



"Bitter Spring": Understanding Ignazio Silone

Simona Zecchi (October 19, 2009)



An interview with Stanislaw G. Pugliese, Professor of History at Hofstra College and author of "Bitter Spring: A life of Ignazio Silone." The controversial Italian writer—loved and hated in his country by anti-communists and anti-fascists alike—is studied in this book from historical, literary, and human perspectives.

After presenting his new book around the world in several occasions, on October 1, 2009, Professor Stanislaw G. Pugliese brought it before a wide audience at the Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò at NYU. Also participating was Maria Paynter, Professor at Hunter College, who assisted him in his research on Silone. They answered several questions from the public and from Prof. Stefano Albertini, Director



of the Casa Italiana.

The topic that especially interested the public was the case of Silone's alleged role as a spy for the Fascist regime against the Communist Party. Considering Silone's multifaceted life and experiences, "why shouldn't we believe he was a spy?", as someone in the public inquired. Professors Pugliese and Paynter explained that this last case broke out very recently, in 1996 (Silone died in 1978)", and considering all the contradictions found even in the authentic documents that the Italian historians found regarding his "spying", a more impartial judgment should be applied. Furthermore, it is Silone's values and his contributions to history and society that are really relevant. During the event, information about many aspects of Silone's life was offered by screening an interesting documentary by Italian journalist Giovanni Minoli from the RAI Television series "La Storia Siamo Noi."

Before the event at Casa Italiana, we had the opportunity to meet Stanislao G. Pugliese and discuss his book ([an excerpt of this conversation is available in audio here](#) [2].)

"I didn't actually chose it; in a sense, it chose me" he said. It was upon accepting the 2000 Silone Prize for his book "Carlo Rosselli: Socialist Heretic and Antifascist Exile" (Harvard College, 1999)—that Pugliese realized that there weren't any biographies of Silone in English, and decided to write one himself.



Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2009) gives a complex, all-around picture of Ignazio Silone's works, values, and life. But it is intended as the work of an historian, not "just" a biographer. "In Italy, biography is not considered a high scholarly or literary form. In America, most people get their history from biographies. But I noticed that many biographies in America are 700, 800 or even 900 pages long. The biographer throws in everything, including the kitchen sink, to 'prove' that they really really 'know' their subject. I am more modest: I do not claim to have written the 'definitive' biography of Silone nor do I claim to have solved the latest 'caso Silone.' But I also like to think that this is more than a biography: that in a way it is an homage to a lost world of peasant culture in the 'Mezzogiorno' that no longer exists."

Ignazio Silone was born Secondino Tranquilli in 1900 in the Italian region of Abruzzo; several of his novels are set in his hometown, Pescina dei Marsi, and are dedicated to the struggle of the Abruzzese peasants against landlords and officials. Secondino lost most of his family during the terrible earthquake that struck Abruzzo in 1915—a 'bitter' connection to what happened in the same region a few months ago ([see the excerpt from his book Emergency Exit](#) [3] that i-Italy republished last April as a warning against what Silone called the "political calamity" that followed the "natural



cataclysm.") He became a writer only during his exile in Switzerland and after being expelled from the Communist Party.

His three most famous novels, *Fontamara* (literally "Bitter Spring"), *Bread and Wine* and *The Seed beneath the Snow*—all set in Pescina—made Silone's popularity soar abroad. In the 1930s and 1940s, he was the most popular Italian writer in the United States; in September 1937, the English translation of *Bread and Wine* beat out John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as Book of the Month selection. In Italy, on the contrary, he was rejected by the literary establishments because both his subject and his style were not considered "proper."

"Silone should be of interest to contemporary Americans for several reasons," says Pugliese. Today, in the current ideological moment, it might indeed be beneficial for Americans to understand the life and work of a man who was hunted by the Fascists and hated by the Communists. The problem is, according to the author, that in America the facts contained in this biography could be viewed as too old, whereas in Italy, given the present political situation, they could be misinterpreted. Silone in fact, did abandon the Communist Party and even worked against it, but he always remained an anti-Fascist activist.

And today, just as it happened several decades ago, the political controversies that made up the many "Silone affairs" do not allow his figure as a writer to come out properly, neither in his Italy nor in the United States.

There are several "Silone affairs," as Pugliese explains. "One is the scandal of his lack of recognition in Italy: why was Silone so well known and read abroad but disparaged by literary critics in Italy?" Another is the controversy about his alleged 'spying' for the CIA against the Communists. In reality in the 1940s he worked with the OSS (the Office of Strategic Service, forerunner of the CIA) to end Fascism and the Nazi occupation of Italy. Much later, in 1968, when Silone learned that the Ford Foundation was laundering money from the CIA to his journal *Tempo Presente*, he closed down the journal with much bitterness and sorrow.

The latest "caso Silone" exploded in 1996, when Dario Biocca uncovered letters Silone had written to a police official in Rome in the 1920s. It is a controversial issue. "Although some of the letters were undoubtedly written by Silone, some are definitely written by someone else. There is also the question as to whether Silone was writing these letters to help his brother Romolo, arrested by the Fascists in 1928." Even the case of his alleged homosexuality has been brought up, due to his relationship with Guido Bellone, a policeman working for the Fascists. However, Pugliese asserts: "Dario Biocca and another historian have implied that it is possible that Silone was blackmailed... but there is no evidence of it; I think this is just speculation."

History's role is to connect interpretation to facts in order to separate distorting memories from good ones, and "personal memories can often picture reality in different ways, as it happened in regards to Silone: both on the left or on the right, everybody had their own opinions about Silone.

Thus Silone was and remains a controversial figure? His biographer's conclusion is a resounding yes: "Even now, in Italy, on the right they praise him as someone who refused Communism without



looking deeper into his refusal.”

The next book signing and lecture will take place at the Huntington Book Revue (www.bookrevue.com [4]), 313 New York Avenue, at 7 p.m. on October 28th

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