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COMMENTARY | BOOKSHELF

Proletariat? No. Peasants? Sì.

Ignazio Silone gained renown in the 1930s with his anti-fascist novels.

By Robert K. Landers

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Arriving late to a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Communist International in Moscow in May 1927, Ignazio Silone, a founder of the Italian Communist Party, asked to see the document, written by Leon Trotsky, that the delegates were being urged to condemn. "Obviously, I cannot condemn it before I've read it," he said. Joseph Stalin, the general secretary of the party's Central Committee in the Soviet Union, explained that it would be inadvisable to show the document to the delegates since it contained allusions to Soviet policy. (These included, in fact, sharp criticisms of Stalin.) Silone was not satisfied. Stalin suspended the session so that a Bulgarian delegate could let Silone in on the party's "internal situation" -- that a power struggle was going on and no one cared what the document said.



The next day, noting that "a resolution against Trotsky can only be taken unanimously," Stalin asked if the Italians were now in favor of it. Silone persisted: "We must see the document concerned." Stalin announced that the resolution was withdrawn.

In Berlin, on his way back to Italy, Silone read in a newspaper that the Executive Committee had severely rebuked Trotsky for a document he had written. And so began Silone's disillusion with communism, as he recounted in an essay for Richard Crossman's famous anthology, "The God That Failed" (1950). Silone took a medical leave from the party two years after the clash with Stalin and was expelled in 1931.

In exile and poor health in Davos, Switzerland, the melancholy ex-Communist turned himself into a novelist -- and achieved considerable renown in Europe and beyond. "Fontamara" ("Bitter Spring"), a powerful anti-fascist novel published in 1933, was set among the suffering peasants of the Abruzzo region of southern Italy -- the first appearance, Silone believed, of "peasants of flesh and blood" in Italian literature.

Bitter Spring

By Stanislaw G. Pugliese

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 426 pages, \$35

A critical and commercial success, "Fontamara" was followed by Silone's masterpiece, "Bread and Wine" (1937). It was also anti-fascist and also set among the Abruzzo *cafoni*, a derogatory term for southern Italian peasants, one that Silone hoped to transform into a badge of respect, if not honor.

"Bread and Wine" was hailed by Graham Greene as "a bitter, humane and humorous book," written with unusual "honesty and thoughtfulness." Though Silone was against the Catholic Church, Greene observed, his voice, as he wrote of one of his characters, was "that of a disappointed lover." Decades later, Silone would memorably describe himself as "a Socialist without a Party, a Christian without a Church."

Ignazio Silone, who had many aliases as an underground Communist, adopted that name in 1923 in a Spanish prison. When he was born in 1900 in the Abruzzo, he was christened Secondino Tranquilli. His family had a social position slightly above that of the *cafoni*: His father was a small landowner, his mother a weaver. When Secondino was 11, his father died. Four years later, his mother was killed in a massive earthquake; Secondino dug her body out of

the ruins with his own hands. The orphan then had a succession of, as he later put it, "three essential experiences: poverty, religion, and communism."

During World War II, Silone was drawn back into the political struggle against fascism and Nazism, helping to establish the Italian Socialist Party's foreign office in Zurich. "From there," Stanislaw G. Pugliese writes in his thoroughly researched and judiciously sympathetic biography, "Bitter Spring," "Silone worked with Allen Dulles of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the forerunner of the CIA) in coordinating assistance to the anti-Fascist Resistance working within Italy." In 1944, with Benito Mussolini and the fascists no longer in power, Silone finally returned to his homeland.

Next to the Hungarian novelist and ex-Communist Arthur Koestler, Silone was the most prominent figure at the founding conference of the anticommunist Congress for Cultural Freedom in Berlin in 1950. According to the Swiss writer Franco Bondy, Silone "tried to keep the anti-Communism of the Berlin conference as tolerant, as moderate, and as 'third fordist' as possible," in contrast to the militant Koestler. In the succeeding years, the congress would hew more closely to Silone's approach than to Koestler's. Silone, who became an editor of *Tempo Presente*, one of the congress's distinguished journals, looked upon many rank-and-file Communists as erring "children of light" (in the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's terminology). When the CIA funding of the congress became widely known in the late 1960s, Silone resigned.

For a long time Silone's literary reputation was much greater outside Italy than in his homeland. But after the 1965 publication of "Emergency Exit," a collection of autobiographical essays, the tide of Italian literary opinion changed. "Silone finally was accorded the kind of critical recognition that he had enjoyed abroad," Mr. Pugliese says, perhaps because Silone's account of his turbulent life made Italian intellectuals ashamed of their disdainful treatment of him. The novelist died in 1978.

Eighteen years later, his posthumous reputation suffered a blow: An Italian historian disclosed that when Silone was still a Communist, he had engaged in a sustained correspondence with a high-ranking fascist police official. Had Silone been spying on the Communists for the fascists? Or spying on the fascists for the Communists? Or -- perhaps most likely -- had he simply been trying to help his younger brother, who had been arrested by the fascist regime in 1928 (and was later tortured and died in prison)? The truth may never be known, Mr. Pugliese notes.

What is known about Silone's life, along with the powerful testimony of his writing, strongly indicates that he was a man of conscience and integrity, a man of the left who opposed both the fascists and the Communists. In consequence, as George Orwell once observed, Silone was "one of those men who are denounced as Communists by Fascists and as Fascists by Communists." More than 30 years after his death, it is high time that English-language readers rediscovered this valiant writer and his works.

Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."