

Earthquake at the door

Meanwhile

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The wolves came at night, crazed by the scent of lost sheep without shepherds and bodies buried beneath the rubble. In the early hours of Jan. 13, 1915, an earthquake had rocked the rugged Abruzzo region of Italy. In Pescina, birthplace of the writer Ignazio Silone, 3,500 of the town's 5,000 residents had perished in a matter of 30 seconds.

Among the dead were Silone's beloved mother, whose body he dug from the rubble with his own hands. After several days of desperate labor, the 14-year-old Silone freed his only surviving family member, a younger brother.

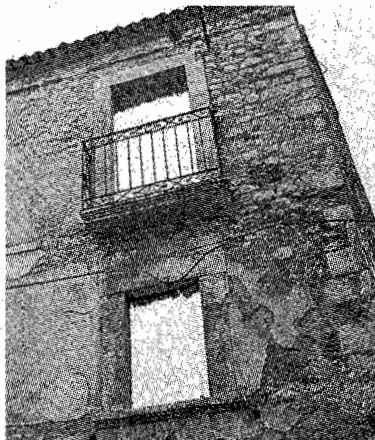
In a twist of fate that surprised no one, the only house left undamaged was uninhabited. At night, the howling of the wolves, combined with the cries of those still trapped beneath the rubble, ensured that no one would sleep. The earthquake and the wolves would torment Silone for the rest of his life. And all of his work — including his most famous novels, "Fontamara" and "Bread and Wine" — bears the often subtle, sometimes vivid imprint of the catastrophe.

"When the earthquake demolished the houses," one of his characters notes in "The Seed Beneath the Snow," "it exposed things that generally remain hidden."

And so history repeated itself on Monday in L'Aquila, 25 miles from Pescina, when the cupola of an 18th-century church, Santa Maria del Suffragio, cracked open during a 6.3 magnitude earthquake to reveal the stucco patterns inside.

Pescina, while spared serious damage on Monday, felt tremors that recalled its own night of terror. Judging from the news reports and photographs, the scene in L'Aquila is one Silone would sadly have recognized.

"In an earthquake," Silone wrote decades after his experience, "everyone dies: rich and poor, learned and illiterate, authorities and the people. An earthquake accomplishes what words and laws promise and never achieve: the equality of all. But it is an ephemeral equality, for when fear had died down, collective misfortune became the opportunity for even greater injustices."



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A building in Pescina, in the Abruzzo region of Italy, that has been abandoned since a 1915 earthquake.

Today, the part of Pescina that was ravaged by the earthquake and eventually abandoned sits in silence above the newer part of town. Silone once called this haunted landscape "Purgatory." He called it "a pile of houses jumbled together in a crack in the barren mountain" where only the poorest peasants lived. But to those born and bred there, "it is the universe, for it is the scene of universal history — births, deaths, loves, hates, envies, struggles and despair."

For Silone, it was a town and region poor in civic history, dominated by a Christian and medieval past. Its only monuments of note were churches and monasteries, and its only illustrious children were "saints and stonecutters." The human condition there has always been particularly difficult, with suffering given primacy of place as the first of natural calamities, followed by the constant threat of earthquakes.

Late in life, Silone, who lived in Rome after World War II, made a surreptitious visit back to Pescina, with the secret task of finding a final resting place. On seeing the old part of town again, still bearing the marks of the earthquake, he could only reflect on the irremediable loneliness and precariousness of individual existence. "Only loss is universal," he once wrote, "and true cosmopolitanism in this world must be based on suffering."

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