

# Ornella Labriola: the loneliness of an irreducible memory

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## Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing the particular case concerning Ornella Labriola (1908-1991), who lived between Italy and Soviet Union. She was a guest of the famous hotel “Lux” in Moscow, the dwelling place of international Communism during the years of Stalinism. In that place, happened her love story with Giuseppe Rimola (1905-1938), delegate of Italian young communists in the Kjm (the Young Communist International). He was arrested and condemned to death as “people’s enemy” in the gyre concerning he terror of Stalinism. During all her life, Ornella Labriola only desired to show people the truth about the death of her own partner, also to rescue the sense of her own existence and choices.

The biographical approach of our research permits to emphasize witness’s feelings, believes, values and auto-reflexivity. Labriola was interviewed a year before her death. Her narration is focused on her relationship with ideology, with the revolutionary time when she grew, with the political treat as it was perceived during the thirties and forties; but also she talked about her love relation with her partner in a cultural context in which it was normal to sacrifice own private life on the altar of revolutionary necessities.

**Keywords:** history; memory; political identity; private life; public life; relation with the past

“... you should know that stories left in the open fade away, stories need to live in secret but equally they can’t live without air...”

(John Berger, *From A to X. A story in letters*, Verso, London, 2009)

## Introduction

This work proposes to tell the story of a woman and her world through a narrative midway between life story and biographical account. The woman in question is Ornella Labriola (Naples, 8 July 1908 - 17 July 1991), daughter of Arturo Labriola and Nadežda (Nadina) Skvortzòva, who spent her life in Italy and the Soviet Union and received most of her education during the Stalin Era. Her real homeland, as she herself tends to acknowledge with pride, seems to have been the Hotel Lux in Moscow, which housed exponents of the international communist movement. She lived there with Giuseppe Rimola (known as Micca, Novara 1905 - Butovo 1938), with whom she shared an extraordinary

love story and dramatic political adventure, which ended tragically with Rimola's arrest and disappearance in the maelstrom of Stalinist terror.

Ornella Labriola returned to Naples in 1954, and for the rest of her life she wanted nothing more than to find out and disclose the truth about what happened to her partner, in an attempt to preserve his memory and also recover the meaning of his life and of a historical period driven by the principles and allure of the communist revolution, which she never disowned despite the high price paid on a human and personal level. These intertwined public and private aspects represent one of the most interesting features of her individual, but also indissolubly collective life. Indeed, to cite Perry Anderson (1980), we can claim that her life story encompasses an inextricable knot of "private ends", "public ends" and "collective ends" – "that is to say, those ends that form part of a programme deliberately targeted at creating or reforming entire social structures and once again raising the question of the division between the two first types of ends" (Passerini 1982: 100). Ornella's words - not only those that represent or evoke the past, but also those that reflect on the present (the period during which I interviewed her at length was characterised by Gorbachev's attempted reforms) - require a degree of historical perspective in order to be understood. They also call into question literature on memory and the processing of exceptional moments and traumatic events.

However, it should be clarified that this work never attempts to "reconstruct" the "facts", instead aiming to focus on the subjective account of an experience with everything that this involves as regards understanding a particular, albeit not a unique life story (subject to comparisons and similarities on a generational level), reiterating "that oral sources are doubly secondary, inasmuch as they are subjective interpretations of partial experiences of reality" and avoiding "any possible equation between orality and authenticity" (Passerini, *ibid*: 101; 103).

What is more, the "facts" are well known. In his excellent essay *Vita e morte di Giuseppe Rimola, militante della classe operaria* (in Bermani, *Storie ritrovate*, 2006: 151-183), Carlo Bermani finally reconstructed the entire picture of the Rimola affair, from his childhood in Novara to his political activism, his arrival in Moscow as a representative of the young Italian communists in the YCI (Young Communist International), his arrest in March 1938 and his sentencing to death by firing squad as an "enemy of the people", carried out in August of the same year. Everything emerged thanks to the opening of the archives of the former NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and the publication in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, on 12 August 1993, of a list of twenty-five Italian communists who shared the same fate. Ornella Labriola, who had passed away two years earlier, never found out how the story really ended.

However, the most important aspect as regards my chosen approach is an understanding of the dimension of insurmountable bewilderment, which is apparent in her account: a bewilderment resulting from the experience she went through, which is also a form of extreme attachment to the places involved during the most dynamic and intense part of her life in defence of an inalienable identity. In my analysis and interpretation of her account, I therefore focused on aspects such as the organisation of the narrative, the expression of feelings, beliefs and values, the rhetorical strategies that served her ideals, and the self-reflective nature of the interviewee. In other words: not so much the information on reality, as the way in which the witness constructed and preserved her personal world of meanings over the years. That world that, despite the accumulation of pain and bitterness, makes her say: "I owe everything to Russia, to the Soviet Union: all my intellectual growth took place there" (31/3/1990).

### **The meaning, method and operational strategies of the research**

I interviewed Ornella Labriola for the first time on 31 March 1990 and for the second time on 5 July of the same year. The two long interviews were recorded, transcribed and subjected to a preliminary analysis, then archived to await processing, like other works that form part of my ongoing efforts in the field of oral resources and collecting memories. The following year, when Ornella died, her executor - Professor Franco Grassi - entrusted the archive to me,<sup>1</sup> giving me an even more responsible role as regards conserving and disclosing what I had received.

Grassi himself had acted as a "mediator", paving the way for the interview not only by introducing me to Ornella, but also urging me to deal with a complex wealth of experience, which predictably risked being lost for a number of reasons. The objective was to restore the Rimola affair, in particular, to the collective memory of Italian Communists, unmasking it through a narrative that also provided it with recognition and full public redemption. Ornella was the one to ask this, after having made numerous failed attempts over the years, as we shall see, and having placed pressure on the leaders of the Italian Communist Party.

From my point of view I was primarily interested in investigating this woman's relationship with ideology, with the party, with the period of history during which she grew up, and with the political activism of the 1930s and 1940s. I was also interested in the relationship that had been established between the USSR and a young Italian communist from Naples, daughter of two unusual parents. It seemed important to explore the relationship between Ornella and Micca against the backdrop of a cultural climate where it was considered right and proper to sacrifice one's so-called private life on the altar of public necessity, in keeping with the dictates of the revolutionary creed.

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<sup>1</sup> This documentary material was donated to the Istituto Campano per la Storia della Resistenza, dell'Antifascismo e dell'Età Contemporanea "Vera Lombardi" - Naples, establishing the "Fondo Labriola Ornella" in the institute's archives.

I therefore chose the tool of the biographical interview on these grounds. I prepared carefully for the meetings, finding out as much as I could about the period of history in question by reading extensively about Stalinism. I also investigated Micca, gathering all the available information so as to paint a complete picture of him.<sup>2</sup>

However, my first contact with the interviewee was not easy. I found these notes in the jotter I used at the time:<sup>3</sup> “She is a disappointed, diffident woman: a misunderstood veteran. In her isolation she has developed a stronger and stronger attachment to the past. These traits make her anachronistic, with an evident and almost obstinate anachronism. I have to work hard to lower the defences put up by her diffidence. I have to earn credibility in her eyes. I thought the ‘mediator’ had provided me with a sufficient introduction, but that’s not the case. I have had to construct a way of being together, a communicative relationship, which was created more spontaneously and with less effort in other similar research projects... I am in her home, I am sitting at the desk in her modest little study, which is almost disused, while I get ready to record the interview. And yet I cannot help but be struck by a photograph of Micca, which hangs in a frame on the wall opposite me. The first image that comes to mind is one of a betrayed generation. Looking more closely, his expression and gaze seem to me to be those of an epic personality. I tell Ornella about my impression. She is not surprised, but instead smiles and adds: ‘He had really thick black hair’ – but she lets me understand that she prefers to proceed in an orderly fashion. What’s more, I’ve prepared a certain order for our talk: in keeping with tradition, I want to start with her childhood, as is always the case in life stories. She anticipates me, making a preliminary point: ‘Who knows whether complete redemption will ever be achieved for Micca!’, and she emphasises, articulating each word with her voice: ‘I don’t have the strength to go on’. It’s clear that she wants to control the game and I will have to win her trust. For the first thirty minutes she surveys me, she wants to discover what interest has brought me to her. She is used to defending herself and being suspicious. She only starts to trust me when she realises that I’m sincerely drawn to her world and neither she nor Micca are indifferent or remote to me. This is the basis of the pact between us. I talk to her about the things I know about Stalin’s Russia, the Italian communists in the USSR and also about her father, a socialist, and his complex political career... I also mention her mother and her belonging to the colony of Russian immigrants in Italy, which formed between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.”

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<sup>2</sup> For this work, I used all the information collected over a long period of time by Cesare Bermiani from a number of different sources (archival, oral, journalistic and epistolary). The whole affair has been made public today in the essay *Vita e morte di Giuseppe Rimola, militante della classe operaia*, op. cit., accompanied by extensive notes and supplemented by the publication of a number of documents. When I conducted the interviews, I had been able to access the documents held by Ornella, including her correspondence with Bermiani. It is now all conserved in the “Fondo Labriola Ornella” in the Archivio ICSR “Vera Lombardi”.

<sup>3</sup> On the methodological importance of keeping a notebook when carrying out research, see Donatella Della Porta, *L’intervista qualitativa* (2010).

Having reached this understanding, we started a fast-paced communication in which her narrative only needed a few prompts from me to flow along the tracks of her memory. This input did not affect the unguided nature of the interview, but was limited to reinforcing the evocative tension of her account. What is more, as highlighted in the text set out below, my interventions, by demonstrating a certain awareness of the events that had unfolded, also served to boost my credibility and thus achieve the complete trust of the interviewee. A “significant relationship” was established between us (Furlotti 1998, in Cipolla, ed.: 164-212), which was unforced and unreserved, based explicitly on understanding. This was in keeping with the criterion according to which understanding is always distinguished by a “participative, conversational and dialogic” connotation (Schwandt, 2003: 302).

I would like to add a few specifications about the unguided nature of the interview, and I will do so by drawing on a clarification by Rita Bichi, which seems to offer an unequivocal explanation of the sense in which to take and practise the qualitative dimension of research through the interview, one of its most emblematic tools. She states: “the unguided nature is only relative and can be perceived more as a ‘tending towards’ than an achievable objective. In fact, it should not be forgotten that an interview, of whatever type, always responds to a structured cognitive project that orientates it and focuses it in advance, and, in this sense, it can never be said to be completely unguided.” (2010: 50).

What is more, given that I proposed, as already mentioned, to grasp and analyse the subject’s point of view, her “self-reflectiveness”, her personal vision and “categorisation” of the experience she has been through, I rendered the effects of the interaction that unfolded between us completely recognisable. To this regard, I would like to recall that tending to enucleate points of view and meanings refers to the principle of “granting these points of view the culturally honoured status of reality” (Miller, Glassner 1997: 100).

I cannot overlook the complex relationship between history and memory in this work, but nor is this the place to discuss it adequately. A wide-reaching debate is known to have developed around this subject, which has affected the entire field of human sciences. However, I can refer to the twofold nature of memory, understood as the source of historical work but also as a human dimension endowed with a peculiar “autonomy” because of the roles it is able to play in the construction of individual, collective, social and public memory. In the biographical sphere it plays a particularly important role, acting as the connective tissue between actions and events, undergoing perennial construction and revision within a weaving process whose wefts comprise voids, cancellations, distortions, recoveries, fixations, transfigurations and overcomings. Considering all these articulations is part of the categorical imperatives for those who carry out research based on the memory of individuals or groups.

In our case, we find ourselves faced with an example of a battle to obtain an “accurate memory” (Ricoeur 2003: 7). In Ornella’s account, we should not underestimate this particular tension that influences the various levels of the discourse: contents, judgements, language, as well as “central concepts” and “key expressions”. It is in this that we identify “a text’s overall meaning, even when analysing its details” (Tonkiss 1998: 253), a text to which it is necessary to adhere during the analysis and interpretation operations.<sup>4</sup>

What is more, given the characteristics of this research, I feel it opportune to make some observations about oral sources. As regards the introduction of “oral history” into the discipline of history, various problems have emerged over time, particularly in Italy. Discussions, contrasts and misunderstandings have accompanied this type of research from the very start, influencing epistemological and methodological aspects of historical science and ultimately contributing to an undeniable renewal and enrichment of historiography, even in terms of interdisciplinary openings. As a result, a brief yet adequate definition has been made by Cesare Bermani, according to whom, taking into account the entire theoretical process and empirical route: “we must also acknowledge that ‘oral history’ is an expression that serves to connote the activity of those historians who - reflecting upon oral accounts and memory - deem that for their work it is indispensable to also use accounts recorded for the purpose or other oral materials” (Bermani 1999, vol. 1: 1). Before arriving at this definition, he worked hard for a long period to clarify two key problems: the reliability and the diversity of the oral sources. For the former he made a distinction between the concepts of *reliability* and *truthfulness*, establishing clear boundaries between the two. As Daniele Jalla explained so well, working with an oral source means working on the principle that “its reliability ceases to be linked to the truthfulness (claimed) of the assertions, in order to be founded on a deeper understanding of the rules of distortion, falsification and removal...” (1982: 123), considering that it is precisely “this level in which oral sources perhaps reveal their greatest potential, becoming privileged indicators of the subjectivity of which they are the expression” (*ibid*). The other central theme, that of diversity, has made it necessary to characterise these sources specifically as compared to written sources. According to Alessandro Portelli, the two types of documentation do not mutually exclude one another. Instead, it should be recognised that they “have shared characteristics, and autonomous and specific characteristics, roles that only the one or the other can play (or that plays it better than the other), and require autonomous tools for interpretation” (Portelli 1999, in Bermani, ed.: 150). Therefore, proceeding to a useful review of the requirements of diversity, he firstly mentions the dimension of orality, which - among other things - raises the issue of transcription during the “passage from the spoken to the page”. The other characteristics include: the assumption that oral sources “are narrative sources” and therefore require tools

<sup>4</sup> To this regard, see D. Della Porta, *op. cit.*, particularly chapter 7, “L’analisi: cosa ci dicono le interviste qualitative”, pp. 102–24.

applied to the “analysis of the account”; the peculiar “ability to inform ourselves, rather about the significance of events rather than the events themselves”; the fact that they are not objective and this “is a characterising and constitutional feature of oral sources, as sources contemporary to the research rather than to the event, constructed, variable, and partial” (ibid: 154-62). Lastly, because of its subjectivity and relationality, it is impossible to silence an underlying difference inherent to the oral source’s very “condition of being”, which lies in its “being transmitted” rather than “emitted”, a condition that instead belongs to the written source (ibid: 160).

The element of transmission is strongly present in this work, as is clear to see by reading the next section. It is through this transmission that the biographical account is constructed and the interviewee’s identity is defined. Ornella Labriola therefore tries to overturn the marginal and devalued condition of her existence. This occurs during the course of the dialogue. In this sense, the relationship that developed between us constitutes what I would call a “restitutive biographical account”. Restitutive of herself, of her past, of the singular nature of her life experience, a sort of retaliation of subjectivity against the inevitable objectivity of events.

Once again, it must be confirmed that, in the case of the “biographical approach” too, there is no method that exists “independently from the object studied” (Bertaux 1995, in Maciotti, ed.: 52). Our case demonstrates that the object-subject is decisive in defining the sense of the entire operation and in modelling its method. But this does not prevent us from identifying and explaining types. In fact, according to Bertaux, “there are at least two ways of using life stories (one oriented towards the discovery of ‘objective’ relations, or, rather, socio-structural relationships; the other oriented towards the discovery of symbolic structures)” and these methods must be identified clearly “in order to avoid any confusion regarding the existence of a biographical method”, without however ruling out that different methods can acquire “a complementary character so as to mutually support one another” (ibid: 58). By way of an example, one type is represented by ethno-anthropological investigations in which life stories (collected by the dozen) use the “interlocutors” primarily as “informers”; another type is that adopted by “researchers on a symbolic level [that] make an effort to gather much more complete life stories and study them case by case (Catania, Caroux), comparing them to one another (Burgos)” (ibid). Our work can be included in this category, which does not rule out the possibility of comparative developments.

I would like to make a final note of a more strictly operational kind regarding the way in which I carried out the interviews. As regards the listening method, I adopted the criterion that suggests not simply listening to a story (however respectful and empathetic listening can be), but exercising the ability to analyse it “while it is being produced, maintaining the focus on a communicative level” (Bichi, op. cit.: 165). In order to encourage or create this condition, an important role is played not only by body

language (posture, gestures, facial expressions, voice intonation), which convey the level of attention, participation and availability, but also specific technical tools. I am particularly referring to the tool of content “reformulation” introduced by C. Rogers (1951) in his psychotherapy techniques, together with the “raises” of A. Blanchet (1997) and the “consignments” of Bichi (2002). On the one hand, these operational methods are intended to regulate, while on the other they are designed to make the work of the researcher more effective, qualifying the relationship with the interviewee. However, the theoretical assumption on which they are based should also be taken into account. Rogers’ reformulations, for example, are based on the following theoretical principles: “the subject is considered capable of reflection and self-regulation; human behaviour has a specific meaning and logic for each human being; affective, behavioural and verbal reactions are closely related to the social meanings subjectively experienced; the speaker is considered as the holder of knowledge that the interlocutor needs to learn” (ibid. 165-66).<sup>5</sup>

### **“I had my own ideas and I developed them in myself”**

Below is a transcription of the first interview. It reproduces our dialogue, or rather its verbalisation, including my questions and interventions. I feel the need to justify this decision with the words of Portelli, who effectively argues for its scientific advisability. “If the interview is the product of both, this must emerge at the time of its publication. Many collections of oral accounts arrange the texts so as to give the impression that it is an uninterrupted flow of narrative by the informant, causing the questions and interventions of the researcher to disappear. This produces a subtle manipulation, because they give us the narrator’s answers but not the questions they are answering; and they tend to give the impression that the informant would always provide the same account (tending to attribute the oral account with same unchangeable nature and fixity as the written document). By doing away with the presence of the researcher, one in no way exalts the autonomy of the source, but instead makes it become rigid, to its own detriment” (Portelli, op. cit.: 160-61).

*“Talk to me, if you would like to, about your life, starting with your childhood. Where were you born?”*

I was born in Naples, on Via Scarlatti, on 8 July 1908. My brother Lucio is two years younger than me: he was born on 31 July 1910. My mother, Nadina Skvortzòva, the wife of Arturo Labriola, was Russian. I had meningoencephalitis when I was 12. We were on holiday in Seiana and I got sick there. I couldn’t go to school because of this and my parents gave me the opportunity to teach myself.

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed examination of these aspects, please refer particularly to the essays by R. Bichi (2002 and 2010).



I had my own ideas and I developed them in myself. I felt much happier in the company of adults. My relationship with my father wasn't always good. Things were exacerbated at the beginning because I spent a lot of time with communists, the Bordiga family in particular. I became a communist at a very young age.

In 1925 my mother and I moved to Moscow: I was 16 years old. I studied at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow from 1931 and I graduated in French. I attended Russian lessons at the same time and so I also graduated in Russian language and literature.

In 1932 I went to Paris to see my father at my mother's suggestion. It was there that I met Turati and Nenni. I felt very happy in that environment. My relationship with my father was excellent at the time: I was strongly attracted by his intellect. I would have liked to stay longer and I even told him about my wish, but he said he couldn't provide for me materially and so I went back to Moscow.

I owe everything to Russia, to the Soviet Union: all my intellectual growth took place there. I met Micca (Giuseppe Rimola) in 1932 at the centre for migrants in Moscow. We became a couple in 1933, but we didn't go to the Soviet to get married. I returned to Italy in 1954; my mother died in 1964, I brought her back from Moscow almost three years before her death, because she had been left all on her own in Moscow and I was always worried.

*Did you spend those last three years here, in this house?*

Yes, in this house. This is my only house. In short, good or bad, we spent them here.

*What was your relationship like?*

Excellent, just as it had always been. We communicated really well. But she became passive in her old age. She wasn't even happy to be in Naples, because she had bitter memories of Italy, of Naples, and of the relationship between my father and herself.

*Did her relationship with Arturo Labriola end badly? Did it upset her?*

Really badly, and it was clear that she – this is my idea – also suffered from the absence of her son.

*Your brother? Why?*

My brother was here in Naples, but it all went wrong between me and him. He lived in Naples with my father and his wife, but at a certain moment he separated from his wife - I don't really know why -... and he ended up marrying a girl of 25 when he was already quite elderly. There was a split between us, which made me suffer... I was left completely alone in the city, with my mother in Moscow, my father dead and this

brother who had practically changed his life from one moment to the next and had stopped seeing me.

*This was when you decided to bring your mother back.*

Yes.

*What did your mother do in Moscow, before she grew old?*

Well, she did a lot of different jobs. She taught at a Montessori school, then she became the head of an early years institution. They later accused her of introducing Fascist policies.

*During Stalinism?*

Yes, yes, during Stalinism.

*Was she put on trial?*

No, no. It never came to a trial.

*Was she suspected, questioned?*

She was suspected by her boss at the institution, who was also under suspicion and I believe was actually put on trial. My mother was only admonished by the party.

*What was the accusation exactly?*

It was a false accusation: she was accused of bringing Fascist culture to the Soviet Union, because she translated and... talked about Italian education from the period, the 1930s.

*Have you kept any of these writings by your mother?*

No, I haven't kept anything... I know that she carried on working at this educational institute afterwards. I literally can't remember what it was called.

*Was it a research institute?*

Yes, research.

*What did your mother tell you about this experience?*

She never spoke of it.

*What about you? Did you frequent the party when you were in Moscow as a student and then as a teacher?*

No, never. I never frequented it because in the USSR they didn't consider me... they didn't accept my application to join the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

*You applied to join the Communist Party of the Soviet Union?*

Yes.

*And did you have a membership card for the Italian Communist Party? The PCd'I?*

No, because having left here - of course you don't think of certain things at the age of 16 - I hadn't thought of legalising my position, but I then became Micca's wife and I frequented... all the most important comrades from the party came to my house.

*Why was your application to join the Communist Party of the Soviet Union rejected?*

It was rejected because they had lost my application and all my documents and they never gave them back to me.

*When did this happen?*

More or less before the war.

*Before Micca was arrested or before 1933, before you met Micca?*

More or less during that time.

*Around 1933?*

Yes, yes. And so I was turned down.

*Can we talk about Micca and your meeting?*

Yes.

*Micca had two other names: Pinèla and Neero. Why?*

He explained it to me like this: because he had thick hair and a dark complexion with this very thick, black, curly hair... that's why he was called Neero. And that's how he signed himself in his correspondence with *L'Unità*. I think Togliatti in person gave him this name. Pinèla on the other hand was short for his real name (Giuseppe), and that's what his family called him.

*In 1933 Micca was in Moscow too. He had arrived the previous year as the envoy of the Young Communist International, the YCI, as a representative for young Italian communists. You lived with your mother at the time. How did you two meet?*

We met like this: I did a certain job at the association for Italian migrants, or rather there was an association not just of Italian migrants, but I was in the Italian group and,

as I knew two languages, they often used me as a translator and I met Micca because I accompanied him to certain textile factories, where he had some contacts with young Soviet communists. So... these meetings, a bit at a time... perhaps because we liked each other, we got together... he was four years older than me. In 1933 we became a proper couple, but we didn't go to the Soviet, or anywhere else... But when they arrested him I said that he was my husband... I always looked after him.

*In 1933, Giuseppe Rimola was ill with muscular dystrophy...*

I remember this very well... he was ill, but this illness of his... he had come out of prison on Procida and in 1931 he returned to his home in Novara, and then he departed. They decided to send him to Paris and then from Paris to Moscow in 1932. But he was already suffering from this illness, he had come out of prison on Procida with it. And his father... his father was really upset and told his wife to give him as much meat as possible to eat. I know he always said this to his mother, but it didn't help.

*How did his illness affect you?*

It wasn't a tragedy for me. I felt that I ought to help him and, in fact, when I saw that he had to go into a care home...

*He went to Sebastopoli, if I'm not mistaken...*

Yes, he went to Sebastopoli and remained there for a whole year. But he wasn't better when he got back, he came back with the same problems, which I knew he would because I've suffered from optic nerve dystrophy and so I already knew there was no hope for dystrophy. However, as the party had decided to send him, I said: 'Go, I'll come with you.'

*Did you ever think about your future? Did you make any plans? For example, did you think about coming back to Italy?*

No. We were too involved in everyday life, in the life of the country. It was impossible to make plans to return to Italy at the time, because we knew there was no possibility...

*During his stay in Sebastopoli, which lasted a year, did you ever see each other? Did you write.*

Yes, we wrote to each other all the time.

*Did you keep any of the letters?*

No. Nothing.

*Why not?*

Listen, firstly, after Micca's arrest, I had to leave the house where we had been living... we had a room at the Hotel Lux and the night they arrested him, on 8 March 1938, the same day a clerk came and told me I had to move out within twenty-four hours.

*And where did you go?*

They gave me a room downstairs, on the ground floor, where they kept all the wives and partners whose men had been arrested. I stayed there for a few months, then I decided to go back to my mother.

*And did you carry on trying to find out the reason for the arrest?*

Yes, I carried on. I went to these offices numerous times, but I never got a good... actually, there was a period... until they sent him... I don't know where... perhaps it was a year or two, I took in sixty roubles a month. There was an office where all the wives or daughters brought... and we had to queue for two or three hours.

*Were the sixty roubles supposed to be given to the prisoner?*

Yes, and I don't know whether he ever received them.

*Were you allowed to write to each other?*

No! Of course not! I couldn't write, nothing. I didn't even know how he was.

*And did you know where he was held?*

No, I didn't know. I didn't know how he was. I just took in this money to a certain office – I can't remember what it was called – and they gave me a receipt.

*In 1935, at the YCI Congress, Micca was replaced by Celeste Negarville. His condition also deteriorated during that period. When this happened, did you and he talk about it?*

Listen, he never said anything to me about party matters.

*Why not?*

I don't know. He probably had to keep things confidential, so I never asked ... when I asked, the answer was: 'Don't think about these things.'

*So, he was a political leader and you were an intellectual who frequented the centre for migrants, but you were not united in your activism, you had different levels of involvement. Is that right?*

Yes, that's right.

*You didn't talk about this event in the YCI, but didn't you notice that he was upset or disturbed by something?*

No, I didn't notice... his good mood seemed to continue, and this amazed me.

*Why did it amaze you?*

Because it seemed to me that, given that he was destitute... I didn't know why, Celeste Negarville came to our house, so I asked myself: why this good mood despite this destitution? I would have suffered.

*And what explanations did you find?*

Perhaps it was due to his personality – because he was a cheerful character – and to keep himself strong. However, when he was arrested in 1938 – this may surprise you – two days earlier, while waiting to present my thesis at my graduation session, I suddenly said to myself: Micca will be arrested tomorrow.

*And what made you think this?*

Hmmm! I've no idea.

*Did you perhaps have a sense of foreboding due to a few signals?*

There was a series of signals, arrests that took place in our environment, close to us. Because where we lived, at the Hotel Lux, someone had been arrested in almost every room.

*Where the arrests made by the NKVD?*

Yes, the police arrested political activists.

*When Micca was arrested, he was translating some of Lenin's works from Russian into Italian. If I'm not wrong, he was working on 'Left-Wing' Communism: an Infantile Disorder, is that right?*

Yes. There was a foreign language publishing house where he was made an editor in 1937, so he did this kind of work...

*During the same period he wrote his memoirs, some humorous tales and also a history of the young communist movement in Novara. What happened to all these works?*

I don't have them.

*Have you read them?*

Sometimes he showed me what he'd written, sometimes not.

*What do you remember about these works?*

Not a lot. At the end of the day I didn't often see what he'd written. Perhaps this was because I was really busy studying and teaching. Also, because of my weak eye, I couldn't place too much strain on my sight. I sometimes read certain passages in which he recalled his family and they could be very funny.

*Did he have a marked sense of humour?*

Yes, very strong, and it derived from his working-class origins.

*Micca hadn't had a formal education...*

He was self-taught, he'd studied in prison and then I'd helped him a lot, advising him on what to read, etc.

*In prison, during his first period of incarceration in Novara, Micca shared a cell with a teacher. This teacher gave him Victor Hugo's Ninety-Three to read. Did he ever talk to you about this education he received in prison?*

Yes, yes.

*But let's go back to Micca's writings. Why haven't you kept any of them?*

I don't have any, because – listen – when he was arrested, I had to leave the room in twenty-four hours and I had to take my things to my mother's. But my mother made a big mistake, without consulting me. During the war – we were near the front – when the Germans approached Moscow, my mother was probably worried about the documents I kept in a suitcase and she threw them all into the fire.

*So that's how your archive case was destroyed...*

Yes, although I had kept everything because Micca had told me that that documentation should be given to the party.

*Let's go back to the moment of his arrest, on the morning of 8 March 1938...*

'Don't worry,' he told me, 'I haven't done anything,' because he had seen that I was in a state of agitation. He said to me: 'Ornella, please, don't worry. I'll be back this evening, I haven't done anything.' Those were his words. He refused to take any clothes and he told me to go to the head of the party in Moscow and to continue writing to his parents, signing with his name.

*And did you go to the leaders of the Italian Communist Party in Moscow straight away?*

The same day he was arrested, I went to the comrade in charge straight away to tell him that Micca had been arrested. He didn't receive me in his room, he received me near

the entrance door. When he heard that Micca had been arrested, his first words were: 'I don't have anything against him.' And I said to him: 'These are party documents, I'm giving them back for him.' And he refused them and said: 'You keep them.'

And I said:

'But no! Micca asked me to give them to you.'

*Documents for the party, which were refused... So the accusation against Micca was shared by the Italian Communist leaders in Moscow? Was this your impression?*

I don't know what the Italian Communist Party did, because I never managed to find out anything, not even when I came back. If I came back, I came back to talk about this with the party leaders ...

*With Togliatti?*

Yes.

*You wrote to Togliatti, who replied that it was right to shed light on this episode ...*

Then I wrote to Pajetta too...

*And Pajetta, using the same expression as Togliatti, replied that it was deplorable that this had not already been done...*

I also went to the party in person, I don't remember the name of the comrade now because I saw him for the first time, but he was a leader and he replied to me (I asked him whether he could shed any light on what had happened to Micca): 'When light is shed on everything, light will be shed on Micca.'

*In what year did this meeting take place?*

Well, I was already here. I don't know exactly, I can't remember. Quite a few years have gone by since then!

*You met this comrade in Rome, on Via delle Botteghe Oscure?*

Yes. I went to Rome.

*What was your reaction at the time?*

I was indignant. And another thing that made me indignant was that he suggested paying me a pension. I refused it.

*What kind of pension? For someone who had been politically persecuted?*

I don't know what he wanted. In any case, he wanted to pay me a pension and I refused it categorically, because I didn't want to be bought.



*In short, that proposal offended you deeply and from then on...*

Yes, I broke off all contact.

*With the party leaders?*

Yes, because I no longer had the strength to go on...

*But you continued to be a member of the Italian Communist Party.*

Yes, I continued and I'm still a member today, but I don't agree with the politics of Occhetto (last secretary of the Italian Communist Party and the man behind the 1989 turnaround that led to the birth of the Italian left-wing Democratic Party, *ed.*). I made that very clear to him.

*Can we go back a little? Micca was put on trial on 29 July 1938...*

Yes.

*After the trial he was sentenced to ten years in prison for spying, and he was denied the right to correspond with people. Did you know about this sentence?*

I didn't know when the trial and sentencing took place. I found out because I went to that office to send him some money, and they took me aside and told me that Micca would be sent I don't know where. Then I made some complaints. I went, I can't remember where, in that office and I said that Micca was very sick, that he couldn't withstand ten years in prison, that he needed treatment. However, I didn't know then that there had been a trial.

*The accusation of spying was one of the commonest accusations during Stalinism...*

Yes, the most common accusation during that period.

*Among the Italian emigrants, a rumour spread that while in prison Micca had had contact with the OVRA (the secret police in Fascist Italy), while others insinuated that he was a Trotskyist and that was why he was arrested. Now, evidently, both these rumours were false, particularly as regards Trotskyism. Indeed, Cesare Bermani cites a document signed by Micca that defines the Trotskyist position as Social Fascism.*

No, no, he was never Trotskyist. He was an anarchist in his youth... his father was an anarchist and he was probably involved by his father.

*His father was an anarchist and as a very young man Micca had frequented the workshop of an artisan called Iaschi, who was also an anarchist, and all the libertarians from Novara met in this workshop. This was where he received his early political education. His uncle was also an anarchist and seems to have had a big influence on him. Do you think this may have played a part in the accusation at his trial?*

I don't know.

*Don't you know how the accusation was constructed?*

I don't know. See, I can tell you one thing... when Micca was arrested... before the arrest comrades came to see him and they stayed for a while, they often ate with us and so on ... When he was arrested, some people who knew me well, and who used to spend time at our house, started crossing over to the other side when they saw me coming down the street.

*Did this happen to all the family members of those who were arrested due to fear of consequences?*

Yes, there was a climate of fear and suspicion.

*So, you found yourself completely alone.*

Yes, I found myself completely alone. So much so that even at the institute, where I worked and where I had studied, I was considered a spy. So much so that the director fired me two or three times. Then I was reinstated, I don't know why. Perhaps because I went to the central committee and complained and then ... they probably received a call from the central committee telling them to reinstate me and to give me back my job.

*On Micca's death certificate, which was issued to you on 11 August 1947, it says that the cause of death was an acute kidney infection.<sup>6</sup> Then, an Italian prisoner said that he had committed suicide by throwing himself from the second floor of the stairwell ...*

I don't know.

*Did you know this Italian? Do you know who it was?*

I don't know who it was. I have had my suspicions, my doubts, but Moscatelli called me to tell me I was wrong. I don't know.

*In 1956, after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the accusation was reviewed and annulled because it was recognised that Micca did not commit the crime of spying of which he was accused...*

Yes, I know this.

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to the archive documents, we now know what really happened to Giuseppe Rimola. He was sentenced to capital punishment on 29 July 1938 and on 16 August of the same year he was executed by firing squad in the Butovo firing range, near Moscow. See Bermani, op. cit, p. 166 and note 31; see also [www.memorial-italia.it](http://www.memorial-italia.it), "Micca Carmelo (Rimola Giuseppe)", GARF, Fondo degli Atti Istruttori 10035, op. 1, P-24705, cc. 10, 1938-1956. The file contains the documentation relating to the arrest, sentencing and subsequent reinstatement (in response to the request for a review submitted to the Procurator General of the USSR by his mother-in-law Nadežda Skvortzova on 25 May 1956), plus ten photos.

*So, in the Soviet Union, they actually declared Micca's innocence. While you didn't obtain what you asked for from the Italian Communist Party. The issue was raised several times, but always interrupted. The last time was because of the death of Cino Moscatelli, who would have perhaps seen it through.*

Yes, definitely.

*Are you still interested in this reinstatement today?*

Of course! I'm interested in this reinstatement because I want the full truth.

*You lived with this man for five years...*

Yes, a few years.

*What was your life like afterwards?*

Listen, it was... It was tragic because... I devoted myself entirely to his reinstatement and the hope of seeing him. I was deeply in love with him and I have devoted my life to him. This is what I can say. I suffered a lot, I suffered in all cases because then, how can I put it, I was accused of being the daughter of Arturo Labriola, who said I don't know what to Lenin, and of being the wife of Micca. So I was a twofold victim... In short, I've not made a career for myself, I've been a teacher and that's it. I couldn't do the "aspirantura" exams - how do I say that in Italian? - and I devoted myself entirely to teaching.

*Both in Russia and in Italy?*

Yes, I devoted myself to Italian, which I really enjoyed. I have some Russian students who still remember me and my teaching today. Then, having come back here, I didn't want to try to get in to the Istituto Universitario Orientale, because I knew that then it was a den of former fascists and the environment was reactionary, so I limited myself to giving Russian lessons at the Italy-USSR association.

*And you've always carried the memory of Micca over all these years...*

Yes. Yes. I've always remembered him as he was. Humane, generous. With a great sense of humour ... Perhaps my suffering today is also due to the fact that I was used to being among comrades and living the life of these comrades, helping them. Now I find myself completely alone.

*Are you referring to the present day?*

Yes, to this period.

*How do you compare it to the tragic period you went through?*

Definitely worse.

*Worse than the tragic period of the war, Fascism and Stalinism? Why?*

Because of the loneliness. I also hate the fact that I can no longer see. I can see your blurred features. Over recent years I've been both physically and morally broken.

*Do you have any regrets?*

I have always focused on the present. It is my culture that causes me to do this... I still follow political affairs.

*And what do you think of the Soviet Union today? What do you believe is really happening?*

Something really tremendous is happening. I believe that tomorrow, these eastern countries will regret what they have done, because they are not used to this, they do not know what they are getting themselves into, why western countries are evil.

*You're not at all optimistic about the future of eastern Europe, about post-Socialism...*

Hmmm! I see nothing that makes me think of a new phase of Socialism in what they are doing. I cannot see that they are building a form of Socialism, I see that they are destroying, that they have destroyed. You have to consider that the Socialism that Lenin created made life really good for working people. He created schools for children and adults, public healthcare for the sick; they have care homes that are not like the pitiful versions we have here in Italy. He created a social sphere that did not exist before and cannot exist in the conditions that are in place now. One day or another they will regret it, because this cannot be, it's not achievable.

*What is not achievable?*

Everything that Gorbachev is doing.

*You mean introducing a market economy?*

They don't know what opening up to the market means, because they have lived under Socialism for seventy years or more. Gorbachev is making a fundamental mistake by not starting with the economy: he needs to start with the economy!

*And what decisions need to be made on an economic level, given that the crisis is real and also serious?*

What did Stalin do? What did Breznev do?

*What do you mean?*

They destroyed the country. They made mistakes... Stalinism lasted until the 20th Congress, until 1956. Then it was the responsibility of Breznev... but I didn't live under Breznev, I was here.

*And Khrushchev?*

I have always been on the side of Khrushchev. Khrushchev tried to do something, but he failed.

*Why, in your opinion?*

He failed because he did not gain the support of the masses, but supported himself on individuals.

*But now it seems that Gorbachev is turning to society as a whole...*

He is very popular with some and strongly opposed by others.

*But he shows a strong focus on public opinion (including international opinion), on what the people think...*

But, look, after having had to live with the consequences of these mistakes, the people no longer trust the leaders.

*Do you also see this in eastern Europe as a whole?*

Yes, it's the same for eastern Europe too.

*What do you believe to be the most serious consequence of all this?*

Society's loss of trust in the Socialist government. They believe that by switching to the western capitalist model now they will resolve their problems, but they won't resolve anything. The situation will deteriorate in my opinion.

Naples, Parco Comola Ricci, 31 March 1990

### **Theoretical reflections, analytical insights and lines of interpretation**

"If we are, if every individual represents the *singular* reappropriation of the social and historical *universal* that surrounds them, *we can know* the social on the basis of the irreducible speciality of an individual practice"

(Franco Ferrarotti, *Storia e storie di vita*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 1981, p. 42).

The partiality of the above text, which reproduces just one of the two interviews with Ornella Labriola, does not permit me to proceed here with a complete analytical interpretation of the recorded material. However, I can provide a few insights and lines

of interpretation that support the theoretical decisions and methodological solutions adopted.

I would like to start with some preliminary considerations.

When tackling the difficulties inherent to the biographical approach in sociology and the statutory issues that continue to characterise the use of biographical resources in research, Enzo Campelli has spoken, following on from Franco Ferrarotti, of a “scientific challenge that the biographical seems to insinuate into the very heart of sociological epistemology and methodology” (Campelli 1995, in Maciotti, ed.: 96). In reality, drawing upon life accounts by listening to subjects raises crucial problems for sociological theory and methodology, such as the redefinition of the relationship “between observed and observer”, the questioning of the “very notion of ‘measure’”, the revival of “expressions such as ‘variable’ and ‘indicator’”. Nor should the perhaps more decisive issue be overlooked: how to ensure a valid and transparent “inferential development” of the available material? The problem to be resolved therefore becomes that of the possibility and controllability of the inference, from which we expect both good “‘management’ of the empirical grounds in view of the formulation of inferences” and strict “traceability of the established inferences established”. The perspective is indicated in a “logic of inference” (ibid: 98) able to fully legitimise the informative and interpretative function of the biographical material in relation to the problematic situations to be investigated. But this logic cannot do without extensive historical and critical knowledge possessed by the researcher, without which it is in no way possible to achieve that “intersubjectivity of results” in which this type of approach is identified. It is not sufficient to make connections and divisions between the various parts of the discourse: it is essential to know who the subject-object-interlocutor is, what world they inhabit, what context they live in, etc. And this awareness must be accompanied by a guiding principle: the postulate of the link between the experience of the person and the experience of society. If the full potential of this link is not realised, the *biographical* aspect is destined to remain reductive and unfruitful. At the same time, precisely because of its *historical nature*, the *biographical* is not self-sufficient: neither as an object, nor as a method. Its very nature demands an interdisciplinary formulation of its scientific use. I am thinking of the necessary interaction of sociology with history, first and foremost, but also with psychology, semiology, literary criticism, etc.

In this there is also the conviction that the *biographical* might serve as the most sensitive area of research on which to define the ideological divide between the qualitative and quantitative levels of research. And this divide certainly comprises permeability as regards other disciplines that, more than any other, distinguishes the biographical approach. To this regard, we need to talk about interdependence, bearing in mind both the covenantal and relational quality of the revelation and the contribution of other interacting and complementary areas of learning, as regards hermeneutic work.

I therefore want to emphasise the fact that it is a type of research that is anything but self-sufficient, both when the information is gathered and during the processing phase. The only exception to this is if one wants to settle for schematic operations involving the content, which could at most be useful in terms of the preliminary organisation of the material, but not for a mature discussion of this type of source.

In order for a source to rightfully belong to the world of historical and social sciences, it must pass through a complete development of its potential and not stop at partial use, as in the case of the mere collection and classification of “narratives”. I am referring, for example, to the multiple collections of accounts that are building up thanks to various memory recovery and conservation projects in wide ranging fields of human experience. These accounts are almost always interesting and valuable, if interpreted as a common asset saved from fatal loss over time, but are far from being real historical and social sources in their own right. By statute, the source is constructed in the epistemologically aware gaze and in the expert hands of the researcher. A document or an account *become* sources thanks to the stringent workings of science. Because of this, the biographical account requires serious contextualisation and all the conceptual tools that highlight its *historical nature* and the complex relationship between present and past.

In our case, contextualisation is particularly demanding, both because of the many different reassessments to which the Stalinist period was subjected and because the *relationship with the context* is enacted by a woman. This calls into question the specific reflection on *gender* as an analysis category with the rich scientific production that it has inspired, including studies on the identity of women protagonists and participants in communist ideology and affairs.<sup>7</sup> Significant aspects of women’s relationship with politics, with the so-called historical time, with public space, with memory, with the body, with care, with the past and the present, have been highlighted here... And these concepts have been called into question, imposing a reformulation precisely in the light of the female historical experience. Just think, by way of an example, of the confusion that continues to reign between the concept of “experience” and that of “everyday life”. The biography of Ornella Labriola has much to teach us in this sense. Her “experience” does not appear in any way comparable to “everyday life”, understood as

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<sup>7</sup> The various historiographical works include the particularly useful essay by Patrizia Gabrielli, *Fenicotteri in volo. Donne comuniste nel ventennio fascista* (1999), although, as regards the female communists who had emigrated to Moscow, the historian complained of a lack of available material, which can be said to have been overcome today. In any case, the documents examined, which mostly included diaries and correspondence, enable her to put forward explanations and interpretations which also to the specific case of Ornella and, above all, her experience of Soviet Russia. See, in particular, chapter 5, “Nella tempesta”, pp. 193-254.

ordinary existential routine,<sup>8</sup> as is clearly apparent in the previous section. The same can be said of public/private dichotomy, which is completely inadequate for setting the scene for an event that nullifies the borders between the two spheres. Not to mention the concept of politics as it is conventionally understood.

What did politics mean to this woman? A way of inserting herself into a current of change, letting herself be drawn into the perspective of achieving her ultimate goal? Or instead an opportunity for subjective affirmation, within a broader framework able to support her desire for freedom and autonomy? At a very young age, when she was still a teenager, she frequented the home of Amadeo Bordiga, attracted by a vision of the revolutionary change of society that did not coincide with her father's position. "I had my own ideas and I cultivated them in myself": this is the key expression that reveals her innermost disposition. Having moved to Moscow, she adhered to the Soviet model and even applied for membership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The arrest of her partner did not provoke, as one might expect, a clear cut rejection of that reality. The way in which she continued to contact the authorities to find out his fate, the importance she attributes to reinstatement, are all clear indicators of her substantial acceptance of the contingencies, despite judging them to be tragic. Her opinion of the Italian Communist Party is different, represented instead as a "grey area", although she continues to be one of its members. She was 83 years old in 1990, when I interviewed her, and she had regularly renewed her membership. How can this contradictory *loyalty* be explained? Was it a question of an attachment linked to her very identity, the paradoxical outcome of the injury she had suffered? A deliberate continuity, thanks to which she could save the most precious part of herself: the past. That past that she persisted in reliving in the form of memory and disclosure. In fact, we should not overlook the fact that she constantly put herself forward as a witness. She did it for years, especially through the tool of correspondence, soliciting, complaining and specifying - as soon as the opportunity presented itself - as documented by the entire body of her correspondence, which covers a period of several decades.<sup>9</sup>

The *fil rouge* is always the figure of Giuseppe Rimola. Around him, as we have seen, Ornella's account takes shape and their experience acquires a *historical nature*. And it is memory that plays a fundamental part in the continuous toing and froing between representation and reality, in order to define and communicate a precise symbolic order. In fact, narrative oscillates between two levels: the level of dramatisation, in

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<sup>8</sup> Around fifteen years ago, Annarita Buttafuoco, whom I like to remember as one of the initiators of the history of women in Italy, when referring to the concepts and terms of traditional historiography, pointed out that these were "concepts that as far as they regarded women had very problematic meanings, due to the specific historical experience that women lived through, meanings, I believe, that differ from those that emerge from research involving male subjects. First and foremost, the problem of experience, often confused with the concept of everyday life, so that - but perhaps it is a question of analysing this 'lapsus' more thoroughly - the "exceptional", the "non-everyday", were liable not to be experienced" (Buttafuoco 1995, in Maciotti, ed.: 122-123).

<sup>9</sup> I will provide an account of this in the volume that will be published, featuring a selection of the letters sent to the various members of the Communist Party and to other people, such as the historians Paolo Spriano and Bermani himself.



which the memory (re)constructs the scene as in a film sequence (selecting what is to be emphasised from the elements that are to be out of focus); and that of information (almost introduced by expressions such as “you see”, “look”, etc.), into which all the rethinking done over the years is channelled and expressed.

A precise analytical unity can be identified in the structure of the account, which is delineated around the relationship with Micca, from the moment of their meeting to the moment of separation/loss. At the centre is the personality of Micca and the reasons for his charm.<sup>10</sup> But over and beyond the scanning of the facts, it is the symbolic level that provides us with the key to reading the sense of their link. In fact, it is apparent from the notes and connotations of the language, that this love is indissolubly linked to the period in which she was born, to the individual and collective change that was unfolding, to the “here everything is new”, an expression that resonates in various ways in all the witness accounts of Italian communists in Russia. What is more, it is only possible for different personal and social worlds to meet at the crossroads of aspirations and desires that arose in remote situations during periods of great disruption. Politics therefore frees up a new way of experiencing love: as a founding principle behind a community reality and as an emancipating decision for the individual subject. A very high place at stake, which exalts care for others, the world and oneself, and prevents the restrictions imposed by disease or cultural differences from being felt. Ornella’s words are very clear to this regard.

The fact that their union only lasted five years (a fact to which, albeit discretely, I wanted to draw attention during the interview) takes nothing away from its symbolic value, but indeed enhances it.

Another unit of analysis (for which, like for the subsequent one, it is however indispensable to refer to the complete transcript of the two interviews) can be formed around the theme of the conceivability of injustice, of the evil committed precisely by that new government of the society in which all the hopes for the regeneration and rebirth of society had been placed.

Lastly, a final unit is represented by the only course of resilience possible for Ornella in the economy of her affections and her principles: the reappropriation of her own fate.

In conclusion, it is worth returning to the leitmotif of the quest for “truth”. I ask myself what the “truth” means to Ornella and I seek the answer in a targeted reading of her account in its entirety. I find the explanation when, indignant about the current condition (at the time of the interview) of the Soviet Union, she attributes its decline to

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<sup>10</sup> It would be worth exploring this trait shared by the Italian communists who emigrated to Russia: their generous personalities and strong ties to their places of origin and education. According to my theory, the tragic and painful knot inherent in the fate of the many carriers of “small stones” to the building of socialism also lies in the particular forces exercised upon them by the Soviet regime, which wanted them to be internationalised proletariats, migrants without an identity.

mistakes made in the past. The truth, for her, lies in admitting the “mistake”. She never mentions “crime”, as other victims would do, such as women who like her underwent losses and suffering due to Stalinism. Ornella believed some mistakes had been made in Russia: it would have been sufficient to correct them, rather than to compromise the greatness of the project and renounce the achievements that had been made. The Soviet experience ended in a political drift. But this failure does not manage to reduce the historic importance of the experience in her eyes, with its generous and epic drive for righteous change.

Ornella Labriola reflected on this for many years and wanted to convey her vision. The quest for truth, from her point of view, coincides with the desire to know the matrix of the error. For a mind like hers, who from a very young age had been attracted by positions of “scientific socialism” in the style of Bordiga, it is a coherent finale. Demonisation and condemnation is alien to her way of thinking. She is prepared to talk about tragedy, but not catastrophe; of “political games”<sup>11</sup> rather than betrayal. By making this distinction, she evades the fate of being a victim and takes back her identity. This is the strategy that makes her account so unique, but also comparable with other accounts.

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<sup>11</sup> This is the expression she uses in the letter to the historian Paolo Spriano dated 22 April 1971, in which protesting about how the historian mentioned Micca in his *Storia del partito comunista italiano*, devoting very little space to him and, above all, saying that he was her husband, she writes among other things: “Rimola was the victim of a political game. The Party knew that Rimola was seriously ill and also knew that prison would have hastened his death, but it didn’t lift finger to help him. This is what the tragedy of Rimola consists of. He gave the best of himself to the Party, but the Party did not come to his aid when he needed it” (cited in Bermani, p. 180; the original is in the Archivio dell’Istituto Campano per la Storia della Resistenza e dell’Età Contemporanea “Vera lombardi”, Fondo Labriola Ornella, Busta 4, Fasc. 8).

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