

My Experience in Italy

By Frank Scandiffio

In 1926 the fascists of Italy evolved a plan to establish a camp on the outskirts of Rome. This camp has brought together each year since then Italian youths from practically every country in the world. The youths even though they are citizens of their respective countries must be of Italian parentage. The organization includes the Balilla proper; that is, boys from six to fourteen and the Avanguardisti. The "Vanguard" is composed of adolescents between fourteen and eighteen years of age. Correspondingly, the girls are divided into piccole and giovani Italiane meaning little and young Italians. They are in general an organization of boy scouts and girl scouts. This assembly has been given the name Avanguardisti di Fasci Italiani All'Estero meaning Boy Scouts of Fascist Italy Abroad. The period of assembly was designated the "Adunata."

The division into squadrons, maniples, centuries, cohorts and legions is the same division which was adopted for its army by Imperial Rome.

The "campeggio", that is camping in tents, is the "Campo Mussolini", the tent city on the Monte Sacro, on the outskirts of Rome. The thousands of foreigners to the camp are made to feel at home during their stay in Italy and taught to be ready to answer when the land of their father calls them.

The "campeggio" of the girls bears a less military character. They devote much time to sports but first they are instructed in all matters pertaining to their own domain, the home.

A closer bond of unity among the foreign-born Italians is fostered; the Fascist principles are outlined; games and exercises strengthen them physically; religious and scientific discourses build them up morally. The main purpose is to bring up a new type of Italian citizen, to teach the boys the meaning of national dignity and eliminate certain defects typical to old Italy. All these aim to produce an Italian youth who will have a keener appreciation of newer Italy.

Speaking of newer Italy, I shall attempt to give a brief description of Italy as I see it. Our ship has just dropped anchor at Genoa harbour. To our left is the "Rex", the magnificent super-liner, pride of Italy. Steaming in, and yet to drop anchor is the "Count of Savoy", luxurious sister ship of the "Rex". At the foot of the stately three-hundred foot lighthouse, two battleships and a light cruiser peer into the mist ahead, their cold, couchant canons clothed in grey canvas.

A Canadian who has never been in an Italian city before will notice as he enters Genoa that the stony streets are particularly narrow with high garden walls shutting out his view from the beauties of an Italian garden. Genoa also has its wide streets but they are relatively few. On the street, the vehicles are dominant. A driver merely honks the horn and depends on the agility of the pedestrian to reach the sidewalk in safety.

Genoa has erected to Christopher Columbus a colossal monument. His birthplace and home in Genoa is preserved and stands as another reminder of this great seaman and scholar. Monuments are many, beautiful, artistic. From here a mountain climber need not travel far to reach his paradise. Genoa is hemmed in completely by snow-capped mountains. They rise so steeply, so abruptly, so masterfully, they appear as though to crowd Genoa into the talons of the Mediterranean.

Ostia may be famous for its cleanliness, for its long stretches of beautiful beaches or for its ancient ruins; Salerno may be famous for its antiquities and beautiful rural scenery; Naples can boast of a magnificent opera; Mount Vesuvius can still boast of its dominance

over other Volcanoes; and Milan can boast its beautiful Cathedral, but I doubt if any can and may ever credit itself with anything as unique and beautiful as the fountains and cascades at Villa D'Este in Tivoli. I have seen many beautiful cities and villas in Italy but none that can compare with the Grand Cascades of Tivoli.

When one visits this place of grandeur such as only nature can form, one cannot help but gaze for hours at the never-ceasing torrent of water flowing smoothly out of the mountain-side, rushing headlong into the trees below only to end in a meandering stream. The peasants line the shores every washday and scrub their soiled laundry at the brink of the Cascades.

Rome, as you know, is the capital of Italy. In it are the Administration Office and the palatial home of Premier Mussolini. Whenever Mussolini makes a public appearance it is usually from the balcony of his office building overlooking Piazza Venezia. The down-town streets during working hours are crowded to capacity. Public Transportation is carried on by busses and street cars. As in most European cities, tables can be seen strewn over the sidewalks in front of cafes and bars. The patrons are served outside where they can watch the never-ceasing ebb and flow of merry shoppers promenading the sidewalks. In this way fashion designers and style seekers can and do learn the styles of the day, and the Italian people are second to none in this art. Being an ancient city, Rome has many old buildings. Although only the ruins remain, in them their beauty can yet be seen. The colossal amphitheatre stands dominant over the ancient ruins. If one were to look down on this coliseum from an aeroplane, the scene would appear as a huge wheel with the coliseum as its hub and the numerous principal streets leading to it as its spokes. The home of Augustus Caesar, the Roman forum, the coliseum, the walls of ancient Rome, the Trojan forum and many other famous ruins are being rebuilt. When this huge undertaking is completed, Rome will appear as a city within a city. St. Peter's Cathedral, the world's largest and most beautiful church, remains as a magnet to draw thousands of tourists daily. In it are the masterpieces of world-famous artists and sculptors. When filled to capacity it can hold over 65,000 people. The Vatican City directly behind the Cathedral is the home of the Pope. One cannot visit the Pope in uniform. A pass from a distinguished person is also necessary.

This being Holy Year, the Pope conducted the Mass services at the confessional altar in St. Peter's Cathedral. It was attended by missionaries from all parts of the world. The Avanguardisti were given a privileged section in front of the altar. Before and after Mass service the people received the Papal blessing. On one other occasion did our group have an opportunity to attend a Mass service conducted by the Pope. At this service over 100,000 people crowded the streets in front of St. Mary Magdalene Church. Many visitors commented on how such a large crowd could remain so orderly but enormous gatherings are not unusual in Italy.

The "Adunata" was held this year in the Roman Forum. This was an ideal location for so great a performance. It has the appearance of a huge bowl; the Roman Forum in the centre and the elevated Capitaline and Palatine hills sloping about it. People thronged both hills but were prohibited to enter the Forum. It was illuminated by numerous large torches posted amidst the ruins, presenting a fearful but interesting scene. On the main section where the drilling was being conducted,

strong searchlights played. Mussolini was present during the entire performance. He was jovial, smiling almost continuously throughout the exhibition. Every Avanguardista was a participant in it. Only after he had delivered a fine speech in Italian did he leave the Forum. Patriotism towards Italy was emphasized in his speech. He also praised the boys and girls in their performance. After expressing the fact he would enjoy another visit the following year from the boys and girls, he saluted and vanished into the background, the dark ruins of the Roman Forum.

On the morrow everything at the camp seemed to be alive. All were doing something, cleaning out their tents, washing themselves with care, shining their shoes, reloading their cameras, drilling, singing or practicing music. The Avanguardiste (girl-scouts) marched into the camp and took up position before the observation stand. A bugle blast summoned the Avanguardisti (boy-scouts) into a hurried line of march and a command placed them all, 7,000 strong, in line before the same stand. Why this sudden preparation? Mussolini was to be our guest for the morning! He was coming to visit the boys and girls at the camp and was due to arrive at any minute! A car sped up the highway, another car followed. They turned left and entered the portals of Campo Mussolini. The cars came to a stop just inside the portals. A single thought was on the minds of everyone, nerves were tense, the roaring planes overhead even seemed to cease for that critical moment. The door opened and out stepped Premier Mussolini. The tension was suddenly relieved by deafening cheers and roaring of planes. The bugle blasted a command and all was quiet again. Mussolini, accompanied by Captains Dini and Parini, and a group of distinguished looking gentlemen, whose names I have not been able to ascertain, walked leisurely around the right side of the field and ascended to the observation platform. Mussolini was clad in a spotless white suit, a white hat and wore black and white sport shoes. His salute was immediately returned.

From the second Mussolini made his appearance on the platform to the second that he departed, a smile never left his countenance. At times he even seemed to be enjoying a joke with the band leader and the result would be a hearty laugh. He delivered another speech, a rather short one concerning his appreciation of our fine singing and again expressed his wishes for our return to Italy. When he was in the midst of his speech a huge plane manoeuvred low over the stand, the roar of motors was almost deafening, Mussolini simply stopped in the middle of a word and looked up at the plane, laughing, until the noise died away, then resumed his speech. His visit must have been important since Fox movie tone, Paramount, M-G-M and many other large picture concerns had cameramen working the cameras throughout Mussolini's entire visit at the camp. Mussolini made his exist amidst loud shouts of "DU-CE", "DU-CE" issuing from over 8,000 mouths simultaneously.

Among the other notables whom I have seen at the camp are, S. E. Prince Umberto, who is heir apparent to the throne of Italy and S. E. Ciano, the Governor of Rome and Minister of Interior. Each in turn gave us words of encouragement to continue our good work. Both Parini, head of all Italian fascists abroad, and Captain Dini second only to Parini in the same office and head of the Royal Police in Italy, kept private tents in the camp and spent a great deal of time among the boys in the interest of the camp.

Police men guarded the camp grounds night and day. In the camp were a hospital tent, a doctor and approximately two hundred yards away a large brick building built purposely as a hospital for the sick campers. A great deal of care was taken for our safety. Captain Dini, though a very busy man

in state affairs, found time to accompany the nineteen Canadian boys in their trip from Rome to Marseilles. It was his wish to see us depart safely. He and S. E. Ciano took especial interest in the Canadian contingent.

Now, dear reader, I will take you back to earth again, this time to a farm a good distance from any large city. Two very large rooms, one, a combination kitchen and dining room, the other, the bedroom, constitute the farmhouse. The affair is of solid mortar. Usually steel bars are embedded in the mortar across the square window-space securing it against prowlers. Doors are securely bolted and locked at night but open to strangers during the daytime. Strangers are treated with hospitality. Wine flows freely; figs, grapes, pears, apples, lemons and oranges are plentiful. In fact, fruit is grown in such abundance that apples, one of our most delicious fruits, is used in Italy as a food to fatten hogs. Land is allotted as by the old Feudal System of France. If a man owns a very large tract of land, more than he can cultivate, he divides it up amongst poor families. It is then the duty of each family to cultivate the land given to their care. A fraction of the output goes to the family, and the remainder to the land-owner. In this way a poor family can live happily on another's farm.

Shovels, brooms, baskets, tables, chairs, ploughs are very often made at home or procured from a neighbour in exchange for some other home-made necessity. The peasants, men and women, labour in the fields bare-footed. The women carry articles in a basket balanced atop their heads. I have on more than one occasion seen women carrying a load of wood on their heads. During dress affairs, sandals made of sheepskin are worn. The women still wear the tight waist bustle, wide pleated skirts, laced velvet vests and bright-coloured blouses. Thursdays and Sundays are market days. Peasants from the surrounding districts come to the nearest city to sell, exchange or buy food, clothes, and home necessities. The streets of the city are littered with rows of wooden counters, wagons, huge baskets and tents displaying their home-made wares. Very little money is passed around. Necessities are usually bought by exchanging one article for another. The wages for work are paid in kind. As an example I will illustrate the use of the flour mill by peasants. They bring their grain to the flour mill to be ground. Instead of paying the owner in money, the peasant gives him a fraction, say one-third, of the flour. This system of trade, the barter system, eliminates the use of money at home. Saturday, in Italy is traditionally "beggar's day." On Saturdays only are beggars allowed to practice their profession. The people look forward to this day and always set aside a mite to offer them.

I attended only one carnival in Italy. This carnival took place in Sora during my visit to relatives. It lasted fully three days and nights. The shopkeepers in Sora locked their doors early each day of the carnival. Peasants from the surrounding districts attended in bright-coloured garb. The streets were illuminated by bright-coloured lamps. The one-hundred-piece municipal band of Naples supplied music for the people in the main piazza (square). The peasants need only the least excuse to give cause for a feast.

When I first arrived at Sora I heard the name Vincent repeated often in conversations. Whenever two persons greeted each other, usually one or the other was hailed Vincent, or Vincenzia, the feminine gender. I asked my friend why so many people were named Vincent or Vincenzia. He explained that many miracles were performed over the tomb of St. Vincent who was buried about two miles north of Sora. Each family believes in having at least one of their family a namesake of this great Saint. Enquiring further into the matter, I fo-

und that natives of other districts were similar in naming children after their patron Saint.

The weather during the summer days is very uniform and a cloud is seldom seen. One cannot help but notice the bluish haze hanging low over the Mediterranean. More unusual still is the bright circle around the sun, the circumference of which appears to the naked eye as though growing and shrinking alternately in size.

The railroad service in Italy is as simple as our street car system. The first class compartments are very comfortable, whereas the third class are decidedly uncomfortable. The hard wooden seats, incessant clattering of windows, and the dampness in the cars make a long trip unbearable. To travel by air in Italy is cheaper than by rail in America. Travelling in a railway coach is just one tunnel after another but the scenery that the Mediterranean on one side and the mountains on the other afford repays fourfold for the discomfort of the tunnels.

Highways throughout Italy are numerous and ultra modern. Although used by heavy wagons and trucks equipped with heavy rubber tires, they seem to be always in first-class condition. On the highways there is no speed limit but the police will not tolerate reckless driving or racing. Each side of a highway is lined with white posts and in many cases the roads are electrically illuminated. Bicycles are within the limits of all purposes. The upkeep of a motor car is costly. The general preference is for a small car, one the size of a Canadian Baby Austin.

In many towns and small cities there is a law that all must be in their homes every night before a set hour. The same law applies to young couples inhabiting cities such as Rome, Genoa. On Sundays, theatres, bars and tobacco shops are open for business.

Upon my return to Canada, I brought with me a few packages of Italian cigarettes. By tests I have learned that Canadians think the Italian cigarettes very strong, a great deal stronger than their own. Perhaps the fact that the Italians drink a great deal of strong coffee accounts for their preference for strong cigarettes. Tea is very rarely used in Italy. The high price of tea may be the cause of its scarcity.

During my stay in Genoa, a swimming race was held amongst the boys at the school. Over seventy-five boys took part in the race. It was merely a case of taking the boys out from the shore about one hundred yards and having them swim toward shore. A Toronto youth won the distinction of receiving a medal in this race. Very few people in Italy play baseball. Many have never heard of the game. Whenever I played the game with some of the other boys from Canada, the Italians couldn't understand how I held the ball so securely whenever it was pitched to me. No one dared to face the ball. If it was pitched toward a crowd they quickly scattered and ran for cover. One Italian made a brave effort to catch the ball and nearly broke a finger. They may be ignorant of baseball, but they set a fine example in the game of soccer. To-day it is their national outdoor sport. The football is one of the most popular good luck charms.

As I previously mentioned, money is very scarce. Somebody hit upon the idea that the country needed more money in circulation with the result that counterfeit coins are flowing around in abundance. On many occasions I have seen a person sharply throw down a coin on the pavement to hear the genuine "klink." Everyone, before accepting money, listens for the sharp, ringing sound which designates the genuine.

Storekeepers, tellers, bartenders, etc., all have a square piece of plate-glass on the counter for this purpose. The thud of a counterfeit coin can be heard distinctly on a glass counter. I had been in Italy only a few days when I happened into a tobacco shop. Here I first

noticed this glass square mentioned above, and asked its purpose. The dealer merely took a coin from the till, threw it down lightly on the glass square and on hearing the sharp klink of the coin against the glass he smiled and told me that was the surest and quickest method of testing for genuine coins. The Italians are very shrewd business people. On the window of a jewellery store I noticed this sign "Watches, 50 lire. Lowest price possible. Please do not ask a lower price." I entered the store and came out with one of the fifty lire watches. I paid the jeweler thirty-eight lire and he gladly took the money. At another jewellery store, I was asked forty-five lire for a wrist watch; I began to walk out of the store. The jeweler called me back and gave me the watch for thirty lire. Another one showed me an eighteen-carat gold ring. He asked one hundred and thirty-five lire for it but I finally bought it for thirty lire. I am sure that each dealer must have made a profit on each sale but how they could come so far below their first price and still gain is beyond comprehension.

Education in Italy since Mussolini's regime has been compulsory and greatly improved. Schools erected in the memory of great men are filled to capacity by pupils eager for education. The buildings are modern, each having a large courtyard in the centre of the building used as a schoolyard by the pupils. Gymnasiums, swimming tanks, showers and restaurants can be found in many new elementary school buildings. The colleges are attended by men from various parts of the world. A diploma from an Italian University is proof of a sound education.

In concluding this essay, I cannot underestimate the value of the trip. It has given us a keener appreciation of Italy and its social customs. It has aroused in us a curiosity to see other lands and other peoples. It has exceeded our expectations of Mussolini about whom we have been reading for the past few years. The man and his accomplishments which have left lasting impressions on our minds make us yearn again to visit those far-off shores.

To the fascist organization we owe our deepest debt of gratitude. To Mussolini and his fascist cohorts we raise our right hand and say, "Long may you live and forever make the royalty and nation of Italy respected."

Toronto, 1933.

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