

THE JOY OF THEIR LIFE:



IL DUCE ON THE STUMP: . . . "The trouble is that the Italian people have a different conception of joy from that of their 'joy-supplier'"

FOR twenty years the life of the people in Italy was not very joyful. Wars and economic crises followed each other in rotation and the rigid regimentation of the Fascist regime did not appeal to the taste of the Italians. But on the tenth of June of 1940 at six o'clock in the evening, Mussolini announced from the balcony of the famous Palazzo Venezia that he "was giving them (the people of Italy) **THE JOY OF THEIR LIFE . . . TO GO TO WAR AGAINST BRITAIN . . .**" These were his actual words.

Well, joy is a good thing and everybody likes it, particularly in Italy, but the trouble is that the Italian people have a different conception of joy from that of their "joy-supplier." They did not show the great delight and enthusiasm which their leader expected from them. In one word they did not consume this new kind of joy.

The crowd of forty thousand well-drilled blackshirts shouted deliriously when they heard the declaration of war from the Palazzo Venezia, but the millions of factory workers in the industrial, north, in the big industrial centres of Torino, Genoa, Milano, Ferrara, and Bologna listened sullenly to the speech relayed through the loud-speakers. There was no shouting, no smiles, and no **JOY**. The listening-in was compulsory, and so they had to come and listen in, but joy cannot be made compulsory. Pale faces, soundless mutterings, and mute curses were the only reaction of the masses. Not one **EVIVA**, not one **DU-CE**. . . Wordless the crowd dispersed. The atmosphere like chilly autumn wind.

Three Wars And—Then Another

This was the kind of joy that the Italian people received after seventeen

years of the Fascist regime of cut wages, unemployment, starvation, and terrorism.

Two major and one smaller war within four years. There were more women mourning in the villages and towns than at any other period in the history of Italy. War cripples and wounded all over the country, and now they were told to take the joy of their life in the form of a bloody World War against the English who were their friends from time immemorial, and the most popular foreigners in Italy.

Between 1925 and 1932 I used to go every year for two or three weeks to Italy. There is no better country in the world to spend one's summer holidays. It is a beautiful country, and the simple people are friendly, hospitable, and always ready for a good laugh. But the longer the Fascist Regime lasted the longer the faces of the people became. You do not see very much of the real Italy if you go there for a short tour and visit only the larger cities, which are more or less eyewash for the foreign tourist. The largest industry in Italy is the hotel industry, depending on American and British visitors mostly. This gives the appearance of prosperity to the Italian cities, but if you scratch the thin surface of glamour, you get a very different picture even in the towns. But I want to speak here about a completely different world in Italy, that is the rural Italy with its millions of poor *cafoni*.

Landless Millions

Something like thirty million souls make up the rural population of the land where the lemons blossom, and over ninety per cent. of these are landless. The land is owned by the *signoris*, that is the landowners, mostly members of the Italian aristocracy, hence Italy must be regarded as a semi-feudal country from the economical point of view. The ownership of the land is not based upon the efficiency of the owner but on privilege. This is one of the cancers of that fine country.

The rest of the agricultural population are the *cafonis*, the landless agricultural wage-earners. Although they own usually a small house which is more often than not just a hovel, and vegetable garden, which could be covered by the shadow of the couple of donkeys, their main income comes from the wages earned by cultivating the estates of the *signoris*, supplemented by the money sent by some member of the family who has emigrated to the United States or South America. Road building, work in the quarries (especially in the South), and fishing, are the sources of income for the rest of the *cafonis*. Their life is hard, with long hours of work—14 to 16 hours daily—and very low wages (a couple of shillings per day). Such is the frugal and humble life of the Italian peasants.

No Escape to Paradise

In spite of all these hardships, they were perhaps the most contented people in Europe. A glass of thin red wine, some cheese, and a slice of bread after a long day of hard work made them quite happy and cheerful. But when the Fascist regime drew the ropes tighter and tighter, Italy became a prison for her people. There was no more emigration to America, which is Paradise in the eyes of every *cafoni*. Emigration has been prohibited except for a very few. The same applied to those who used to go to France, Switzerland, and to other Continental countries seeking work at road-building. Then no *cafoni* was allowed to leave his village without the written and stamped permit of the *podesta*, who used to be the Mayor, but is now merely a trustworthy member of the Fascist Party. The *cafonis* were completely at the mercy of the local *signoris*, who did not lose much time in reducing wages below the breadline. The *cafonis* were absolutely helpless, they could not even go to the next village to try to find work, for the *podesta* gave permits only to the very few enthusiastic

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by
ALEXANDER SCHWARZ

supporters of their enslavers, and the rest were reduced to actual slavery. This is what the Corporative State means for the millions of mute sufferers in Italy.

What the Tourist Doesn't See

I have spent many weeks tramping in Italy, walking from village to village in the north, and in the south from Trieste to Brindisi, and from Palermo to Messina in Sicily. I have seen nothing but misery and desperate faces from coast to coast. Hopeless bitterness in the once rich and happy Lombardy, curses and superstitious anger in Umbria and in the south, and naked, utter poverty in Sicily. This is the picture of that other world in Italy which the tourist does not get to see, for he is blinded by the glorious architecture and the art of the Renaissance masters. If you want to see the real Italy, or perhaps the underground Italy, you have to forget about the modern, comfortable, and speedy vehicles of the twentieth century and walk along the dusty, remote village roads of Sicily, Umbria, and the Abruzzos. There you will see the poverty-stricken, desperate people who regard the Fascist regime as the rule of Antichrist.

If you are a doctor you will also see the traces of a dreadful disease caused by poverty and under-nourishment; the pellagra. You will see people in rags and barefooted. I remember once hiking for weeks in Sicily and I did not meet one person with shoes on his feet. All were barefooted, but not because they liked it, but because the Fascist regime needs the money for the glittering false glamour of the Army. For food they have *polenta* in the morning and *polenta* in the evening. It is the cheapest food

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COMPULSION begins early under Fascism . . . "but joy cannot be made compulsory"