

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Maurizio Ascari, *Faded Letters* (Patrician Press, 2013)

Italy's involvement in both World War I and II may be considered as less straightforward and more complex than that of some of the other participating countries. Without wishing to involve this review in a dissertation about either war, it is important to note that although initially allied with the Austro-Hungarian Empire in WWI and an ally of Germany in WWII, Italy finally allied itself with Britain and France in both confrontations.

These shifts in Italian foreign policy are reflected in *Faded Letters*, which the author describes as a hybrid between a family memoir and a novel. The narrative is based on the life of Antonio Ascari, who was deported to Germany and then to Poland as a labourer in 1944, and who succumbed to pneumonia and died after the war as he attempted to return home. Beginning the story with an account of Antonio leaving Novara for Germany, while his wife Pina is so stricken with grief that she cannot bear to go to the station to say goodbye the story then turns back in time to the birth of Antonio in 1905. It traces some of the family history during the period up to the end of WWI, then through the difficult years up to the start of WWII.

At this point I need to comment on the font used in the printing of this novel. Because it blacks out part of some of the letters, vowels in particular, and smudges the top of the numerals in dates, it was very hard to actually follow the timeline within the narrative, and even the places in Italy where various members of the family lived and worked. I found this created serious difficulties in locating the events, which did not always follow a straight timeline.

Despite the difficulty in physically reading the text there is much to commend in this book, which uses research, family letters and conversations to give a picture of Italian life, especially the difficult years in Italy when the truce with Britain and France and the US had been signed and the Germans, once allies, became an occupying force. While Marshall Badoglio announced that he had asked General Eisenhower for an armistice, the people listened to the radio broadcast in the local cafe. Immediately after this, Mussolini, now in Munich, spoke, denouncing this action, speaking with contempt for the monarchy and declaring Italy a republic that would fight on with Germany and Japan. One can understand the sense of turmoil, confusion and conflicted loyalties evoked by these announcements.

The privations and hardships Antonio endured in the labour camp are the most poignant sections of the novel. Antonio found his life bleak and almost without hope until he thought of his wife Pina and her music, and returned to his past as an escape from his oppressive present:

In that brick barracks that was covered with snow, in the north without hope, he listened once more to the music she used to play. He saw himself as a child, seated on a small wicker loveseat by the window. Next to him a grey-green cat. He had not thought of this in years. (119)

The music motif is picked up later when Pina, after a period of grieving, found that she could remember Antonio in the music that had formed emotional link between them: 'All of a sudden she realized she was happy because she was with him in the music that he love, that she had taught him to love' (143).

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Antonio's experience of captivity contrasts that of a younger relative, Claudio, who was a prisoner of war in an American camp in France. He was promoted to head chef and 'always had wonderful meals ... he had picked up strange habits. He spread his steak with jam because Americans eat them like that' (149). This is in direct contrast to Antonio who scrounged rubbish heaps looking for any edible scraps.

The women left behind in the cities and villages suffered in a different way – looking for news, fearing invasion, sheltering from attacks from the air. Any who had supported the Fascists were subject to interest, and reprisals from the partisans, who waged guerilla warfare against the Germans. One young woman, Ester, is taken by the partisans to be questioned about her involvement with the Fascists. After being questioned she is taken to a barn:

They did not give her anything to eat, but she was not hungry ... If she was to die the next day she could well spend the night awake. She began to pray nervously. The cold and the hunger did the rest. (115)

Ascari describes the thoughts and emotions of his characters, people of his family, as though he actually knew them. At times this is very moving, at others a little clumsy, for are all our thoughts profound? People struggling with momentous events may reduce them to something more manageable, something more mundane. *Faded Letters* offers a vignette of ordinary Italian families, with their hopes, courage, suffering and resilience during the difficult years of war. This resilience and courage, at times, leads to a rigidity, a lack of empathy, but in other instances the love and support for family members is evident. It brings to life this extended family, through letters, accounts and photographs. It throws a light on an Italy that no longer exists, but which prefaced what Italy was to become.

Emily Sutherland