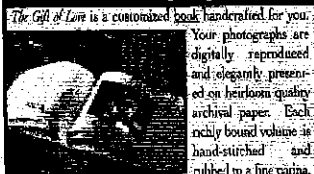


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REPUTATIONS

THE SPY WHO FAILED

Did the great anti-Fascist novelist Ignazio Silone betray his cause?

BY ALEXANDER STILLE

During the summer of 1930, a sick, penniless Italian exile living in Switzerland began writing a novel about peasant life under Fascism in his native region of the Abruzzi. "Since, in the doctors' view, I had only a short time to live, I wrote hurriedly . . . to construct to the best of my ability that village in which I put the quintessence of myself and the district in which I was born, so that at least I might die among my own people," the author, who had adopted the pseudonym Ignazio Silone, later wrote. It took Silone two years to find a publisher: a small Swiss firm, which published the novel, entitled "Fontamara," in 1933, in German translation. It was an immediate sensation, selling more than a million and a half copies, in twenty-seven languages. The novel was published on the eve of the Spanish Civil War, which forced the world to take sides on the Franco regime; it galvanized public opinion against Fascism and influenced an entire generation of American intellectuals, including Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, Irving Howe, and Alfred Kazin. "In the light of 'Fontamara,' oppression, misery and injustice took on a luminous quality," Kazin wrote in his memoir "Growing Up in the Thirties." Silone's second novel, "Bread and Wine," which is also about the Abruzzi and came out three years after "Fontamara," met with even greater success. When the Allies invaded Italy, in 1943, to push back the Axis forces, they distributed unauthorized editions of both books to the Italians along the front.

In recent years, however, researchers have begun to turn up documents in police archives which strongly suggest that Silone, in the decade before he became a writer, acted as an informant for the Fascist police. To grasp how disturbing and unlikely a development this is, one has to appreciate the fact that Silone, who died in 1978, has long been

regarded not only as an important novelist but also—like Orwell, Camus, and Malraux—as something of a secular saint, a man of rare intellectual and moral courage, who had opposed Fascism from the start and endured years of exile and persecution for his beliefs. He helped create the Italian Communist Party, then defied Stalin in the halls of the Kremlin, and finally, well before the big Moscow show trials, broke with Communism. After the war, Silone won a new set of readers, with a memoir describing his romance and disillusionment with Communism; it appeared in an anthology entitled "The God That Failed," along with essays by Arthur Koestler, André Gide, and Richard Wright, among others. Personal integrity was the central feature of his work. In "Bread and Wine" he wrote, "No word and no gesture can be more persuasive than the life and, if necessary, the death of a man who strives to be free, loyal, just, sincere, disinterested. A man who shows what a man can be."

Many of Silone's friends and supporters have refused even to read the incriminating documents, which were recently published in the book "L'Informatore" ("The Informant"), written by two Italian history professors, Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali. "I wouldn't believe in the truth of these documents even if Silone rose from the tomb and confirmed them," Indro Montanelli, the highly respected editorialist for the Milan newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, has written. Others have accused Biocca and Canali of being publicity-hungry and of rushing their book into print before the material had been thoroughly evaluated.

But the documents—letters and reports—cannot be easily dismissed. Most Silone scholars now acknowledge their authenticity, even as they continue to dispute their meaning. These docu-

ments add a new dimension to Silone's already dramatic story, and, far from negating his work, they help to explain why, in the summer of 1930, he abandoned politics and became a novelist.

Silone once remarked that he would willingly spend his life "writing and rewriting the same book, the single book that every writer has within that is the image of his soul." In Silone's case, this book was about his childhood, in the southern Italian region of the Abruzzi, and about the political odyssey that led him into and out of Communism. He was born in 1900 with the name Secondo Tranquilli, in an area of vast feudal estates where peasants eked out a subsistence living. The town described in "Fontamara" is "about a hundred shapeless one-story houses, battered by the wind and rain," along a "steep street that passes through the whole village." Most of the houses consisted of a single room, where the peasants lived with their chickens, pigs, and donkeys.

Although Silone was the son of a small landowner, he identified from a young age with the peasants, or *cafoni*. As a boy, he saw a local nobleman set his dog on a peasant woman, who was knocked to the ground and battered. The woman took the nobleman to court, where various paid witnesses testified that she had provoked the attack and no one would speak up on her behalf. She lost the suit and was stuck with the legal costs. The judge, a family friend of the Tranquillis, explained that, while he regretted the injustice, he was required to follow the facts presented at the trial. This, for Silone, exposed the hollow promise of law and democracy in "liberal" pre-Fascist Italy.

Silone's father died when the boy was eleven, and his mother was killed in an earthquake that levelled the area in 1915. Afterward, Silone was horrified to see a relative stealing from a victim buried in the rubble. In "Bread and Wine," the protagonist describes a similar scene and observes, "To grow up requires a whole life, but to become old one night like that is enough."

In his memoir, entitled "Uscita di Sicurezza" ("Emergency Exit"), Silone quoted a doctor from his village who used to say, "People who are born in this district are really out of luck. There's



Like Orwell, Camus, and Malraux, Silone was regarded as a secular saint. Evidence now suggests that he was an informant.

no halfway house; you've got to either be a rebel or become an accomplice." By the age of sixteen, Silone was already a rebel. Along with two other boys, he led a group of peasants as they stormed the local police barracks to protest the arrest of three residents. For twenty-four hours, before authorities arrived to restore order, this group ruled the town. "Couldn't we take advantage of the fact that the whole village is

asleep to make Socialism?" one of the boys suggested.

Not long afterward, Silone moved to Rome and became a full-time activist in the Socialist youth movement. He was part of the radical wing of the Socialist Party, which split from the more cautious, reformist majority in 1921 and formed the Italian Communist Party, hoping to create a revolution in Italy. But in 1922 Mussolini and the

Fascists seized power, and, in the political crackdown that followed, the Communists were forced underground. Many of the Party leaders were imprisoned, and the young Silone took on more and more responsibility. He gained a seat on the central committee and was chosen to accompany the head of the Party, Palmiro Togliatti, to meetings at the Kremlin in 1927, at the height of the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky.

In his memoir, Silone describes how he and Togliatti refused to condemn Trotsky on the basis of evidence that they were not allowed to examine. He was later shocked to read that the Executive of the Communist International had unanimously passed a resolution against Trotsky. "Don't they realize that when they open the archives all their lies will eventually come out?" he asked Togliatti, and the Party leader replied, "If that's what you're worried about, relax: no important decision in the Soviet Union is written down."

Silone should perhaps have worried more about the archives of Mussolini's police. In the last three years, Canali and Biocca have unearthed what appears to be a correspondence between Silone and Guido Bellone, a police official in Rome who was in charge of investigating subversive groups in Italy. The letters are clearly those of an informant to his police handler, and are signed with the code name Silvestri. But the informant's true identity can be deduced from a number of details in the letters that closely correspond to the events of Silone's life in the late nineteen-twenties: his depression, his taking refuge in a clinic in Switzerland, his disillusionment with Communism, and the gradual return of his religious faith.

Moreover, there are government documents that explicitly link Silone to Bellone. A 1928 letter from the chief of the secret police to Mussolini states, "The Inspector General of Public Security Commissioner Guido Bellone has received a telegram from Basle from Tranquilli Secondino—one of the Communist leaders—giving notice of his arrival in Italy. The conversation with him could be interesting."

Silone's defenders have been forced to admit that these documents are genuine. "No one denies that Silone had

EVE

I like that room,
the warm one with machines
where the woman folds her shed skins.

I hang in the broken ceiling, watching her,
barely distinguishable
from the cold-water pipe
and the coiled power cable.

I watch her all winter:
her long-legged hands,
the glinting needles of fur at her nape,
her red warmth
drifting in mammaly billows.

And now I show myself,
pour my flickering head
into her sac of air,
and slowly, willed against her own will,
her face rises like a rising moon,
opening palely to mine,

and in the wide O's of her eyes
I see myself: my head like a big cut topaz,
the little watch-jewels of my eyes, yes,
my tongue the alive nerve of a rock,
and I feel her want,
a yearning almost,
as though for something already about to be lost.

And I offer myself.

—James Lasdun

some disconcerting contacts with the Fascist security apparatus," the historian Alexander De Grand writes in the current issue of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*. Some have tried to argue that Silone must have begun to collaborate with Bellone after his brother, Romolo Tranquilli, was arrested, in 1928, on suspicion of taking part in a terrorist bombing. His motive, according to this theory, was to win Romolo's release.

However, the documents published by Biocca and Canali show that Bellone and Silvestri were in touch in 1924, long before the arrest of Romolo. One police report, dated October 7, 1924, states, "Silvestri has been named the head of the Italian Communist movement for France, Belgium and Luxem-

bourg, and therefore will be moving to Paris at the beginning of October." This precisely describes Silone's circumstances at the time.

Luce d'Eramo, a friend of Silone's who published a critical study of his work in 1971, offers another theory—that Silone was a double agent. "The documents may be authentic," she said, when I telephoned her at her home in Rome, "but Biocca and Canali leave out the most important thing: Silone was acting as an informant with the knowledge and consent of the Italian Communist Party. He was sending the Fascists generic and harmless reports in order to get information from them." D'Eramo claims that a Party official told her this in 1979, after Silone's death. Unfortunately, no evidence to

support this theory has been found in the archives of the Italian Communist Party, and d'Eramo's source is now dead. And if there was nothing improper about his relationship with the Fascist police why did Silone never mention it during his lifetime?

Furthermore, if one reads the full range of documents that have now been published, it is difficult to see them as "generic and harmless." In one, for example, the informant told the police about a network of Communist railway workers who helped smuggle Party propaganda into Italy; the network was promptly dismantled. From Berlin, he provided information about go-betweens who brought the Communists donations from abroad, giving names, descriptions, and bank information. But the most chilling evidence comes from the period after Silone was made head of the Party's clandestine organization in Italy, in 1927. Bellone's informant, identified here as "T," provided a detailed breakdown of the underground organizations in Italy's main cities, and these groups were systematically rounded up by the police. The only cell that was not raided was Silone's, in Rome. (Silone's supporters dispute the attribution of these letters, while Biocca and Canali insist that "T" stands for "Tranquilli.")

On the other hand, Silone's position in the Party gave him access to far more information than he passed on to Bellone, which suggests that he was a reluctant informant. And Silvestri's growing sense of guilt is evident in a letter he sent to Bellone in July of 1929:

You understandably complain about the infrequency of my letters: our relations can become more regular and frequent only if they change in nature and character. At the point I have reached in my moral and intellectual formation, it is *physically* impossible for me to maintain the same relations with you as ten years ago. . . . The first thing to eliminate, because it leaves me either indifferent or humiliated, is money. But we can speak about this in person with greater ease.

The arrest of his brother (who later died in prison) would have made Silone's position unbearable. Romolo Tranquilli, emulating his older brother, was sacrificing himself for a cause that Silone had lost faith in and appears to have been actively betraying. At the same time,

Silone must have worried that if he tried to sever his ties to the Fascist police they might retaliate against his brother.

Then, in April of 1930, Silvestri, in an extraordinary letter to Bellone, made a final break. In it, one can hear the voice of Ignazio Silone:

My health is terrible but the cause is moral. . . . I find myself at an extremely painful point in my existence. A sense of morality, which has always been strong in me, now overwhelms me completely; it does not permit me to sleep, eat, or have a minute's rest. I am at a crossroads in my life, and there is only one way out: I must abandon militant politics completely (I shall look for some kind of intellectual activity). The only other solution is death. Continuing to live in a state of ambiguity has become impossible, is impossible. I was born to be an honest landowner in my hometown. Life has thrown me along a course that I now want to leave behind. I am conscious of not having done great harm either to my friends or to my country. Within the limits of the possible, I always tried not to do harm. I must say that you, given your position, have always behaved like a gentleman. And so I write you this last letter with hopes that you will not try to prevent my plan, which will be carried out in two phases: first, I will eliminate from my life all falsity, doubletiness, ambiguity and mystery; second, I will start a new life, on a new basis, in order to repair the evil that I have done, to redeem myself, to do good for the workers and the peasants (to whom I am bound with every fiber of my heart) and for my country.

If you are a believer, pray to God that he 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

Silone began work on "Fontamara" around this time. The horror of his own betrayals clearly fuelled the moral passion in his novel. The letter adds an important layer of meaning to the central crisis of Silone's life: his break with Communism in 1931. It now appears that this was preceded—and, in a sense, precipitated—by an even more urgent break, with the Fascist police. By announcing his intention to abandon the Party, Silone reduced his usefulness to the police, making it possible for him to slip free.

What remains mysterious is Silone's motive for informing in the first place. He may, however, have left some clues in "Bread and Wine." The book's hero is a sick and disillusioned Communist leader who returns to the Abruzzi and eludes the Fascist police by posing as a priest. The protagonist is clearly an idealized portrait of

the author, but Silone may also have represented himself in a second character, a young Communist who confesses to having acted as a police informant. After he is arrested and beaten by the police, the young man, Luigi Murica, is approached by a kindly policeman, who offers to help him in exchange for a little information. Initially, Murica provides only generic reports, but then he is pressured by the police to give more detailed information. He compensates for his betrayal by working harder than ever for the cause, and this allows him, temporarily, to function on two levels at the same time. "An insuperable abyss opened up between my apparent and my secret life," the young man says. "Sometimes I managed to forget my secret. . . . But I was deceiving myself. When my new comrades admired my courage and my activity they reminded me that in reality I was betraying them."

Explaining his decision not to confess to his comrades, Murica says that "fear of being discovered was stronger in me than remorse. . . . I feared for my threatened reputation, not for the wrong that I was doing." Like Silone, the character overcomes his fear by regaining his religious faith, telling himself that "good is often born of evil, and that I would not have become a man without having passed through the infamies and errors committed."

The recent revelations don't diminish the power of Silone's writing. If anything, his heroic image may have obscured the darkness and complexity of his books. Readers who approached the novels as straightforward denunciations of social injustice may have missed the undercurrents of deceit and betrayal that now come into relief. And if Silone no longer seems a man of moral purity, one marvels at his ability to remake himself. He went on to do exactly what he vowed in his last letter to Bellone, "to start a new life. . . . in order to do good," killing off Secondo Tranquilli and becoming Ignazio Silone. ♦

From the *Wall Street Journal*.

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