

ON REVISITING OLD G.I. HAUNTS

by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Every summer, hundreds of former G.I.s, visiting Europe as tourists, seek out some of the spots they knew as soldiers during and after the late war. The nostalgic draw to the scene of former carousing and enjoyment is usually mixed with a sincere desire to see old friends and familiar landmarks. The memories of the period of occupation are often more sweet than bitter, for one was much younger, one still had hair, and the uniform symbolized a kind of super virility to which the females were constantly being attracted. The fact that most of these females were quite material minded is not really relevant today. After all, one was a freer spirit (and freer spender) then, learning a foreign language and foreign ways, and the future in civilian America was something only to dream about. But eventually the dream came true. ^{be = reality} One said goodbye, and one sailed away.

Several summers ago I revisited the small town in Northern Italy where I and several hundreds of my buddies made up the forces of occupation for two postwar years. The town, called Tarcento, is in the province of Friuli, the country Hemingway wrote so vividly about in "A Farewell to Arms." This small resort town in the foothills of the Dalmatian Alps, had two hotels which we moved into. When our unit settled down, the town became ours. The one movie house began operating for our benefit, and one of the nicer mansions became the enlisted men's Red Cross Club.

We made many friends in town. Our best friends were the washerwomen who came to our quarters and solicited our laundry. The group of fellows

I buddied around with became attached to one sweet lady, a Signora Zanitti. She was honest, cheerful, expert, and prompt. We lavished on her all the generosity which we American soldiers had in abundance. Chocolate for her two children, cigarettes for her husband, and canned goods from the States. We visited her home, which was quite primitive in our eyes, ate chestnuts and drank wine and talked for hours. When their barn burned down accidentally a few weeks before Christmas, all of us collected a substantial sum of money and prepared for the Zanittis a huge basket. On Christmas we all turned up at the Zanitti house with our gifts. Mrs. Zanitti, her husband, ~~her~~ children, and ~~her~~ mother-in-law were almost stunned by our gesture. It made us feel good to be generous in that kind of dedicated, almost schoolboy way.

We made other friends as well, particularly among the girls at the Red Cross Club. Our best friend was Stefania, a lovely large-boned girl of Slovene origin, with a remarkable ability to be a true friend. She wrapped our packages, discussed our problems and amours with us, and, herself, fell sadly in love with a married sergeant.

Another vivid friend we made was Lena Furmi, an eccentric, flighty old maid of fifty, who became enamoured, but quite platonically, ^{with} a 19-year-old buddy of mine--a chubby corporal from Maryland who learned to speak Italian faster and better than any of us. Lena wrote poems to ~~the~~ him, showered him with small useless gifts, and told us all the tales of her girlhood in Florence when D'Annunzio and the Duse were in flower.

Another friend we made was Signore Martelli, a large bald gentleman

who owned a ~~luxurious~~^g gift shop in Udine and had a villa in Tarcento. He invited us to the villa, which was furnished in exquisite taste, served us wine and let us listen to his phonograph. Once his grandson played the piano for us. It was all very homelike.

Eventually each of us received shipping orders. At each departure, the goodbyes were sad. Signora Zanitti always cried ~~wick~~ when one of us left. Stefania, too, took our departures very much to heart. And when the corporal from Maryland left, it was a major calamity in Lena Furmi's life. We had joked a great deal about the old bag. But she cried and she suffered in her own way and in reality we pitied her. The Martellis, of course, never cried when anyone of us left. They always invited the departee for a last evening, and when the time came for goodbyes they always wished us well.

My return to Tarcento a number of years later was motivated by sentiment. I wanted to see these people again as well as the places where the last days of my adolescence ^{had been} were spent. I took the train from Venice to Udine, and from there the same tram that my buddies and I used to take each weekend. When I reached Tarcento, after a ride through the green, rich fields of Friuli, I felt as if I had come home. The town was exactly the same, except that all traces of the G.I. occupation had been erased. The movie house was no longer ours. The hotels which had once housed us were now simple hotels once more, and, in fact, I took a room in one, very close to the original room I had "occupied" free of charge.

I visited the Zanittis. They were overjoyed and very surprised to see

me. I saw the new child and was recognized by the ones who had grown. It was wonderful to see them all healthy. We talked over old times and discussed the whereabouts and progress of the other soldiers.

Then I visited the Martellis. I was greeted warmly and cordially and invited to stay for lunch. In the warm afternoon we sat on the cool terrace overlooking the swift-flowing river that passed through the town, ^{and} facing the majestic and towering Dalmatians. We talked about former days and how things had changed. It was peaceful and relaxing.

Then I looked up Stefania. She was very, very happy to see me. Her life had not changed much. Her love affair with the married sergeant had ended painfully. She was working now and living quietly with her parents.

And then I ran into Lena Fumli. I was in luck, for I would not have known exactly where to find her. She was her usual buoyant self and spoke glowingly of her corporal whose image she would carry in mind to the end of her days. I promised to take back to him her fondest regards.

Then, by myself, I explored the places in town and the countryside which had particular significance for me. It was a very satisfying and, of course, sad walk. But it was exactly what I had come to Tarcento for.

When I left the next afternoon, the Zanittis saw me off at the tram. Mrs. Zanitti ~~came~~ again as she had when I left in uniform in 1946. But this time, there was something even sadder about the departure, for I knew it would be a very, very long time before I ^{would} return to Tarcento, if indeed I ever ^{could} did.

But the story does not end ^{here} there. Recently, at a cocktail party in

New York, I met a distinguished gentleman from Trieste. When I told him that I knew his region of Italy well, particularly the area around Tarcento, he became excited. Tarcento, why of course he knew Tarcento. It was the playground of the Triestini, known all over the region, even as far as Fiume, for its famous restaurant, the Boschetti. "Of course," he asked, "you know the Boschetti." I was embarrassed. In all the time I had spent in Tarcento, I had never heard of the Boschetti. He was surprised. I explained that I had merely been a soldier of twenty at the time and hadn't yet become a gourmet. He laughed understandingly. But after I left the party, I thought about Tarcento and how little I ^{had} actually ^{known} ~~knew~~ about the town. Indeed, I wondered, why ~~had~~ ^{had} it/never occurred to me to buy a Baedeker when I was there.