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Abstract

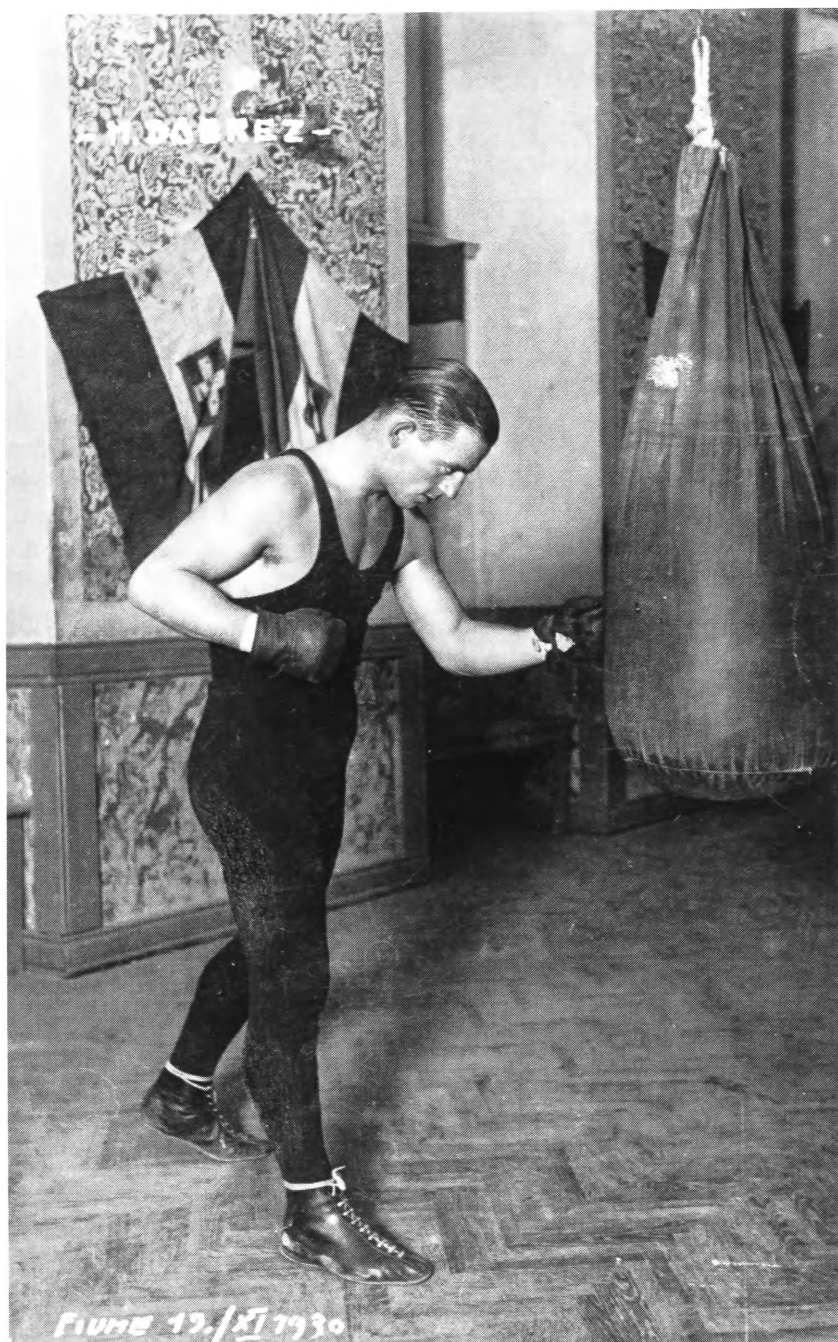
This account of Mario Dobrez's European career in the late 1920s and early 1930s and its traumatic Australian aftermath is necessarily personal, since he is my father. While he was alive and I was young I had no interest in the factual details of his boxing life, except for the stories of travel and occasional drama, and he had even less. I gather from him and from Italians who knew him at the time that he won most of his 100-odd bouts and was comfortably in the running for the European middleweight title, by which time, however, he was losing interest, having fought two matches with opponents of major reputation, one with Bosisio (which he lost), another with Jacovacci (which he drew or, if one is to believe a partisan report, effectively won).¹ But within a decade of professionalism he was bored with the business and gave it up for better things, training other fighters, finally a job as accountant in a government enterprise. Vanity played its part in the switch: he wanted his Roman nose intact. In any case, though press cuttings refer to him as 'the challenger', he was totally indifferent to the idea of a challenge. The 'climbing everest because it is there' argument would have struck him as vacuous. He had no 'will to win', no 'killer instinct', no 'urge to achievement'. The competitive ideal puzzled him.

LIVIO DOBREZ

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His many photos, some now out of reach in Denver, Colorado, give an idea of his life as a sportsman. Fit, handsome, photogenic, sperm-laden and with money to burn he faces the camera boldly and innocently, without self-doubt or self-knowledge in the Deco decade of flash convertibles, transatlantic liners, South American starlets and Brownshirts. Hair pushed back in the fashion of the day, expensive double-breasted suit or tweed plus-fours or in boxing gear for the fancy publicity shot. With luck well on side, he is experiencing fame at a time when pc has yet to be and the sport has some glamour to it, prepared for an exit which will sidestep the shabbiness of prolonged professionalism. The photos locate him at the training camp near Venice, or in the ring, or on board ship, or as a coach at the Rome Farnesina, home of Raphael's 'Galatea', or as tourist at the arena at Verona,



Mario Dobrez. publicity shot. Fiume, 1930

or at the pyramids, or skiing in the maritime alps. Most of the northern Italian cities are there: Trieste, Padua, Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Como, Brescia, Trent. As well as Naples, Zurich, Geneva, Belgrade, Budapest, Cologne, Berlin, Paris, Alexandria, Algiers, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Bermuda, New York. He is impressed by Belgrade, thinks Budapest the finest city in Europe, perhaps because it is at the time, or because he meets beautiful women there. The verdict on Britain is richly ambiguous: English women, apparently, 'either very beautiful or very ugly'. (As a boy, I ponder these pronouncements.) Once, as a raw youth, he spends the night in the same room as a dead pugilist. In New York, on the verge of World War II, he is fêted by the Jewish émigré community, one of whom touchingly proposes a marriage of convenience so that he might avoid coming events in Europe. (The offer is declined.) In Berlin he dances with a splendid girl until told she is a man. (Very Weimar.) In Buenos Aires the fights are rigged: one of the squad drops to the mat at once, in protest; he, with difficulty, keeps his feeble opponent on his feet for the duration. Once he does an exhibition bout with his friend Carnera, world heavyweight champion.³ Crossing the Atlantic he is masseur to Dolores del Rio. At any rate that's his story. I see it all as an unreal retro movie, complete with slightly off-key period soundtrack (Dave Rentz on Canberra radio 2xx) set on the eve of universal catastrophe. Struck by an MD portrait with the motto '*Je prend mon bien ou je le trouve*' [sic] or by a posed shot of a Leni Riefenstahl athlete who addresses his 'dear partner Mario Dobrez' '*aus Dankbarkeit für die Gute Lection*'. Gratitude for the good — lesson? Perhaps MD beat him.

My father fought for ten years because he enjoyed spending money on his entourage of friends, sportspeople, aficionados and admiring gays. He could not comprehend the sports enthusiasm of intellectuals but took to any company. Café and restaurant culture fostered endless articulate talk, one of his legacies to me. A legacy not passed on was that of admiring females. He kept a rough tally, like that of his exploits in the ring, after the manner of Don Giovanni's operatic *mille e tre*, until his conversion to my mother and monogamy. With the curious naivete of his generation, a naivete which led to the war, to postwar disasters and the quarter-acre banality of reconstruction, he believed in *Heimat*, the family, coffee and conversation.⁴ *Heimat* was Fiume, an attractive Austro-Hungarian coastal city at the northern end of the Adriatic, where Italian, Slav and German meet. The family was characteristically postwar nuclear. Friends mattered until they fell away in hard times.

I am reminded of the political in all this, both in connection with sport and, more generally, as it put an end to Mario Dobrez's social existence, by comments made on yesterday's *Late Night Live* by Paul Keating on the subject of Menzies' alleged policy of appeasement vis à vis the Nazis.⁵ My father, being apolitical, accepted the fascist status quo which favoured sport and sports success. He exhibited the unthinking contradictions of his peers, more honestly than most,

Alessandria - Cairo 1930

ALESSANDRIA (EGITTO)
1930



Mario Dobrez (third from left), Alexandria, 1930



defending the Italian Right when, postwar, it was unfashionable, but, prewar, having his best friends in the large ex-Hungarian Jewish community of Fiume and, once at least, during the German occupation, risking all our lives for one of those friendships. He avoided service during World War II, a war in which he did not believe (partly out of an inexplicable sympathy with all things American), but volunteered for the late-colonial invasion of Abyssinia, having nothing better to do and with the mental proviso that, in the event of combat, he would fire in the air. (This was never put to the test.) I am shocked at the foolishness of his serving in Abyssinia. It is neither more nor less shocking, however, than Australians serving in the Sudan or in South Africa. But I expect my father to be better than that. He was, eventually, with experience of adversity. In Australia he once voted for Menzies 'because he brought us here' and out of residual suspicion of communism, in his mind identified with Tito. In the end he was persuaded to march in the Vietnam moratorium, because his son's university circle did so — still thinking the Americans weren't so bad.

The war brought Mario Dobrez to Australia, in the process erasing a comfortable bourgeois way of life. This after my uncle Oskar, founder of the local CP branch, was held in internal exile in Calabria for three years — like the author Carlo Levi; after Fiume was bombed by the Allies for its torpedo-making facilities; after uncle Willy was tortured and killed by the Germans, my father's fascist contacts cutting no ice in that situation; after the Germans left and Tito's partisans moved in, driving out the majority of the Italian-speaking population — something one would now term ethnic cleansing. After 'Fiume, Italy' became 'Rijeka, Yugoslavia', Dobrez, then in Trieste, city of Svevo and Joyce, should have rebuilt his fortunes on the basis of sporting connections in the postwar boom. But in the late '40s the boom was yet to come. He rashly opted to emigrate, having no idea what that entailed. For some reason the US was excluded as an option, though we had a Californian branch of the family. Canada, he recalled from his earlier visit, was too cold; Argentina, he reasoned, too politically unstable. Knowing neither good nor bad about the antipodes, he decided on that. It was an astonishing choice, suggestive of suicidal despair, given its implications: that he would cut himself off completely from his society, his past and all he'd ever achieved. But his mood, while disillusioned, was not despairing. He did it out of ignorance; too great or insufficient imagination; the feeling, understandable at the time, that Europe was finished; and detachment from his past, now that his home no longer existed. Italians, more so than many Europeans, give their first loyalty to a region or a city. Dobrez was already as much an exile in Trieste as Joyce had been. The further step to Australia evidently seemed a small one.

Human jetsam in the postwar fell into the hands of the International Refugee Organisation. Since the Italian border had shifted, we were classed as Displaced Persons, in the company of Latvians, Poles, Ukrainians. IRO processed us in a series of German camps, then, on the *Flotta Lauro* ship, the 'Fairsea', transported



Mario Dobrez (at right), transatlantic crossing, 1937 or 1939

us to Melbourne and to a series of Australian camps: Bonegilla, Cowra, Greta. Alienation in the camps was total. It was Sophia Turkiewicz's *Silver City* without the romance.⁶ Like everyone else, my father was required to work for two years in situations dictated by the government: he laboured on Punchbowl roads, in Hunter mines, on the Waragamba dam. Fitness made the adjustment to physical labour a little less difficult than it would have been for some. In due course the family of four settled in Adelaide.

South Australia was marginally less remote to my father's previous existence than would have been, say, Pitcairn Island. His life in Adelaide, the city in which he died in 1976, amounted to the burial of sorts which haunted Richard Mahony and which is figured in the opening of Richardson's novel. Since there was no Italian community to speak of at the beginning, and since the later Italian migrants came from the other end of the peninsula, he had no scope for making social contacts. Even so, things would have improved had not my mother died soon after our arrival, correctly diagnosed in Trieste as having a curable illness, repeatedly misdiagnosed in Adelaide. Many years after this event, when Xavier Herbert's partner Sadie died, I received an outraged letter from the writer, detailing how Sadie had been 'killed by the doctors'.⁷ My father's alienation was such that it never occurred to him to protest. The loss was of a kind that could only trivially or superficially be ascribed to human agency. At any rate it altered fundamentally the meaning and mode of our being in Australia. Dobrez reasonably saw no point in learning the new language, no point in adapting creatively to new surroundings. He had no motivation to change his first factory job, or even to progress in that job beyond the lowest level of machinist. Likewise none to return to boxing as a coach or entrepreneur. To begin with he fought not to go mad, succeeding in this, so that my analogy with Mahony stops short of that particular extreme. Beyond that, he fought to sleep nights, with the aid of booze. When drunk he was civilised and depressingly prone to reminiscence. It was at this time that my maturing relationship with him generated rage in me, rage at his having given up in all but the care of his two children (at which, however, he was very good, learning to cook for us — at a high level of middle-European cuisine, claret permitting — ensuring our education and so forth). My anger, which it's unnecessary to censor from the present essay, is due above all to the love I feel for my father and to the pity which identified me with his suffering, so that in the end I wondered if I had not lived out the most intense part of his life as intensely as he had.

In spite of himself, Dobrez was placed in situations through which he might have returned to sport. People remembered him in places as distant as Canada. In Adelaide the migrant community sought him out — he was asked to coach fighters, on two occasions given a gym to run. But the quality of local boxing was poor and the organisation of matches so unprofessional that it was not possible to participate. My father made no effort to promote the gyms, whose only useful outcome was the training of his son and his son's undergraduate friends. He taught

us what he called Swedish exercises and sparring without contact. It seems superfluous to explain why the gyms were doomed to fail. At a time of maximum commodification, when universities are required to reckon in profit and loss, I am encouraged by my father's stubborn incapacity to be a salesman. He could not promote himself as a product, even in the worst of circumstances, when he was unable to cover bills with his basic wage and took to high-interest loans, then loans to repay loans, and so on. At the same time there was also something pathological about it. His pride was immense and it destroyed him while I looked on, understanding finally that we were in Australia because he had been unable to hustle and beg his way in postwar Europe, in particular because he had been too proud to ask for favours from people he had previously patronised. Likewise we remained in Australia because he was too proud to return. Thus my father condemned himself to exile and to solitude, paying the horrendous price the rest of us lovingly paid also.

His attitude to Australia was absurdly positive, even *de profundis*. He regarded criticism of the place as irresponsible and cheap, since we were here by choice. We found Australia provincial and sympathetic, marvelling at dripping, chops, bad tea with milk, and the outside dunny. When three of us went through the naturalisation ceremony, we each received a framed photo of Elizabeth II from the mayor of Thebarton. There are awkward photographs to prove it. Returning home we trashed the queen and substituted our own deceased madonna, but without political intent. My father had no sense of nationalism of any kind, his only loyalty being to his regional identity, the people, the culture. He had never imagined himself as boxing for the glory of any country, only for the sake of travel, sexual conquest, good company and good food. His formal education stopped in his impatient late teens, but he was well read, periodically reminding me that Fiume rates a mention in *The Divine Comedy* and introducing me, long before I learned to read in English, to translations of popular writers like Jack London and P.G. Wodehouse. Being Italian, he liked opera, forever recalling Gigli and others he had heard. Likewise, being Italian, he took for granted a little knowledge of the visual arts. He liked his operas sweet and his pictures florid, Baroque: we argued uninhibitedly about this. Australia did not figure; his real was elsewhere. Ineradicably Catholic, he loathed the church, surprised (half impressed, half disappointed) that Irish Australian priests did not keep a mistress. All his intelligence was squandered on nostalgic conversation over a glass. It was, by any standard, a terrible waste of a life, convincing me that first-generation migration must inevitably be a disaster. The next generation being the one fully to grasp the extent of the disaster. Searching for something that might serve as a suitably ambiguous epitaph for Mario Dobrez, I find the following in a glossy Rome publication, dated 1953, on the subject of Fiume:

A separate chapter is merited by Mario Dobrez, the strongest and classic product of boxing in Fiume. Dobrez had the ill-luck of fighting at the time of Bosisio and

Jacovacci, the two greatest continental pugilists. Nonetheless his victories in all the world's rings made him a renowned champion. The Trieste match with Jacovacci for the national title definitely revealed him as outside his class. Only a forced draw allowed the mulatto to retain his middleweight crown. Now, down there in distant Australia, our Mario tries to conquer nostalgia as he conquered in so many battles over the world's rings.

Even with the facts right, epitaphs, of course, never tell the truth.

NOTES

- ¹ Bosisio and Jacovacci each held the Italian middleweight title for a time. The Milan match with Bosisio was abandoned in the thirteenth round, that with Jacovacci, in Trieste, went the full fifteen rounds. All this in 1930–31.
- ² Mahony is the protagonist of Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1930), a novel which charts the rise and fall of an Irish migrant to Australia. Mahony's tragedy ends in madness.
- ³ Carnera held the world heavyweight title in 1933–34, winning it from Jack Sharkey, losing it to Max Beer. Born in Udine, he was from my father's part of the country and the two were good friends. In later years the enormous and gentle Carnera appeared in *On the Waterfront*, made and lost a great deal of money and utterly ruined his health. When he visited Adelaide in the 1950s my father took me to meet him — after midday, as he could not recognise anyone before that.
- ⁴ The German term '*Heimat*' seems to me to have more force than its English equivalent, 'home', and more local application than the Italian '*patria*'.
- ⁵ Interview with Phillip Adams on ABC radio, 23 April 2001.
- ⁶ *Silver City* (1894), a fine film by a Polish-Australian director, deals with events in an Australian migrant camp c.1950.
- ⁷ Herbert is one of Australia's most noted novelists, author of *Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975).