# Rinascita sfuggente

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# *Elusive Rebirth*

Giovanni Persico

# FOREWORD

It's not always easy to stay objective when telling your own story or that of your family, especially when covering the past two centuries without losing sight of historical accuracy.
I've tried to fill in the missing links through historical research, particularly for older periods like the 1800s. For the last century, I relied on the testimonies of the few people still living today.

We are in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and this is where my story begins.

It's the early 1800s. After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo—following 15 years of his domination over the Italian peninsula—the Congress of Vienna restored the old monarchies to their thrones. On the surface, it seemed like everything had returned to the way it was before, but that wasn't really the case, even though the King had come back.

During the French occupation of Italy, Napoleon had appointed his brother-in-law, Joachim Murat, as regent for eight years. Murat revolutionized Neapolitan society, spreading the ideas of the French Revolution among the nobles and bourgeoisie of Naples. This sparked a cultural rebirth, planting the seeds of future uprisings against the absolute monarchy of the Bourbons.

For context, the Bourbons were a royal dynasty that ruled over parts of Europe.

*Liberty Leading the People, Eugène Delacroix (1830)*

*This iconic painting by French artist Eugène Delacroix captures the spirit of the July Revolution of 1830 in France, symbolizing the fight for freedom and the people's resistance against oppression. The figure of Liberty, personified as a woman holding the French tricolour flag, became a universal symbol of revolution and the pursuit of democratic ideals.*

*Though it depicts a French event, the revolutionary energy of the era influenced many parts of Europe, including southern Italy, where similar ideas began to challenge the absolute rule of monarchies like the Bourbons.*

In this climate, in the city of Salerno near Naples, a young man—the son of a notary—was studying in a seminary to become a priest. At that time, around 1830-1840, education was entirely under the authority of the Catholic Church.

However, the Enlightenment ideas of the French Revolution, seeded during Napoleon's occupation, were circulating even within these religious schools. Concepts like the right of people to self-determination resonated deeply. In the Italian context, this meant striving for independence from the foreign tyranny of the Bourbons. These ideas captivated the few who were literate, spreading through the seminary and influencing our future priest as well.

At home, the young man often clashed violently with his father, whose role as a notary embodied the very institution of the Bourbon monarchy. His father's loyalty to the King and his conservative nature were deeply tied to the social status he owed to the monarchy. To the young seminarian, his father became the symbol of everything he despised—the King, the tyrant, the foreign oppressor. He was swept up in the revolutionary fervour of the time, even if it meant opposing his own family.

But this wasn't the only forbidden passion he harboured. Alongside his revolutionary ideals, he found himself drawn to something else equally inappropriate for an aspiring priest. Every morning, a young girl would deliver milk to the seminary. Their friendship blossomed, and before long, he had fallen for her.

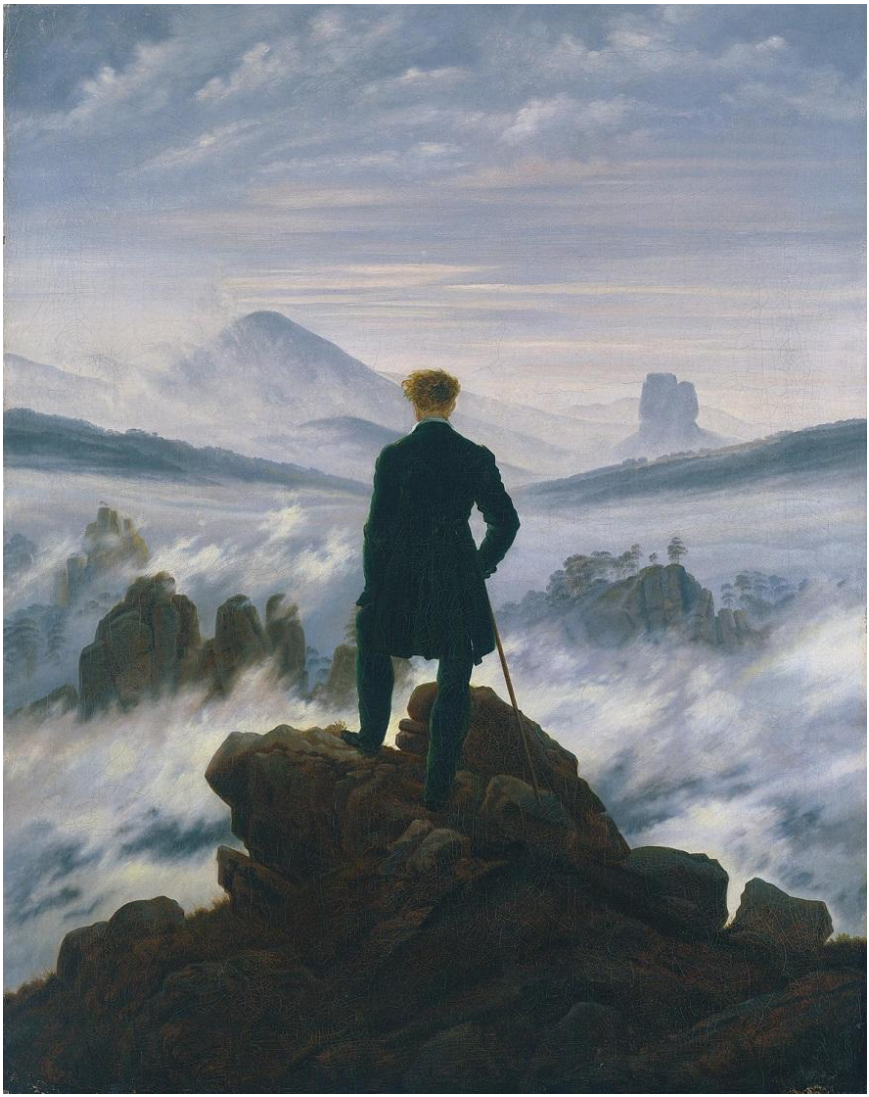

*Portrait of Giuseppe Garibaldi, Rossetti*

We can only imagine what's stirring in his mind.

Two impossible loves: his family stands against him, the state he lives in stands against him, and on top of that, he lacks the true calling to become a priest.

This young man perfectly embodies the romantic spirit of the Italian Risorgimento. His faith and passion for an idea are so profound that he's willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. He lives a life that defies death itself, bravely confronting the unknown.

The emotional state of this would-be priest reflects the classic inner turmoil of the romantic hero—a constant clash between unfulfilled desires and harsh reality. His heart longs for something beyond his reach, something that forever slips through his fingers. Alongside this restless yearning for the unattainable—the infinite—his spiritual core is anchored in a deep love for freedom in all its essential forms: political freedom, social freedom, and moral freedom.



*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog – Caspar David Friedrich, 1818*
*This masterpiece perfectly reflects the spirit of Romanticism, where the ideal triumphs over reality, and life unfolds toward the unknown, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. It's this very spirit that fuels our Rebellious Priest.*

At a certain point in our existence, we are faced with making drastic, irreversible decisions.

The would-be priest decides to leave everything behind and flees with his beloved milkmaid to the Campanian inland, to Calore in the province of Avellino, where the woman had some relatives.

It was a courageous choice: he leaves behind the comfortable world of his family, the future as a priest with its social standing, and the city that raised him, to enter into the poverty and misery (in every sense) of the Neapolitan hinterland.

He loses one life and wants to build another.

He gives up many material things to embrace the spiritual—love.

As expected, his father reacts by disowning, disinheriting, and cursing him.

He dishonoured his family by running away with a commoner, and he dishonoured his father's role as a notary and representative of the Bourbon Kingdom.


*Napoleon Crossing the Alps, Jaques-Louis David (1801)*

In the 19th century, having a son who runs away from home and rebels against the state (represented by the father) was a serious disgrace.

The father, determined to erase the shame cast over his family, sends violent henchmen to force his son back and restore his honour. But by now, the bridges behind him are burned, and there is no turning back.

He must protect himself from both his father's wrath and the Bourbon police, now that his rebellion has become public knowledge.

Calore, a small village in the municipality of Mirabella Eclano (province of Avellino), offers him a place to hide. This remote countryside settlement becomes his refuge. The would-be priest has chosen love over everything else, and now he strives to build a new life with the woman he fled for.

To survive, he teaches the local peasants how to read and write, as they are all illiterate.

We can only imagine the harsh life of a farmhand in that region—working from dawn until dusk, around 16 hours a day in the summer, using hoes and shovels. The physical toll was immense, and their poor diet, almost devoid of meat-

based protein, left them severely malnourished. Obesity was rare among these people; in fact, they envied those who were overweight, as it signified access to good food and better health.

Most of the peasants were undernourished for the amount of labour they performed and often died from malnutrition, with their bodies showing signs of other diseases linked to the lack of proteins. Life expectancy was painfully short.

*L'angelus, Jean-Francois Millet (1858-1859)*

Let's imagine a peasant, working 16 hours under the scorching southern sun, toiling with his hoe, only to spend his evenings learning to read and write—because he believes this is vital, a way to open his eyes to the world.

Our would-be priest wasn't paid for his teaching. Instead, the peasants showed their gratitude by giving him food to survive. This image brings to mind Socrates in the Athenian polis, teaching the youth without charging a fee, unlike his rivals, the Sophists—such as Protagoras—who earned hefty payments for their lessons.

To read is to unlock the door to knowledge. These peasants began to understand the reasons behind their social conditions, the lingering medieval structures that still held the South in their grip, how the powerful rose to their status, and why Italy remained fragmented and dominated.

These secret evening lessons soon attracted people from neighbouring villages, transforming into a sort of clandestine school-sect.

It had always been this way—and it would continue to be. The ignorant masses, subdued by both temporal power—the foreign monarch of the day—and spiritual power—the

Church of Rome with its army, the Clergy, whose widespread influence controlled and directed the consciences of the Italian people.

However, it's important to note that many clergymen took part in revolutionary movements, opposing the official stance of the Church of Rome. This highlights the Church as a complex institution, made up of diverse and often conflicting factions. Such internal dissent, however, disappears in the 20th century, where every priest aligns with the Pope. Dissent is no longer tolerated.

While the French Revolution was a grassroots movement, driven by the people, the Italian Risorgimento was sparked from above—by intellectuals, the bourgeoisie, and nobles.

Nevertheless, the French Revolution's momentum—the force of its ideas seeping into society—became the driving force and precursor of Italy's unification. First, with Napoleon Bonaparte and the Cisalpine Republic, and later with Murat and the Parthenopean Republic. Murat's Proclamation of Rimini (where Naples declared against the Austrians) was the first sign of Italian unification.

As Napoleon Bonaparte campaigned across Europe, including Italy, he not only conquered territories but also carried the symbols of the French Revolution. In Italy, he was widely seen by the people as a liberator. Yet, while waving these ideals, he simultaneously controlled and censored the press, and placed his family members at the helm of the newly conquered kingdoms, ensuring they served French interests.

Napoleon spoke Italian, having been born in Corsica when it was still part of the Republic of Genoa. His family was of Tuscan origin, and he was generally well-regarded by the Italian people.

In studying such a controversial figure, today many Italians side with him, recognising the cultural and social revolution he brought across Europe—an upheaval that paved the way for modern democratic states.

We are on his side—the proof lies in the fact that throughout Italy, you won't find a single street named after Waterloo.

Given the historical context, the revolutionary uprisings of 1820-21 and those of 1830-31 were brutally suppressed in blood. In the South, in particular, unrest was constant. As this ignorant populace began to awaken to their reality, it was

only a short step from awareness to subversion and armed struggle.

By around 1840, our protagonist was living with his partner—a love that, for the society of the time, remained secret and scandalous. His union with the young milkmaid defied the social norms of the day. She too likely embraced the revolutionary cause, educated by him. Unlike the hostile environment in Salerno under his father's influence, here he had found a people who, though ignorant, shared his cause: independence from foreign rule.

He became known as the "Red Priest." While there are no definitive records of the origin of this nickname, there are two likely explanations. The first, and most straightforward, is that he may have had red hair. The second is that he wore a Garibaldian red shirt.

Garibaldi adopted this red woolen shirt as a nod to the traditional butcher's apron, which was designed to hide the blood of slaughtered animals. He first used it in Montevideo in 1843, dressing his 500 Italian volunteers—the Italian Legion—to fight against the Argentine dictator Juan Manuel

de Rosas, who aimed to conquer the newly established Uruguayan Republic.

I believe my great-great-grandfather didn't have red hair, as no one in the Persico family lineage has ever had that trait, and considering that red hair is a dominant genetic characteristic, it would likely have appeared in later generations.

So, if he wasn't red-haired, I am convinced he must have worn the red shirt, a powerful symbol of independence.

*The Potato Eaters (1885) is a famous painting by Vincent van Gogh, depicting a peasant family gathered around a table, eating potatoes. This painting reflects van Gogh's deep empathy for the working class and his focus on the harshness of rural life. The composition captures the rawness of the moment, with dark, earthy tones that evoke the difficult lives of the subjects. Van Gogh chose to portray these figures in a moment of everyday labor, highlighting their weariness and the modesty of their sustenance. The painting is known for its expression of hardship and the artist's exploration of human suffering through his use of color and form.*

The Red Priest lived in Calore, but he was constantly on the move to avoid capture, as his was a secret organization similar to the Carbonari uprisings of 1820-21. Among these ignorant people, he became their leader, thanks to his education and revolutionary teachings. He had created a conscious, awakened community, capable of following him into defiance.

Under his guidance, this rebellious people rose up, their eyes opened to the injustices of their condition. It wasn't long before they clashed with the Bourbon police, with the Red Priest leading them at the front lines.

It was during one of these armed confrontations with the Bourbon forces that he met his end. It was 1845.

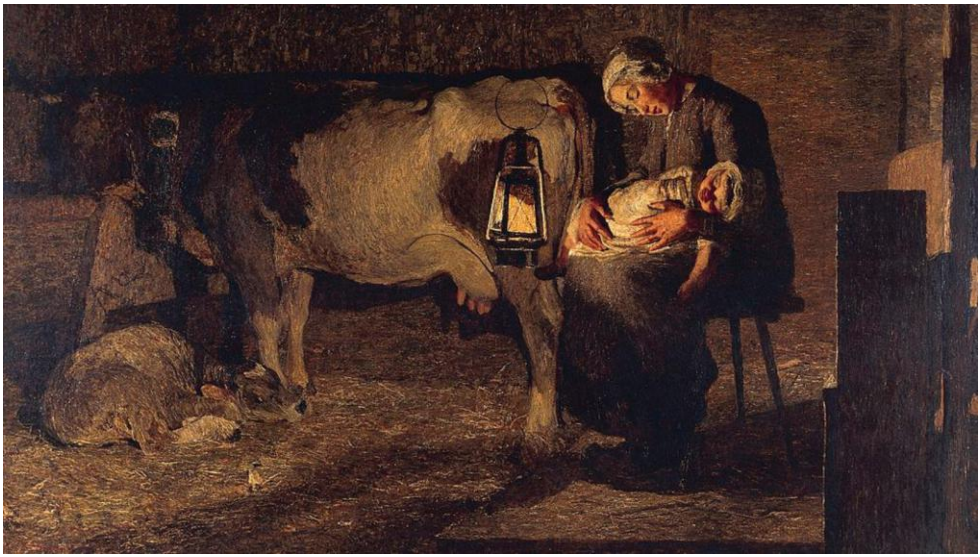
And so, the Red Priest's story ends—killed for a noble ideal, the freedoms of which we enjoy today. In his short life, this man faithfully embodied the romantic spirit of his time: the restless drive of a heart divided between love for a woman and the dream of a future nation.

By erasing his past and charging toward an unknown and dangerous future, he found death. Yet, his courageous

choices, driven by pathos, made him feel truly alive—proud to have served a cause, and to have given meaning to his life. The Red Priest does not appear in history books. He belongs to that mass often referred to as the dust of history.

History is written by the victors. The powerful pass down their vision of life: Strauss's waltzes echo through royal palaces; intellectuals' lofty ideas are recorded and celebrated; the grand splendour of royal weddings, the opulence of high-ranking clergy, the beautiful works of art that have reached us today—all of this magnificence belongs to a world far removed from the vast majority of the people, who were locked in a perpetual struggle against hunger.

I can almost see the reality portrayed in Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*, where beauty was survival itself. It's as if they're saying, with quiet satisfaction: *We made it through another day—we ate.*



*Le due madri (The Two Mothers) is a painting by Giovanni Segantini, created in 1889.*

*This work is a poignant representation of motherhood and the bond between a mother and her child, a recurring theme in Segantini's art. The painting depicts two figures: one a mother with her child in a peaceful, serene setting, while the other shows a more tragic or sorrowful portrayal, possibly symbolizing the contrast between the nurturing and the suffering aspects of motherhood.*

*The painting reflects Segantini's exploration of naturalism, emotional depth, and the connection between humans and the environment. It was painted during the artist's time in the Alps, where his work increasingly focused on the relationship between people and the natural world, often combining symbolic elements with realistic depictions of everyday life. Le due madri highlights the emotional and physical weight of motherhood while also conveying a sense of universal connection between the figures.*

We know everything about Napoleon's hemorrhoids at the Battle of Waterloo—how he couldn't ride his horse that day and lead his armies to victory as he normally would. But we know nothing about the countless men who died on that battlefield.

They are just the dust of History.

The sacrifice of the Red Priest was not in vain. Even if, in History with a capital *H*, he is nothing more than dust, today—nearly two centuries later—I am here to remember him. Memory, the feeling that stretches across the centuries, keeps his story alive.

The physical end of this man does not mark the conclusion of my story. Because, in that very same year—1845, the year he died—his child was born, the son he had with the milkmaid. Yes, quite the time to be born.

His partner, the Rebellious Priest's companion, was undoubtedly a revolutionary herself and now found herself persecuted by the police.

When the notary of Salerno, the Red Priest's father, heard of his son's death, he was struck by a crisis of conscience. The man who had once disowned and cursed his son now felt the

weight of remorse for abandoning him. With his son gone, he saw a chance to make amends—to do right by those who remained: the mother and the newborn child.

*Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe (The Luncheon on the Grass) is a famous painting by Édouard Manet, created in 1863.*

*This work is considered one of the most provocative and influential pieces in the history of modern art. It depicts a picnic scene with a naked woman sitting on the grass alongside two fully clothed men, one of whom is holding a pipe. The woman's direct gaze and her unapologetic nudity shocked viewers at the time.*

*Manet's composition challenged traditional conventions of academic painting and sparked controversy because it blurred the lines between classical art and contemporary realism. The contrast between the nude woman and the well-dressed men, along with the casual, almost confrontational atmosphere, was seen as a challenge to the established norms of morality and artistic representation.*

Given his financial means, the notary of Salerno purchased a farmstead in Calore called *"Le Torri di Elia"* for the mother and child. It was a large estate with four towers—three square and one circular. The ruins of this structure can still be seen today.

The mother likely lived there for some time, but hounded by the police, she was eventually forced to surrender the child to a charitable institution to keep him safe. After that, she likely met a tragic end—probably killed—and no further trace of her was ever found.

Both the Rebellious Priest and the milkmaid were subjected to a damnatio memoriae by the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies—a condemnation to oblivion, effectively erasing their existence from the historical record.

The irony is striking: they were already the dust of history, insignificant in the eyes of the powerful, and now, with the damnatio memoriae, they were completely annihilated, as if they had never existed at all.

The newborn, the son of revolutionaries, was officially recorded by the juvenile court with the notation: "Figlio di N.N."

N.N. stands for "nescio nomen," meaning "name unknown" or "child of unknown parents."

The boy's trail vanishes amid the chaos of the Wars of Independence and the regime changes that swept across Italy. What is certain is that he grew up in an orphanage.

Years later, as he began to piece together his story, he realised he had appeared from nowhere, without any knowledge of where he had come from—who his parents were, what they had done, or why he found himself there.

*Apparso, (the Orphan or Persico Giovanni) with his grandchildren (1906).*

The court gave him the name Pressico Giovanni, which later became Persico—yes, just like me.

In our story, this new character appears, a foundling whose presence feels like the Phoenix rising from its ashes. He emerges in this place just as Italy itself finally begins to emerge as a unified nation, fulfilling the dream of his parents who gave their lives both for him and for Italy.

What would his father, the Rebellious Priest, have thought? To know that he had given his son an Italian state where he could grow up in freedom, free from foreign oppression. His death was not in vain.

Just a few years later, the foreign-ruled kingdoms were swept away; with Garibaldi's descent into the South, the unification began. By 1861, the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed, a constitutional monarchy led by the House of Savoy.

Across Europe, people rose against the ancien régime. The year 1848, known as the Springtime of Nations, marked a wave of revolutions—all for the sake of obtaining that simple yet powerful piece of paper: the constitution.

No longer was there a king with absolute power over everything and everyone. Instead, there was an assembly of

representatives, a parliament. This marked the first entry into history for the common, ignorant people, giving them a voice in the decisions of the state.

The dust of history, in theory, appeared for the first time (since the French Revolution), and our Apparso is the symbol of this new Italy. He emerged from nothing, just as Italy appeared in the most unrepeatable conditions on the European stage.

The circumstances that led to a unified Italy were a unique sequence of events and conflicts between European powers that could never be replicated. The historical evolution toward a united Italy was by no means a foregone conclusion. It wasn't simply destined to happen "sooner or later." It was the result of specific circumstances and individuals, a delicate chain of events held together, in many cases, by luck. Had one person or one event been missing at the right time, it might never have happened.

For example, England sought to secure its monopoly over the Mediterranean and wanted to eliminate the Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and its formidable navy. In return, they offered support to Garibaldi during the Expedition of the

Thousand. Meanwhile, the French supported the Kingdom of Sardinia during the Second War of Independence to weaken the Austrians, in exchange for Nice and Savoy.

All these intricate alliances and diplomatic manoeuvres were orchestrated by Cavour—not to mention the influence of his cousin, the Countess of Castiglione, whose charm extended even into royal bedrooms. Without the support of foreign powers, Italian unification would not have been possible. The fury of the people, however noble in principle, wasn't enough to win wars without the armies of Napoleon III.

This brings us to a historical-philosophical reflection.

The Rebellious Priest fought and died for an idea of freedom he would never live to see. But he passed the torch to his son, Apparso—leaving him a world where he could be free to choose. It's as if from death, a new life emerged; a rebirth, with a vision completely different from the past.

This is the cycle of Nature, in which man is a part. Death is not always negative. Take our own evolutionary history: 65 million years ago, a meteorite struck the Earth, raising the planet's temperature by 200°C and blocking out the sun with dust and debris for decades. This led to the extinction of the

dinosaurs, who had dominated the planet for 150 million years. 95% of living species vanished, paving the way for the small creatures that lived underground to emerge and evolve. Thus began the age of mammals, from which we come.

Life was reborn in a new form.

In our story too, life that seemed finished is reborn through Apparso, a foundling who grows up in the newly born Kingdom of Italy.

His life was anything but easy, growing up without a family in post-unification Italy.

The historical context of this period was shaped by the new Italian Kingdom's fight against brigandage, aiming to unify the Italian people under one flag. However, in the newly formed Kingdom, real power remained in the hands of the wealthier classes—the bourgeoisie, the nobility, and other elites.

In post-unification Italy, only 400,000 people out of a population of 22 million—about 2%—had the right to vote. Voting was restricted to those who were literate and had a certain income. How could these representatives truly serve the interests of the masses?

Governments from both the right and left catered exclusively to this tiny minority of nobles, wealthy landowners, and high-ranking officials, while the remaining 98% of the population continued to be the dust of history.

The hope that things would change under the new Kingdom was quickly disappointed. Yes, the King had changed, but the promised revolution had not materialized as Garibaldi had declared. The landowners were still in place, and the peasants remained burdened with even heavier servitude, still landless and oppressed.

In this climate of misery, there were only two options: become a brigand or an emigrant.

The institutions in the South were still controlled by the rich landowners—the Barons, Princes, and Marquises—vestiges of the medieval past. How could the ignorant masses of peasants accept this? And so, the brigand was born, fighting against the new institutions of the Kingdom of Italy.

After 1848, the peasants had become more aware of the oppression they suffered under the galantuomini—the landowning elite who held power over the defenseless poor.

The battle waged by the Italian army, led by General Cialdini, was harsh and brutal, amounting to mass slaughter. According to *Civiltà Cattolica*, over one million people were killed in the South, out of a population of nine million—more deaths than in the entire Risorgimento.

At this point, it's important to offer some clarification.

A historical revision is necessary and overdue. With the passage of time, historians have been able to deepen their understanding of the phenomenon of brigandage.

The newly formed Italian state could not afford to face an internal revolt and, in its official narrative, dismissed the brigands as mere criminals. It was a matter of state policy.

However, historical justice has never been served by the Italian state for those poor, ignorant people who simply asked for bread. Instead, they were nailed into history as savage brigands in the name of a new state that had barely been born.

Two contrasting sentiments emerge from the Italian people:

1. The unification of Italy, driven by a shared sense of Italian identity (*italianità*).

2. The enormous divide between Northern and Southern Italy, a chasm that the unification failed to bridge.

*Viale dei cipressi at the time of Carducci:*

*"The cypress trees that, in Bolgheri, tall and straight*

*Go from San Guido in double row,*

*Almost in a race, youthful giants,*

*Leapt towards me and looked at me..."*

*— Giosuè Carducci (1907)*

Brigand—a term used disparagingly by the intelligentsia of the time to label these people as savages and subversives. But who were they, really? For the most part, they were peasants, blacksmiths, artisans, former soldiers from the Bourbon army, shepherds, and yes, perhaps a few criminals. Many were organized into bands, but they were all poor folk—people who had once fought against their Bourbon overlords and now found themselves fighting against the very state they had hoped would liberate them. And, of course, their eternal enemy remained: the landowners, who, under the new Kingdom of Italy, had simply changed their skin without relinquishing power.

The brigands fought under a single banner: hunger—the fight for land to feed themselves.

I doubt Apparso ever became a brigand; he was likely too young at the time to take up arms.

The world of the Rebellious Priest was one where people sought to overthrow the ancien régime, with its absolute monarchies, dreaming of a better life—one free from hunger. The Rebellious Priest and Apparso were father and son,

separated by only one generation, yet they emerged from history as two completely different men.

The father was a bold dreamer, a daring visionary who gave his life for an ideal. He achieved his goal only after his death, belonging to the educated, privileged class that played a role in shaping this nation.

Apparso, on the other hand, was thrown into the world, spending his childhood in an orphanage without any understanding of why he was there, where he came from, or who his parents were. It's as if he were the sole survivor of an extinct family, rising like the Phoenix from its ashes.

He grew up in the South after unification, in an environment that was both backward and silenced for reasons of state. Unlike his father, Apparso—poor and illiterate—had no grand ideals or dreams. His only goal was to build a family and ensure there was bread on the table each day.

This was a different Italy from the one his father had known in the first half of the 19th century—an Italy plagued with problems, struggling to become a balanced state, especially in the South, where poverty and underdevelopment reigned.

For Apparso, life boiled down to a simple equation:

Land = Food = Survival.

Food was the primary need. Only after securing food came the needs for shelter and clothing (*secondary needs*), followed by physical freedom—the ability to move freely—and lastly, freedom of expression.

For the Rebellious Priest, only the last of these needs remained unfulfilled. For his son, Apparso, it was a daily struggle to satisfy the very first—to simply survive.

Two completely different perspectives, two very different eras, yet separated by just one generation.

In his ignorance, Apparso might have asked: *Why didn't my father just stay at home, in his father's comfortable house, perhaps becoming a high-ranking clergyman, and giving me a life that was less miserable and more dignified?*

It's clear that they had two different value systems.

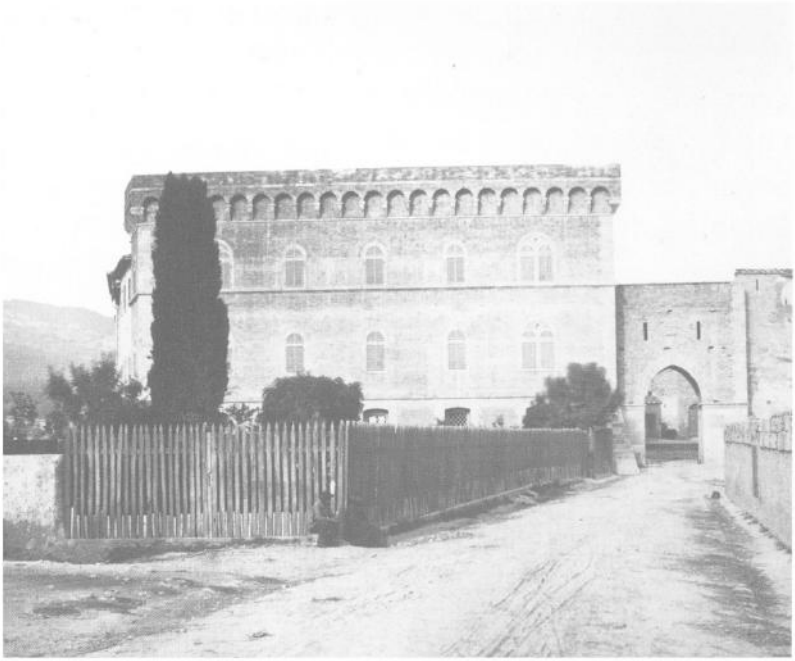
But history unfolded as it did, and the tape of time cannot be rewound. Yet, without the sacrifice of the Rebellious Priest, who fought for the dream we now live in, perhaps I wouldn't be here writing this story in this language.

Apparso's world was that of the second half of the 19th century. He was thrust into existence, with no choice over his

social status or religion. The state gave him the status of an orphan, a name to navigate life, but no knowledge of his family's story, which had been erased from history.

So many questions haunted this orphaned boy. He was told his parents were dead, but no one knew where they were buried. They said his mother abandoned him before dying—lies that weighed heavily on his life, lies he would later seek to uncover and understand.

*In this green space, covered by shrubs, lies the "zero point" of my family, "Le Torri di Elia." The ruins, now submerged by vegetation, are faintly visible; it's as though nature is reclaiming its space, erasing my history, just as the Roman Church did in the 19th century by issuing the damnatio memoriae against the Rebellious Priest, my great-great-grandfather.*



*The entrance to Bolgheri before the expansion of its façade. This is how Carducci saw it in the 19th century.*

In the new chapter of the Kingdom of Italy, the administration sought to shed light on the despotic Bourbon regime. This effort brought to the surface facts and circumstances that helped Apparso in his search for the truth about his past. He sought out testimonies from survivors to fill in the gaps of his fragmented history.

Learning the truth both saddened and noblefied him. But now, as an adult, he accepted his condition as the son of N.N. (nescio nomen). He couldn't honour the memory of his parents—there was no tomb, no headstone. The only connection he had to his origins was the masseria of Le Torri di Elia, where he was born.

After this tumultuous beginning and coming to terms with his identity, Apparso led a quiet, ordinary life in the home provided by his grandfather, the notary. He worked the land, married, and had two children: Berardino and Carmine.

Having endured a troubled origin and difficult childhood, Apparso consciously chose a life less turbulent than his father's. He lived in the masseria of Le Torri di Elia, inherited from his grandfather, and cultivated five hectares of land near the Calore River, which provided a source of water for

irrigation. His primary crops were corn and wheat, while he also grew vegetables, maintained vines and olive trees for personal use, and raised poultry and cattle for transportation and sale.

Corn was the dominant crop, yielding abundant harvests when irrigated and serving various purposes. Between the rows, climbing beans were planted. After the corn (or granturco) was harvested, the stalks and leaves were used to feed larger animals like cows, pigs, and sheep. The husks—the leaves that wrapped around the corn cob—were repurposed as mattress stuffing, as proper mattresses didn't exist yet. (*I remember trying those in my childhood—how hard it was to find the right position to avoid the roughest parts!*)

The kernels had to be separated from the cobs by hand. Across Italy, it was common to spend evenings after dinner in the barn doing this work. These moments became opportunities for socializing with neighbouring families. Stories were told, and folk songs were sung—an expression of peasant culture, the only form of entertainment at the time. Everyone participated: men, women, children, and the elderly,

reinforcing the solidarity and sense of belonging within the poorest social class.

This was a culture of sharing, solidarity, and fraternity—all Christian messages deeply embedded in peasant life.

Indeed, this reflects a Christian message that the Church managed to interpret, remembering the "least of these" in contrast to the established secular power. It was the influence of mendicant orders like that of St. Francis, but this too was a form of political art. The many faces of the Church: presenting the cross while wielding the sword or money—a duality that endured until the last century. But now, with education and the spread of knowledge, the multitudes of faithful who once made up the Church are no longer there. I'm not sure what future awaits this institution that has been at the heart of Western civilization.

Yet, Italy was still not fully unified. Pieces were still missing, like the Triveneto and Lazio. Once again, fortune favoured this new state.

During the Third War of Independence (1866), the Italian army was defeated by the Austrians at Lissa and Custoza. However, Italy was allied with Prussia, and when Prussia

defeated Austria at Sadowa, Italy managed to secure the Triveneto—though the Trentino-Alto Adige remained out of reach.

For Rome, which was protected by France, Italians had to wait until 1870. That year, the Germans defeated the French, and with France in disarray, the Paris Commune was formed. The French, now preoccupied with their own crisis, could no longer support the Pope, and this opened the door for the Italians to finally enter Rome.

After the Third War of Independence, Bismarck famously told Victor Emmanuel II:

*"You Italians are the people of the three S's."*

- Solferino (1859): where the Italians triumphed thanks to French support.
- Sadowa (1866): where the Austrians were defeated by the Prussians. Although Italy lost most of its battles, it was allied with Prussia and still managed to claim Veneto.
- Sedan (1870): during the Franco-Prussian War, the Prussians defeated Napoleon III, who had been a

staunch supporter of the Pope. With his fall, the path to Rome was finally clear.

Italy was unified piece by piece, through a combination of luck, humiliations, and, notably, without winning many battles.

The self-deprecating nature of the Italian psyche can be seen in the names of streets and squares across the country, which commemorate defeats as much as victories: Custoza, Caporetto, Mentana, Curtatone and Montanara, and more—almost as if to remind ourselves of our low self-esteem.

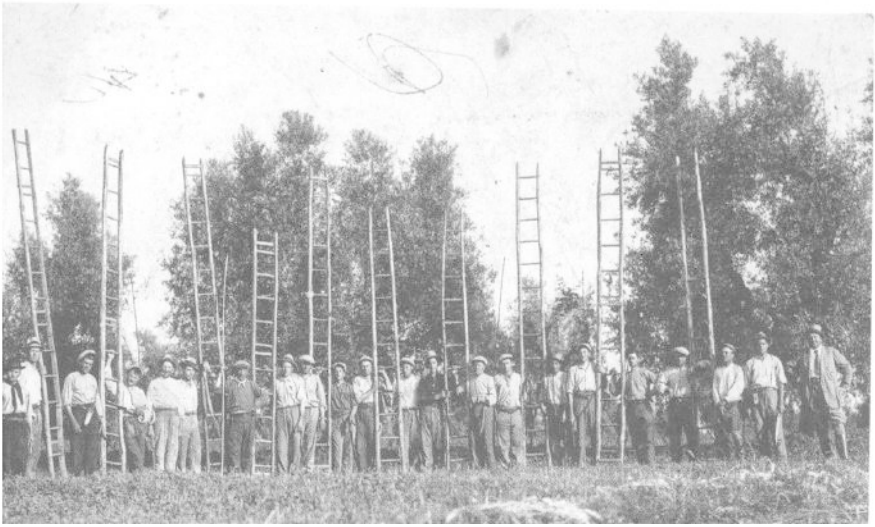
It's worth noting that after unification, the Pope refused to recognize the secular Italian state, despite the fact that Italy had passed the "Leggi delle Guarentigie" (*Guarantee Laws*), which ensured the Church could continue to exercise its spiritual authority within Italy.

But Pope Pius IX wasn't satisfied. He issued the Non Expedit (*"It is not advisable"*) decree, banning Catholics from participating in Italian political life. This is the same pope who established the dogma of papal infallibility.

These policies placed a heavy burden on the Italian people, allowing the Church to interfere in Italian politics and shape societal values. For the next century, the Church would play

a dominant role in defining the moral framework of Italian citizens, contributing to Italy's backwardness in comparison to the rest of Europe.

Therefore, we can confidently say that the unification of Italy was a unique, unrepeatable event in history—a tragicomic tale in which a pseudo-state, despite losing almost every war, managed to acquire the entire peninsula through a web of alliances, treaties, and a string of extraordinary circumstances.



*Pruning of olive trees*

The problems of the new Italian state were immense, and the first right-wing governments had to confront them head-on. There was the national debt, the fight against illiteracy (which in the South reached a staggering 90%), the widespread discontent among Southern populations, and the resulting surge in brigandage. Another significant challenge was the language barrier—Italy was a patchwork of dialects, and only in Tuscany was standard Italian spoken.

Because of this, the early right-wing governments opted for a centralized state, aiming to unify Italians under one flag. However, this lack of local autonomy only served to exacerbate the differences between various regions of the country.

Later on, the left-wing governments, after achieving a balanced budget—thanks largely to the grist tax (*tassa sul macinato*), a deeply unpopular levy on milling grain—shifted focus toward industrialization. But this development primarily benefited the North, once again leaving the South behind in a state of agricultural underdevelopment.

In this bleak landscape of poverty and misery in the South, Berardino, the son of Apparso, found himself a young man, poor, without work, and without a future. At 22 years old, he

made the difficult decision to leave everything behind and seek his fortune in the New World.

*Here are the migrants, packed like rats on the journey to America, hoping for a better future than the one they had in their homeland.*

Berardino: Why Does a Young Man Choose to Emigrate?

For hope—the hope of a better future, escaping the poverty of the South.

The state policies in the second half of the 19th century had little to no impact on improving the living conditions of southern Italians; in fact, they often made things worse. The South was dominated by the latifundia system, where landless laborers worked for wealthy landowners without any technical or productive improvements. Meanwhile, in the North, factories were emerging, offering salaried jobs and benefiting from mechanization that boosted production and wealth.

Northern Italy managed to catch the wave of the Second Industrial Revolution, driven by Northern Europe, while in the South, land (and by extension, food) remained concentrated in the hands of the latifundisti, perpetuating poverty.

For Berardino, the son of Apparso, there was no future in Italy. At 22 years old, he sought fortune in a faraway land—America. In 1893, he boarded the Cristoforo Colombo from the port of Naples, a young man with nothing to hold him back because his Italy had nothing to offer him.

The myth of the New World captivated many Italians of that era, drawing them toward New York, or more specifically, Ellis Island.

Yes, it was here that migrants from all over Europe arrived to be processed, registered, and directed to their new lives and jobs.

All they carried were their few belongings, stuffed into a burlap sack or, at best, a cardboard suitcase tied with string.

*Bundle for animal feed.*

Passing through Ellis Island was no simple task. A person with a limp, a lazy eye, a skin blemish, or even a slight cough could be sent back to where they came from. And this was after enduring a month-long journey in third class on the ship, crammed into tight, unsanitary conditions.

To America at that time, these people were seen as nothing more than numbers, human capital for productive purposes. They didn't tolerate what they considered defective goods—hence the strict inspections at Ellis Island. Anyone showing the slightest flaw, in their eyes, wasn't fit for work and was promptly deported.

During my visit to the Ellis Island Museum, I saw it in their faces, in their eyes—the wonder of having reached the promised land and the hope for a better future than the one they left behind. *America! America!* they shouted from the ship, packed together like rats, desperate for a new beginning. Between 1860 and 1915, about 65 million Europeans passed through Ellis Island. With some approximations, we can say that a significant portion of today's American population descends from these migrants—and Italians number in the tens of millions.

But life wasn't easy for Italians in this new world. They entered an environment already dominated by earlier waves of migrants—like the Irish and English—who were settled in and now viewed the newcomers with hostility. Italians were often seen as inferior and compared to Black people, facing similar discrimination.

Most Italians were forced into the lowest, dirtiest jobs—manual labor, poorly paid, and grueling. Unlike many Northern Europeans, who were often literate and educated, the majority of Italians arrived illiterate, their hands rough from the fields, unprepared for the challenges of navigating a foreign land that saw them as second-class citizens.

*Marriage of Persico Bernardino with Lopitato Fiorita (1901)*

To truly grasp the climate for Italians in the late 19th century, consider just this one example: The Bishop of New York, of Irish origin, witnessed an Italian religious procession in the streets and dismissed it as a "manifestation of pagan ignorance."

This was the air Berardino breathed when he arrived in America. He found a place to stay in Boston with the Lopilato family, who had been neighbors back in Italy. Berardino took on various jobs, but his most important work was in road construction, a common labor for Italian immigrants at the time.

It was in Boston that he met Fiorita Lopilato, who was 12 years younger than him. (*It seems he didn't have to look far to find a wife!*) They married in America.

However, the Lo Pilato family was opposed to the marriage. They felt that Berardino, with his strong Italian ties—evident in his speech and mannerisms—would eventually drag Fiorita back to the life of poverty they had left behind. They only accepted the marriage on the condition that Berardino would never return to Italy.

Berardino, being the typical migrant trickster, agreed to their terms. But, as with many promises, time had other plans.

Fiorita's parents knew that a return to Italy meant a return to misery for their daughter. Yet, after 14 years in the USA, and following the death of Fiorita's father, Berardino broke his promise and returned to Italy, leaving behind the land of opportunity.

During their time in America, Antonietta, their first daughter, was born. However, Antonietta later returned to America as a young woman, where she married an Italian and started a family in the country where she had been born.

Back in Italy, Berardino settled down and built a large family, having eight more children, all boys.

The firstborn, Giovanni, bore the heavy burden of supporting the entire family by working the fields on their land. With so many mouths to feed, Giovanni's life was hard and short. He died young, at thirty-five, from a respiratory illness.

Another son died shortly after birth, leaving six sons, each spaced a couple of years apart.

*Quarto Stato by Pelizza da Volpedo, 1898*
*The dust of history that moves forward. The police were shooting at chest height. Finally, the poor, ignorant masses want to matter more in history. They are no longer willing to accept the decisions of the bourgeois and nobility at their expense. The mutiny at Caporetto during World War I is an example, where almost a million Italian soldiers deserted. It was not their war, but a war for the classes above them. Why die for them? Their battle has always been for the bread of survival, and now there is class consciousness. They will be called proletarians because their only possession is their offspring. This ignorant mass no longer asks for food, but for freedom, justice, and rights (such as the right to vote). With dignity, they will be the driving force of the new society. This ignorant mass will become the backbone of Western democracies. If history has gone in a certain direction, we owe it to them, and today we can say that they were on the right side.*

It was typical of this period to have many children, as extra hands were needed for farm work. Italy at that time was

primarily an agricultural country, and infant mortality was high. Every child born was considered a blessing—especially if it was a boy—an idea reinforced by the Church, which still held significant influence.

You could say that the social formula for an Italian family during the Fascist years was simple: many children to work or fight, widespread ignorance and illiteracy, and the fear of God, heavily promoted by the Church. These uneducated masses were managed socially by Mussolini's regime and spiritually, emotionally, and within the family, by the Church. Let's not forget that the Church controlled all aspects of family life—from sexuality to emotions—through the practice of confession. Confession was introduced by the Church in the 1400s, initially as a tool to monitor the powerful. Seeing how effective this form of surveillance was, the Church expanded it to the general population through its widespread presence across the country.

Education was also a monopoly of the Church, as public schools were few and far between. Practically all formal teaching was carried out by the Jesuits, a religious order that began its educational work in the 1500s. Thus, the Church

held power over families and much of society, using the fear of God as a tool of control.

*Le déjeuner sur l'erbe (The luncheon on the grass.... of the poor)*

This power seems to endure beyond time, even after being undermined at its core by many distinguished thinkers over the last four centuries.

1. Until the 1500s, it was believed that the Earth was the center of the universe, as written in the Book of Genesis, where man, placed at the center of all creation, dominates over all other creatures—an idea known as anthropocentrism. Then came a Polish priest named Copernicus, followed by Galileo, who proved otherwise.
2. It was said that man was created by God. But Darwin, with his theory of evolution, demonstrated that we descend from apes.
3. Freud, the first to interpret and explore our psyche, showed that we are not even masters of our own minds (highlighting the importance of the unconscious). So much for man being the ruler of creation on this Earth.

Later, Italian civil society took steps to cut the fragile umbilical cord that tied the people to the Church, first by legalizing divorce and then abortion.

However, during the 1920s to 1940s, the Church still held significant influence over Italian society. It was in this climate that my grandfather's family—Berardino (later changed to Bernardino), a young migrant from the late 19th century—lived, or rather survived, with the meager earnings from their land. A typical poor, large family from the South.

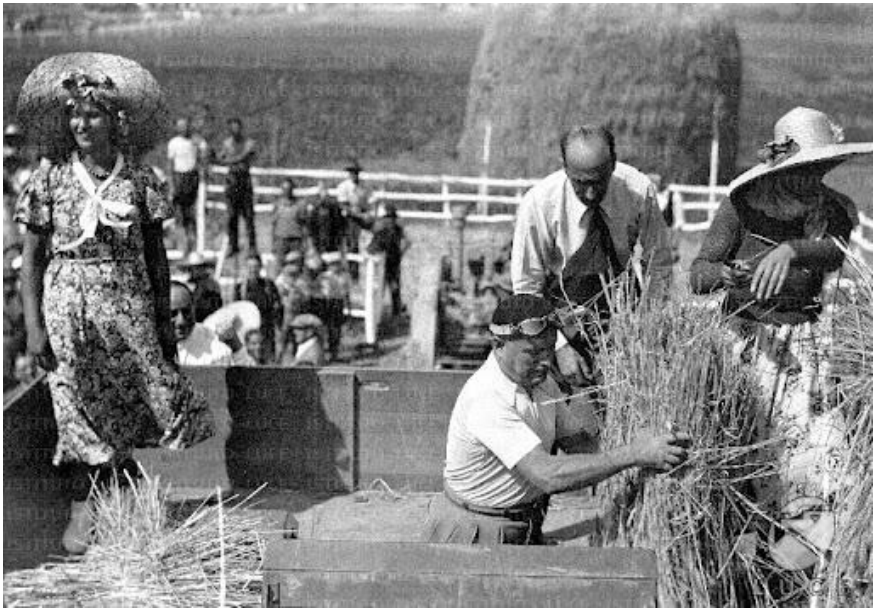
*The first agricultural machines*

Berardino and his wife, Fiorita, were illiterate, but they witnessed the progress driven by men of ingenuity and came to understand the importance of education, giving their children the opportunity they never had. All of their sons completed the fifth grade, even though compulsory education at the time only went up to the third grade—a significant achievement given their financial struggles.

For them, hunger—or the struggle for food—was at the center of existence. I remember that, until just a few decades ago, when visiting someone who was ill, it was customary to bring food. This wasn't just a gesture of kindness; it was practical support since the sick person couldn't work and had to cover medical expenses as well. Healthcare wasn't free like it is today, and there were no insurance protections. Being sick meant facing serious hardship, and receiving food from friends and neighbors helped ease that burden.

Overpopulation was something Mussolini was well aware of. Driven by a pompous nostalgia for Rome's ancient glories, he dreamed of building an empire while simultaneously thinning out the masses. That led to the ill-fated invasion of Ethiopia—an unfortunate Italian adventure. Ethiopia was the

only African country that remained uncolonized and sovereign, largely because no one else wanted it.



*The Duce who shows himself at work alongside the peasants.*
*Fascist propaganda aimed at winning over the poor classes while his dictatorial government suppressed all dissent and sided with the wealthy classes*

During the Fascist era, Italy experienced significant demographic growth (the Persico family is an example of this). Italy remained an agricultural country, especially in the South, where the masses lived in poverty. It seemed as though nothing had changed compared to the previous century. While the regime's propaganda painted Italy as a thriving and prosperous nation, this only applied to a small minority.

The Persico family—parents Bernardino and Fiorita, along with their six sons—lived on five hectares of land, of which only two were irrigated. They survived on the modest yields from their land: grains, potatoes, a small vegetable garden, and some livestock like a pig, chickens, and rabbits. Most of these were raised to be sold, allowing them to earn just enough to buy essentials like salt, sugar, and a few other items they couldn't produce themselves.

There are a few photos from this period that show how undernourished and underweight they were. Obesity simply wasn't an option—they couldn't afford it.

*The neighbors of the Persico family in Bolgheri*

One of the six sons, Roberto, volunteered for war in 1936, sent by Mussolini. He earned 19 *soldi* a day to send back home, driven by the gnawing hunger his family faced. He fought on Franco's side during the Spanish Civil War, though he didn't really know if he was on the "right" side—he had no political awareness of the conflict. All that mattered to him were those 19 *soldi*, enough to fight his real enemy: hunger.

With the onset of World War II, after some initial hesitation, Mussolini dragged Italy into the conflict alongside Hitler, who had proven his military strength by conquering half of Europe. Mussolini didn't want to be outdone. Confident in the sheer number of people he could sacrifice, he sent Italians off to battles from Africa to Albania, Greece, and Russia—campaigns that were all lost due to a lack of resources and poor organization.

The Persico family, with its six young sons, was scattered across Europe. After the armistice, some even ended up as prisoners in Germany. Luckily, they all returned home unscathed. But for them, the war hadn't changed much: they

were poor before, and they remained poor afterward. They still had to fight daily just to earn their bread.

Of course, the war devastated the country and crippled the national economy. Many were displaced, and countless lives were lost. Speaking of casualties, Italy suffered about half a million deaths—far fewer than our ally Germany, which lost six million.

*A proud farmer of his work with two specimens of Chianina*

This family, too, saw their home destroyed by the famous *Torri di Elia*, the Rebellious Priest's towers. An Anglo-American bombing—friendly fire—obliterated the building, which at the time was occupied by a Moroccan company of soldiers.

At the end of the war, Olimpio (one of the six brothers) returned home after serving two years in Albania and Greece. There, he endured severe hunger and initially refused to eat the turtle broth offered by the Albanians. But eventually, he grew to appreciate it—it turned out to be the very thing that saved him from starving to death.

In April 1945, when the war ended, Olimpio had spent two years fighting and was only 20 years old. He landed in Bari, and with no orders from the Italian army, he and several fellow soldiers—mostly from the Marche region—decided to walk back home. His comrades headed north toward the Marche, while he set off toward Avellino.

At that precise moment, all these young men, barely in their twenties, were technically deserters. But given the chaotic state of the Italian army, no one could truly consider them as such.

Twelve years later, Olimpio and one of those soldiers from the Marche would find themselves as neighbors in Bolgheri. History's strange coincidences.

The war was over. The house was gone. It was time to leave.


*Enrico, one of the six brothers, at the American base in Naples (1944)*

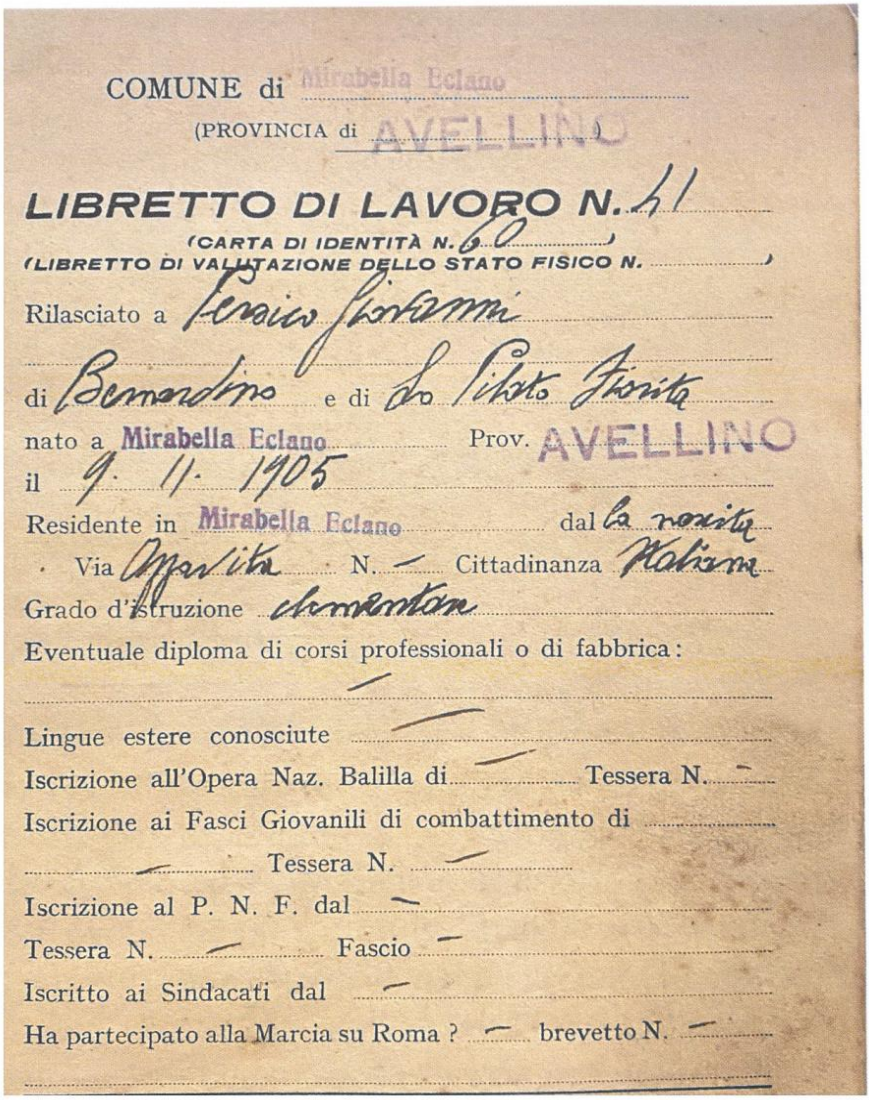
*Spanish Civil War, Roberto, one of the six brothers, volunteer (1938)*

In 1946, the Persico family sold their land in the South and moved to the province of Reggio Emilia, where they bought a small 4-hectare farm. By then, the family had grown—some of the brothers had married and had children—making it hard to survive on such a small plot. So, they took on debt to purchase a larger 8-hectare farm.

Life in that new place, I'm told, wasn't easy. They faced hostility from the locals because they were outsiders and came from the monarchic world of the South. While the Persico family wasn't politically involved, the people around them were highly politicized and saw them as outsiders who didn't fit into the local culture.

But even so, there was solidarity among the poor. In the beginning, the six brothers had to work the land with nothing but shovels and hoes. They pulled the wooden plow themselves—four of them straining at the front while one guided it from behind. One day, a neighbor, moved by compassion, approached them and said, "Even animals don't suffer like this. Come, let's get the mare from the stable, and I'll help you."

It felt like the unspoken message was clear: *Help yourself, and God will help you.*



COMUNE di Mirabella Eclano

(PROVINCIA di AVELLINO)

**LIBRETTO DI LAVORO N. 41**

(CARTA DI IDENTITÀ N. 60)

(LIBRETTO DI VALUTAZIONE DELLO STATO FISICO N. .....)

Rilasciato a Persico Giovanni

di Bernardino e di Lo Sibito Fiorita

nato a Mirabella Eclano Prov. AVELLINO

il 9. 11. 1905

Residente in Mirabella Eclano dal la nascita

Via Apparita N. — Cittadinanza Italiana

Grado d'istruzione elementare

Eventuale diploma di corsi professionali o di fabbrica: —

Lingue estere conosciute —

Iscrizione all'Opera Naz. Balilla di — Tessera N. —

Iscrizione ai Fasci Giovanili di combattimento di —

— Tessera N. —

Iscrizione al P. N. F. dal —

Tessera N. — Fascio —

Iscritto ai Sindacati dal —

Ha partecipato alla Marcia su Roma ? — brevetto N. —

*Work booklet of Persico Giovanni (1835), son of Bernardino, showing how participation in fascism was "appreciated".*

At that time, Emilia was a stronghold of leftist politics—a political laboratory for the Communist Party, where revolutionary ideas took root more easily. Many believed that a revolution was just around the corner, that the landowners would be overthrown and their lands seized by the people.

But that's not how things unfolded. A revolution as drastic as Russia's in 1917 would have been too extreme for Italian society. Plus, Italy was—and still is—firmly within the sphere of U.S. influence. After the war, the Italian Communist Party received support from the Soviet Union, but the final break with Moscow would come later under Berlinguer's leadership.

This was the atmosphere the Persico family found themselves in. For six years, they lived alongside political agitators who openly spoke about killing the landowners. All the expressions of dissent and rebellion that Fascism had brutally suppressed were now surfacing. Those who had fought in the Resistance were asserting their power, and in this region, the Communist faction was particularly strong.

But the Persico family faced another challenge: the climate. Used to the clear, sunny skies of the South, they struggled to adapt to the damp, foggy weather of Emilia. For people

working outdoors year-round, the climate was a crucial factor. I remember my uncle once telling me, "In all those years we spent there, I never figured out where the sun rose." It's important to have points of reference.

*Wheat threshing*

In 1948, the referendum resulted in a victory for the Republic over the Monarchy. The House of Savoy went into exile, with little regret from the Italian people. However, the referendum deeply divided the country: the Monarchy won in the South, while the more populous North voted for the Republic. Perhaps this split also explains some of the hostility the Persico family faced in the North.

It's remarkable to think that just a century earlier, Mazzini's republican ideals were punishable by death, forcing him into exile for his beliefs. Now, finally, even women had the right to vote.

At this point, some reflection is necessary. After a century, the arc of the Kingdom of Italy, which began with the wars of independence, came to a close. It's true that the House of Savoy created the Kingdom of Italy, but it's equally true that they were responsible for its downfall.

How can a single person determine the fate of an entire nation? I'm talking about King Victor Emmanuel III.

What did he do?

In 1922, he failed to declare a state of siege in Rome and refused to deploy the army against the armed March of the

Blackshirts, allowing Benito Mussolini to stage a coup and seize control of Italy for the next 20 years under a dictatorship.

In 1938, he signed the racial laws encouraged by Hitler and Mussolini, contributing to the persecution and eventual extermination of Jews.

Then, in 1943, following the armistice, he showed his cowardice and indecision by fleeing from Rome to Brindisi, on his way to Egypt, to avoid being captured by the Nazis—who had become our enemies after Italy's betrayal.

The King of Italy, the first among Italians, the head of the army, and the man whose signature (or lack thereof) shaped Italian politics, abandoned his post and left the Italian military in disarray.

Even the lowest-ranking Italian would have surrendered to the Germans, accepting responsibility for their actions and sparing the Italian people from blame. This could have prevented two years of civil war and, more importantly, after the war, Italy wouldn't have been seen as a defeated nation.

*These two men determined the fate of the Italian people, just two men who could change the course of history, the effects of which are still felt today*

In this context, a historical analogy comes to mind. During the era of the Maritime Republics, Count Ugolino della Gherardesca, the *podestà* of Pisa, fled with his fleet during a naval war against Genoa when the situation turned dire. His retreat marked the end of Pisa as a maritime power. He was later imprisoned along with his grandchildren in the *Muda*, and the keys to their cell were thrown into the Arno River. Dante, in *The Divine Comedy*, placed him in the deepest circle of Hell.

The Gherardesca dynasty still exists today—there's an example of it in Bolgheri, which we'll talk about later. As for the House of Savoy, the Italian people punished them through the referendum, forcing them into exile. Out of a sense of pity, the Italian state allowed their return after 60 years, but this time without a kingdom. After all, they're Italians too.

*Sculpture of Ugolino and his children by J. B. Carpeaux, 1857*
*Ugolino della Gherardesca, the podestà of Pisa and head of the Pisan fleet against Genoa, abandons the battle off the coast of Meloria and flees to save his life. The Pisan administration imprisons him in the carcere della Muta along with his sons and grandchildren, throwing the keys into the Arno. The sculptor represents the moment when the children ask their father to eat them in order to survive. This episode is recounted in Dante's Inferno, Canto 33 of The Divine Comedy, where he places the traitors of the homeland.*

The decisions made by Italy during the entire Fascist period, from 1924 to 1943, shouldn't be attributed to the Italian people but rather to Mussolini, who embodied Fascism, and to King Victor Emmanuel III, who endorsed and supported the *Duce* with his decisions—the only person who could have stopped him. What should have been a temporary historical anomaly became a dictatorship thanks to these two men.

How is it possible that just two people determined the fate of a nation of 42 million? Being Italian is one thing; the decisions made by the state—especially a totalitarian one—are another.

In 1940, eight months after the start of World War II, Italy decided to enter the conflict, declaring war on France, which had already been invaded by Hitler. The French (who still hold a grudge against us to this day) called us cowards, vultures, opportunists—ready to swoop in on our neighbor's land, just as we had done in World War I by siding with the highest bidder.

So, I ask: Who are the real cowards? The Italian people or those who made decisions on their behalf?

Italians: cowards, vultures, opportunists.

The facts seem to back up these labels.

World War I, Caporetto, 1917: Nearly a million Italian soldiers abandoned their positions and refused to fight, going into hiding as deserters. They claimed it wasn't their war—it was a war for the bourgeoisie and the king.

World War II, 1940: After letting others fight first (as in the First World War), Italy entered the war on the side of Hitler's Germany, which had already invaded and defeated France. Italy attacked southern France like a vulture because Hitler was already occupying the north.

1943: After the disastrous Battle of Stalingrad, it became clear that Germany was in serious trouble. Italy switched sides again. King Victor Emmanuel III arrested Mussolini and installed Badoglio, this time fighting against Germany. The war was heading toward a clear defeat for the Axis powers. The partisans of the Resistance had little actual impact on the outcome of the war without the Anglo-American bombers. Later propaganda would glorify these partisans in numbers and importance to secure Italy a seat at the peace table as a nation not entirely defeated.

But what kind of international credibility can a country like this have? Always ready to jump on the winner's bandwagon. How did this *Homo italicus* fall so far from the greatness of Ancient Rome and the brilliance of the Renaissance? Even today, in international forums, we're often labeled as unreliable, cowardly, and unserious—thanks to these two men.

How could we entrust the fate of an entire people to just two individuals?

Centuries ago, the sovereignty of the people was reduced to flow into the hands of a single person: the king. But what did these two men do to deserve such power, which wasn't even granted to them by the people?

One (Mussolini) seized it through force and political blackmail. The other (Victor Emmanuel III) held great power simply because he was born into the right cradle.

They didn't conquer or earn their sovereignty. Remember that Roman emperors like Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius proved their worth on the battlefield and were acclaimed by the army as leaders of a people—or rather, an empire.

But what did Victor Emmanuel III do to deserve the title of King of Italy?

It was already anachronistic centuries ago, and even more so in the 20th century, when merit was tied to hereditary succession—a relic of the Middle Ages. Today, many dynastic monarchies are facing an identity crisis, with their only remaining power being symbolic and historical, carrying no political responsibility.

The *Rebel Priest* undoubtedly holds far greater value than these men. He sacrificed his life for an idea of Italy, unlike the other, who risked nothing while sending armies to slaughter for the sake of political games. And yet, the *Rebel Priest* has been lost in the dust of history, absent from the textbooks.

So, who truly made Italy—the *Rebel Priest* or Victor Emmanuel III?

The economic outlook of this period was bleak. Italy, devastated by war and with its economy in ruins, accepted the Marshall Plan and, little by little, began to recover.

Politically, the country was dominated by the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*), closely allied with the

Church. Once again, the Church seized the opportunity to jump on the winner's bandwagon, influencing Italian politics for the next 30 years.

Once again, the Persico family's story mirrored the trajectory of the country. The six brothers, hard-working and devout Catholics, voted for the Christian Democrats and attended Mass every Sunday.

Throughout history, land ownership has been a form of power that mediates the balance of strength between individuals within society. From the Sumerians to the Greeks, through the feudal system—where laborers were sold along with the land—and up to the Industrial Revolution, land was concentrated in the hands of a few, and peasants were consistently prevented from owning it.

*One of the transports of the time*

They heard from a friend who had done his military service in Tuscany that, in the Bolgheri area, the *Marchesi della Gherardesca* were selling their lands due to the new sharecropping laws. As we mentioned earlier, in the early 1950s, the De Gasperi government implemented an agrarian reform that redistributed land from large estates to citizens and abolished *mezzadria* (sharecropping), a remnant of the Middle Ages.

After political struggles and tensions, *mezzadria* was deemed an obstacle to agricultural progress. It wasn't just about the unfair division of agricultural products between the landowner and the sharecropper, but also the obligatory gifts the latter had to give to the former, under rigid and outdated contractual norms that undermined human dignity. Economically, it was also inefficient: landowners had no incentive to improve their farms with modern machinery or irrigation systems, as they weren't directly involved in the work. Social tensions were high during this period, and political agitation was common.

The *Marchesi* of Bolgheri, Incisa, and Antinori chose to sell their lands to avoid the forced transition from sharecropping

contracts to rental agreements, which would have reduced their profits and imposed stricter obligations. However, to avoid selling their land to radical communists who sought quick expropriation and might have forced their way into their homes, the *Marchesi* ensured that the prospective buyers were not politically extreme. They sent the local parish priest to gather information about these future emigrants from his colleague in the families' hometowns (back then, priests knew everything about every family).

The plan worked. Except for a few hotheads, these emigrants were generally moderate, hardworking, and peaceful. Curiously, even the so-called "hotheads" weren't radical agitators—they still attended church, showing just how deeply rooted and influential the Church remained, even among people living in areas where ideologies opposed to it were gaining traction.

One of the six Persico brothers visited the farm in Bolgheri and returned to Emilia with news: the land was beautiful and fertile, a vast 64 hectares—enough for the entire family to live well. But there was a problem: they needed a lot of money they didn't have—33 million lire.

Later, they managed to sell their Emilia farm for 8 million lire, but in the meantime, they needed liquid funds to cover a 3-million-lire down payment. The bank director, knowing them well, withdrew the money from his personal account to help them secure the deal. Looking back, it's clear that people like him don't exist anymore, as the saying goes. He bypassed all the laws and protocols imposed by the bank to personally loan them the money. But he knew, given their reputation as hard workers, they would pay him back.

Thanks to this generous act, they found themselves in Bolgheri, where they could build a future for their families.

At first, life in Tuscany wasn't easy. The locals were suspicious and hostile, especially the former sharecroppers who had been evicted by the new landowners. The Persico family found themselves among other emigrants from the Marche region, with whom they shared much in common, particularly poverty. What set them apart from the native Tuscans was their entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to embrace hard work. Soon, these emigrants from Campania and the Marche became a single community, sharing the same struggles and ambitions. Now, the specter of hunger no longer haunted

them; instead, they were driven by the desire to progress through hard work.

The arrival of their first tractor—a long-hoped-for machine that would ease their back-breaking labor—was a turning point. At the time, *Chianina* oxen were still used for fieldwork and transportation, but this tractor was shared among the newly formed small farms. They not only shared equipment but also exchanged manual labor. I remember witnessing wheat threshing in the 1960s, where all the families in the area took turns helping one another. Threshing was a massive operation that required many hands, and no family could manage it alone.

Everyone worked—men, women, the elderly, and even children, each contributing as they could. One team would feed bundles of wheat into the thresher, others would bag the grain, some would constantly clean the machinery, while others pressed the straw into bales. Often, children like me helped cut the wire to the right length. The whole scene was surreal: massive belts spun without any safety covers, the roar of machines filled the air, June's heat bore down, and

clouds of fine straw dust made it hard to see. Today's labor inspectors would have arrested everyone on sight.

I've never understood why the grain sacks had to weigh 100 kg and not less. They were hoisted onto trucks by men who themselves barely weighed 60 kg.

Toil and labor—*faticare, travagliare*—were synonymous with work for these people, and here you could truly grasp their meaning. While the men were in the fields, other women took on the task of preparing meals for this community of threshers. The focus was definitely on quantity over quality, given the enormous energy they expended throughout the day. After dinner, with the machines finally silent, they would dance and socialize. (I'm not sure many people today, after a day like that, would still have the energy to dance.) These were moments of joyful gathering that fostered a deep sense of belonging to a community—one that would never hesitate to come to your aid when you called for help.

*San Guido, where the oratory and the church are located, is the beginning of the famous cypress avenue that leads straight to Bolgheri. It is here that generations of children, like me, grew up.*

These people, born from poverty, experienced a kind of rebirth, trading the certainty of struggle for the hope of something better. But always accustomed to sudden downfalls beyond their control, they would later chase what they believed to be the ultimate goal: happiness—mistaking economic satisfaction for true contentment. What they didn't realize was that, through the lens of profit and money, they would never truly find it. That's why I've titled this book *Rinascita Sfuggente* (*Elusive Rebirth*).

The rivalry between the Tuscans and the emigrants would persist for many years. When the Persico family arrived with rented trucks loaded with their belongings, ready to take possession of their new land, the Tuscans sneered, "You came here with trucks, but you'll leave on foot." But there was a fundamental difference: these emigrants, coming from the harsh, hilly agriculture of the South, were no strangers to sacrifice and hard work. In the flatlands of Bolgheri, they found the freedom to grow and evolve.

They weren't afraid of hard labor because they had already faced the specter of hunger. I remember my mother telling

me how, in the South, she worked as a day laborer from dawn till dusk just for a single meal.

The story of my parents' marriage—or rather, how my father won my mother's hand—deserves its own chapter.

In the early years at *The Osteria Vecchia*, the family's farm in Bolgheri, they settled into a large, old house without a roof, overgrown with brambles creeping up the walls. The brothers worked tirelessly to make it livable, repairing the house and setting up irrigation systems with buried pipes, using nothing but shovels and pickaxes. They also began building shelters for the animals.

The expenses were considerable, and finding money to get married was nearly impossible.

My father, Emiliano (one of the six Persico brothers), after helping his brothers get *The Osteria Vecchia* up and running and providing a roof for his future family, decided it was finally time to marry.

It was the early 1950s when negotiations began with the father of Chiara Martiniello, a girl ten years younger than Emiliano. The Martiniello family had been neighbors of the Persico family in the South and were considered "well-off"—they

owned a few more hectares of land and didn't see Emiliano, a poor man, as a suitable match for their daughter. But upon hearing that the Persico family was thriving in Tuscany, they eventually agreed.

The dowry arrangements were as follows:

Emiliano was to provide gold in the form of rings and bracelets, while the Martiniello family would buy the bedroom furniture.

But how do you square the circle when you have no money?

In Donoratico, a town near Bolgheri, Emiliano went to a jeweler and arranged to take the gold for the dowry on credit, promising to pay once he returned from the South after the wedding.

When he arrived in Calore, where the Martiniello family lived, Emiliano presented the gold to Chiara for the wedding, and in return, he received 600,000 lire from her father to buy the bedroom furniture. He insisted that he and Chiara would choose the furniture together in Tuscany, not her father.

They were married in the South and then made their way back to Bolgheri. The return tickets were paid for with the dowry money because Emiliano didn't have a penny to his name.

The money Emiliano received from his father-in-law, intended for the bedroom furniture, was partially used to repay the jeweler. The rest went to his brothers to help cover the mortgage on the land they had secured from the bank.

By then, my father and mother were legally married, and there was no turning back—a divorce would have been scandalous at that time.

The remaining balance owed to the jeweler was slowly paid off over time, begrudgingly. As for the bedroom furniture promised to his wife, Chiara had to wait a long time before seeing the gleam of new furniture in their home. In the meantime, wooden crates served their purpose well—after all, vintage furniture is all the rage nowadays.

So, Emiliano, at 35 (an age when "many trains" had already passed), managed to get married without a cent, cleverly sidestepping the financial trap of the dowry.

Everyone worked—men and women alike—while the elderly looked after the children. The enormous debt was gradually paid off, aided by the Marshall Plan loans with 1% interest. Over time, they managed to clear their debts.

The success of this region wasn't just due to the perseverance and temperament of these people, but also to agricultural innovations that transformed the land and their lives.

They adopted deep plowing techniques, which allowed plants to develop stronger, deeper root systems, resulting in higher yields. There's an anecdote about a guard of the *Marchese* who, referring to the emigrants' farming methods, remarked that by plowing so deep, they were bringing sterile, wild soil to the surface. But the emigrants proved him wrong.

Another key innovation was the discovery and utilization of groundwater. They dug wells to irrigate precisely when needed, boosting both the quality and quantity of their crops. Their production ranged from cereals (including irrigated varieties) and sugar beets to vegetables, which were even exported abroad. A bit later, canned tomatoes became a major product, drawing buyers from the South as well.

By the 1960s, any outsider visiting Bolgheri would immediately notice two distinct landscapes. On one side, there were dull yellow and brown fields, overrun with weeds and neglected—a reflection of the *Marchesi's* outdated, indifferent approach to land management. On the other side,

the emigrants' lands flourished, a vibrant tapestry of greens. They cultivated every inch of soil, right up to the edge of the ditches, leaving nothing to waste. The fields were so meticulously maintained that they looked like gardens. They even managed to grow two crops a year.

This contrast perfectly illustrates why politicians like De Gasperi and Fanfani pushed to abolish *mezzadria*. A small landowner puts heart and soul into every piece of land, maximizing its productivity and creating wealth both for themselves and for the country.

These people didn't just have incredibly high productivity during the day—they worked at night too. During the day, they labored manually in the fields, and at night, they irrigated. *Rain irrigation* systems required windless conditions, which only occurred at night when the *maestrale* winds subsided.

This relentless effort was further supported by favorable developments in Italian agriculture, particularly mechanization. The first tractors and iron tools began to appear, revolutionizing their work.

In the 1960s, they had only one irrigation line, which had to be manually moved from one part of the field to another. This required a lot of people, so men and women would go out at night, barefoot because the ground was wet, moving the pipes every three hours while leaving the children at home.

The success of this area was a perfect storm of factors: agronomic innovations, unparalleled productivity, entrepreneurial spirit, and sheer tenacity. But there's one more element, perhaps the most important to me, and it has nothing to do with the others.

The *isola felice* (*happy island*) of San Guido.

*Osteria, 1962. The first tractor.*

The emigrant community settled around San Guido, at the beginning of the Bolgheri avenue, where *Marchese* Incisa had built a school, a church, a theater, and other services in 1957. The children of these emigrants, who spoke their regional dialects (I was one of them), could attend kindergarten and then elementary school. They were offered full-day programs, meals, and an education in the Italian language—and *perhaps* in a new way of life. For these emigrant families, not having children at home during the day allowed them—especially the women—to focus entirely on working in the fields.

Every morning, the children were picked up by the *corrierina* (a small bus) and brought back home in the evening after a full day at school. The theater hosted holiday performances for Christmas and Easter, while a dentist provided checkups (something even schools today rarely offer). Gifts at Christmas and Easter were the only ones many of these children ever received.

In the early years, the school even had showers for the children. It may sound strange today, but many families at that time didn't have hot water at home—sometimes not even

cold water. Houses were unheated in the winter, and children were often inadequately washed to avoid catching illnesses.

The large football field, reserved just for the children and located in front of San Guido, was a source of immense joy for the boys. It gave them a space to release the pent-up frustration they experienced at home through the simple act of playing soccer.

All of this was funded by *The Marchesi* Incisa, Mario and Clarice della Gherardesca—philanthropists who chose to invest part of their wealth in supporting a community of poor emigrants rather than buying a yacht and traveling the world like many other nobles of the time.

*Three generations, at the back Berardino with four brothers and the new generation*

It wasn't just money that the *Marchesi* provided to maintain this structure, which, at the time, served hundreds of children.

Marchesa Clarice—

The only Christmas gift many of us received was a simple football, given by her. With her calm, gentle voice, she would softly say, *"Be careful not to break your parents' windows, and don't play too much—you need to study."*

The Catholic education she received and passed on to us fully embodied the Christian message and helped foster integration between the emigrant community and the local Tuscans.

Next to the church were the Franciscan nuns, who served as the social glue of the community. They cared for the sick, supported families in need, and provided emotional comfort, becoming a lifeline for many.

Of all these memories, one regret still haunts me even after half a century: I never had the chance to thank her. As a child, I took it all for granted. And by the time I was old enough to understand, she was already gone.

Just like the bank director in Reggio, Clarice was one of those rare people whose actions shaped the course of my life. But

Knowing her, I don't think she would have accepted my thanks. She probably would have said, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

That was San Guido in the 1960s—*an island of happiness* where the Bolgheri community grew, both economically and culturally.

For these emigrant families, prosperity finally arrived. They built comfortable homes, sent their children to high school, and even to university. Their agricultural success continued, producing high-quality crops, and the Bolgheri plain became one of Tuscany's premier horticultural regions.

*1966 – Persico Emiliano with his son shows the "red gold" of Bolgheri.*

Now comes the hardest part of my story—talking about myself.

It's challenging to recount one's life, highlighting the key moments that shaped and directed it, without falling into subjectivity and losing sight of historical objectivity.

Let's begin.

I was born in 1957 in a farmhouse called *The Osteria Vecchia*, purchased by the Persico family in 1953. I was delivered by a midwife and spent my entire childhood in San Guido, receiving a Catholic education, while at home, I was taught the values of respectful, honest work.

My adolescence in the 1970s mirrored that of many young people of the time: the rise of the working-class movement, civil rights battles, and the growing influence of the Italian political left, which wasn't without justification. The Italian political landscape, dominated by the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) and its strong ties to the Church, began losing ground to the advancing *popolo rosso* (the red masses). The Church, in particular, faced heavy losses as the umbilical cord that connected it to the Italian people was severed—first with the legalization of divorce, and later, abortion.

Young people during that era were highly politicized. They engaged consciously in the country's decisions but were often enamored by foreign political models like Che Guevara's Cuba or Mao's China, rallying behind distant causes. It became something of a political trend among young Italians to look abroad for examples to follow—perhaps even a national characteristic.

For the first time, workers and students stood side by side, demanding economic and social rights. This gave birth to the *Movimento del '68* (the 1968 Movement), a watershed moment that marked a clear divide between the old and the new. Nothing would be the same again. Italy opened up to free, mass education, giving everyone the chance to pursue studies regardless of their financial means.

Though I wasn't a believer, in a twist of irony, I met my wife in the church at San Guido. Somehow, this place kept weaving its way into my life. She was Irish, sent by her parents (longtime friends of *Marchese* Mario) to teach English to the children at the San Guido kindergarten.

We married in a civil ceremony, as I wished, and celebrated with just our two witnesses at a restaurant. My family

disapproved, believing she wasn't suited to life in the countryside. But she was the one who opened my eyes to an international perspective.

In the 1980s, I graduated with a degree in Agriculture. After a brief period working in my family's business alongside my brother, I decided it was time to broaden my horizons. I went to work for a multinational company specializing in professional vegetable seeds. This job allowed me to travel across almost all of Italy, giving me a deeper understanding of the country's diverse agricultural realities.

After a few years, I returned to Bolgheri to fully dedicate myself to agricultural work.

*Tomato harvest in the fields (1968)*

We lived on the second floor of *The Osteria Vecchia*, in what had become a shared building, after my parents moved out in the 1960s to build a new house nearby. It was there that my two children grew up, all the way through their adolescence.

The story of *The Osteria Vecchia* itself deserves to be known. A marble plaque embedded in the wall states that the building was restored and expanded in 1781, which suggests it likely existed even in the 1600s. On the ground floor, there are brick-arched vaults, reminiscent of old wine cellars, while the upper floors were used as living quarters. According to those who lived there before the Persico family, it functioned as an inn where stagecoaches traveling to Rome could stop to rest, eat, sleep, and change horses. The road passed right in front of it, as part of a correction to the ancient *Via Aurelia*. It's said that even Napoleon himself might have stopped there during his campaign in the South.

*The Osteria Vecchia* is two to three centuries older than the famous *Viale dei Cipressi* of Bolgheri—the cypress-lined avenue immortalized in poetry. While the poet destined glory

to the cypress avenue, the humble inn was left with its simple service to travelers.

At one point, I applied to the municipality for permission to build a house on my land, but the request was denied. This rejection had a significant impact on my life—it meant I couldn't provide my family with a suitable home on the land where I worked. *The Osteria Vecchia*—the house where the six Persico brothers lived when they first arrived in Bolgheri—was four centuries old and in a state of decay and disrepair, but it was the only home I could afford. I tried in many ways to get approval for new construction, but the answer was always the same: *No.* They'd say, *"You already have a house. Fix it up and live there."*

Given the small amount of land I had, I needed to intensify production to increase my income per unit. I installed greenhouses for early crops and began supplying local shops and supermarkets. The business went fairly well because horticulture was in high demand.

Meanwhile, in the nearby town of Bibbona, I found a small farm with olive trees, and I purchased it in 2000 to live there. That's where I live today, surrounded by greenery—nothing

like the dense vineyards of Bolgheri. I continued growing vegetables because it provided quick income to help pay off the mortgage on the property. This was the main reason I got into viticulture a bit later than most, but soon enough, I planted my first grapevines.

*Three generations of the Persico family, with the elderly Berardino and his wife Fiorita beside them.*

My two children live and work in the United States, having left right after finishing school.

Brian, along with his business partner and childhood friend, runs a distribution company that operates across nearly all U.S. states. It's a food and beverage company that primarily imports niche Italian products. He manages the Atlantic coast market and currently lives on the 63rd floor of a building in Manhattan. The development of new wines in the U.S. largely depends on him—after all, they're his wines.

My second child, Ilaria, lives in Florida. She's married, has a son, and is an American citizen. She works as a photographer for real estate magazines and helps us build the brand image for our new wine business.

In my family, I'm the only Italian left.

My children emigrated to America because their own country didn't offer them the opportunities to grow—much like what happened over a century ago with Berardino.

*History repeats itself.*

You could say that, over the last two centuries, the Persico family's story mirrors the broader history of Italy: a winding,

treacherous path leading all the way to me, standing here today as...

...*an Italian*.


*Osteria in Bolgheri.*

*This is where the six brothers lived, and it is where I was born.*

## Explanation of the Title

The longed-for stability sought by the members of the Persico family is constantly confronted with obstacles that are often greater than they are, so much so that at certain points, it seems as though extinction is a real possibility.

The thread that runs through the story is the rebirth that follows the loss of things and loved ones, but with each new step, the characters realize that this rebirth slips away, like a handful of sand between their fingers.

## Explanation of the Characters' Names

### REBELLIOUS PRIEST

The son of a notary from Salerno, who becomes a revolutionary.

### APPARSO

The son of the Rebellious Priest, who becomes an orphan and later adopts the name Persico Giovanni.

### PERSICO BERNARDINO

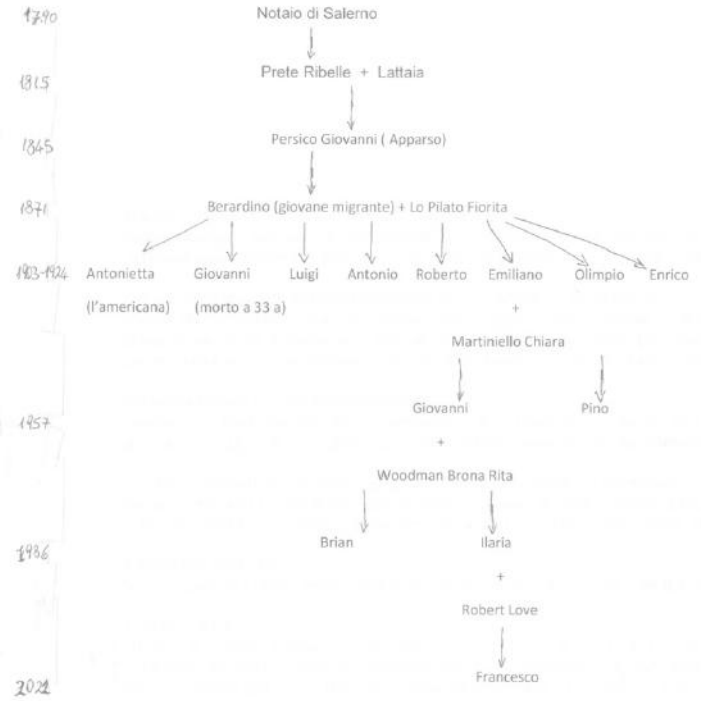
Becomes Bernardino, the young migrant.

### THE 6 BROTHERS

The six sons of Persico Bernardino.

I would like to thank the "survivors" of the Persico family for their testimonies and photographic documentation, without which it would not have been possible to write this story.

FILOGENESI


1790
Notaio di Salerno
1815
Prete Ribelle + Lattaia
1845
Persico Giovanni ( Apparso)
1871
Berardino (giovane migrante) + Lo Pilato Fiorita
1903-1924
Antonietta
(l'americana)
Giovanni
(morto a 33 a)
Luigi
Antonio
Roberto
Emiliano
Olimpio
Enrico
+
Martiniello Chiara
Giovanni
Pino
1957
+
Woodman Brona Rita
Brian
Ilaria
1986
+
Robert Love
Francesco
2021