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WORKING PAPERS

HEC 2020/01
Department of History and Civilization

Talking about Silence

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EUI Working Paper **HEC** 2020/01

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ISSN 1725-6720

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Published in March 2020 by the European University Institute.
Badia Fiesolana, via dei Roccettini 9
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy

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Abstract: The paper focusses on an oral history project on homosexuality during Fascism in Italy that I worked on. The project transformed itself as the research progressed and I encountered unforeseen difficulties, in that participants refused to collaborate or denied having been persecuted during the dictatorship because of their homosexuality. This article explains how I dealt with the obstacles and the moral dilemmas that arose and how I interpreted silence, omissions and denials.

Keywords: homosexuality, Fascism, repression, silence.

From the mid-1990s onwards, my interest in oral history projects on homosexuality during Fascism in Italy was spurred by the deep silence that surrounded the subject.¹ Between 1994 and 1996 I was making a documentary based on the unpublished diaries of art historian Nietta (Antonietta) Aprà, which focussed almost exclusively on her life-long relationship with translator Flafi (Linda) Mazzucato. It was extremely difficult to find anyone who would remember and be happy to talk about these two women as a lesbian couple in 1930s Milan.² I could see that Italian official historiography on Fascism had mainly concentrated on reconstructing the *Resistenza*, the struggle of political dissidents against the dictatorship. While Italian Jewish survivors' memories became available relatively soon after the war, starting with the publication in 1947 of Primo Levi's internationally acclaimed *If This is a Man*,³ the repression endured by other minorities, such as Romas, Jehovah Witnesses, gays and lesbians, remained untold. The historiographical gap was increasingly evident, and historians and activists felt that there was an urgency to record survivors' accounts before that generation disappeared.

In the early 1990s, documents of the fascist period became available (70 years after the closure of a file, by Italian law) and some details on the persecution endured by gays and lesbians during Mussolini's dictatorship began to emerge. Giovanni Dall'Orto led the research in the field. Gaining unprecedented access to archival materials, he wrote several articles about gay men sent to *confino* (forced residence in a remote location, usually an island) and interviewed one of them.⁴ His work was preceded by a series of programmes by Gianni Rossi Barilli and Paolo Hutter, that were broadcast by Radio Popolare, an independent Milan radio channel. Rossi Barilli and Hutter interviewed a group of gay men, whose identity remained undisclosed, who talked about their lives during the twenty years Mussolini had been in power, the *Ventennio*. For the first time the existence of an underground gay Milan during the dictatorship could be traced, with its meeting points, ballrooms, bars, cinemas and theatres where the local proto-community used to gather.⁵

¹ Romano Gabriella, "L'Altro Ieri", video 2001; "Ricordare", video 2003; *Il mio nome è Lucy. L'Italia del XX secolo nei ricordi di una transessuale*, Donzelli, Roma 2009; "Essere Lucy", video 2011; *The Pathologisation of Homosexuality in Fascist Italy: the Case of G.*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke 2019. I speak about the making of "L'altro Ieri" in "Ritratti di donne In interni", in Milletti Nerina, Passerini Luisa eds., *Fuori della Norma. Storie lesbiche nell'Italia della prima metà del Novecento*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 2007.

² Romano G., "Nietta's Diary", video 1996.

³ Levi Primo, *Se questo è un uomo*, De Silva, Torino 1947.

⁴ Dall'Orto Giovanni, "Ci furono femminelle che piangevano quando venimmo via dalle Tremiti!", *Babilonia*, October 1987, p. 26 – 28. Dall'Orto G., "Credere, Obbedire, Non Battere", *Babilonia*, May 1986, p. 13 – 17. Dall'Orto G., "Per il bene della Razza al Confino il Pederasta", *Babilonia*, April - May 1986, p. 14 – 17. Dall'Orto G., "La 'Tolleranza Repressiva' dell'Omosessualità", *Quaderni di Critica Omosessuale*, n. 3, 1987, p. 37 – 57.

⁵ Rossi Barilli Gianni, Hutter Paolo, "Novecento", radio interviews for Radio Popolare Milano, 1983.

Some Italian LGBT historians and researchers were inspired by these initial first steps, including myself, and started investigating the subject.⁶ I wrote a documentary proposal on a group of gay men who were sent to the same island, San Domino, off the Puglia coast, in 1938. A London-based production company agreed to produce it, pre-production funds were obtained from the EU “Media” audio-visual development project and I travelled to Italy to find survivors.

I had high expectations: I was convinced that the few survivors would jump at the opportunity to talk about the repression and discrimination they had endured during the regime. This project, I thought, would give them a chance to be heard on issues almost nobody knew much about back then. Homosexuality, not a crime in Italy under the Zanardelli Code (1889) and not included in the subsequent Rocco Code (1930), had been tolerated if lived “discreetly”, not declared or visible in any way. Now, I believed, the legacy of the past would finally vanish, and silent victims of fascist repression would have a voice. Expectations were high also from the LGBT community in Italy at the time, eager to prove that some gays and lesbians had “resisted” and were among the protagonists of national history.

As most gay *confinati* (people sentenced to forced residence on a small island) on San Domino came from Sicily, my research started there. Unexpectedly, I quickly found myself in a very different scenario than the one I had envisaged. Many survivors had died by then, but the majority of the older gay men who were still alive, and that I managed to find thanks the now accessible State Archives police records and subsequent research, were unwilling to talk about their past, let alone release an interview to be recorded and then screened in public or maybe even broadcast. Few accepted to meet me, but the conversation would often start by them stating that they had no money as they had just had sudden unforeseen expenses, or they were experiencing unspecified financial problems. I was disconcerted: why this preamble? I was later told by younger gay men that this is what one is supposed to do when confronting a blackmailer: one meets him or her but makes it very clear that there is little for him or her to be gained. Maybe, most of these older men were blackmailed in their past, as they all seemed familiar with the procedure. Sometimes, they claimed that I was mistaken, suggesting there could be a problem with homonymity, as they had never been sentenced to *confino*. It was a lie, as I had seen the police records which contained their photographs and the physical similarity left no doubts. Other times, they admitted having been sentenced to a period of forced residence on a remote island but explained this happened because they were unjustly denounced by envious neighbours. It was a credible excuse because during Fascism, many Italians were informants and took revenge on

⁶ Goretti Gian Franco, "Il periodo fascista e gli omosessuali: il confino di polizia" and "Un 'pederasta' catanese al confino", in Circolo Pink ed., *Le ragioni di un silenzio*, Ombre Corte, Verona 2002; Milletti Nerina, "Analoghe Sconcezze. Tribadi, Saffiste, Invertite e omosessuali: categorie e sistemi sesso/genere nella rivista di antropologia fondata da Cesare Lombroso (1848 - 1949)", *DWF*, 1994, 4 (24), p. 50 – 122.

colleagues, neighbours and personal enemies. One said he was raped at a young age and this generated confusion over his sexual orientation. Rape cleared him of any assumption that his homosexuality was a choice. It was rather the result of a coercion, almost contracted through forced contagion for which he had no responsibility. As a consequence of these wrong and undeserved accusations, he admitted he was incarcerated and then sent to *confino*. However, he still refused to be interviewed as the shame of having been accused of “pederasty” was still tormenting him. Some of these men were married in the 1990s and my phone call clearly threw them into a panic, although I had approached the subject carefully by saying that I was looking for older people who remembered Fascism in Sicily and could have been persecuted during the regime. I thought this formulation would reassure them because firstly, I admitted I was not sure they were who I was looking for, so they could think they had not been “identified”, and secondly in Italy to be considered an antifascist was never an insult.

Things became increasingly difficult. Whenever I managed to speak to anyone, the level of secrecy imposed on our meetings seemed disproportionate: one man agreed to meet me in a busy outdoor space but did not describe his appearance to me on the phone, so that he would recognise me and come near, if he felt safe enough to approach me. It was material for a spy story! On a couple of situations, I was even threatened: Sicilians appreciated those who minded their own business, I was told by the friend of a potential interviewee who had sent him in his place at our second meeting. The past was best left alone, and curiosity inevitably brought trouble, the man explained. I did not report this and other incidents, although part of me thought I should. It was a moral dilemma I had not foreseen. And the overall situation I found myself in was completely unexpected. My initial genuine, though probably naïve, intention to offer a chance to tell an unheard story to a voiceless group of people was interpreted as the attempt of a nosy journalist to find a scoop. I was chasing reluctant interviewees as if trying to track down war criminals and they were implementing every trick to avoid my questions. Besides, nobody seemed to share my initial interest to finally describe the persecution that LGBT people had endured under Mussolini.

The possibility of making a documentary only about those who were sent to *confino* to San Domino vanished. However, after leaving the project for some time, I decided to start anew, looking for older gay men who would be willing to talk about their memories of fascist times and I expanded my research to older lesbians as well. I thought that maybe the *confino* experience was too painful to be discussed, while ordinary experiences of fascist repression would be easier to describe. I decided to keep the lesbians’ and gays’ memories separate, as I had become aware that their experiences of the dictatorship were diametrically different.

I started travelling around the country, talking to people, groups, associations, involving friends and friends of friends, asking them if they could put me in touch with anyone who remembered Mussolini’s years. Some tried on my behalf, but very few older gay men and women responded to

their calls. I drew an approximate map of places, based on my contacts' information, where older gay men met (lesbians seemed to be totally invisible, nobody was aware of them ever venturing out of their homes, with very few exceptions). This part of the research revealed how neatly divided the LGBT community was. The younger generation had lost track of older LGBT people, they hardly had any contact with them and had only vague ideas about where they met, where they went, who they were and what they had done in the past. In the understandable effort to engage in political activism and the fight for human rights, they had forgotten their predecessors.

The few times I finally met somebody who agreed to be interviewed, there had to be long negotiations. I was asked to guarantee total anonymity, and, in some cases, I agreed that his/her voice would be dubbed as well as the interviewee feared that regional accents could reveal where s/he came from or would allow acquaintances to identify him/her. One woman not only wanted her voice to be dubbed, but also accepted to release the interview at a friend's home, in another town, so that the furniture of the location would not identify her and neighbours would not see that a stranger with a camera-case was paying a visit. These men and women seemed to live in the closet they had been forced into by the dictatorship. Silence seemed impenetrable.

I also had to face another unforeseen moral dilemma: I met a man in Naples, nick-named 'A *Pullera* ("She the hens-keeper"), who seemed to remember Fascism well. He had lived *en-travesti* most of the time and during the regime was frequently harassed by the police and incarcerated because of it. However, he said that he would release an interview only upon payment of a consistent fee. He explained that to go back to those days would require an effort he wanted to be paid for, as he was not happy to talk about Fascism. In fact, he said he preferred not to talk about it at all, but he needed money and would accept to remember old days only because of this reason. I could not afford the amount he requested, so I left, promising I would come back. I do not usually pay interview fees but seeing his living conditions, I thought it would be immoral to refuse. When, few years later, I managed to find the sum through a private donation, I went back to Naples, but I discovered it was too late. I was told that, shortly after our first meeting, the interviewee had been jailed for having hidden weapons on behalf of local gangsters, a well-known mafia strategy, as older people usually obtain more lenient sentences. When he was released, he was transferred to an old people's home quite far from Naples. By the time I found him, sadly he was no longer mentally present.

Despite the sense of failure, in 2001 I finished the short video on lesbians during Fascism ("L'Altro Ieri", The Day Before Yesterday) and decided to put together a "pilot" video with the little material I could gather on gay men's memories of the *Ventennio* ("Ricordare", To Remember, 2003). I hoped somebody would produce a full-length documentary in the future on the experience of Fascism by gay men in Italy. Originally aimed at potential producers and sponsors, some LGBT associations were keen to screen it as it was the only audio-visual material available on the subject at the time. I agreed

to have it shown, although it was a very rough “promo” rather than a finished piece. Besides, I knew it would be controversial. The very few interviewees were not recognisable, one was even dubbed, their names never appeared. Nobody was involved in *Resistenza* (the fight against the fascist regime), nobody voiced antifascist opinions. In fact, one man stated he had never been interested in politics as his constant struggle for survival left him little time for such frivolities. These men belonged to a past that seemed to have remained intact, used words that were politically incorrect, dated, or had no familiarity with LGBT vocabulary: one of the interviewees was not even comfortable with the word “*omosessuali*” (homosexuals) and said “*uomini sessuali*” (sexual men). He only had pejorative terms to describe himself, such as *pederasta*, *femminiello*, *ricchione* and the like.

Viewers’ disappointment was greater than mine because I had had more time to adjust to these answers and behaviours, while my small audiences were hit with 40 minutes of difficult truths. Besides, at a time when the gay community concentrated on finding “positive images”, who would want to associate with these older people, who looked like passive victims of the regime? Who would back a project on survivors who made embarrassing statements about the good old days, overlapping their youths and a dictatorship that repressed, punished and imprisoned them? At one screening in Caserta, the first comment from the audience was: “I don’t know whether I should be angry or ashamed because of what I have just heard and seen”. I was painfully aware that it was too much to digest during an evening event organised for Memory Day (27th January). LGBT associations took a step back, and nobody sponsored my project to produce a properly funded documentary. The video remained forever unfinished.

I analysed again the material I had collected over months of work, read notes on off-microphone conversations, pondered over the excuses that survivors had given to avoid meeting me, the words and strategies deployed, their unwillingness to co-operate. What was the reason for this silence?⁷ The more I reflected on what I had gathered, and especially the not-recorded materials, the clearer the picture became. Firstly, I realised that these older generation men had identified silence as part of being gay. Being “discreet” was the only behaviour that ensured survival and at the same time acceptance by the community. Visible types were kept at a distance as they attracted the negative attention of the police. They were still in the 1990s commented upon as silly, mad or irresponsible. If one was “discreet” and demonstrated he knew “how to behave”, he became part of a strong underground network that acted like a family. In fact, it often substituted families, as at the time gay people frequently were thrown out of their homes at an early age. Gay men looked after each other, they found jobs for the unemployed, offered a room to the temporary homeless, gave protection against physical attacks, threats and blackmailers. Being silent and invisible was the way they showed they had understood the rules of the

⁷ A subsequent collection of essays tried to answer these questions: Circolo Pink ed., *op. cit.*

underground network which ensured survival, knowing that it would be almost impossible to exist without the community's support. The gay circuit was meant to be a life-long bond, those who were allowed in were given a new name, usually an ironic nickname, that they could not choose, as if entering a convent or a sect. The nickname would also help protecting their identity in case correspondence was intercepted.

The situation for my interviewees did not improve much after Liberation. The moralistic 1950s were often perceived as much worse in terms of repression, gay men continued to live underground lives, some contracted a cover-up marriage to gain respectability. Silence had continued to be perceived as increasingly necessary. I had underestimated the strength of their loyalty pact and the importance their community still had for them. Furthermore, I had given little thought to what had happened to these men after their arrests and sentences. I realised that when they came back home, together with having to face shame, derision and hostility from neighbours and family members, they might have also been kept at a distance by their gay circuit as the assumption was that they had attracted a sentence because they had "misbehaved", by being too scandalous or visible. I deducted that they must have regained trustworthiness within the community by being even more silent and invisible than before. In fact, they all insisted that they "knew how to behave", that they were men of the world, they swore they never caused scandals, even if they had been arrested during the day at their premises, in front of their relatives and neighbours, in the middle of a small town.

Secondly, in a country such as Italy, where minimum pensions do not guarantee dignified life standards, some of these men and women had to go back to live with their younger relatives, nephews and nieces, or depended on their generosity. They were put up, fed and pampered in exchange for "discretion". Some refused an interview or wanted to be sure they were not identifiable, for fear that they could lose these privileges if they talked about the past and their homosexuality, as their relatives would object. Silence still meant survival. A man I met was so afraid his niece could find me in the sitting-room, he asked me to vacate the premises from the garden window as he heard her footsteps approaching. After having lived an independent life, he was at her mercy.

Thirdly, I had also underestimated the importance of the generational gap. I knew these older men felt criticised by the generation of LGBT people who were born after the war, they were aware that younger people may have disapproved that they did not rebel against the regime and still lived in fear and guilt. Ageism also played a part. But, as they gradually trusted me and started talking to me without censoring themselves, I became aware that older gay men, in turn, criticised younger LGBT people and had decided to take a distance. They described young gay men as loud, excessively politicised, intransigent or simply vulgar attention-seekers. Pride Parades were defined absurd and useless, a mere "*carnevalata*" (Carnival party). Older gay men were also nostalgic of rigid sexual roles and thought that "effeminate" men should only have relationships with "virile" individuals whose

sexuality would not be categorised as “sexually inverted”. This was very much in line with old theories on the matter, when, according to Aldrich, the activity “against nature” was the so-called “passive homosexuality”. The partner identified as “active” was not thought to be homosexual, but simply a man with a legitimate need to express his sexual desires.⁸ For the older men I met it was inconceivable that two self-declared gay men could form a couple and they all lamented a “shortage of real men”. Modern gay relationships were dismissed as childish promiscuity or innocuous lesbianism, as they used to say, showing they had also absorbed the traditional concept that sex between women was not sex because it did not involve penetration.⁹ They frequently made jokes about modern “in-betweens”, “*né carne né pesce*” (neither meat nor fish), who thought they were smart, but did not know what real sex was about.

Finally, I had projected on them the willingness to speak out, become visible, tell their untold story, which was a clear misunderstanding of what they intended to do. None of them believed that verbalisation was important, opposite to what my generation thought. Besides, I had, like most LGBT people of my generation, initially thought that the way older gay men and women belittled fascist repression was a way not to be perceived as passive victims. If Fascism had not been so terrible, lack of open opposition to it would look less guilty or cowardly. It was a misinterpretation on my part that they were accustomed to and found offensive. It had contributed to their withdrawal. Silence was therefore signalling resentment. One of my interviewees’ accounts aptly summarises this. He said that when he was young, he was constantly arrested, kept in a prison cell for days, released and then arrested again, sent back to Naples if caught in other towns. He had committed no crime, there was no warrant, no official warning, imprisonment and release were at the local police’s discretion. Finally, he was sentenced to *confino* in Ustica, off Sicily, for several months. Yet, he concluded, he loved every moment of his youth, implying that the regime did not manage to spoil the best years of his life. I was initially shocked, but I understood later that this was his way to tell me that was the way he “resisted”, he was stronger than repression. Older gay men knew younger LGBT people judged negatively because of their views on homosexuality too, as explained in the previous paragraph. In this respect, I started thinking that at least being a woman to some extent helped. They would have probably been more hostile to a male interviewer, as he would have been closer to the issues at stake, and therefore potentially more critical.

Thinking back about how my gay and lesbian interviewees had accepted to be interviewed, I also had a feeling that at least in a couple of situations, prior group discussion had occurred on whether one of them could talk to me or not. It was not a spontaneous and independent decision, an initial

⁸ Aldrich Robert, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean. Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy*, Routledge, London & New York 1993.

⁹ Aldrich R., *Ibid.*

conversation never led to an interview straight away. Contact had to be suspended for a period where the potential interviewee would have time “to consider”. Only after a while, he or she would let me know. It looked like s/he wanted to consult others so that a collective choice could be taken. After a first meeting, s/he would probably meet friends and talk about me, together they evaluated my project, my aim, my ideas, the way I behaved and then approval to release an interview was agreed, on certain conditions that were collectively drawn. This had also some negative consequences, as in the case when the potential interviewee met me once, then talked about me and my project to a friend who took it upon himself to gently “discourage” me, as described earlier. Furthermore, approaching people through friends’ recommendation was the only way considered acceptable in terms of approach. This probably explained why the initial part of the research encountered so many obstacles. The community always had to approve, nobody was allowed in by simply approaching one of its members with no credentials or prior introduction.

As mentioned, the experience of gay men and women during Fascism seemed diametrically different. In the 1920s and 1930s women did not have meeting areas, a community hardly existed. They were often segregated at home, the repression in their case started because of them being women, let alone lesbians. They were often labelled as degenerates or mentally ill individuals and were punished accordingly: segregation at home, internment in an asylum, social ostracism. In some cases, they were subjected to rites of exorcism.¹⁰ However, their awareness in the 1990s was different from that of their male counterparts. They had all been touched by the Feminist Movement to a certain extent, some had joined women’s or lesbians’ groups in the 1960s and 1970s or later. Maybe, their isolation and the absence of a lesbian community during the *Ventennio* meant that they were less inhibited and felt freer to talk about the past. Fear of being rejected by relatives remained in some cases, but they did not feel so negatively judged by younger lesbians, whom they often frequented. This was the case also for Lucy, a MtoF transsexual I interviewed from 2006 onwards.¹¹ She had no inhibition talking about Fascism and its repression, and one of the reasons for this was that at the time and in prior decades she was totally isolated from the LGBT community. She had a group of gay friends, that I met, who quietly disapproved of her talking to me, they refused to be interviewed or to have their recorded words used in any of my projects, but Lucy felt she could take a decision without their seal of approval.

Research and interviews on the experience and memories of Fascism of Italian gay men and women involved me for more than a decade. It was difficult to gain trust, but once I obtained it, it was for ever. I became part of the “family” and I was regularly invited, we exchanged cards, we often spoke

¹⁰ As confirmed by Silvia Mazzoleni in Romano G., “L’Altro Ieri”, 2001.

¹¹ Romano G., *Il mio nome è Lucy. L’Italia del XX secolo nei ricordi di una transessuale*, Donzelli, Roma 2009; Romano G., “Essere Lucy”, video 2011. Lucy was deported to Dachau where she wore a red triangle for having deserted the army.

on the phone. My drawers are full of letters, post-cards and photographs sent by this project's interviewees. The fact that I respected requests of anonymity was crucial as it convinced them I was on their side. It meant they gradually felt safe enough to introduce me to people of their circuit. P., for instance, used to take me to a tobacconist in his town every time I visited him and would be happy for me to join his conversations with the young women running the shop. I could not understand why it was a compulsory stop as there seemed to be no connection and he did not even smoke. He later told me that these women were the nieces of a gay man who had been a life-time friend. The two had been arrested on the same day during Fascism. It was his way to introduce him to me.

To conclude. I would say that I learnt a number of lessons from this research. Firstly, when starting an oral history research project, I would always keep a very detailed record of how many people refuse to participate. While one is used to judge the success of a project on the number of people who are convinced of its validity and therefore accept to be interviewed, I would argue that the number of absences is as relevant. I always ask those who did not agree to talk, if they can explain why they decided not to take part in the project. Their reasons not to participate provide relevant data and should be kept in the picture. I also routinely ask those who agreed to talk if they have an opinion on the silence of others and I try to include their thoughts and deductions on this. Insiders usually have a good understanding on why other members of their community are reluctant or unwilling to participate.

The second lesson I learnt from this project is that, prior to interviews, it is necessary to spend a considerable amount of time not just familiarising with future interviewees, but also trying to enter their circuit or community. To gain the group's trust is vital because, as I explained earlier, many decisions are taken collectively, not by an individual alone. Often people agree to talk only if they are sure that their peers will not mind them doing so or they might accept because their community designates them to be their spoke-person. Getting to know the group they belong to also gives a clearer picture of who you will be interviewing, revealing his/her status within the community and this additional element might re-direct and re-shape interview questions.

Finally, I now try to pay special attention to what is not said in an interview. Silence is as important as words, as pauses in music are as important as notes. I always jot down first impressions immediately after the interview, in answer to some questions I ask myself: what was omitted? What questions were avoided by shifting to other subjects or periods of time? What felt as an uncomfortable question or generated embarrassment? What was answered dismissively? In the few conversations I had with older gay men about Fascism there were evident omissions. Everybody was very keen to talk about Liberation and the *dopoguerra* (the first years after the war), for instance, and insistently brought the conversation to that subject. They loved to remember the Americans who came to Italy and brought freedom, the optimism everyone shared then, the professional achievements and wealth that followed.

I kept trying to go back to the original topic: yes, but what about Fascism? What did they do then? Where did they live? Did they have a job? Where did they meet? How would they describe the discrimination and repression they had to endure? Inevitably the answers were short and brisk: we were normal people, doing what everybody else did, we went for walks, we loved going to the theatre, we ate ice-cream on a Saturday afternoon, with friends, laughing and talking. No big deal. No scandal and, of course, no rumours. Yet it was highly unlikely that these young men, frequently arrested without warrant and continually stopped by the police at their discretion, would have not generated some gossip in the provincial towns where they used to live. Their way to minimise the impact of fascist repression, as I mentioned earlier, was initially interpreted as a strategy to make their lack of opposition look less guilty, but it had several other layers I had overlooked. What these men were also telling me was that they resented having been negatively judged twice. The dictatorship considered them degenerates, anti-Italians, parasites and sick individuals. The following generations had categorised them almost as fascist sympathisers. They were neither. They were very anxious not to be judged again, by me or anyone else.¹² At the same time, they wanted to communicate that they had found the strength to forget Fascism and go on to gain social acceptance. The narration of the afterwar “resurrection” was not a way to avoid questions, it was the way they showed Fascism had not managed to cancel their existences. They had “resisted”, despite what younger generations thought. They were proud of having succeeded in throwing it all behind and starting a new life after the dictatorship.

This gave me the key to interpret ‘A Pullera’s lack of interest in my project, which I had initially found inexplicable. He was named like this because he used to sell live chicks at the market. Sometimes he became affectionate to one of them and decided to keep it as a pet. He fed it, played with it, gave it a name, but then he was too hungry and had to kill it and eat it to survive till the next day. He said to me that people laughed, as he ate and cried at the same time. The cruelty of his nickname framed his existence: not only had he been poor to the point of starvation, but as a young boy living in the streets of Naples, he had also been derided for it. When he grew up, during Fascism, he went in and out of prison for petty crime, prostitution, cross-dressing and homosexuality. The criminal convictions on his records made it impossible to find a job after the war and liberated Italian institutions did not take into account that his crimes were the result of the fascist repression implemented on homosexuals. His only option after 1945 was to continue living like he had always done, shifting between selling contraband cigarettes, prostitution and crime. After hearing his brief description of his life, I thought it was unimaginable that he would not want to talk about his past, to let people know the injustices he had suffered. However, ‘A Pullera’s silence had nothing to do with

¹² An interesting point of reference on this subject is: Benadiba Laura, “The Persistence of Silence after Dictatorships”, *The Oral History Review*, 2012, vol. 39, n. 2, p. 287 – 297.

fear or shame or forgetfulness. It was his way of saying that fascist oppression, brutal and relentless as it was, had not managed to cancel his personality. He had lived as an out gay man, under Mussolini and afterwards, often dressed as a woman, sang in public *en-travesti*, day after day, arrest after arrest. As if Fascism did not exist. In doing this, he had shown he had more courage than most. And after twenty years of abuse, intermittent incarcerations and marginalisation, he had found the strength to forget and keep on living, despite the indelible emotional and social scars Fascism had left on him. And in the 1990s some people implied that it was a cowardly thing to do not to be happy to talk about Fascism in public? A young woman with a tape-recorder suggested he had a responsibility, almost a duty to get people interested in his life-story? After 60 years of disinterest from the republican state, historians, the LGBT community? His silence and his request for an interview fee suddenly acquired several additional meanings. “Ricordare” is dedicated to him and to a silence that I felt deserved remembrance and respect.



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

The European Commission supports the EUI through the European Union budget. This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.