt when his brother was saved *in extremis* and his intense bitterness about having to interrupt his studies. However, despite so much gloom and doom, we can recognise his trust in fate, his combative spirit and his determination to overcome his present misfortunes: the lady-in-waiting provides him with a realistic hope of an "emergency exit" from the tragedy.

Loss

Having lost his nearest and dearest, his hometown and the comfort of family life, the 15-year-old Secondino effectively became a refugee, but one without the time or opportunity to build hopes and dreams of a better

Ignazio Silone with his partner Gabriella Seidenfeld in Trieste in the early 1920s.

life in a new country, the way most emigrants do. The trauma of being wrenched from the maternal breast followed by his forced exile when still an adolescent made him wracked with pain, rage, nostalgia and regrets, which he sublimated in explorations of his native land. There followed a period in which he oscillated between open rebellion and well-meant resolutions. He left the religious college in Rome and then travelled to Sanremo and Reggio Calabria attending different schools under the direction of his benefactor, Don Orione, an unusual man who held a special place in Silone's heart, until he finally managed to earn his diploma. After a brief stay in Pescina at the age of 18, Silone travelled around Europe for the next ten years (to Spain, France, Belgium, Germany and Russia), first in the service of the Socialist Party and then carrying out important political propaganda mandates for the Communist Party, which at that time was banned. Then, aged 29, he arrived in Switzerland. The next fifteen years (1929 - 1944) were of great importance in his development: after his dramatic expulsion from the Italian Communist Party in 1931, came his *rebirth* as a man and *birth* as a writer and essayist.

During all the time he spent away from Pescina - first because of his studies and then because of his political activities and exile - he managed to stay in close contact with his home town and its people by writing to his relatives and paying them the odd, often unexpected visit. His relatives kept him up to date on what was happening and who was doing what. In a letter written by Silone when just 16 he expressed his love for the land and his hurt pride. Addressed to Don Orione, he complains, among other things, about the insults he suffered from a few senior students in college. They had called Abruzzo a "land of barbarians." He continues: "Insults regarding one's native land are one of the most offensive things a young man has to bear." Nonetheless, he was unable to get along with some of the other students from his own region and in another letter he asks the priest to remove him from the group of students from Marsica in San Remo: "I mean the big ones."

Having earned his diploma in Rome, he returned to Pescina. In a letter to Don



Ferretti, another priest at one of Don Orione's schools, he announces that not only has his health improved, but he now has "a reinforced concrete house with three rooms. It's known as the *devil's house* in Pescina because there's always a great racket being made around here. Especially at night. There are ten of us: students, tramps, workers and... fun people. The locals often call the Carabinieri out to keep the peace. But we're not doing anything wrong: we sing, eat, drink, laugh and dance. Drink and sing most of all. I'd never sung before in front of other people; now I sing from morning to night. And that's the way it should be." This unrestrained, happy-go-lucky behaviour was likely a reaction to the years of strict and often unjustified discipline at the religious college. But Silone was soon to repent of this lightheartedness in another letter written to the same person, and many years later as a writer he recalled the "disastrous" outcome of some of these friendships.

These months in Pescina were a harbinger of his many years of adventure as a political militant and revolutionary. This chapter in his life started in Pescina, at the local farmers' league based in a hut belonging to the Town Council. Here he provided assistance to the illiterate by writing letters, protests and appeals regarding the landlords and authorities' abuse of power. He also stirred up and supported local insurrections. He then moved to Rome, as the Regional Secretary of the Young Socialists Movement, which led to his name being added to police lists of subversives. This move was tantamount to an escape: "Even twenty-five years ago, I had no luggage when I left from the station. I left at night, like a thief, and never

imagined I would stay away for so many years,” he would recall in *The Pain of Return*. His membership of the new Italian Communist Party (PCI) he described as “a freezing wind” that blew out the “small lamp kept alight before my most precious dreams.” The Party became for the revolutionary Secondino Tranquilli, “family, school, church and barracks,” and he had to bury his feelings and memories of himself as a man “coming from Pescara, from the country, from a seminary.” But this did not last. His love for Gabriella Seidenfeld, a fellow political militant, his companion until the early 1930s and life-long friend, restored his *joie de vivre* and, as he wrote in 1924, “being born again, I once again became what I used to be, i.e. a man from Pescara.” In other words, he was free to be proud of his native land and to live according to the values instilled in him during his first fifteen years of life.

Pescina, the Marsica area and the region of Abruzzo were his points of reference as a militant, the background against which he explored and defended his political and revolutionary beliefs. Meanwhile, the nom-de-plume *Silone* became one of the many pseudonyms he used to sign his articles during this period of clandestine activity. As he was to explain years later, he chose the name in memory of “the head of the Marsi resistance, [Quintus] Poppedius Silo, in the war against Rome, [...] a symbol of autonomy.” Three ardently formulated articles (never published) sent to the left-wing paper *Avanti!* prior to 1920 are typical of his writing in which he denounces the delays and the iniquity

of the offices in charge of reconstructing Pescara after the earthquake. So too his note and detailed report dated January 1928 on *Fascism in Abruzzo and South Italy*, an insightful study of the causes and development of this political phenomenon in which he denounces the oppressive policy of the Prince of Torlonia regarding farm workers in the Fucino Basin. These thoughts he later repeated in the narrative style, extending and enhancing them in the first edition of *Fontamara* (1933), his debut novel, which figured almost as an act of vengeance and was the basis of Silone’s international fame (translated into 27 different languages). The original edition of this novel differs substantially in style and severity from the final version, which was the result of no fewer than eight revisions and a reflection of the writer’s maturing opinions.

Rebirth

Yet another metaphorical earthquake shook the life of the young Silone at the end of the 1920s. By then he was a leading figure in the Italian Communist Party, together with Palmiro Togliatti. The crisis the militant Silone faced was the result of Stalin’s despotic and arrogant domestic and international policies and the passive opportunist attitude of the PCI towards the USSR. It was compounded by a personal crisis: his younger brother Romolo was arrested in 1928, accused of an assassination attempt on the King of Italy in Milan. Romolo was later found not guilty of the actual deed and the death sentence was converted to 12 years in prison. Silone, however, felt responsible for his brother’s plight, having failed to maintain a close relationship with him during his years as a militant. Spurred to take action on the international scene, he fell into disgrace with the Fascist Party, especially after a failed attempt to free his brother. The huge bribes he paid to make his brother’s stay in prison easier also had no lasting effect and Romolo eventually died in the prison at Procida (officially due to tuberculosis) in 1932, one year after Silone’s expulsion from the PCI after being accused of having a “softened intellect.” In fact, Silone had confessed in a final article that the only thing still keeping him in the Party was his emotional bond with his fellow country folk in Abruzzo.



Romolo Tranquilli, Ignazio Silone's brother, in 1926. Two years later he would be arrested by the Fascist police and would then die in prison in 1932.



During this period, when Silone's life seemed to be falling apart, he became increasingly aware of a new, urgent inner voice that had in fact been a growing presence in him for a number of years. Perhaps arising from his reading of works that had disturbed him and seized his soul, such as Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*, this voice was doubtlessly motivated by the intense drama unfolding in his political and personal life. The urgent need it communicated became impossible for the 30-year-old to ignore while he was in Switzerland, where he had gone to cure his lungs and where he made friends and acquaintances with many important local figures and artists and intellectuals from all over Europe: democrats, dissidents and refugees like himself.

Silone had been closely linked to the PCI ever since its foundation in 1921 and believed in the fundamental principles set down during the Lyons Congress in 1926. He was also an anti-Fascist. In Switzerland he realised the revo-

lutionary and persuasive power of a well-told story, which is destined to have a more prolonged and widespread effect than any political manifesto. Silone therefore set out to use his novels to denounce the human condition, i.e. the social, economic and political problems then afflicting the many marginalised people on whose behalf he had become a militant, despite the great risk to his personal safety and the hardship of living life underground. He also wanted to illuminate the educational and supportive role a militant communist could play in a community of oppressed people. Last but not least, he also wanted to show the authentic and sincere nature of his belief in communism, regardless of the calculations and opportunism of the official party. Ever since his adolescent years, Silone had always believed in respecting the weak, the persecuted, the landless, the *cafoni* [peasants] and in struggling against the landlords and the powerful. He had reacted against the "striking, incomprehensible and

Silone at the Fonte Vecchia [old fountain] in Pescina in the 1960s.

almost absurd contrast between private family life that was, or at least appeared to be, mainly sober and honest and social relationships that were often rough, hateful and false. [...] Looking after one's own business was the fundamental condition for an honest, peaceful life. We were repeatedly told this. The teachings of the Church confirmed it. The virtues we were taught concerned the private sphere, the family. From my earliest years, however, I loved to hang about the streets and my favourite companions were the sons of poor farmers."

Return

The key word behind Silone's writings is *understand*: "If I've written my books [...] it's been to try to understand and let others understand" he would later say. In order to understand and let others understand, Silone returned in his mind to his own native land, the Marsica and Fucino areas for inspiration as he wrote his books in Switzerland. He felt a new "need for sincerity and truth," qualities he found in the place "where I was born and which I know and love like a child knows his mother's breast," memories of which he carried with him for many years, "an integral, indeed a central part" of himself, just as he felt himself to be a part of the land. Being separated from the maternal breast was traumatic for him, but he saw the brutal wrench from his native land as a lasting source of suffering and violence. The act of telling a story became for Silone a spiritual return to his native land and a source of salvation. It was a land characterised by age-old suffering. The actions and voices of his characters in this setting gave Silone the author a chance to describe his own struggle and the reasons behind it. Some fifteen years after the major earthquake, with Italy in the grips of a monarchic-Fascist authoritarian regime, the exiled Silone adopted the harsh mountains of Abruzzo as the setting of his rural tales of his *cafoni*, which he depicts in stark contrast to the image of Italy propagated by his fellow countryman Gabriele D'Annunzio. He portrays "the secret face, full of pain, tired, weary, oppressed and bloody, that exists behind the official image, the *natural facade*" – a setting of the soul, "fictional, yet true [...] truer than the real apparent world"

where he strives to reveal "the hidden, forbidden truth."

During his fifteen years in Switzerland, Silone wrote several works, including *The Journey to Paris*, the trilogy of novels *Fontamara*, *Bread and Wine*, *The Seed Beneath the Snow*, and the drama *And He Did Hide Himself*, all set in the land of Marsica during the period of Fascist dictatorship. These writings were translated into many languages and met with unexpected success worldwide. They weakened the respectable image of Italian Fascism abroad. Silone's image of Abruzzo did not change, even after he settled in Rome in 1944 following the defeat of Fascism. He visited his beloved Pescina and found "an extraneous world that continues to live on its own account, [...] in its own natural and indifferent manner." Silone continued to write about the place even after his return to Pescina when life had become easier and the people began to speak a different language to the one he had held dear during his years as an exile and had employed in his works. In fact, he rewrote all the works he had written in exile in a calmer, more mature and peaceful style, and also wrote several new books and essays: from *A Handful of Blackberries* to his draft of *Severina*. *The Fox and the Camellias* was somewhat of an exception, as it was set in Switzerland. All his works were inspired by the places that were burnt into the young man's memory like photographs prior to exile: "every alleyway, every house, every fountain, and which young girl, at what times, drew water from the well; every door, every window, and who leaned out to greet you, at what exact time." Places from the Marsica area to the mountains of Abruzzo and Mount Maiella, a favourite with hermits, and which, thanks to its centuries of staunch majesty so poetically described in *Fontamara*, provides the perfect setting for Silone's mediaeval dramatic play *The Story of a Humble Christian*, the outcome of much study and exploring of his Abruzzo roots. In this play Silone tells of the adventures of the hermit Pietro del Morrone, who became Pope Celestine V, but, "faced with choosing between sanctity and power, out of honesty he chose the great renouncement." In his dramatic portrayal of the story of Celestine ("the most Abruzzese of the Saints; one can't

Pastoral scene in
Pescina.

understand the essence of Abruzzo without understanding him”), Silone draws on his own political, religious and life experiences. He uses places familiar to him, places from his past, brought into the present and projected into the future. The places in *his* Abruzzo, part of his childhood, animated by stories and legends that become mythical. Places of tragedies, drama and suffering and where history, inexorably, repeats itself. Silone creates characters that are emblematic of that rough, but “courageous” and “generous” land. The Maiella, the mountain of Pietro del Morrone, is, Silone writes, “the Lebanon for us, the people of Abruzzo. Its buttresses, its caves, its valleys teem with memories. These are the same places where once innumerable hermits used to live, like in a Thebaid, and where more recently hundreds of outlaws, escaped war prisoners and freedom fighters have found refuge, aided and abetted by the majority of the local population.”



Sacredness of the place

Silone describes his complete works as being “that single book that the writer carries around within himself, an image of his soul, of which his published works are mere fragments of a more or less approximate nature,” a *macro-work* the uniqueness of which rests in the plot striving towards truth and liberty. His consistency and resoluteness in pursuing this does not, however, detract from the intrinsic motifs of Abruzzian traditions used by Silone to enrich and enhance his stories. They are never used simply as passive forms of documentary, but are included for the purpose of

offering a better representation (often by means of contrast) of the events, conditions, spirit and meaning underlying the existential universe of his rural world. For example, for the rich, food and religious celebration go hand in hand (“on Christmas Eve the Baby Jesus arrives and so roast fish is eaten”), whereas for the *cafoni*, who never eat anything but corn bread, at best garnished with an onion and some beans, the days commemorating the saints are used by the poor in place of an official calendar (if the saint’s name isn’t being used to curse or swear): “It was the month of Maria, if I’m not wrong.” People’s clothing and the furnishings of their homes not only indicate their origins and social status, but also their character, the nature of their soul. An example, one of many, is “the new apron, a coral necklace and the silver medallion” worn by the tavern-keeper Marietta as part of her Sunday best in *Fontamara* when she accompanies the other women to the Carabinieri in town to address the closure of the spring. So too the frequent use of charms, curses, funereal rites and pilgrimages to sacred sanctuaries, which was popular in the folkloric religion in the quest for mercy and grace (which in Silone’s stories is to no avail). Among the Christmas traditions, besides the Nativity and the Yule log, there was also the story of the holy family, reinterpreted by Silone to meet his narrative needs: “These instilled in us a respect for and feeling of solidarity with the persecuted. Moreover, they gave us a somewhat pessimistic image of the world we were about to enter: a world where innocence is persecuted by the authorities themselves.”

Even the style of his masterful essay on Abruzzo (written in 1948 for the Touring Club Italiano, added to over the years and published in 1963 with the title *The Land and its People*) is quite original. Facts, local history, traditions, discussions and concealed polemics are combined in a sort of narrative travelogue that is easy-going and clever and possesses a hint of benevolent irony. Silone was an observant traveller: “All roads leading into Abruzzo, apart from that from the Adriatic, require one to traverse steep mountain passes. That time we chose to take the Via Salaria.” Unlike others who had

Ignazio Silone in the offices of the "Tempo presente" journal.

written on Abruzzo without (apparently) actually going there, Silone takes great pains in detailing the routes, describing the views seen at various times of day, the places he stopped at, the people he spoke to. Along with him, this lets us learn about and explore the area and stimulates our curiosity. Jestingly Silone tells how times and the character of the place have changed: "The 'sheep' of Rocca di Cambio," he said, laughing, "are now the tourists. Less effort is involved and you earn more." He makes a critical remark about the luxury-filled hospitality of the Abruzzo coast: "It's rare to find a rich man or a member of the nouveau riche now living on the land once populated by the poor who appreciates a light, moderate diet." And he immediately underscores the contrast with his beloved mountains, home of his soul: "Knowing the mountains of Abruzzo is of crucial importance. [...] The historical and social reality of the people of Abruzzo has been largely determined by these mountains."

Brave in the face of adversity, with unshakable ideals and determination, open-minded, inscrutable in his silence: Ignazio Silone was the product of this mountainous country like the rural characters he describes in his stories whose ties to this land were close and strong "like a kind of sacrament." Silone died in the Swiss mountains that had once helped cure his body, fed his soul and kept the memory of his native land alive during his years in exile. It is thus understandable that Silone wished to return to his home country to make his final resting place on the sacred land of the mountains he so loved.

* *Lecturer of Literary Criticism for the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at the University of L'Aquila and member of the Managing Committee of the Ignazio Silone Study Centre in Pescina.*



Bibliography

Silone, *Memoriale dal carcere svizzero* [Memoir from a Swiss Prison], edited by L. Mercuri, Cosenza, Lerici, 1979.

Silone, *Romanzi e saggi* [Complete Works], edited by B. Falcetto, Milan, Mondadori, 1998-1999.

G. Casoli, *L'incontro di due uomini liberi: don Orione e Silone* [The Meeting of Two Free Men: Don Orione and Silone], Milan, Jaca Book, 2000.

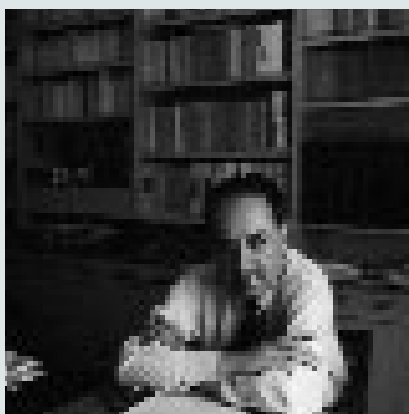
Per Ignazio Silone [For Ignazio Silone], Florence, Polistampa, Fondazione Spadolini Nuova Antologia, 2002.

Silone, la libertà. Un intellettuale scomodo contro tutti i totalitarismi [Silone: Liberty. An Awkward Intellectual Against All Forms of Totalitarianism.], edited by A. Forbice, Milan, Guerini e Associati, 2007.



Ignazio Silone, the man who saved himself

by Andrea Paganini*



Left:
Silone in 1950.

This page:
Silone in the library of
the Associazione Italiana
Libertà e Cultura (AIRC).

Pescina razed to the ground by the 1915 earthquake.

*"[...] what God really did, God only knows."*¹

The figure of Ignazio Silone – the archetypal Italian anti-Fascist – has recently split historians and intellectuals into two apparently irreconcilable factions in a hotly debated controversy that, despite the many articles and books already published on the issue, shows no sign of abating. So what is it all about?

Let's start with the certain, undisputed fact that emerged from the Italian State Archives and was made public just over a decade ago. On the 13th of April 1930 in Locarno, Silone wrote a "last letter" to Guido Bellone, a high-ranking Fascist police official. The much-debated question is what was the nature of the previous correspondence between these two men? Was Silone the cleverest and most effective informer for the Fascist police, as the historians Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali² allege, or was he a consistently indefatigable enemy of Mussolini's regime, as Giuseppe Tamburrano³ claims (just to mention the leading protagonists of the two opposing sides in this dispute)? Who was Ignazio Silone in reality? And how should we interpret his works?

Anyone wishing to study Ignazio Silone's intellectual biography in depth and discover the truth surrounding the man needs to go beyond the basic dichotomy of innocent versus guilty (as his widow, Darina Laracy, suggested on the 1st of May 2000 in Pescina in an address to the scientific community). But first, a little background.

Secondino Tranquilli

"Once upon a time, here in Pietrasecca," he said, "there was a man called Carlo Campanella, while in New York there was a man called Mr. Charles Little-Bell, Ice and Coal. Was it one and the same man or two?"
"The same person," many people replied.
*"If a man can change his name, why not a playing card too?" said the priest.*⁴

After the 1915 Abruzzo earthquake, Secondino Tranquilli (Ignazio Silone's real name) became a homeless orphan at the age of 15 with an uncertain future ahead of him. He was personally involved in the social problems faced by the poorer sections of his



community and took part in small uprisings. When just 17 he became a member of the Italian Union of Young Socialists, marking the start of a militant political career that would last more than a decade. Two years later, already known to the police as a subversive, Silone became the Secretary of the Rome branch of the Socialist Union. Then, in 1921, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) split and the revolutionary off-shoot formed the Italian Communist Party (Pcd'I or PCI). Tranquilli was one of the founders, along with Amadeo Bordiga and Antonio Gramsci, and soon one of the new political party's leaders with special responsibility for the press. In the meantime, Mussolini, head of the newly formed Fascist Party, was sworn in as Prime Minister of Italy at the end of October 1922. Since he had a police record, Tranquilli was forced to flee the country. He moved to Berlin, then Madrid and finally Paris, where he co-ordinated communication between the political exiles and wrote for a left-wing paper.

In 1925 he was back in Italy working in the PCI press office when the Fascist dictatorship came into being. Like all members of the opposition parties, he was declared an outlaw and forced to lead a life in the underground. In 1927, during a Communist plenum in Moscow, he saw Stalin come to power, about which he had great reservations. Shortly afterwards many members of the PCI were arrested by the Fascists and Tranquilli therefore returned to France, full of doubts about recent developments in Russian communism and extremely critical of the authoritarian policy adopted by the

Party. He disapproved of the intolerant and abusive tendencies, not to mention its absolute inability to accommodate differing ideas.

At the same time, Tranquilli had to deal with a new family crisis. His brother Romolo, who had been arrested in 1928 on charges of having conspired against the regime, was sentenced to a 12-year prison term; he would die four years later in the prison at Procida as a result of the exceedingly poor conditions under which he was held.

[Locarno] 13th April 1930

*"[...] there was an unbridgeable gap between my apparent life and my secret life. [...] Politics seemed senseless. What did all that stuff matter to me? I'd certainly have preferred to live in peace, to have two or three square meals a day and let 'the necessity of imperial expansion' and 'economic democracy' go to the devil."*⁵

Towards the end of the 1920s, the future writer experienced a major life crisis, compounded by health problems and an uneasy conscience. This led him to write the now famous letter to the Fascist police official. The full text reads:

"My apologies for not writing further. What you wanted to know is no longer a secret (the papers already speak of it). I don't know what I and my friends will do now.

My health is terrible but the cause is moral. (You will understand, if you remember what I wrote last summer.) I find myself at an extremely painful point in my life. The sense of morality, which has always been strong in me, now overwhelms me completely; it does not let me sleep, eat or have a minute's rest. I am at a crossroads, and there is only one way to go: I must abandon militant politics completely (I shall look for some kind of intellectual activity). The only other option is death. Continuing to live in such a state of contradiction was impossible, is impossible. I was born to be an honest landowner in my hometown. Life has thrown me on to a course that I now want to leave behind. My conscience tells me I have not done great harm either to my friends or to my country. Within the limits of what was possible, I have always tried not to do harm. I must say that, given your position, you have always acted

as a gentleman with me. And so I write you this last letter. I trust that you will not try to prevent my plan, which will be carried out in two stages: first, I will eliminate from my life all that is false, duplicitous, equivocal and secretive; second, I will begin a new life, on a new basis, in order to repair the evil that I have done, to seek redemption, to do only good for the workers, for the peasants (to whom I am bound with every fibre of my heart) and for my country.

Between the first and second stage, I need a bit of physical, intellectual and moral rest. No material considerations have influenced my decision. I am not afraid of hardship. What I want is to live morally.

The influence and popularity I enjoy among many emigrants have led me to conceive of my future activity (as soon as my health permits) as a form of truly independent literary and publishing work. I should add that, at the present time, great changes are afoot in my ideology and so I feel re-attracted, very attracted, by religion (if not the Church) and that the evolution of my thought is made easier by the stupid and criminal direction being adopted by the Communist Party. The only thing that makes me regretful about this decision is the fact that it has become a persecuted party with thousands of workers acting in good faith, if we exclude the leaders. To avoid influencing the basic elements, I have decided not to announce my break with the party publicly and intend to wait until the time is right, hopefully soon.

Please treat this letter as an expression of my esteem for you. I wish to end, definitively, our long period of honest relationship with an act of honesty. If you are a believer, pray to God that He will give me the strength to overcome my remorse, to begin a new life and to live it for the good of the workers and of Italy.

Yours, Silvestri"⁶

On the basis of this letter – and the previous ones attributed to him – the "historians for the prosecution" claim that Silone had infiltrated the PCI from 1923 onwards (or even earlier) and fed the Italian Police information on its underground organisation, thus engaging in a risky game of duplicity requiring an extremely difficult balancing act. The "historians for the defence" reject these alle-

gations, refuting the authenticity of the majority of the letters or that they are correctly attributed to Silone. They also maintain that he only wanted, at the end of the 1920s, to make the OVRA (*Opera Vigilanza Repressione Antifascismo* [Organisation for Vigilance against Anti-Fascist Activities]) to believe he was willing to collaborate with them in order to help his imprisoned brother. Others are convinced that the correspondence was “instrumental” in nature and thus his guilt is “very slight.”⁷

The final verdict on the writer from Abruzzo, his honour and his credibility, seems, therefore, to depend on these two opposing and irreconcilable views. Was Silone an abject, despicable informer who betrayed the anti-Fascist cause, or was he an honest intransigent freedom fighter pitched against all forms of totalitarianism? Needless to say, some have attempted to reconcile the two positions and have inevitably ended up in at a dead end, suggesting madness or schizophrenia, or seeing Silone as a kind of Doctor Jekyll/Mr. Hyde. But why should such an extreme verdict, one way or the other, be necessary?

At this point we need to step back and approach the matter from a different angle, looking further back in time, without rejecting any possibility *a priori*. We need to focus on the crucial year, 1930, the crossroads in Silone’s life and an unavoidable starting point for any serious explanation of his life and works.

End of the crisis – the turning point

“[...] it would be necessary to go far from one’s country. A change of name is not enough, if the water, the stones, the grass, the plants and the dust on the road are those of the town in which one was born. One must go far away.”

*The monk said this in such a grave voice that Don Paolo had to stifle an impulse to embrace him.*⁸

The turning point for Silone, 1930, coincides with the period when Fascism enjoyed great power and unprecedented popular consensus after the elections and the signing of the Concordat with the Holy See. By the time Silone settled in Switzerland his relations with the PCI had become strained and frayed. Far from his native land and old friends, Silone felt guilty about his brother

Romolo’s terrible punishment. He was also suffering from nerves and lung disease. This was when he severed all relations with both the OVRA and the PCI, the party that for the past decade had been for him “family, school, church and barracks: [...] a totalitarian system in the most complete and genuine sense of the word.”⁹

So what caused him to take this decision? Perhaps his brother Romolo’s fate? Or the totalitarian tendencies of Communism? Perhaps his recognition of the cruelty of the Italian Police, by that time part and parcel of the Fascist regime? Or maybe a crisis of conscience due to the revival of his moral and religious awareness? Perhaps all of this together.

Unable to leave the Communist Party on his own initiative, it is likely that Silone did all he could to get himself expelled (as effectively happened in 1931) and so end his double life. It is clear that his decision to sever all contacts is totally devoid of any political opportunism, as both Fascism in Italy and Communism on an international level were at a peak at the time and there were no signs that they would fall from power. His decision to distance himself from both parties cannot, therefore, be explained as a change to another allegiance, but simply as the result of a moral impulse. This new-found morality also explains the crisis of conscience that led him to break with all facets of his previous life.

There is no doubt that this was not a spur-of-the-moment decision to rediscover the religious *Weltanschauung* of his early teenage years, but something he had been considering over the years. Indeed, in the late 1920s, he had written to his companion Gabriella Seidenfeld: “I realise that all my thoughts now are the same as those I had at the age of 15.”¹⁰ In July 1929, according to recently released documents, Tranquilli informed Bellone that “at the point at which [he found his] moral and intellectual development” it would be “impossible to continue the same relationship with [him] as 10 years ago.”¹¹ (If, indeed, his collaboration with the police dated back to 1919, it should be noted that neither the National Fascist Party nor the Communist Party existed at that time. The natures of these political parties – especially the Italian Communist Party – were far from well-defined in their early years.)

Portrait photo of
Ignazio Silone in 1950.

The letter dated 13th April 1930 is an extremely intense moral and emotional work. He says he is tormented by an acute crisis of conscience and is at an extremely painful point in his life, with only two possible ways forward: suicide or a completely different way of life. He claims that he has reached a “crossroads” in his life, that he wishes to abandon militant politics and can no longer live in such a state of “ambiguity.” He wants to find a “way out” in order “to begin a new life” free of “all that is false, duplicitous, equivocal and secretive” and intends to “repair the evil” he has done, “to seek redemption”, “to live morally.” He then says he wants to dedicate himself to “truly independent literary and publishing work.” He also adds that “great changes are afoot” in his way of thinking and that he feels “re-attracted, very attracted, by religion.” He ends by saying that he hopes God will give him “the strength to overcome [his] remorse,” “to begin a new life” and to live it “for the good of the workers and of Italy.”

How can we fail to perceive in this letter a strong similarity to what Silone would write in his *Emergency Exit* many years later as he recalled that traumatic yet decisive time, likening it to a woman's labour in giving birth? “[...] I seem to have become another man entirely: at the time, I was thirty years old, I had just left the Communist Party, to which I had sacrificed my youth, my studies and every personal interest; I was gravely ill and

without any means of support; without family (I had become an orphan at age fifteen, my only remaining brother was then in prison as a Catholic antifascist and, soon after, died in prison); I had been expelled from France and from Spain; I could not return to Italy; in a word, I was on the verge of suicide.

In that period I underwent a terrible crisis, but one that brought me salvation. As Saint Bernard wrote in one of his books, there are men that God chases, persecutes and searches out and, if He finds them, He grabs them, mangles them, tears them to pieces, bites them, chews them up, swallows and digests them; and then He creates them as entirely new creatures, creatures that are entirely His own. If I think back on the sufferings, the dangers, the errors and the penitence suffered by my many friends and myself, it seems that we had that painful and privileged experience of which Saint Bernard speaks. In Switzerland I became a writer; but – more importantly – I became a man.”¹²

All this suggests that a new direction¹³, a severing, a turning point occurred in the year 1930. It is no coincidence that Silone's personal records contain only documents from 1930 onwards, a manifestation of the clear break that Silone wanted with his past. Nor is it surprising that his literary activities started that year: “I had never considered writing until the age of 30.”¹⁴ “I had never realised I had this calling in me before then.”¹⁵ All Silone's literary works were written after this date and are a coherent expression of a man dedicated to portraying, in art as in politics, a vision of the world where liberty and human dignity rule supreme. Even his adoption of the pseudonym Ignazio Silone – with its civil and religious undertones – dates to that period and alludes to the birth of a new man.

Ignazio Silone

*“You can't talk about a living man as if he were damned,” protested Don Nicola.
“If it were true, we might as well close the churches and open a shop.”
“I've the impression,” he continued,
“that Rocco now faces a crossroads and that not only his future, but also his past, depends on which way he goes.
I mean, his decision will affect the sense of his whole life.”*



“How can that be?” asked the sister. “No one, I’ve always thought, can erase his past.”
“He can do something that puts it in a new colour, a new light.”
“So you believe that Rocco can still restore his good name? Save himself? Is that it?”
“He’s reached the point where he can do something that will give his past life one meaning rather than another.”¹⁶

Switzerland granted Silone asylum for almost 15 years until the end of the Fascist regime, so that he ultimately regarded Switzerland as his “second patria.” The first few years of exile were hard. Not only did he suffer from tuberculosis (for which he was treated in Davos), but the young exile felt abandoned by all. Yet this was the period when he wrote *Fontamara*, the epic story about the *cafoni*, the peasants, the “last” of his native land. This novel, an international success, was published in 1933, first in German (like all his other works during exile) in Zurich, where he had settled and come into contact with numerous intellectuals and artists. He became involved in publishing, contributing to the journal *information* and Le Nuove Edizioni publishers in Capolago. In 1934 he published an essay on the origins and evolution of Fascism and in 1935 a collection of tales entitled *The Journey to Paris*. The following year he published the novel *Bread and Wine* (later changed to *Wine and Bread*), which was also warmly received by several important critics. This was the first novel in the trilogy based on Pietro Spina and partly inspired by autobiographical events. *The Seed Beneath the Snow* (1941) and the play *And He Did Hide Himself* (1944) followed, in which Silone outlined his system of values, recognising in the “rediscovery of the Christian heritage in the ferment of contemporary society’s liberation [...] our most important spiritual advantage.”¹⁷

In 1938 he published *The School for Dictators*, a satire aimed not only at Fascism, but all forms of totalitarianism. Intolerant of the coercive institutional and political structures, Silone spoke out sweepingly against the regimes of Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler. He saw communism as a species of “red Fascism.”

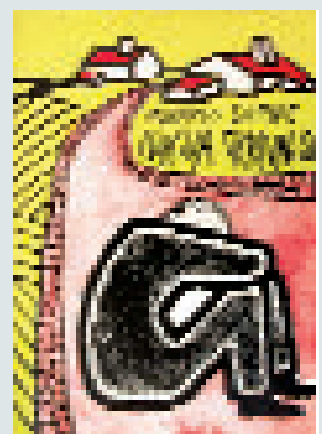
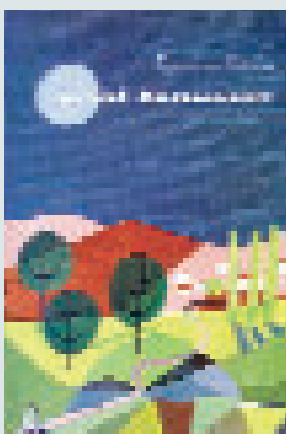
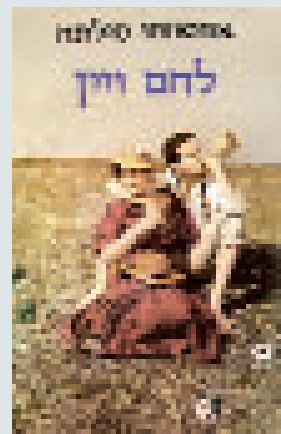
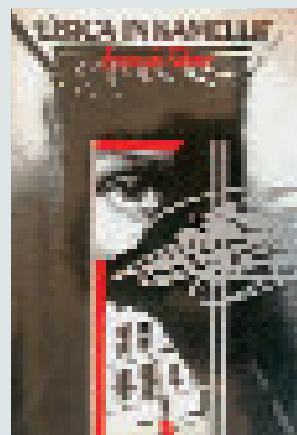
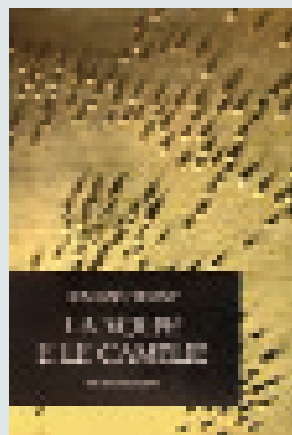
It was only in 1939, after a decade of abstinence, that Silone returned to active politics,

despite Switzerland’s ban on political activities for refugees. He joined the Foreign Office of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and then became its leader in 1941. He also met the young Irish woman who was later to become his wife in 1939, Darina Laracy.

In 1942 he was arrested by the Swiss police for having printed and distributed anti-Fascist propaganda. He stayed in prison for only a few days, using the time to write his famous *Memoir from a Swiss Prison*, in which he said “[...] The impulse that has prevented us from capitulating before the dictatorship does not have its origin in classism, materialism or intellectualism, but is essentially ethical: upon it we must reconstruct the socialist movement; this necessity implies moving beyond our previous ideology and overcoming the cynical and sceptical nihilism so prevalent in today’s political life.”¹⁸ Silone returned to Italy in 1944.

In the post-war years he was a member of the Assemblea Costituente and a member of Parliament. Silone was overjoyed about the Republican’s victory over the Monarchists. He managed the left-wing paper *Avanti!* and then the *L’Europa Socialista* journal. He joined several socialist political committees, but in the end he opted to pursue an independent path. To underscore his independence, he referred to himself as “a socialist without a party, a Christian without a church.”¹⁹ He posed the question: “How many realise that the tyranny of means over the ends is the natural death of the noblest aims? And that the reduction of man to a tool and a raw material renders any claim to want to guarantee man’s happiness a sham?”²⁰ He opposed all forms of party politics, bureaucracy and machinations and stood out because of his anti-conformist positions. In 1945 he first proposed the idea of going beyond anti-Fascism, to adopt a pro-active *post-Fascism* stand open to dialogue: “The truth, today, can only be had through an exchange of ideas with those who think in a different way.”²¹ Silone retired from active politics in 1953.

In the meantime, he had published *A Handful of Blackberries* (1952), a decisively anti-communist novel that rekindled his old argument with Palmiro Togliatti. This work was a huge success abroad, but was ostracised by the Italian ideological critics, who raised



Left:
The covers of a few
editions of Silone's
works, translated into
all main languages.

issues linked with the author's life. As he took part in conferences and debates around the globe, Silone championed freedom of thought and developed close relationships with intellectuals such as Sartre and Weil. In 1956 he established the cultural magazine *Tempo presente*, which he managed until 1968. The same year saw the publication of his novel *The Secret of Luca*.

In 1960 Silone's only novel to be set in Switzerland and not Abruzzo, *The Fox and the Camellias*, came out. Five years later he published *Emergency Exit*, a sort of intellectual autobiography and perhaps his most important book. Then, in 1968, *The Story of a Humble Christian* was published, a work that met with great public and critical acclaim, even in Italy.

The birth of a new, aware man

*"[...] I would have loved to spend my life writing and rewriting the same old story, in the hope of, if nothing else, understanding it and letting others understand it – just as in the Middle Ages there were monks whose entire lives were devoted to painting the face of Christ over and over again, but in practice never ever painted it identically. It's now clear to me that I'm interested in a certain type of man, a kind of Christian, caught up in the workings of the world, and I couldn't now write on any other subject."*²²

Ignazio Silone was not a compulsive, automatic, methodical writer. He only wrote when (and because) he had something urgent to impart. The basic themes of his work are well-known: the fight against injustice and for freedom; the dignity of the most humble and persecuted; religious and sympathetic socialism; humble ground-roots Christianity; moral anti-Fascism; impatience with all forms of totalitarianism.

But what is the story that Silone keeps writing and revising in his novels? Who is that man and Christian that so interests him? One of the most recurrent themes in his narrative works is surely that of the "man at a crossroads": a person faced with having to make a radical choice, due to an issue of conscience, that inevitably calls for an extreme sacrifice. In *Fontamara* the protagonist is Berardo, a prisoner, who delivers himself up to torture and death after assuming guilt

that is not his: "If I betray [them], another hundred years will pass before a similar occasion presents itself again. And if I die? I'll be the first *cafone* that didn't die for himself, but for others."²³ In *Wine and Bread* – as in *And He Did Hide Himself*²⁴ – Murica regrets having betrayed his companions in the underground movement (having chickened out of suicide at the last moment) and so refuses to collaborate with the police, leading to his death in prison. In *The Seed Beneath the Snow* Faustina is unfairly dishonoured, whereas Pietro sacrifices himself for Infante. In *A Handful of Blackberries* it is Stella who suffers in expiation, though Don Nicola and Rocco also choose sacrifice to ease their conscience. In *The Secret of Luca* the innocent protagonist decides to suffer 40 years in prison rather than compromise the honour of his beloved. In *The Fox and the Camellias*, faced with having to choose between his role as a spy and his loyalty to Silvia (and anti-Fascist father), Cefalù commits suicide as the result of an existential crisis, the paradox being that his suicide redeems him. In *The Story of a Humble Christian*, in order not to compromise his own conscience and thus remain loyal to his concept of evangelical Christianity, Pier Celestino abdicates as Pope and suffers a series of "mortifications," which he accepts "without rancour, with thanks even, as an opportunity to practise humility."²⁵

The outcome of the various sacrifices made by Silone's characters is all too clear: "man arrives, through suffering, at an awareness of his own humanity."²⁶ The very act of sacrifice leads to deep awareness, of oneself or of others. Struck by Berardo's fate, the peasants of Fontamara become aware of their own rights and those of others and start to ask "What's to be done?" After attempting suicide and regaining his senses, Murica becomes the very subject of the phrase that so impressed him: "The person who finally attains full awareness of his own humanity."²⁷ The same is true of the prisoners who then witness his death in prison. In *The School for Dictators*, the exile Thomas the Cynic struggles "not for power, but for understanding,"²⁸ while in *The Seed Beneath the Snow* the meaning of expiatory suffering is probed: the spiritual meaning of the pain that is an integral part of the existence of

every human being. Ultimately, in *The Fox and the Camellias*, Cefalù's extreme act makes Daniele aware of the essential humanity of his "enemy," having witnessed the dramatic conclusion.

These themes of a turning point and increased awareness are paralleled in Silone's explicitly autobiographical works. Almost as if he were able to see into the future, in a letter to Don Orione in 1918, Tranquilli wrote: "I realised that my new faith [Marxism] would have led me unavoidably to suicide if it were to prove a delusion. I feared there would come a crossroads: I've reached it now, and I'm afraid."²⁹ A broader view of life and the value of life itself – this is the discovery made through suffering, experienced as self-sacrifice. In a letter to his brother Romolo, written while in prison, we read that, despite the suffering, "I'm happy to live and know now why I must live; yet once, if you remember, I didn't know what I was doing and what I should do in this world."³⁰ His *Emergency Exit*, when read carefully, illustrates a gradual process of increased awareness. "In the dark I reflected about what had happened to me; I knew that, with the passing years, I'd understand better."³¹ Again, "Our soul [...] now has dimensions sculpted by suffering that we couldn't imagine back in 1919."³² Driven by a deep "need to understand, to appreciate,"³³ Silone reconstructed his own course of human suffering. In this regard he frequently repeats something André Malraux once said: "It's a matter of transforming experience into awareness where at all possible."³⁴ Silone clearly indicates how one can attain this awareness: deny oneself, sacrifice oneself, never compromise one's principles to satisfy convention or the authorities. This is typical of an evangelical and Christological theory that transfers the knowledge deriving from the Crucifixion to human experience: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it."³⁵ Don Benedetto, one of the characters in Silone's novels who is a true "figurae Christi," asks: "Can you imagine Christ plea bargaining with Pontius Pilate in order to avoid crucifixion?"³⁶

Silone is interested in the character who does not try to avoid a crisis, but actually welcomes it, if it leads to a discovery of values. Someone who goes beyond his own limits, who passes from a spiritual death to a true life, who becomes a new fully *aware* man. Not an individual, but a person-in-relation within a small non-conformist group. Silone's human(e)ism is aimed at abandoning ideology and creating an ideal community where life is grounded in shared values of liberty, genuine friendship and the communion of souls in the name of Christ: "Wherever we meet, He has promised to be with us."³⁷ The Christian community Silone envisages is a reality "where love replaces the law."³⁸ Indeed, he goes even further. In his writings and post-war politics, despite his own experience he goes against the current in an age of suspicion, mistrust, hypocrisy and betrayal by stressing the need for open dialogue where our common humanity can be discovered, even with our enemies. The man, the individual, is, he believes, more important than his political affiliations.

Confession and testimony

"[...] There are forms of anguish that concentrate around us all the forces in our being, our vital energy, and are embedded in our souls like the backbone is in our body, like the threads in a woven cloth. Can we destroy these threads? Of course we can, but then the fabric is destroyed." "But, my son, can't you weave a less sad fabric with the same threads?" "What? Become another? That, too, is one way to die."³⁹

In order to understand Silone, we must appreciate the importance of this turning point in 1930. From that moment on he is, in all senses, a new man. Ignazio Silone is not Secondino Tranquilli. Certainly, the past cannot be simply wiped out and the writer would always carry the scars on his flesh and soul. But a man can also change, deeply, radically and completely – if we fail to understand this, we will never understand Silone. It is not a case of remaining true to oneself, but of becoming loyal to what is *good*. The author of *Fontamara*, *Wine and Bread* and *The Seed Beneath the Snow* is a man acting in

good faith. If we cannot bring ourselves to accept this, then we will never understand Silone, nor St. Paul, St. Augustine or St. Francis of Assisi. They all share the same dynamics of death and resurrection that are an intrinsic part of Christianity: “Yes, there are some established certainties. These, to my way of thinking, are Christian certainties. They seem to me to be so built into the human reality that they are almost one and the same thing. To deny these means disintegrating the man.”⁴⁰ Then again, if we look at the secular sphere in Silone’s day, there is no reason why we should not believe in Benedetto Croce’s anti-Fascist stance, taken in good faith, even if



he had friendly relations with the Fascist ideologist Giovanni Gentile up until the Matteotti murder. And what about those Italian post-war intellectuals, who were nearly all “last minute” anti-Fascists? Silone said “[...] the literati, the artists and the intellectuals have no reason to be proud of having played any disinterested, far-sighted or courageous part during the tragic decades just past. [...] events have, in any case, proved that profession of the arts and literature does not, *per se*, constitute a guarantee of morality and strength of character.”⁴¹

Ignazio Silone is Ignazio Silone from 1930 onwards. That date distinguishes all that was before from all that was after. So, even if we candidly admit what the scientific community has yet to acknowledge (i.e. that in the 1920s Silone acted ambiguously), can we really categorically condemn a person for

having stained his character through a crime in his past? If so, no man is saved.

Yet, we might ask, if Silone is an honest man, why did he never talk about this shady part of his life? Why did he hide this secret? Let’s try and answer this by putting ourselves in his shoes.

Silone’s crisis of conscience probably started in the latter part of the 1920s, perhaps at the time that Fascism clearly revealed itself to be a dictatorship, becoming indistinguishable from the bodies of the State. Psychologically it would be difficult to disentangle oneself from the contradictions of the time, to stop acting as an informer with all this entails and to disown one’s own past. In *Bread and Wine* we read: “Anyone who has had the misfortune to fall into this shameful trap [becoming an informer] is also condemned to wishing that the dictatorship continues for ever: he, at the bottom of his affronted heart, hates it to death, but also fears its fall ‘because then all will be known and I’ll be discovered.’ Thus he stays bound to his shame by the chain of fear.”⁴²

And after 1930? To confess at that time that he had compromised his integrity by collaborating with the Fascist police would undoubtedly have meant an attempt on his life by the communists. And that’s not all: he would have been hounded by the Fascist Secret Service, who would not have allowed him to leave the system (perhaps Bellone would have protected him in this sense). Can we condemn a man who, without causing anyone else further harm, tries to save his own life?

But why – we might ask – didn’t he admit to this in 1945, at the end of the war? Some 15 years had passed since the turning point in his life. Secondino Tranquilli no longer existed. Ignazio Silone was really a different person: a man who had distanced himself from all forms of totalitarianism, having spent fifteen years in exile, suffering untold hardships and staying true to his coherent yet awkward political beliefs. He had built up a network of anti-Fascist friends and collaborators. He had published books of a clear, incisive morality and still had many more to write for his readers and humanity itself: “I’d like to say two or three more things before I die, things that no one else can say and that destiny has charged me with saying.”⁴³

Silone at his typewriter in his home in Via Villa Ricotti, Rome.

To dig up the past would, most probably, have meant silencing the voice of free conscience, one that had already been ostracised by the opposing ideology.

Moreover, was he really obliged to confess? And to whom? The world at large or the people he had harmed? Or perhaps, given that he was a Catholic, to his spiritual father, as his character Murica did? And who says he didn't? What kind of inquisition is needed to prove this? Wouldn't that be dangerously slippery, pathological terrain to tread? What right do we have? "It would be puerile to confuse the truth with a thing simply laid bare."⁴⁴

Those who criticise his alleged duplicity should bear in mind that we do not know – and never will know with any certainty – what motivated Tranquilli to enter into correspondence with the OVRA officer. Weakness or having gambled too much? Had he been threatened, seduced or held to ransom? Was he aware that he was playing into the regime's hands or did he think he was honestly acting against Communism (red Fascism)? When did his conscience start to bother him, forcing him to put an end to this ambiguity? "No one will ever know"⁴⁵ what really went on in his mind, we are likely to say, just as he said in *Fontamara* regarding Berardo's salvation.

But then are we really sure he never confessed all? Silone could not undo the harm done or the grief felt; perhaps he continued to confess it obsessively and sincerely in his works. Perhaps all he did was to show us his conscience. In *Wine and Bread*, for instance, or the play *And He Did Hide Himself*, in the preface to which he wrote that the confessions bear witness to his own spiritual journey.

"There are bureaucratic, disciplinary confessions imposed by orthodoxy and then there are the free confessions of those who have conquered their own 'fear' In determining the origin and evolution of the facts of conscience, however, the chronology of memory is far more certain and trustworthy than the chronology of the archives. This [memory] recognises the interior links between facts that only appear to be isolated and distant, it brings them together and establishes the actual continuity of existence.

The distress I felt [in 1930...] was not the result of the action of abstract values, but

that of the more pressing and immediate psychological and political motives."⁴⁶

Silone's widow Darina has recently doubted the interpretation given to certain archive documents: "I'm beginning to realise [...] that the real document is a person's whole life. One needs to allow space, a wider sense of things, otherwise one runs the risk of losing grasp of what is more important, the truest thing, the sense of it all."⁴⁷

After all, in order to explain his own life, Silone constantly harks back to severing with the past when he was 30 and refers to his writings: "At that time I went into retreat (for the reasons that the readers of my most recent book *Bread and Wine* will know)."⁴⁸ It leads us to suppose that he keenly wanted the truth to come out. Not so much the truth about his life, but the universal truth that he felt within him, having survived an experience that marked him for life: "When a person has been to Hell and returns to the living," says Murica, "he has the absolute duty to speak about what he knows."⁴⁹

"My books have been the story of the uncertainties, the difficulties, the successes, of the victory of my soul in its struggle against all that was vulgar and merely instinctive in my earlier life. I don't believe that my books have any great literary value; I myself know, only too well, their formal defects. Their value is essentially that of human testimony; there are pages in those books that were written in blood. For my rebirth and resurrection (from the defeated man I was in 1930 on arrival in Switzerland to who I am and how I feel today), I am, in very large measure, indebted to Switzerland. [...] My last books, and especially *Bread and Wine*, *The School For Dictators* and *The Seed Beneath the Snow*, are the sincere expression of a man who remains radically opposed to Fascism and to every form of dictatorship, but for human and ideal reasons that transcend those of political anti-Fascism."⁵⁰

Not just the characters, therefore, but the writer himself is driven by a strong desire to understand and be understood:

"None [of the explanations provided by others] help at all in letting people understand the secret of the crisis that led me to leave the Party. I myself only realised this slowly, with difficulty, in the years that followed. And I have no difficulty in admitting that I

The "penna d'oro"
[Golden Quill] award
that Ignazio Silone
received from the
Presidency of the
Council of Ministers
in 1971.

still reflect on it, in order to understand things better. If I have written books, as I said, it's been to try and understand and let others understand."⁵¹ Hence the urgency he felt, the need to write, to communicate, to bear witness to the sense of our humanity. "It is not pleasant to write about oneself, one's mistakes, stupid acts, hysterics; it is not enjoyable to relive, even in memories, those nightmare years; and yet we have the duty to bear witness."⁵²

This is why Silone became a writer and, as such, mainly chose a particularly dramatic and absorbing form of narrative. Only the reader who accepts, feels and suffers with the characters takes part – together with the author – in an increase in awareness: "the story is a way to gain awareness, to evolve."⁵³

In a letter to the author Rainer Biemel dated 2nd September 1937, Silone again focuses on that year, 1930:

"Art has played a decisive role in my life. At the time I had virtually given up all desire to continue living. I experienced a grave crisis of conscience when I was 30, both physical and spiritual, and gave a brief summary of this in the first few chapters of *Bread and Wine*, when I describe Spina's disgust with politics. My crisis was far harder and lasted almost a year and a half. I carried it around inside me and with me to various health institutions and finally Davos, a place with which you are probably familiar through Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Since my life until then had been politics and I was at that point disgusted with it, I began to wonder what the point of living was. For a year and a half this question went round and round in my mind, every day and nearly every night. My entire being was sick and tired, like a man skin-

ning himself. Many a time my friends feared I was about to give it all up.

Fontamara, *Bread and Wine* and other works yet to be published cured me. It was difficult, but healthy, like a new birth [...].

The need for truth and sincerity that drove me away from party politics is the main stimulus that sustains me and my literary activities. Not only have I decided not to retract anything about my previous political non-conformism, but I believe I have delved deeper and am now able to give it a content that is irreconcilable, unshakable and uncompromising.

Artistic creation has been for me a great struggle where my spirit – freed from the earlier anguish, detached, released and no longer part of a confused, ambiguous world – has tried to put things in order and has created its own world: a world that's simple, clear and logical. A world conceived, but *true*, in any case truer than the real world we perceive, with the hidden, forbidden truth it manifests. [...]

I'm not concerned about proving anything with my work. But it's quite natural that by re-creating the world, my readers can learn about the truth that normal life strives to conceal. Only truth can increase our awareness, enrich it, strengthen it, free it. Only [truth] can affirm and defend human dignity against all that offends and holds it in contempt. Thus the true artist is always an educator, even against his will."⁵⁴

Conclusion

*"In every age and every society,
the supreme act of the soul is to give of oneself,
to lose oneself in order to find oneself.
One only has what one can give freely.
[...] Our love, our disposition for sacrifice and
self-abnegation are fruitful only if they are*





*carried into relations with our fellows. Morality can live and flourish only in practical life. We are responsible also for others.”*⁵⁵

Perhaps some are disappointed because Silone was not “immaculate.” And yet the writer from Pescina never boasted being this: “On my part, there has never been any presumption that I have followed the right way while others erred or slept. I, too, have done many foolish things.”⁵⁶ Then again, he states that contradiction is, to a certain measure, intrinsic in human beings: “Man today is in a poor state. An image of modern man that is not too removed from actuality and that shuns hollow rhetoric can only be described as deformed, split, fragmentary; in a word, tragic.”⁵⁷

Silone possessed integrity, not because he fell, but because he knew how to get up again and give value to his fall: “Do you think man can overcome his destiny? Yes, if he accepts it.”⁵⁸ “And if my literary work has any sense when all is said and done, it’s this: at a certain point the act of writing meant for me an absolute need to bear witness, the unavoidable need to free myself of an obsession, to affirm the sense and limits of a painful final break and more sincere fidelity. Writing has never been, and indeed could not be, a serene aesthetic pleasure for me, except in very rare moments, but is instead a painful and solitary continuation of a struggle [...]. And the difficulties I sometimes face in trying to express myself [...] arise [...] from a conscience that struggles to ease a few private and perhaps incurable wounds and that, in any case, stubbornly demands complete integrity. Because it’s not enough to be sincere in order to be true.”⁵⁹

Of course, when considering a man’s life, we should never be too harsh or naïve. What we must remember is that any crime of duplicity, if such really happened, was committed during a period before Silone started writing and so has no effect – as his denigrators claim, and those who prejudicially allege that the documents found are not authentic – on the validity and credibility of the life and works of a writer who was *born* after this period. Indeed, although never justifying evil, a person who has been caught up in it and has managed to escape intact is a stronger and more reliable person than one who has

never experienced evil. Shouldn’t we admire the person who – through a heroic gesture – escapes from hell in order to bear witness to that horror, with a sense of love for humanity, so that others may avoid it?

With regard to those who study Silone: in life as in the world of culture, real friends are not those who keep awkward secrets under wraps, but those who want the best for us and appreciate us despite such truths.

There is no doubt that Silone experienced a dark moment of the soul. If we read his works carefully, we understand that liberty, integrity and honour are not just innate or pre-acquired qualities for him, that may get lost along the way, but they are rather a victory in an arduous battle: “Man [...] is something we become.”⁶⁰ Sandro Pertini, at the death of his friend, saw in him “a man with a pure heart and honest intellect.” Igino Giordani, a writer and politician whose anti-Fascism is enriched with adamant Christian Christianity similar to Silone’s in various ways, called him “an honourable man.”⁶¹ Having said this, however, all that we know points to the fact that this purity of heart, rectitude and courage were, in Silone’s case, a goal reached only after having completed a merciless and onerous journey, the outcome of which was far from certain: “Freedom is not a thing you can receive as a gift. I think that that is the most important victory of modern psychology.”⁶²

How can we fail to recognise in Murica’s words the similarity of his soul’s path to that of Silone’s?

“It may be, Pietro, that you were born whole, pure and thus also brave, by virtue of nature. My courage, on the other hand, if I may say I have any, is not natural; it is, as at this moment, the overcoming of fear; because my natural tendency is to be fearful and weak. Only recently have I begun to understand what courage really is, in the sense that you mean: courage seen as a deed of honesty.

[...] My confession [...], when no one yet suspected me, was a difficult, painful and supreme act of courage.”⁶³

Even Pietro Spina – as though portraying the same character at a different stage of maturity – must have been through a similar experience in the past. Indeed, Silone says of him (although the words could

Left:
Silone in Rome in
1962.

Ignazio Silone (third from left, top row) during the laurea honoris causa ceremony at Yale University (13th June 1966).

equally apply to Silone himself) that: “Destiny has decreed that he should go underground and see everything from that viewpoint, so that appearances will not deceive him. He now sees that the things that the world venerates and adores are worth nothing and so he despises them, while those things the world scorns and abhors he recognises as the only true and real things.”⁶⁴ The point of view represented here is that of a grain of wheat that has to die in order to produce new life, Christ who becomes a “worm in the dirt” so that he can save us all. It may be seen as a real conversion: a conversion to the Truth, which inevitably coincides with Goodness and Beauty and which, for Silone, is also embodied in literature.

Owing to his own overwhelming thirst for moral integrity and his focus on the here and now, Silone was able to state with equanimity:

“[...] the past, with the deep wounds it has left in us, must not be used by us as a reason for weakness. We must not allow ourselves to become demoralised by guilt, sloth or nonsense, whether spoken or written. From the moment that our will is pure, a new force can arise in even the worst of us. *Etiam peccata*. This way of thinking may seem religious to some, and they are not entirely wrong. It is a word of which I am not ashamed, because it does not express a sentiment, but a form of awareness. I have already said on another occasion that I believe the rediscovery of the Christian faith [...] to be our most important spiritual advantage. I believe that this can also be perceived in *Bread and Wine* and *The Seed Beneath the Snow*.”⁶⁵

We cannot claim to understand Ignazio

Silone if we ignore the Christian perspective: that of the “sad nostalgia”⁶⁶ of the prodigal son and the return of the lost sheep: “[...] there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.”⁶⁷

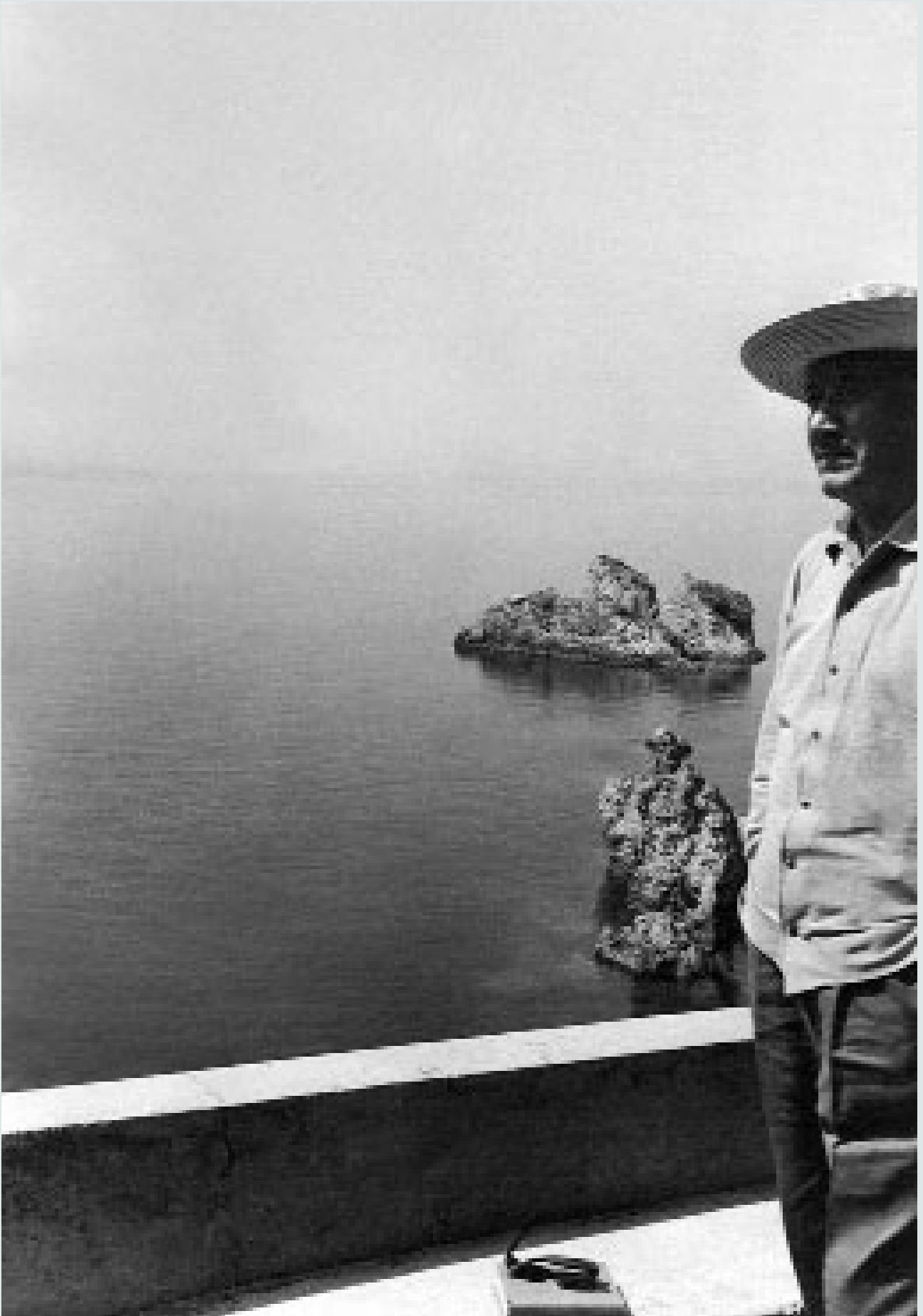
Despite his crisis of conscience – or rather because of this crisis, which he accepted and endured as an authentic spiritual and moral catharsis – Ignazio Silone’s work sums up the experience of a man who saved himself. And perhaps this is what causes the heart-strings of universal brotherly love to sound in all those who read him with a truly open heart and mind. Or are ready to free themselves to do so.

* *Teacher, writer and director of the “L’ora d’oro” publications*

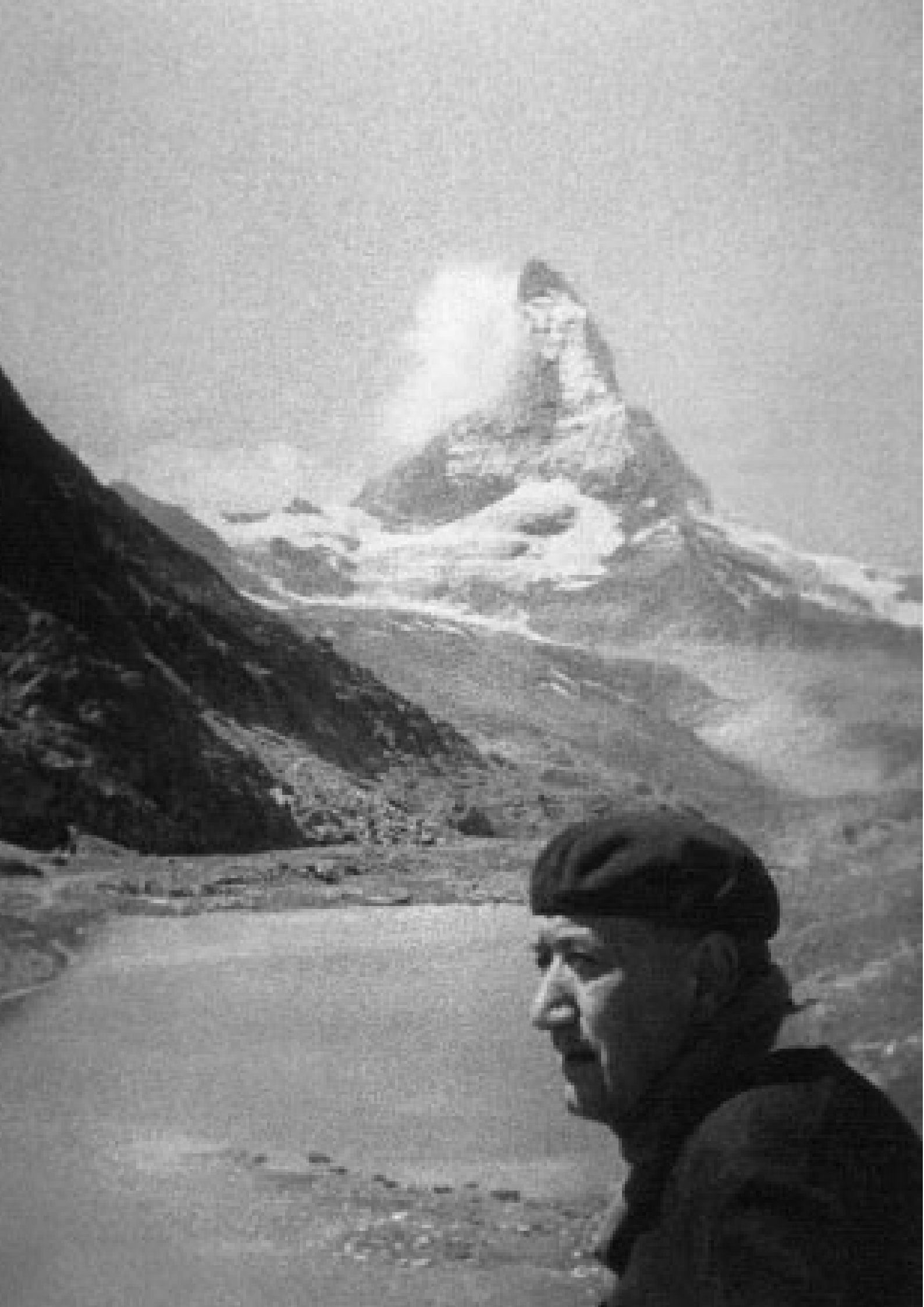


Bibliography

- ¹ I. Silone, *Uscita di Sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], in *Romanzi e saggi* by B. Falcetto, Milan, Mondadori, 1998-1999 [hereafter RS], vol. 2, pages 757-758.
- ² Cf. D. Biocca and M. Canali, *L'informatore: Silone, i comunisti e la polizia* [The Informer: Silone, the Communists and the Police], Milan, Trento, Luni, 2000, and D. Biocca, *Silone. La doppia vita di un italiano* [Silone: The Double Life of an Italian], Milan, Rizzoli, 2005. According to Biocca, Silone was, since 1923, "the most valuable of the police informers to infiltrate the Communist Party" (*ibid*, page 312).
- ³ G. Tamburrano, G. Granati and G. Isinelli Alfonso, *Processo a Silone. La disavventura di un povero cristiano* [Silone on Trial: The Unhappy Story of a Humble Christian], Rome, Piero Lacaita Editore, 2001, and G. Tamburrano, *Il "caso" Silone* [The Silone "Case"], Turin, UTET, 2006.
- ⁴ I. Silone, *Vino e Pane* [Wine and Bread], in RS, vol. 1, page 345.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, page 472.
- ⁶ Silvestri was the pseudonym used by Secondino Tranquilli in his correspondence with Guido Bellone.
- ⁷ Cf. O. Gurgo and F. de Core, *L'avventura di un uomo libero* [The Story of a Free Man], Venice, Marsilio, 1998, page 144.
- ⁸ I. Silone, *Vino e Pane* [Wine and Bread], op. cit., page 329.
- ⁹ I. Silone, *Uscita di Sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., page 852.
- ¹⁰ Letter to Gabriella Seidenfeld quoted in D. Biocca, *Silone*, op. cit., page 22.
- ¹¹ Letter by Silvestri (Silone) dated 5th July 1929, in D. Biocca, *Silone*, op. cit., page 146.
- ¹² I. Silone, *Memoriale dal carcere Svizzero* [Memoir from a Swiss Prison] in RS, vol. 1, page 1396-1397.
- ¹³ Silone speaks about an "important turning point in [his] life" (cf. I. Silone, *Parliamo di me* [Let's Talk about Me] in RS, vol. 2, pages 1256-1257).
- ¹⁴ Interview with C. Marabini, *Silone: siamo profughi tutta la vita* [Silone: We're Refugees All Our Life] in *La Fiera letteraria* weekly paper (3rd May 1976).
- ¹⁵ Cf. *Un premio al pudore* [Award for Shame], interview with G. Livi, in the *Epoca* magazine (15th September 1968).
- ¹⁶ I. Silone, *Una Mancinata di More* [A Handful of Blackberries], in RS, vol. 2, page 158.
- ¹⁷ I. Silone, *Uscita di Sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., pages 869-870.
- ¹⁸ I. Silone, *Memoriale dal carcere Svizzero* [Memoir from a Swiss Prison], op. cit., page 1409.
- ¹⁹ Interview published in the French magazine *L'Express* (23rd January 1961).
- ²⁰ I. Silone, *Uscita di Sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., page 889.
- ²¹ Quoted in O. Gurgo and F. de Core, *L'avventura di un uomo libero* [The Story of a Free Man], op. cit., page 271.
- ²² I. Silone, *L'avventura di un povero cristiano* [The Story of a Humble Christian], in RS, vol. 2, page 540.
- ²³ I. Silone, *Fontamara*, in RS, vol. 1, page 187.
- ²⁴ Cf. A. Paganini "Ed egli si nascose": *Ignazio Silone e il dramma di una vita* ["And He Did Hide Himself": Ignazio Silone and the Drama of a Man's Life] in *Quaderni grigionitaliani*, vol. 70, n° 1 (January 2001), pages 4-22, and n° 2 (April 2001), pages 103-113.
- ²⁵ I. Silone, *L'avventura di un povero cristiano* [The Story of a Humble Christian], op. cit., page 629.
- ²⁶ I. Silone, *Vino e Pane* [Wine and Bread], op. cit., page 493.
- ²⁷ I. Silone, *Ed egli si nascose* [And He Did Hide Himself], Rome, Città Nuova, 2000, page 51.
- ²⁸ I. Silone, *La scuola dei dittatori* [The School for Dictators], in RS, vol. 1, page 1028.
- ²⁹ Letter from Silone to Don Orione dated 29th July 1918, in G. Casoli, *L'incontro di due uomini liberi: don Orione e Silone* [The Encounter of Two Free Men: Don Orione and Silone], Milan, Jaca Book, 2000, page 118.



- ³⁰ Postcard sent by Romolo Tranquilli to his cousin Pomponio on 5th November 1929, quoted in D. Biocca, *Silone*, op. cit., page 134.
- ³¹ I. Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., page 783.
- ³² *Ibid*, page 873.
- ³³ *Ibid*, page 802; cf. also pages 894 and 933.
- ³⁴ I. Silone, *I periodici di cultura* [Cultural Periodicals] in *RS*, vol. 2, pages 1172-1173.
- ³⁵ *Gospel According to Mark* 8: 34-35.
- ³⁶ I. Silone, *Vino e Pane* [Wine and Bread], op. cit., page 453.
- ³⁷ I. Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., pages 789-790.
- ³⁸ *40 domande a Ignazio Silone* [40 Questions for Ignazio Silone], in *RS*, vol. 2, page 1212.
- ³⁹ I. Silone, *Il seme sotto la neve* [The Seed Beneath the Snow], in *RS*, vol. 1, page 643.
- ⁴⁰ I. Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., page 893.
- ⁴¹ I. Silone, *Sulla dignità dell'intelligenza e l'indegnità degli intellettuali* [The Dignity of Intelligence and the Indignity of Intellectuals], in *RS*, vol. 2, page 1118.
- ⁴² I. Silone, *Pane e Vino* [Bread and Wine], Lugano, Nuove Edizioni di Capolago, 1937, page 293.
- ⁴³ Letter from Silone to Gabriella Seidenfeld quoted in D. Biocca, *Silone*, op. cit., page 175.
- ⁴⁴ I. Silone, *La scuola dei dittatori* [The School for Dictators], op. cit., page 1033.
- ⁴⁵ I. Silone, *Fontamara*, op. cit., page 190.
- ⁴⁶ I. Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., pages 845-846.
- ⁴⁷ M. Dorigatti and M. Maghenzani, *Darina Laracy Silone. Colloqui* [Darina Laracy Silone. Conversations.] Zevio, Perosini, 2005, page 112.
- ⁴⁸ I. Silone, *Alcuni fatti della mia vita* [A Few Facts about My Life], now in *RS*, vol. 1, page 1382.
- ⁴⁹ I. Silone, *Ed egli si nasconde* [And He Did Hide Himself], op. cit., page 87.
- ⁵⁰ I. Silone, *Memoriale dal carcere svizzero* [Memoir from a Swiss Prison], op. cit., pages 1397-1399.
- ⁵¹ I. Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., page 860.
- ⁵² *Ibid*, page 866.
- ⁵³ *Un premio al pudore* [Award for Shame], interview with G. Livi, op. cit.
- ⁵⁴ Letter from Silone to Rainer Biemel, in *RS*, vol. 1, pages 1374-1376.
- ⁵⁵ I. Silone, *Vino e Pane* [Wine and Bread], op. cit., page 499.
- ⁵⁶ I. Silone, *Ecco perché mi distaccai dalla Chiesa* [Why I Distanced Myself from the Church], now in *RS*, vol. 2, page 1271.
- ⁵⁷ I. Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., page 892.
- ⁵⁸ *40 domande a Ignazio Silone* [40 Questions for Ignazio Silone], op. cit., page 1212.
- ⁵⁹ I. Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., pages 802-803.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid*, page 801.
- ⁶¹ Quoted in *Bacchelli, Batocchi, Cassola, Luzi, Quasimodo, Silone interpretano la società del Novecento. Colloqui*. [Bacchelli, Batocchi, Cassola, Luzi, Quasimodo and Silone interpret society in the 1900s. Conversations.] by C. Casoli, Genoa, Milan, Marietti, 2005, page 109.
- ⁶² Interview quoted in L. d'Eramo, *L'opera di Ignazio Silone* [The Works of Ignazio Silone], Milan, Mondadori, 1971, page 552.
- ⁶³ I. Silone, *Ed egli si nasconde* [And He Did Hide Himself], op. cit., page 85.
- ⁶⁴ I. Silone, *Il seme sotto la neve* [The Seed Beneath the Snow], op. cit., page 892.
- ⁶⁵ I. Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., pages 869-870.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid*, page 871
- ⁶⁷ *Gospel According to Luke* 15:7.



“My second patria”: Silone and Switzerland

by Vincenzo Todisco*



Left:
Ignazio Silone in
Cervino in 1966.

This page:
In Davos in 1933.

Ignazio Silone spent fourteen years of his life in Switzerland, from 1930 to 1944, a crucial period in his personal, political and artistic development. During his exile he broke with the Communist Party and discovered literature as a new tool for influencing public opinion. What follows is a look at the main stages in Silone's life as a political refugee in Switzerland. For clarity's sake, his political and literary viewpoints are considered separately, even though his literary activities were inextricably linked to his political ones, as is apparent in the many essays Silone wrote during his years of exile. In this period Silone strengthened and expounded his anti-Fascist stand and distanced himself from Communism. In Switzerland Silone's Christian mysticism also matured. His was a personal religious creed, not bound to any particular church, just one expression of his intransigence when it came to any form of power, secular or ecclesiastical. Last but not least, Silone's time in Switzerland saw him become an advocate for the autonomy of culture. He supported the ideas of utopia and the rebel, like Albert Camus.

The recent controversy about Silone's possible collaboration with OVRA, the Italian secret police under the Fascists is dealt with elsewhere and thus will not be dealt with in detail here. The controversy concerns his activities during the 1920s, before he fled to Switzerland. It should be pointed out that the issue of Silone's relationship with the Fascist police should be regarded as inextricably linked to a personal matter that caused him great anguish: he strove to do all he could to save his imprisoned and seriously ill brother Romolo from death, having earlier failed to protect him politically (hence his great sense of guilt). From his first novel - *Fontamara* - onwards, Silone consistently sided with the losers, the underdogs, the *cafoni* (humble peasants). He felt himself one with them. Indeed, it was during his exile that his ideals took shape, embodied in the courageous decisions he took at dramatic moments in his life and openly expressed in *The Story of a Humble Christian* (1968). These ideals were based on a strong moral and social conscience and, especially, the conviction that politics should not be a

struggle for power, but a struggle to win back the freedom taken away from the people by those in power.

Four important events took place during Silone's early years in Switzerland (1930 - 1934): the start of his literary career with the novel *Fontamara*; his painful break with the Communist Party; his collaboration with *information*, a political/cultural journal he founded with some other Swiss intellectuals; and developments in his emotional life. It was only around 1941, after a relatively peaceful period, that Silone returned to militant politics. These, his last years of exile, were the saddest and most dramatic for him.

Silone flees Italy and finds refuge in Switzerland

In the latter half of the 1920s, when Fascism ruled Italy, all activities deemed to be against the regime were forced to go underground. With its exceptional laws of 1926, the regime ensured the dissolution of all opposing political parties and decreed the suppression of the critical press. The Italian Communist Party (Pcd'I or PCI) became illegal and went underground, and the Fascists started persecuting its leaders. The situation became increasingly dangerous and Silone, one of the PCI's leaders, was forced to flee Italy at the end of 1929. He entered Switzerland as an illegal immigrant in 1930, seriously ill and with no passport, having miraculously escaped the Fascist persecution. He went first to Zurich and then, upon his doctor's advice, set out for Davos. Upon his return to Zurich he was briefly imprisoned on the charge of being an exile "without papers." Twelve years later he would again be in prison, this time for having been involved in illegal political activities. In his *Memoir from a Swiss Prison*, written in prison in December 1942 and addressed to the Prosecutor General of the Swiss Confederation (which we will look at in detail further on), he recorded his initial contact with the country that would be home to him for the next fourteen years:

"Exactly twelve years ago, in December 1930 (like now, just a few days before Christmas), I was a guest in this very prison where I am currently incarcerated. The reason that

Another image of Silone in 1933, during his stay in Davos.



time was so that the authorities could examine my case, I having entered Switzerland without a passport. If I look back now at the time I have spent in this country and the transformation I underwent, I seem to have become another man entirely: at the time, I was thirty years old, I had just recently left the Communist Party, to which I had sacrificed my youth, my studies, and every personal interest; I was [...] without family (I had become an orphan at the age of fifteen, my only remaining brother was then in prison as a Catholic anti-Fascist, and, soon after, he died in prison); I had been expelled from France and from Spain; I could not return to Italy; in a word, I was on the verge of suicide.”¹

In this excerpt, written at a time of great distress, Silone describes the strong impact Switzerland had on the course of his personal life. Silone had, of course, written articles and letters for the PCI in the past, but had never tried his hand at literature. As soon as he reached Switzerland, he headed for a health centre in Canton Ticino and started writing *Fontamara*, which he would continue and complete at Davos, where he stayed about a year under a false name. He then settled in Zurich, which had become an important centre for intellectual refugees from all over Europe following the fall of Paris and the subsequent dispersion of the last anti-Fascist and anti-Nazi forces in continental Europe. Silone initially kept well away from all forms of politics. These years

were years of meditation, reflection, ideals and spirituality: an “internal transformation,” as he himself described in his *Memoir from a Swiss Prison*. This period of introspection saw him dedicate himself to writing and absolute silence, thus keeping his promise to the Swiss police that he would not get involved in politics again, having just left the Communist Party.

Silone breaks with the Communist Party

When the left wing of the Italian Socialist Party split off to form the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1921, Silone was one of the founding members of the new political party. Difficulties started to arise, however, towards the end of the 1920s. The first major crack appeared in 1927, when Stalin demanded the ratification of his condemnation of Trotsky during a meeting of the Komintern in Moscow, without it being possible to verify any of his alleged crimes. Silone immediately perceived what Stalinism would become, long before many other intellectuals did, and he became increasingly critical. Over the next few years – his early period of exile in Switzerland – Silone ended up convincing himself that Communism was becoming more and more a dictatorship and he could therefore no longer honestly identify with the Communist Party. This was one of the bitterest disappointments in his life, as he had originally believed that he had found all the answers to his hopes in the Communist movement.

Stalin’s policies only aggravated the tyrannical character of the international Communist organisation, transforming the Communists from the “persecuted” into “persecutors” and causing Silone to hope for a democratic and socialist revolution that would distance itself from Communism. He therefore left the PCI for good in 1931, and in the early 1940s he did not hesitate to speak out against it when he returned to an active political role with the Socialists, despite the ban on such activities for political refugees in Switzerland. Silone thus moved towards Socialism in the years that followed his break with the Communist Party. His view of Socialism excluded all forms of collaboration with Communism, given that the latter was not

based on democracy, but totalitarianism. Silone felt that any form of dictatorship, whether left-wing or right-wing, suffocates every principle of liberty and so should be fought against. In this climate of opposition and criticism, Silone set up a journal called *information* in 1932, together with several other Swiss intellectuals. It was published from 1932 to 1934 thanks to the efforts of Emil Oprecht, a socialist publisher who did his best to support the political refugees in Zurich. To underline the anti-conventional nature of its contents, the journal was printed in lower case letters throughout, titles included. The journal *information* contained critical articles and essays dealing with the social, political, religious and cultural issues of the day. Max Bill, the famous Swiss painter and illustrator, was responsible for its graphics. Silone regularly published his own political essays and articles, seeing *information* as a tool that afforded him the chance to express his own anti-Fascist beliefs. Many of these works heralded the contents of his major essay *Der Faschismus: seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung* [*Fascism: Its Origin and Development*], an early logical analysis of Fascism that Silone

would later publish in Zurich in 1934. The journal *information* was published in German, though Silone obviously drafted his contributions in Italian and then had them translated into German. His original manuscripts in Italian were hidden in a storeroom in Emil Oprecht's house. Unfortunately, this burnt down during the war and so the manuscripts were lost. In 1994, Maria Antonietta Morettini Bura of the University of Perugia translated back into Italian for Guerra Edizioni publishers all of Silone's essays and articles that appeared in *information* so these are now available in the original language.² Silone did not, however, sign his political articles with his real name, Secondo Tranquilli, but used various pseudonyms and nom-de-plumes, including Marsico, Pasquini, Magister, Master, Silone Ippolito, Fritz Nickel and Willi Tranq. His use of pseudonyms was a habit he had acquired during the period he was actively involved with the PCI. His alias was Sormani in the early 1940s when he returned to active politics in Switzerland, setting up the Foreign Office [*Centro Estero*] of the Italian Socialist Party.

Fontamara: the "other" image of Italy abroad

Silone's encounter with Switzerland was, as we have said, all-decisive for his *re-birth* as a writer. As a refugee forced to forsake his official political duties he immediately started writing in 1930. His first book, *Fontamara*, helped spread throughout Europe the ideas of justice and liberty that, to Silone's way of thinking, were associated with a fundamental intolerance of totalitarian regimes. Written during his stay in Davos in 1930, the book was only published three years later, in 1933, in German, thanks to the vigorous efforts of Emil Opfrecht. Despite the many difficulties that surrounded its publication, this work resulted in almost immediate international fame and success for the author. *Fontamara* inaugurated a long and often tormented literary career, always linked to political events in Italy and Europe from the 1920s onwards.

When we read Silone we also read about the man himself. We get insight into his conscience as it manifested in one of the





Silone (third from right) at the Congress of the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity in 1946. The future President of the Italian Republic, Sandro Pertini, is the first on the right.

most turbulent periods of history in the last century. *Fontamara* is a surprising book, given that Silone arrived in Switzerland with a purely political background, pragmatic experiences that had clearly influenced his life choices. At the age of just 17, when he had publicly denounced the authorities in his region (Abruzzo) of fraud and embezzlement during the reconstruction of the area hit by the 1915 earthquake, Silone set off on his militant political career that would eventually lead him to assume the leadership of the PCI.

Then, in Switzerland, he was faced with the fact that he had to give up all political activities, at the pain of immediate expulsion from the country. This, exactly at the moment when he felt the need as never before to fight and express his disapproval of the Fascist regime in Italy and the impulse to make known to others his own anguish, visions and concept of utopia. *Fontamara* substitutes, in this sense, for his political activities: it represented a new outlet, a new tool in the intellectual struggle against the Fascist regime. It is as if, no longer able to take political action, Silone attempts to oppose Fascism through literature. This he succeeded in doing, as the book immediately took off and was distributed secretly in Italy. *Fontamara* became the anti-Fascist literary work in Switzerland and among German immigrants. Readers around the world got a true picture of Italy, one that the Fascist propaganda and rhetoric had tried to disguise.

The book had a strong impact on its readers. Foreigners finally discovered the south region of Italy, the Marsica area and the

peasants of Pescina, the *cafoni*, which Silone used to symbolise the age-old suffering of his people, a universal prototype of the poor, ever the victims of imposition and abuse. Speaking about the 1940s in an interview in 1996, Ettore Cella³ (son of Enrico Dezza, the anti-Fascist manager of the *Cooperativo* restaurant in Zurich) summed up the significance of *Fontamara* for those living in Switzerland at the time: “Thanks to *Fontamara*, Silone created a new word for us non-Italians: *cafone*. This book was like a revelation for us; we had no idea what the south of Italy was like. This was partly because the Italian community in Zurich was mainly made up of Italians from the north of the country and often even they didn’t know [what it was like]. *Fontamara* let us get a real picture of Italy.”⁴ Silone himself dwelt on this aspect of his work in a particularly noteworthy preface to one of his many revised editions of the book:

“This tale may appear to the foreign reader, who will be the first to read it, to be in sharp contrast with the picturesque image of southern Italy that he often finds in books written for tourists. In certain books, southern Italy is, we all know, a fantastically beautiful land, whose peasants sing hymns to the glory of God as they go to work and the country girls in their traditional costume echo their song, while in the nearby woods the nightingales sing. Unfortunately, in *Fontamara*, these marvels have never happened.”⁵

By telling the dramatic tale of the peasants in his land, Silone manages to give the reader an authentic image of Italy’s south. *Fontamara* has been revised many times. The 1944 edition included a series of striking illustrations drawn in the 1930s by Clément Moreau, a German refugee whose real name was Carl Meffert and whom Silone had met in a refugee camp in Ascona. The success of *Fontamara* helped Silone emerge from the deep existential crisis that had tormented him during his early years in exile. Ottorino Gurgo and Francesco de Core in their biography of Silone write:

“Thanks to the success of *Fontamara*, Silone is a reborn man. He is living a second youth, or, better, the genuine pleasures of a youth that had always been denied him.

[...] As a writer he no longer finds himself at the edge of an abyss. He's quite famous, revered and appreciated. *Fontamara* is a work that's being read in every corner of Europe, though not in Fascist Italy.”⁶

Those were the years when, thanks to *Fontamara*'s success, Silone was able to free his culture from provincialism and intensify his narrative/non-fiction output. Following *Der Faschismus*, he started on a collection of stories, published in 1935 (again by Oprecht), called *A Journey to Paris*.

Silone and Zurich society

Having established himself as a successful writer, Silone became a notable figure in Zurich society. He was reputed to be a handsome, charming, mysterious man with a proud bearing and languid gaze. The women in the intellectual circles and literary drawing-rooms were all fascinated by this enigmatic, physically attractive man, the refugee writer. These drawing-rooms and circles – the best-known being that of the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung – opened up new horizons for Silone in the literary world and added sparkle to his otherwise dull life as a political refugee. Here Silone met the woman with whom he had what was perhaps his most glamorous yet unhappiest affair, Aline Valangin.

There were three important women in Silone's life: Gabriella Seidenfeld, Aline Valangin and Darina Laracy, who would ultimately become his wife and stay by his side until his death. Silone had an intimate relationship throughout almost all his period in exile with Gabriella Seidenfeld, a Jewish refugee who had lived in Switzerland for many years. However this did not stop him from having the odd affair with other women, including the Swiss Romansh writer and musician Aline Valangin, the wife of the lawyer Wladimir Rosenbaum. In her memoirs, Aline Valangin said of Silone: “I received letters from him which would have made any woman ecstatic. I sent one of these back to him – a particularly long one, like a litany of love in which he praised me and likened me to Our Lady of Suffering – as it was too much, too fantastic, too beautiful.”⁷ Silone frequented the Swiss and German intellectual circles during his first years in exile, distancing himself from other Italians.



It was only in 1935 that he gradually drew closer to the Italian community in Zurich, to the point that he once again became involved in politics and figured as one of the major anti-Fascist leaders. Franca Magnani, in her autobiography, *Una famiglia italiana*, gives us a detailed description of the Italian community in Zurich at the time. Magnani explains Silone's abstention in this way:

“Silone lived a separate, retired life, partly on account of his poor health – he had been in a sanatorium in Davos – but mostly because he had just left the Italian Communist Party. ‘You don't leave the Communist Party like other political parties,’ was what his father had impressed on him, ‘the Party becomes family, school, church and barracks.’”⁸

Zurich had a large number of Italian immigrants in those years, mostly the result of the first mass emigrations in the early 20th century. One of the early emigrants was Enrico Dezza, the father of Ettore Cella. Originally from Emilia-Romagna, he was one of the founders and leaders of the Italian Socialist movement in Zurich. The *Cooperativo* restaurant at Militärstrasse 36 served this community of emigrant socialist

Ignazio Silone and his wife Darina in Zurich, in the library of the Fleischmann home where the writer was a frequent visitor for ten years.

workers, giving them somewhere to meet and enjoy cheap meals. During the Second World War, the *Cooperativo* continued to be a political/cultural centre, a Socialist, anti-Fascist hotbed. Here Silone, together with Enrico Dezza, edited the left-wing *L'avvenire dei lavoratori* newspaper. When Mussolini came to power and, as a result, the foreign consulates in Switzerland, as in other countries, were run by Fascists, the *Cooperativo* became the sole point of reference for opponents of the Fascist regime. Thus, when the Fascists set up their after-school youth movement in Zurich, as in many other cities, the Socialists gravitating around the *Cooperativo* set up their own free school, asking Franca Magnani's father, the republican Fernando Schiavetti (then an exile in Marseilles), to head it. When Silone, a regular at the *Cooperativo*, decided to enter the political scene, Europe was already torn by war.

The Foreign Office of the Italian Socialist Party in Switzerland

With the occupation of France, the last organised Socialist, anti-Fascist and anti-Nazi organisations in continental Europe dispersed. Many political refugees from all over Europe, and Italy especially, fled to Zurich, the city called "the navel of Europe" by some of Silone's biographers. After the destruction of the International Socialist Bureau in Paris, the Communists played a major role in the fight against Fascism, being the only political force that still had a decent organisation. Silone was eager to contribute to the future reconstruction of Italy and realised that the time had come to take action, also because he saw Communism as a threat to the democratisation of Italy at the end of the war. A keen observer of the international political scene, in the spring of 1941 he saw the initial rifts in the Fascist regime and the start of what he called "a phase of internal decomposition," the first obvious signs of crisis. The increasingly negative results of Italy's military campaigns together with this party crisis pointed to the major catastrophe soon to take place in Italy.

Early 1941 marked the start of the second chapter in Silone's exile in Switzerland. After a long period of political inactivity, he returned to active politics. He set up the so-

called *Centro Estero* (CE) in Zurich, the Italian Socialist Party's foreign office. As a result, Silone was once again imprisoned when the Swiss authorities discovered this organisation in December 1942. The aim of the CE was to re-awaken Socialism in Italy. The original Italian Socialist Party (PSI) had been set up in 1892 in Rome and then suppressed in the 1920s by Mussolini. It was only after 1940 that the Socialists started to regroup, thanks to the creation of a *Centro Interno* (CI) in Italy. The CE, therefore, was basically a project concerned with reintroducing the PSI and thus was concerned exclusively with events in Italy. The CE never operated actively in Switzerland. Silone summed up the programme, intentions and aims of the CE's activities in his *Memoir from a Swiss Prison*. Given the political situation in Europe at the time it is clear why Silone became involved in Italian politics again. The first cracks in the Fascist party were occurring, and in the spring of 1941 following the break within the dominant political class in Italy, the anti-Fascist forces abroad began to regroup around the Communists, as did several Socialist groups. Silone was determined not to sit on the sidelines and watch while there was a real risk of the Fascist dictatorship being replaced by another – the Bolsheviks – which he called "red Fascism." He therefore decided to intervene, but without abandoning his main activity, writing:

"I am not, nor do I wish to be, a politician, in the meaning ordinarily given this word. I am, and I want to remain, a writer, tied to no other discipline except that which my thinking and conscience master."⁹

Silone saw his activities on behalf of the CE as a passing phase in his life. He intended to get back to writing as soon as possible and, indeed, saw his arrest by the Swiss police as providing him with a welcome opportunity to concentrate on his writing again:

"When the investigation into this political intermezzo is finished, I will return to my work [...]. Perhaps prison, for my spirit, is the most propitious place; the most vivid, living texts of Italian freedom have been written in prison [...]. Divine Providence can make use of anything, even the Swiss federal police."¹⁰

The CE had a clear-cut political goal: to create political unity in Italy on the basis of federalism and democracy. The CE was, of course, dependent on the CI, which kept it informed on developments in Italy. On the basis of this information and thanks to its greater freedom of movement, the CE planned and prepared the terrain for the final defeat of Fascism and provided support for the delicate transition from dictatorship to democracy. The CE, therefore, was concerned with political, ideological and organisational leadership. Needless to say, information could only be transmitted via a clandestine network of agents, crossing the border between Italy and Canton Ticino and Italian Graubünden. The actual exchange – letters, messages and political dispatches – was entrusted to “contacts,” the couriers facing the great risks involved in getting messages past the border. One such contact was a ticket clerk from Poschiavo, the anti-Fascist and Socialist Filippo Cramereri who risked his life for the cause.¹¹

Despite its importance, the CE was a branch of the CI and consequently had a modest, subordinate role. It was responsi-

ble for Italian Socialist propaganda around the world and in particular for providing support during the delicate transition from the Fascist regime to democracy in Italy. It concerned itself with ideology, political advice, organisation through the press and the distribution of propaganda. Its most important element was the *Terzo fronte* manifesto, conceived by Silone, which appeared on the 1st of May 1942. Of course, the CE needed funds in order to meet its goals. The organisations and associations that helped finance the CE included the British Labour Party and the Swiss Trade Unions. The Swiss Public Service Union was the most supportive in Switzerland. The Swiss Social-Democratic Party was also approached, but failed to respond.

The CE had four leaders: Silone (working under the name *Sormani*), director; Riccardo Formica (*Minotti*), secretary; Olindo Gorni (*Giannini*), an intellectual from Geneva; and Piero Pellegrini (*Pedroni*), editor of *Libera stampa*, a socialist paper in Canton Ticino.

Silone was arrested on the 14th of December 1942. The Swiss police confiscated a large amount of allegedly conspiratorial material. Silone was interrogated the next day and on the 16th wrote a letter to the Chief of the Information Service at the Prosecutor General's Office of the Swiss Confederation, in which he said he would be writing his *Memoir from a Swiss Prison* and provided explanations in Italian concerning the previous day's interrogation. He felt the need to clarify a few details. Firstly, owing to his poor grasp of the German language, he said he had been unable to explain himself properly and so wished to return to a few points that arose during the preliminary investigation. Then he wished to provide a defence against the charge of communist and anarchic militancy, feeling that Swiss police were still unaware of all the facts. Silone also wanted to clarify the term “Social-Democratic,” stressing that this should not be confused with “Communism.” At the time of his arrest, Silone's crime was not clear. In his *Memoir from a Swiss Prison* he said:

“The warrant of arrest I signed upon arrest was issued on the basis of the special law against Communists and Anarchists, yet the arresting police officer himself sponta-





neously admitted that it was a temporary charge, which would doubtlessly be replaced by another during the preliminary investigations. [...] The question, therefore, of the juridical and political nature of my arrest and that of my friends is still open to debate.”¹²

In other words, the charge of anarchic and communist activities was unfounded and thus Silone stresses: “We are resolute partisans of democracy and liberty.” He therefore proclaims his anti-Fascist position and stand against all forms of totalitarianism.

Once the police had completed their investigations, it became clear that Silone was guilty of illegal political activities in Switzerland, but exclusively directed at Italy and not Switzerland. In his *Memoir from a Swiss Prison*, Silone insisted that the CE had no links whatsoever with the Communist Party. The reason for his becoming involved in militant politics again was his desire to contribute to the introduction of democratic institutions in his country. The influence that Switzerland had had as a role model was undeniable.

The Swiss authorities realised that the CE’s activities were aimed at preparing

Italy for a political struggle and were limited to the funding of the PSI in Italy. The CE did not advocate violence, not even in Italy, but “civil disobedience,” a term that appeared in Silone’s *Il Terzo fronte* manifesto: an individual’s decision to passively resist the state authorities.

The Federal Police Department, however, continued to view the conspiratorial activities of the CE as a risk for national security (since it might have soured Swiss/Italian relations) and so proposed that the Federal Council should expel Silone in 1943. His expulsion was never put into effect for two good reasons: Silone was ill and, thanks to his international fame as a writer, Switzerland could not afford to be seen as having handed Silone over to the Fascists. All the CE members were released. Silone left prison on the 30th of December and went immediately to Davos, where he was interned and then transferred to Baden. There he had to obtain police permission before travelling and was always kept under police supervision. His correspondence and telephone calls were all monitored and every month he had to give the police a list of all those who came to visit him. The list for the month of July 1943, when Silone was staying at the Schweizerhof Hotel in Baden, includes (among others) the names and addresses of “Herr u. Frau Dr. Oprecht” (his publisher), “Sigr. Avv. Egidio Reale” (his lawyer) and “Frl. Dr. Darina Laracy” (his future wife, at the time living in Davos).

Despite his detention and internment, this period of exile in Switzerland had a lasting effect on Silone the man and on his cultural development. He saw Switzerland as a friendly land, with a tradition of welcoming political refugees. He owed Switzerland a lot, since it was there he discovered his real human condition. Indeed, he wrote: “For my rebirth and resurrection [...] I am, in very large measure, indebted to Switzerland.” He continued: “I consider Switzerland as my second *patria*, as the homeland of my spirit.”¹³ In spite of the formal wariness of refugees shown by the Swiss government for diplomatic reasons, Silone would always remember the spirit of political tolerance and protection that Switzerland demonstrated, true to its tradition. Nor did he ever forget his debt to a country that

This and previous page:
Silone’s Socialist party
membership card for
1945.

gave him refuge. He set his novel *The Fox and the Camellias* (1960) in Canton Ticino, as a personal tribute to Switzerland.

Silone continued to view Switzerland affectionately right up to the day he died. Less than a month after his death, the author Enrico Terracini described Silone's relationship with Switzerland as follows: "Very few people can claim to know Switzerland as well as Silone did; he had in-depth knowledge of the country's history, customs and politics. [...] If you mentioned the name of any Swiss politician, he could tell you all about him, his life, virtues and faults."¹⁴

Although Silone loved and respected Switzerland, he never considered staying there indefinitely. In fact, he never became fluent in German. He was never really and truly integrated. He was interested in the civil and religious history of Switzerland, but his main concern was always with Italy, which he felt a duty to free at all cost. As soon as he could, he returned to Italy, even though he realised that his work there would not be appreciated and he probably foresaw that he would undergo a second painful moral and intellectual exile there.

Silone returns to Italy

Immediately after the liberation of Italy, Silone returned to his homeland and wrote *And He Did Hide Himself*, a play based on his novel *Wine and Bread*. In 1945 he took over the direction of the left-wing paper *Avanti!* and officially joined the Italian Socialist Party as a deputy in the Assemblée Costituente. In 1949 he retired from active politics and was a severe critic of the political system, as reflected in his last major work, the dramatic play *The Story of a Humble Christian* (1968), in which he formulated his basic premise that "one can't be a Christian and a Pope at the same time." Thus, in his literature, he expresses his rejection of all forms of power, in any era and any historical or political context.

Silone dedicated the rest of his life to writing. In 1965 he won the Marzotto Prize for *Emergency Exit*. It was only at this point that the Italian critics started to pay him the attention that was long overdue.

Silone had suffered from lung disease for many decades. Having been admitted to a clinic in Geneva in 1978, Silone's health

rapidly declined and he died on the 22nd of August that same year. His final, unfinished work *Severina* was published posthumously in 1981.

* Author, teacher and scientific assistant at the Pädagogischen Hochschule Graubünden [Graubünden University of Education].



Raffaele Tranquilli reads about the death of his cousin Ignazio Silone in an article in "Il Tempo".

- ¹ I. Silone, *Uscita di Emergenza* [Emergency Exit], in *Romanzi e saggi* by B. Falcetto, Milan, Mondadori, 1998-1999 [hereafter *RS*], vol. 1, page 1396.
- ² I. Silone, *Gli articoli di "information" (Zurigo 1932-34)* [The information articles (Zurich 1932-34)], by M.A. Morettini Bura, Perugia, Guerra, 1994.
- ³ Ettore Cella, director and actor, he worked with Silone on the staging of *And He Did Hide Himself*, based on the novel *Wine and Bread*, played a role in the world premiere in Zurich in 1945 and staged the German premiere (Lucerne) of Silone's play about Celestine V, *L'avventura di un povero cristiano* [The Story of a Humble Christian] (1971).
- ⁴ *Sulle tracce di Ignazio Silone a Zurigo: intervista ad Ettore Cella* [In the footsteps of Ignazio Silone in Zurich: an interview with Ettore Cella] by V. Todisco, in *Quaderni grigionitaliani*, vol. 64, n° 4 (October 1995), pages 325-331.
- ⁵ I. Silone, *Fontamara*, in *RS*, vol. 1, page 14.
- ⁶ O. Gurgo and F. de Core, *Silone. L'avventura di un uomo libero* [The Story of a Free Man], Venice, Marsilio, 1998, page 172.
- ⁷ Extract from: P. Kamber, *Geschichte zweier Leben - Wladimir Rosenbaum & Aline Valangin* [The Story of Two Lives - Wladimir Rosenbaum & Aline Valangin], Zurich, Limmat Verlag, 1990, page 100; the translation of the passage into Italian and English is ours.
- ⁸ F. Magnani, *Una famiglia italiana* [An Italian Family], Milan, Feltrinelli, 1992, pages 98-99. First published in Germany (1990) with the title *Eine italienische Familie*.
- ⁹ I. Silone, *Memoriale dal carcere svizzero* [Memoir from a Swiss Prison], op. cit., pages 1410-1411.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ For details on Filippo Cramerì, see V. Todisco, *Filippo Cramerì: messaggero di Silone a Poschiavo* [Filippo Cramerì: Silone's messenger in Poschiavo] in *Quaderni grigionitaliani*, vol. 62, n° 4 (October 1993), pages 313-334. The information provided in Silone's *Memoir from a Swiss Prison* and that found in the Federal Swiss Archives make it possible to reconstruct Silone's clandestine activities on behalf of the PSI's Centro Estero.
- ¹² I. Silone, *Memoriale dal carcere svizzero* [Memoir from a Swiss Prison], op. cit., pages 6-7.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, page 12.
- ¹⁴ E. Terracini, *Il silenzioso* [The Silent One], in *Il Dovere* (18th September 1978).

The Ignazio Silone Study Centre

by Sebastiana Ferrari and Martorano Di Cesare



The Ignazio Silone Study Centre was established by the Municipality of Pescina on the 5th of November 1982 in honour of Ignazio Silone, the town's famous literary son, and to promote his work and spread his ideas of liberty and justice. The Study Centre is hosted in the former monastery of San Francesco, said to have been founded in 1200 by St. Francis himself, situated in the middle of the historic town of Pescina, just below the old bell tower of San Berardo which Silone chose as his final resting place. The complex also contains the fine San Francesco theatre, the church now dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua, a conference centre and, more recently, the Silone Museum. The cloister features a superb sculpture by Cascella.

The Study Centre organises and promotes many cultural events throughout the year, the most important ones honouring his birthday on the 1st of May and his death on the 22nd of August, when conferences and seminars dealing with various aspects of his literature and politics are featured on the programme.

Silone always showed a special interest in young people. So, every year the *Giornata siloniana della scuola* [Silone School Day] is held at which awards are given for the best essays on Silone written by secondary and

high school students from the province of L'Aquila in the *Silone maestro di vita* [Silone, Master of Life] literary competition.

The Study Centre works with various cultural institutions and universities in Italy and overseas. It has especially close ties with the University of L'Aquila, offering undergraduates the chance to gain work experience at the Centre.

The Centre also publishes the journal called *Quaderni siloniani* and many works dedicated to Silone.

Since 1988, the Study Centre has hosted the *International Silone Prize*, which has been officially sponsored by the region of Abruzzo since 1995. Each year the *International Silone Prize* recognises persons whose works bear testimony to or reflect the values of liberty and justice that were so dear to Silone. Past winners of this prize include: Galante Garrone, Carlo Bo, Riccardo Bauer (posthumous), Luce D'Eramo, Mimmo Franzinelli, Ermanno Olmi, Sebastiano Vassalli and Giuliano Vassalli. In addition to the essay prize, awards are also given in three other categories: scholarships for university theses in any discipline concerning the life, work or thinking of Silone; the translation prize for spreading the voice of Silone's works throughout the world through faithful literary translations; and the high school

Two images of the museum adjacent to the Ignazio Silone Study Centre in Pescina: the corridor with Silone memorabilia and the writer's study.

Primary school pupils
from Pescina visit
Silone in his home in
Rome.

prize, for students in Abruzzo for essays written on Silone and the Marsica area.

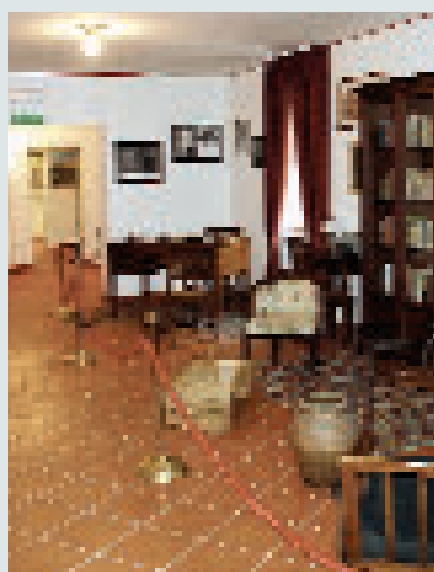
The heart of the Study Centre consists of the Silone archives, donated by Darina Silone to the Municipality of Pescina on the 1st of May 2000 in honour of the writer's 100th birthday. Silone's correspondence represents the largest part of these archives, more than six thousand letters written in the period 1930 - 1978. Silone wrote to many important people from all around the world: writers, intellectuals, artists, politicians and philosophers, plus many young students, workers and the general public. The photography section of the archives is particularly interesting, providing visual glimpses of the writer's life during the same period as the letters. They depict all the most important public and private events in his life, from the first photos taken in Davos (Switzerland) to his final days, including photographs showing him in Italy's Assemblée Costituente, during his holidays in the Greek Isles and in the company of friends and relatives in his house in Rome. All these documents are in the process of being catalogued; a summary of the correspondence can be consulted online at www.silone.it.

Silone's personal library was also donated to the Study Centre by his widow, Darina, together with his desk, typewriter, various personal objects, paintings, awards and recognitions. These are now kept and exhibited in the Silone Museum.

Opened on the 1st of May 2006, the museum is part of the State Archives of L'Aquila and was set up in order to celebrate the greatness of this intellectual, politician and writer. Especially aimed at students and the young, it offers everyone insight into

the man, his life and his work. Of course, his literary works are the nucleus of the museum: novels, essays and other writings, plus innumerable archive documents. The exhibits are arranged in chronological order, based on the date of publication of each of his works, from *Fontamara* to his posthumous work, *Severina*.

The Ignazio Silone Study Centre is, therefore, a "magical" place offering intellectuals, teachers and students from all over the world the chance to discover or rediscover this man, a true (and perhaps the most genuine) champion of liberty and justice in the 1900s.



Pier Carlo Della Ferrera is responsible for the quotes for the images accompanying the Annual Report.

Banca Popolare di Sondrio (SUISSE) is not bound by the text, which merely reflects the thoughts of the authors.

Photo sources and references

The photographs in the cultural part of this Annual Report are the propriety of the Ignazio Silone Study Centre in Pescina (Italy), whom we thank for the information provided and its co-operation in this work.

The sketches illustrating the quotes in the Financial section and on the back cover are by Clément Moreau, while the photographs are by Antonio Massimiani and Orazio Mascioli.

Banca Popolare di Sondrio (SUISSE) is perfectly willing to meet its obligations under current law with regard to claims made by the holders of any rights to the images whose owners were not identified or found at the time of publication.



GRAPHIC DESIGN
Lucasdesign, Giubiasco

RESEARCH AND COORDINATION
Myriam Facchinetti

Quote on the cover:
Ignazio SILONE.
The Seed Beneath
the Snow (1941).

Illustration on cover
by Clément Moreau.