

A CHILL IN THE AIR

An Italian War Diary 1939–1940

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PUSHKIN PRESS
LONDON

A CHILL IN THE AIR

SEPTEMBER 3RD

We know – and it is war.

This morning – the last day that cars can be used – being a clear, cloudless day, we drove up into the hills to visit our old friends, the Senni family in Badia Prataglia, but as we drove along the Val di Chiana we saw in every village little groups of *richiamati** and women crying. We had meant to reach the Sennis in time for Chamberlain's statement, but as we drove up to the door, one of the boys came down to meet us: "The speech is just over. It's war."

I went quickly upstairs and found Mary Senni (American by birth) and Diana Bordonaro (half-English) by the radio, with tears in their eyes. Half an hour later Chamberlain's statement was repeated. When it was over, Mary came across to me: "If Italy comes in now on the German side, I shan't be able to bear it! I would have let my boys go, to fight for something they believed in; but now – not against civilization!"

All afternoon we sat round the radio, listening to one country after the other – Europe moving to war. Then the King's speech – slow and halting, but

* Reserve soldiers who have been called up.

somehow very moving – and “God save the King.”

Later on we talk of the effect of all this on the Italian people. “Nothing”, says Diana, “no propaganda, will ever persuade the Italian peasant and workman, that it was Chamberlain who wanted war. They’ll know it was Hitler’s fault.” “Yes,” says the son of twenty, “and the more time elapses, the more difficult it will be to persuade us to fight on the German side.” But I am not quite so sure.

SEPTEMBER 5TH

Today Mussolini’s statement is published, laying the onus of the declaration of war on Hitler, and presenting himself as the “single just man” who “made a last attempt to save the peace of Europe”. According to his account, his proposal for a conference of the Five Powers was sent on August 31st to France and England, whose favourable reply only reached him on September 1st. But during the night “frontier incidents had occurred which determined the Führer to begin military operations against Poland.” The French and English answers having been favourable (especially the French), Mussolini conveyed them to

Hitler, who replied that he would consider them, but not if they had the character of an ultimatum, and asked for twenty-four hours for consideration. Both his conditions were agreed to, but France and England insisted on the evacuation of Poland, previous to any conference.

The news of the sinking of the *Athenia* has been given in such a manner that people say, "God knows who really did it! It's certainly a very convenient piece of propaganda."

Today Antonio has been called up as an officer in the reserve. His regiment, which was in Albania, is to be re-formed in Florence, and he is to go there tomorrow.

SEPTEMBER 7TH

Yesterday we went to Florence, and Antonio joined his regiment. 1000 soldiers are leaving for Albania – not, however, additional troops, but to relieve men returning on leave. Great muddle over getting the troops equipped. Nothing but straw for them to sleep on (the barracks being overcrowded), a shortage of boots and clothes. Crowds of weeping women waiting to say goodbye outside the barracks door.

SEPTEMBER 8TH

Each necessary war-restriction measure is preceded by articles in the daily press, showing that such measures are really conducive to the well-being and comfort of the public. Thus, just before the sale of coffee was forbidden, long medical articles appeared, describing the deleterious effects of coffee on the nerves and constitution: "wine is far less harmful". The meat rationing was preceded by similar articles in praise of vegetarianism; and now the abolition of private cars is accompanied by long articles in praise of bicycling!

SEPTEMBER 9TH

Meanwhile the *mot d'ordre* is optimism, and a complacent calm. The leading article in the *Corriere della Sera* sets the note: "Since the bulletin of the Council of Ministers has expressed, in unequivocal terms, Italy's decision to take no military initiative, the life of the nation has resumed its normal rhythm. The schools will open at their regular date; the farm-work has all

the labour that it requires. Commerce and affairs in general have not suffered any serious disturbance. The great transatlantic liners sail as usual from our ports.” As to the future: “However this conflict may develop and terminate, it is clear that the last traces of Versailles are wiped out forever. Europe must take a new shape.”

These phrases, in slightly different words, are echoed by almost everyone I have met. Many would echo, too, I think, the remark of a Fascist young woman this summer: “A good Italian’s duty now is to have no opinions.”

Last night the BBC announced the decision of the Cabinet to found its policy on the supposition that war will last three years or more. Here the news is received with incredulity and dismay.

Antonio’s half-sister Lily, and her husband, Karl von Hertling (an old cavalry officer) have arrived for a short visit. Both he and his wife, as Bavarian Catholics, are intensely anti-Nazi. They refer to the Brown-shirts as *die braune Affen**, and to Hitler as “the sleep-walker” and “the lunatic”. They complain bitterly, too, of the way in which every career – except the army – is closed to everyone who is not a member of the Party. They

* The brown apes.

are indignant over the persecution of the Christian churches, both Catholic and Protestant, and speak with great admiration of the Protestant pastors, who, they say, have shown on the whole a greater courage in resisting the régime than the Catholics. Karl, moreover, though not himself free from anti-Jewish prejudice, declares himself horrified by the treatment the Jews have received. After the first pogrom in Munich, he said everyone was ashamed – and when, for a few days, even the bakers were forbidden to supply Jewish customers, the people of Munich (especially the poor) secretly provided them with food. Nevertheless, when I ask him “What proportion of the people you know share your views?” and his wife cries, “Everyone!”, he says gravely, “No, no, my dear. You only mean, everyone in our little circle.” He goes on to say that in his opinion most of the *pratiquant* Bavarian Catholics, especially those belonging to the aristocracy, and some of the peasants, are hostile to the régime; so are most of the intelligentsia, and in the Army, before the war, about half of the officers – especially the older men. But the great mass of the middle classes (especially the schoolmasters, small officials, government employees, etc.) are quite solidly and uncompromisingly pro-Nazi. So are many of the working men.

They have brought with them their only son, Lupo – a boy of nineteen, incredibly like Antonio in appearance and mannerism – but deeply depressed. Once, when we are alone together, he says to me that his whole life has been a nightmare, since his parents did not dare to enrol him in the Hitler Jugend. He is convinced that he will be killed as soon as he is called up.*

During all the early stages of our conversations both Karl and his wife were very nervous, keeping their voices low. “We wouldn’t talk like this at home,” they said, “hardly even in our own house.” “Yes, it’s too dangerous,” added his wife. “The other day in Munich I was in a tram, and some people began to say something against the Führer. I got out at once and walked home. I wasn’t going to run any risk of being mixed up with them!”

We walk home down the Lungarno in silence. Suddenly Karl burst out: “But how can people help believing? Day after day, year after year, every paper gives us the same news, preaches the same doctrine. Plenty of people say, ‘We don’t believe what’s in the papers: it’s all a pack of lies!’ But all the same something sinks in. We’re bewildered; we’ve got to believe in something...”

* Alas, it is only too true. Like many others, he was killed in the war, for a cause in which he did not believe. [IO, 1980s]

I think of the phrase quoted in Nora Waln's book: *Ein Schlaf-wandelndes Volk*. Wandering now in a nightmare – a nightmare in which we are all caught up.

It is Sunday afternoon. My window looks out over the Lungarno, which is crowded with soldiers. They look just what they are: rough, awkward country boys dressed up in ill-fitting uniforms. One, a little older than the rest, has spent the whole afternoon lying on the strip of grass at the water's edge, playing with his baby daughter and now, as they come back, (the child steadying herself by clutching one of his fingers) I see that he has made her a chain of dandelions. On the pavement, a little further on, a cheap photographer is doing good business. Two gawky, grinning young privates pose for him, leaning against the parapet. Two others, one with his arm around a pretty girl, the other with his mother, are looking at the photographs taken yesterday. "*Sì, è proprio lui!*"* A less martial, more homely scene could not be imagined. Then the radio in the room behind me blares out the latest news: bombs falling on Warsaw, refugees escaping. Will these men be taking part in similar scenes?

* Yes, that's really him!