

ITALY BECOMES A REPUBLIC

by

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Generally speaking, the American officers in Italy were politically naive—at least I was. It wasn't until I read Robert Murphy's book a few years ago that I began to understand the reason for the different points of view of the American and British officers in the Allied Control Commission.

The American officers, for the most part were industrial experts selected because of their expertise in engineering, public health, etc. Very few of them were active politically or even in the Civil Service. No one bothered to tell us what the political objectives of our government were or what kind of a situation we should prepare Italy for once the war was over. I think most of us had no idea of doing more than winning the war and going back home to our civilian occupations. The British officers were quite different.

The British officers all knew that their government wished to see the monarchy restored. Preferably this would be accomplished by recalling Vittorio Emanuelli, the old King who had been forced into exile. A second choice was to give the throne to his son, Prince Umberto or, if that proved impossible, then to establish a regency for the six year old grandson of the old King until the Princepino should come of age. The reason the British gave for this was that, after the war, they did not want Great Britain to be left as the only monarchy in Europe and they were afraid, and with cause, that this would be the result if Italy were to become a republic with a strong Communist party.

But it was clear to me that the Italians would not accept Prince Umberto. Whenever the question of Prince Umberto's becoming King came up in conversation with an Italian of either sex, the immediate reaction was, "Egli preferici Raggazzi." (He prefers boys). Whether or not he was a sex deviate, I would have no way of knowing. He was a big handsome fellow who towered over me on the only occasion when I shook hands with him and exchanged pleasantries. He was married to Princess Maria who was idolized by the Italian people. Every account I

ever got of her was that she was beautiful, gracious and kindly but was separated from her husband, Prince Umberto, and lived a lonely life in her own castle from which the Prince was denied entrance.

There were certain political risks involved in having the British back a regency for the Little Prince but they felt that those risks would have to be taken or else back Prince Umberto. In the end, the British backed Prince Umberto. It is interesting to speculate how different the history of Europe might have been had the British thrown their weight in favor of a regency. My own view is that it would have made no difference and the answer may lie in the small part that I played in the matter.

It was agreed that, at the earliest practicable date, the Italian people should have an election and vote on whether to re-establish the monarchy or establish a republican form of government. The British felt that the sooner the election was held, the better would be their chances of getting a vote for the monarchy and in this I think they were probably right. In April of 1945, even before the actual surrender of the German forces in Italy, the British were pushing the Allied Control Commission to hold the election.

Shortly before Christmas of 1944, I had been assigned to the British 8th Army to serve on a panel of Field-Grade officers to try cases involving espionage or wire cutting and was stationed at the Emilia Region headquarters of ACC at Riccione where Mussolini had had his summer palace. Cases involving the death penalty required a court composed of five field grade officers. There were about thirty officers on the panel and each case required the five officers be drawn by lot to sit on the case. When I was not drawn to sit on the court, which was most of the time, I was available to act as defense counsel or for other odd jobs.

One day, when I had no other assignment, Col. Bowman, an American officer who was Regional Commissioner for Emilia Region, asked me to get the views of the Provincial Commissioners at Ravenna and Forli on the question of how soon an election could be held in those provinces and to report to him with my own independent views

based on my observations. So with a car and driver I started out for Ravenna.

At Ravenna I talked with the Provincial Commissioner, a British Lt. Colonel, who assured me that everything was quiet in his province and that he saw no reason why the election should not be held immediately and that he recommended strongly that this be done within a week. After a brief reconnaissance, I pushed on to Forli which was within about six miles of the German lines.

At Forli, the Provincial Commissioner was an American Lt. Col. from Texas who gave me quite a different story over a somewhat frugal supper. He said that hardly a day passed without a visit from one or more German planes strafing the road between Forli and Ravenna; that most of the population were living out in the hills and rarely came in to town; and that it would be impossible under such conditions to hold a fair election. We were eating by candlelight with blankets over the windows but when an air raid siren went on in our courtyard, an M.P. shouted at us, "Put that damn light out, double time!". Believe me, we did! I don't know whether the Lt. Col. or I got the candle first but I got a small blister which might have been from the candle and a scratch which might have come from his ring. Then we had a nice long talk until the all-clear sounded. Then I collected my car and driver and started back for Riccione.

It was a beautiful moonlight night but I was not reassured when my driver said, "They don't often strafe this road at night but with all this moonlight they may. If I hear a plane in time, I'll ditch the car and start running. I suggest you do the same."

Luck was with us. The methodical Germans wouldn't strafe the road even though it was almost as light as day. Their plan was only to strafe the road at night.

I made a formal report to the Colonel and concluded with the recommendation that no election should be held under existing conditions. I supported my recommendation with a somewhat lurid tale of the air raid. The Colonel's only comment was, "You make out a very strong case for your recommended course of action!"

Whether or not the report had any appreciable effect on the history of Europe I can't say. However the election was not held until after the

war was over, I was home again and out of uniform, and then on a close vote the Italians themselves voted to form a republic.

My orders were to join my unit as soon as I could find them. When we went through Bologna it had been so recently taken by the American 5th Army that the directional signs were all in German. My driver spoke a few words of German as well as a few words of G.I. jargon and he said that he thought he knew the way to Milano. In this he proved to be quite right.

He took us three quarters of the way around the big open square where Mussolini and his girl friend were hanging upside down as mute evidence of their death at the hands of the Partegiani. The Signal Corps had made pictures of this gruesome sight which were widely distributed around Milano. We did not stop to collect any souvenirs but kept going as rapidly as possible around the square in the general direction of Parma, where we hoped to join my unit.

Later I discovered that we had gone very close to the La Scala Opera House. I did not actually see the remains of the Opera House, although before leaving Italy I, together with many G.I.'s, did make a small contribution to the restoration of La Scala.

Towards evening as my driver and I were approaching Modena, we encountered a crowd of Partegianis who were celebrating by firing their weapons into the air and shouting and gesticulating how we should get to the principle hotel in Modena. I think it was largely luck that this was where we should have gone to find my unit.

When we finally walked into the Alberto Hotel we were welcomed by Major Francis Byrnes, the Provincial Commissioner for Parma, who had an enormous stack of accumulated mail, including orders to proceed to the Province of Parma. Frank welcomed us with more enthusiasm than he would have shown King George VI and had us shown to the best room in the best hotel in Modena.

After dinner I excused myself, took a hot bath and was enjoying the enormous accumulation of mail as I lay on a comfortable bed. However, when I turned on the 25 watt electric light, which was all that was available, a sharp-shooter across the street used it for target practice. At least that was my first thought. The British Lieutenant Colonel who

had just finished his bath, shouted "put that damn light out". My mail from home had to wait until daylight the next morning. Then I tried to dig the spent bullets from the woodwork to bring home as souvenirs.

The next morning our little cavalcade started out for Parma. As usual in the army, most of the information you wanted was gotten from the enlisted man. As we started out the enlisted man driving for me said that there was a column of 25,000 Germans heading in our direction prepared to surrender. I somehow got separated from the rest of our unit and as I went on my lonesome way towards Parma I had visions of a column of 25,000 Germans clamoring to surrender to me. Fortunately, as I found out later, the column stopped just short of Parma and I did not have the necessity of deciding what to do with that many men demanding of me the right under the rules of land warfare to surrender.

That evening we billeted in the hotel which had the night before housed one of the German units but what interested me most was that the British Lieutenant Colonel told me that I was to be detached from the Parma unit and ordered to Cuneo. This change in orders resulted in one of the more colorful incidents of the war.

It was reported to my superior, Major Francis Byrnes, who agreed with me that I should stay in Parma until I received written orders to proceed to Cuneo. Finding myself in Parma without any duties other than to await orders to travel to Cuneo, I volunteered to do anything Major Byrnes wanted me to do.

Frank said (and truthfully) that the most interesting job available was Sindaco of the City of Parma. It was nearly a week before the courier brought my orders to go to Cuneo but until such orders arrived, I was given authority to act as Sindaco of the City of Parma, one of the most important cities in northern Italy.

I had hardly gotten my coat off the next morning when an officer of the Partegiani who was acting as Sindaco, called on me at my temporary office. He said that he had learned through the underground that the Germans had cached 5 tons of cheese. His informant said that there had not been a cheese ration in Parma for two years and that the cheese was hidden under the coal pile of the military hospital. He volunteered to

rescue the cheese. I said that I had no authority to authorize the mission but that if the Partegiani wished to run through the coal pile in search of the cheese cache, I would have no objection. The Partegiani later reported to me that the Germans had used the cache as bait for a trap which would be detonated as soon as the hospital's coal was touched. The next thing I knew of the matter was when the Partegiani reported that the trap had been detonated and was asking me what he should do with the 5 tons of cheese. To the great joy of the Partegiani and the citizens of Parma, I declared a cheese ration in the town which was then surfeited with cheese, to the delight of everyone connected with the Allied Military Government. Everyone connected with the affair was delighted and the Allied Military Government enjoyed a popularity probably never equalled in its history.

I had hardly gotten over my pleasure in the handling of the cheese ration than I found myself thrown into a different kind of situation. The top ranking partegiani in parma diffidently knocked on my door and when I invited him to come into what was in reality his office as well as mine, he said he had a formal invitation from the Cardinal of Parma to attend a special service at the Cathedral for the Partegiani who had been killed. I assured him that although I was not a member of his church, I had great respect for the Partegiani who had died fighting in our cause and I would be happy to say so publicly. If he wished me to take part in the service at the Cathedral, I felt that it would be rude of me to decline.

The leader of the Partegiani assured me that all of the friends and sympathizers of those who had died would greatly appreciate it and indicated that if my Methodism would stand the shock, the Cardinal would also appreciate having me attend the service. I would be met on Sunday afternoon at 3:30 and the leader of the Partegiani would escort me as a guard of honor to be presented to the Cardinal.

As Frank was the highest ranking officer in the area and an ardent Roman Catholic, I accepted the honor on his behalf and conveyed the message to him without any doubt that he would wish to attend in person. What I did not know was that at 3:30 that Sunday afternoon Frank was unaccountably missing and had never received the invitation from the Cardinal which I had forwarded to him.

In Frank's absence I found myself marching up the center aisle of the glorious Gothic Cathedral of Parma at the head of the ragged delegation of Partegianis and was seated at the right hand of the Cardinal.

As I looked out over the sea of faces of the Partegiani and their sympathizers, I wondered what would happen if I were called upon to say a few words of greeting and appreciation of their work. However, the Cardinal saved me from any embarrassment in the situation by preaching what was undoubtedly a very fine sermon in Latin interspersed with colloquial Italian. Then he motioned to me to follow him in a parade through the Cathedral, across the piazza and up onto a raised platform erected on the steps of the rectory. The Cardinal stood between me on his right hand and the Chief of the Partegianis on his left, making the sign of the cross and bowing first to me and then to the Partegiani leader. While I bowed to the Cardinal, the Partegiani leader and the thousands of spectators who had jammed into the Piazza were cheering. I honored all of them with a series of stiff military salutes. Between us we put on quite a show.