

Bread, Wine, Politics

Ignazio Silone's novels describe the lives of the peasants of his native Abruzzo.

BY GEOFFREY WHEATCROFT

WHEN an earthquake struck L'Aquila in April (and the preposterous Silvio Berlusconi told survivors to think of their emergency tents as a holiday camp), it was hardly the first such tragedy Italy had known. On Jan. 13, 1915, quite near L'Aquila in the mountainous Abruzzo region east of Rome, a much more terrible earthquake hit Pescina dei Marsi and killed 3,500 people in a village of 5,000 — among them, the mother of a 14-year-old boy named Secondino Tranquilli.

He had already lost his father and five of his six siblings, and so young Secondino carried heavy emotional burdens before he reinvented himself as Ignazio Silone in

BITTER SPRING

A Life of Ignazio Silone.
By Stanislaw G. Pugliese.
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a Spanish prison in 1923. At first an underground party operative like Trotsky or Tito, Silone would become a celebrated realist novelist: Italy's greatest living writer, in Faulkner's opinion, as famous in his time as George Orwell or Arthur Koestler. Like them, he was a moral critic of the horrors of the age who told the truth about both Fascism and Communism. Later he was embroiled in some of the darker controversies of the cold war, and was still a lightning rod in Italy even after his death in 1978. But his fame has faded outside his country, and Stanislaw G. Pugliese's absorbing new biography, "Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone," is the first to appear in English.

Having become secretary of a radical peasants' group at only 16, Silone was already a prominent left-wing socialist by 1921. Early that year, at an age when others are still studying or in their modest first jobs, he helped found the Italian Communist Party. This was only the beginning of a life that would seem implausible in fiction. Indeed, Pugliese says of one later episode that it was the kind of outrageous coincidence found in Victorian romantic novels, although if anything Silone's life was closer to the kind of pop "faction" in which the hero finds himself wherever history is being made, rubbing shoulders with its makers.

He met Lenin in Moscow, where (as he later recalled in a radio interview) "everyone was contributing to remaking society." Then came the Spanish interlude, when he was imprisoned while helping the local Communists. In 1927 he was in Moscow again for the epic meeting of the Commu-

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Ignazio Silone in 1966.

nist International that saw the showdown between Stalin and Trotsky. Silone refused to condemn Trotsky on the basis of a document that he, like all others present, had not been allowed to study. Afterward he read that Trotsky had been condemned "unanimously." It was not long after that eye-opening experience that Silone broke with the Communists.

Now he was on his own, an anti-Fascist physically exiled from Mussolini's Italy and an anti-Stalinist intellectually and morally exiled from much of the left. Living in Switzerland in the 1930s and 1940s he found fame not as an activist but as a writer, for three novels set in his birthplace, Pescina. "Fontamara" — literally "Bitter Spring," giving Pugliese his title — was followed by "Bread and Wine" and "The Seed Beneath the Snow." The first two especially were pioneering classics of proletarian fiction, telling of the tragic struggle of the Abruzzese peasants against rapacious landlords and brutal officials.

It's hard now to recapture the impact of those books in their day. "Fontamara" was turned into a play in New York in 1936, and "Bread and Wine" was chosen over "The Grapes of Wrath" as a Book-of-the-Month selection. Silone himself made few literary claims for the trilogy, and no doubt they aren't "great novels" in the sense that "Anna Karenina" and "Ulysses" are. But then neither are "Darkness at Noon" or "Nineteen Eighty-Four," let alone "Uncle Tom's Cabin": political or didactic fic-

tion is not to be judged by the standards of Flaubert. The fact is that "Fontamara" and its successors inspired a generation, and Silone's admirers included Bertrand Russell, Graham Greene, Thomas Mann and Arturo Toscanini.

By Christmas 1942, Silone was back in prison. The Swiss wanted to expel him — no joke when the country was surrounded by Axis territory — but relented because of his eminence, whereupon he found a new ally and a new career. Allen Dulles was then the Bern station chief of the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the C.I.A., and enlisted Silone. He gave Dulles advice both military — the Breaner pass should be interdicted — and political, correctly predicting that "unconditional surrender" was a foolish policy that would prolong the defeat of Italy.

AFTER the war, Silone was active for a time in Italian politics as a leader of the democratic left, campaigning for a united Europe and opposing the plan to merge Italy's Socialist and Communist parties. The Socialist Party was saved, though not from the fissive tendency that saw its rival factions split away.

In 1950, Silone's "Emergency Exit" was one of the autobiographical essays by former Communists that appeared in the anthology "The God That Failed," and now Silone was an official cold warrior. He went on to edit *Tempo Presente*, the sister journal to *Encounter* in London and *Preuves* in

Paris, espousing liberal anti-Communism with financial support from the Congress for Cultural Freedom. As some guessed early and the world would learn, the C.C.F. was itself clandestinely financed by the C.I.A.

This part of the tale has often been told, among others by Peter Coleman in "The Liberal Conspiracy." Coleman compared the "gentle socialist moralist" Silone favorably with Koestler, whom Silone disliked both for the fanatical quality of his anti-Communism and for his philandering, in its way almost as fanatical. Not that Silone himself was consistently faithful to either of the remarkable women with whom he shared his life, Gabriella Seidenfeld and then Darina Laracy, one from a Jewish immigrant family and the other Irish. Pugliese sees these infidelities floating in the "murky waters of his state of mind and persona"; Silone was plainly neurotic and in some ways unlovable (as if that distinguishes him from other great writers).

On more than one occasion during his life Italians spoke of a *caso Silone* — a "Silone case" or affair, referring to his breach with the Communists or to the C.I.A. connection. But the most dramatic *caso Silone* of all was posthumous. In 1996, the historian Dario Biocca produced startling letters from the archive, written mostly in the 1920s to a senior Fascist policeman from an informer called "Silvestri," who appeared to be Silone.

If not quite on the scale of *l'affaire* in France a hundred years earlier, this case convulsed politically conscious Italy, dividing *innocentisti* from *colpevolisti* as Dreyfusards had been divided from anti-Dreyfusards, and likewise inevitably on partisan lines. "Bitter Spring" is readable, well informed and accurate (although when Pugliese refers to "Vladimir Nabokov" he must mean the novelist's cousin Nicolas, a musician who ran the C.C.F.); and its treatment of this episode is one of the best and most judicious things in the book.

At the time, I decided not to trust anything said confidently about the case by anyone who didn't command Italian and hadn't studied all the enormous resulting literature, which I don't claim to have done myself. It does seem that Silone had at least some contact with the police, who had arrested his one surviving brother, Romolo (who would die in prison at the hands of his captors), but it's hard to see evidence of any great betrayal.

If Silone's books are less read now than they once were, they ought not to be forgotten, and they will not be. Pugliese quotes a touching story from a professor at a Florida college who was teaching "Fontamara" to his class some years ago. The middle-class white kids couldn't see the point of this tale of distant peasants fighting brutality and oppression — but his black students were overwhelmed. Whatever the postmodernists may say, justice and freedom are universal values. □