

First published in Italian as "Noi Siamo La Classe Operaia" in 2004
© Baldini Castoldi Dalai editore / Dalai editore, 2004
A Far Better Thing I Do
© Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd, 2013



ISBN 978-981-07-8231-3

Published under the imprint Ethos Books
by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
28 Sin Ming Lane
#06-131 Midview City
Singapore 573972
www.ethosbooks.com.sg
www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Vanessa Lim
Design and layout by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
Printed by Digicool Pte Ltd, Singapore

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Berrini, Andrea.

A far better thing I do ... : the 2000 from Monfalcone / Andrea Berrini
; translated by Joan Rundo. – Singapore : Ethos Books, 2013.

pages cm

ISBN : 978-981-07-8231-3 (paperback)

1. Emigration and immigration. 2. Italy – Emigration and immigration.
3. Yugoslavia – Emigration and immigration. I. Rundo, Joan.
- II. Title.

JV8131
304.809450924 -- dc23

OCN 861725836

A FAR BETTER THING I DO

ANDREA BERRINI

Translated by Joan Rundo

FOR LISA



1

In the early months of 1947, 2000 workers from the Monfalcone shipyard and aircraft factory set off for Fiume. They are going to look for jobs in Tito's new Socialist Yugoslavia. The shipyards are idle in Monfalcone; they have been semi-destroyed by the bombings and with no contracts, the management is implementing a plan to lay off the workers. In this post-war period, being unemployed means going hungry.

Those who leave their homes for a destination that is physically close but at the same time very far away include many who are leaving safe jobs, with positions of responsibility and good wages. They are not emigrating out of necessity but out of choice. Their friends and relatives advise them to stay and warn them of the dangers that they are about to face. They do not listen to them, as they have already made up their minds: they are going to construct Socialism.

In February 1947, everything seems to happen all at once. They set off in small groups, like gusts of wind in rapid succession. We can imagine them in groups of four or five: brothers, cousins, childhood friends, who day after day, make their way towards Fiume. Together they have lived through the Fascist dictatorship, the war and the occupation of neighboring Slovenia and Dalmatia. Many of them have fought with the partisans. They board trains in Gradisca, Fogliano and Redipuglia.

They lean out of the windows in Ronchi dei Legionari, Monfalcone and Prosecco and enthusiastically recognize others boarding the train. A few hours later, at the station in Fiume, they will discover that a hundred of them have arrived on the same day, by the same train. They will go down to the port, singing *The International* and *Bandiera Rossa*.

Most of them come from the Cantieri Riuniti dell'Adriatico in Monfalcone and are headed for the 3rd May Shipyards of Fiume. This was the date, 3rd May 1945, when the Nazi occupation was finally driven out by the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia which, in its western displacements, also included some Italian partisan groups. In particular, the Trieste Battalion, which was originally also called the Proletarian Brigade because it had been formed on 8th September 1943 by the same workers of the Monfalcone shipyards, who had swarmed en masse out of their hangars: the blue-collar partisans. A thousand of them fought on the Carso, more than 100 lost their lives, some of them were Italian speakers, others spoke Slovenian. The liberation came two years later.

By the end of 1948, most of the 2000 workers from Monfalcone who had emigrated to Yugoslavia had already returned to Italy. Today, more than half a century later, those who are still alive recall: "They came back with their heads hanging low, like men defeated. When they set off, they had been full of bravado and scorn. They were going to build the new world. When they did not find it, they came back in silence. But here, their names were in red in the ledgers, the shipyards slammed the doors in their faces. In their homeland, the ex-workers of the Monfalcone shipyards found that they were pointed at as traitors and anti-Italian. They were addressed by the ignominious term "Tasi ti, sciavo". Keep quiet, Slav.

Some of the 2000 – a few, but still too many – waited for years before seeing their families again. In 1948, the Cominform, the association of all the Communist Parties in the world which Stalin controlled with an

iron fist, had excommunicated Tito and the leaders of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. In Fiume, many of the Monfalcone men, active in the Italian Communist Party, publicly sided in favour of Stalin. The most militant of them were arrested and held for years in Yugoslavian detention camps, facing ordeals that are difficult only to describe. Some never returned home.

When considering this episode in history, it is unfortunately its cruellest and tragically symbolic aspect that attracts the greatest attention: the concentration camp.

That Gulag on the Beautiful Barren Island. This was the headline of an article by Claudio Magris, published in the *Corriere della Sera* on Sunday, 19th August 1980, commenting on the first revelations about Goli Otok, the small, stark island, swept by the winds of the Kvarner Gulf, where the Cominformists, opponents of Tito's regime, were held:

The game on the chessboard of Universal History was a game of life and death and Yugoslavia, which has the unforgettable merit of having dared to be the first to break away from Stalin's barbarity, fought against the danger of this barbarity in equally barbarian ways; fearful of plots and being overthrown internally, it persecuted Stalinists (striking, as is often the case, on all sides, without worrying about those who were affected without being Cominform supporters), with Stalinist methods, inventing gulags of its own (p. 7).

Magris defines the 2000 emigrants from Monfalcone as "obscure Ulysseses".

They came to war-devastated Yugoslavia with their enthusiasm and their professional skills... Unlike almost all the other men and also many of their new comrades and colleagues, they were not working to survive, but lived to work on the construction of a New World...to a very

great extent, it was an ideological and ideal choice, a categorical imperative of class conscience (*ibid.*).

The *Corriere della Sera* headline writer betrays the intentions of Claudio Magris, who puts the spotlight on the workers of Monfalcone and their reasons, rather than on the tragedy of Goli Otok. Magris concludes:

Reclaiming the historical memory must not only be to remember the suffering, unmask ideological illusions and denounce injustice, but also and above all to save and inherit that coherence, courage and strength that allowed the Monfalcone men – and their Yugoslavian companions of misfortune – to resist, even though out of faith in a name that was worse than the one that was persecuting them. We must continue their moral legacy, even though we do not share faith in their flag. Woe betide us, when faith in the “god that has failed” is lost and the human quality – dedication to a value higher than personal interest, loyalty, courage - that had helped to forge it, disappears with it (*ibid.*).

Magris uses a term – faith – which risks, however, reducing the decision taken by the 2000 to a context of irrationality, whereas the verb “forge” refers to factories and their membership of the working class.

I am looking at an old photograph. A group of about 50 men in boiler suits are perched around the helm of a ship as tall as a two-storey house. The men are clinging on to the scaffolding that supports the helm, sitting on its wings, straddling the huge structure. On the right, you can make out the convex hollow of the stern of a ship that looms over the men and the helm of which you can guess is immense: they built it. Part by part, they assembled it part by part, in team work.

Each of these men knows that he shares two things with his workmates. They have built – forged – the same ship. They are working for the same employer.

In February 1947, the train does not appear to cross any borders. There is a lax control immediately after Monfalcone. The British and American Military Police check the safe-conducts, which are nothing more than pieces of paper showing their destination, which is the head office of the Yugoslavian trade unions in Susak, an industrial suburb of Fiume, where the immigrants will be sent to their new jobs in Yugoslavia. There is no need for a passport in that very anomalous part of the new Europe, as yet there is no precise definition of the Iron Curtain. The inhabitants of the area straddling the Isonzo River, citizens of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire until 1918, have never completely felt Italian, and Monfalcone itself, until the middle of 1946, seemed destined to become part of the Yugoslav Federation. Languages have always mingled in those lands, the names of villages are written in the two languages, the local dialect and Slovenian, and even the surnames change, depending on need, power and armed conflict. The doors are still open there, between the West that was reconstructing its industrial system and the social hierarchies at the end of the Second World War that it had sparked off, and Eastern Europe which was planning to bring out of the rubble a Socialist society marked by the Soviet model and its armored tanks.

The Monfalcone workers go through that door.

Cominform

Testimony of (Surname, name) from Monfalcone

On X XXXX XXXX

In February 1947, on the request of the Fiume shipyard and through the Single Trade Unions, I left for Yugoslavia together with a group of workers, consisting of 80 skilled laborers employed in the Monfalcone shipyard. We left with our families, convinced that we would be making a technical contribution to building Socialism in that country.

We were immediately taken on at the 3rd May Shipyard in Fiume. We had taken the decision enthusiastically; and it was with great enthusiasm that we began to work, accepting the trade union positions in the factory as well.

It was the 1948 Resolution by Cominform that put an end to our enthusiasm. From then on, we realized that our policy to emigrate to Yugoslavia had been wrong. Even today, thirty years later, I still get the shivers when I think back to those events.

Following the Resolution, I resigned from the trade union and gave up all political activity. I worked at the shipyard and that was all. And many other comrades did the same.

Then the persecutions began. A first group was arrested in August 1948; then it was the turn of a second group of comrades. Many workers, most of them from Monfalcone, were put on trial and interned.

My turn came in May 1949. They came for me when I was at work and took me to the prison in Via Roma in Fiume. After six days I was questioned for the first time. I was accused of being a Cominformist and having raised funds in favor of the Italians who had already been arrested.

Locked in my cell, I was there for 90 days without anybody turning up. At last I was questioned for the second time, when they asked me if I had changed my mind about the note of the Information Office. I answered that I had nothing to say.

One evening they came for me in my cell and took me home. When we got there, they told my family, my wife and two children, to pack for the next day, as they were to be deported from Yugoslavia as *personae non gratae*.

During the night, my family packed up the few belongings they had so that they would be ready to leave; I was taken back to the prison in Via Roma. Two weeks later I was deported at the Casa Rossa border crossing of Gorizia, where I was handed over to the Italian police, who held me in prison for another week pending information.

In the meantime, my family, who should have been deported the next day, did not know what had happened to me and what was going to happen. The next day, my wife was sacked from her job, evicted from the house and her ration card taken away from her, ignoring the fact that she was ill and had two children to look after. In these conditions and without any resources, she had to wait another three months to get the visa allowing her to return to Italy.

On the basis of my experience, I can say that the Yugoslav policy was a nationalist one which we comrades, anti-Fascist fighters in the clandestine struggle and in the fight for liberation, could not approve of. Almost all the Italians suffered, to a greater or lesser extent, the consequences of a wrong policy.

When I returned to Italy, I set about looking for a job, anything at all. At the shipyard, there were no jobs for those who had come back from Yugoslavia. I found a job in the training yards ran by the local authorities; later I found work in the building trade.

I went to the Staranzano branch of the Italian Communist Party, where they understood the drama we had gone through in Yugoslavia: they gave me the Communist Party card for 1950.

What is my impression of Titoism? Unjustified treatment and persecution of the Italians who had emigrated to Yugoslavia "to build Socialism".

As far as the Cominform Resolution is concerned, I can say that, thirty years on, the truth has to come out on these events, as a consequence of which many

comrades, Italians and Yugoslavs, suffered all the torments of hell. What is certain is that we are Communist soldiers, and that is how we behaved.

3

This splendid and terrible story is told today by its main characters, who are now 50 years older. Their accounts come after the collapse of the Berlin Wall that had made a clean sweep of a good part of our society's memory of itself. Recently, to describe that great project that was tenaciously pursued by many people – a Socialist society – an adjective that soon degenerated into a cliché has been used distortedly: ideological. This generic term has been weighed down by a negative connotation, which is none other than a key to lock up the drawer of memories.

The men of Monfalcone, however, have a great memory. It is a typical and highly symbolic affair, packed with truth about the last century. Paradoxically, very little has been written and discussed about the 2000 men from Monfalcone, a wild bunch with a Gramscian matrix. The matter is closed.

However, if instead of looking for History with a capital 'H', we try and probe the memory of its less prominent figures, the individuals who once felt they belonged to a class, and then found themselves on their own, each lost in their individual mazes, the lock springs open easily and the drawer of memories at last can be pulled out. Words and sentences come out which, although they are swollen with rhetoric, were carved into flesh and blood. They were words which made people move and gave a direction to their lives:

onlookers, trying to limit the damage. I think that this vision is one of the evils of the world today.

The book could end in only one way: presenting the faces of its characters.

I can still see in my mind's eye some anomalous images. Giacomo Scotti amidst the houses of Volosca, at 70 years old, who climbs up on to a wall to reach a tree bearing very sweet figs. I am holding him by the elbow, I'm frightened that he will fall.

The old boys of the ANPI [Italian Association of Partisans] of Monfalcone in front of the gates of the shipyard in Panzano, on the stage with Coffferati who is making his speech in memory of the 503 war dead, like every year on 25th April. The old partisans wear the grey-green beret of the Proletarian Brigade with the red star on it. The young workers listen. It is raining.

When these elderly characters speak, they are radiant. It is their past that is more radiant than the future. They are wonderful for their disillusion and wisdom, yet they still want to remember and make their claims.

I do not know whether they were right or wrong in February 1947. I only know that their experience – and their existence – has made them even finer people today.

Acknowledgements

This book would not exist if I had not been able to benefit from the cooperation and friendship of all the people named in its pages. They were willing to spend their time with me and share their feelings and passions, first and foremost, all those men and women who were the heroes and heroines of the events and still are with their memory of the facts almost 60 years afterwards. This book is dedicated to them.

Special thanks go to two friends who opened the doors for me to this research. I have already written extensively about Fabio Songa, who was the first to tell me about Monfalcone and Panzano, his grandfather Giovanni and his uncle Vittorio.

However, I must recall the months spent with Renato Sarti to construct a play around the story of the men from Monfalcone and Goli Otok.

I had not yet met Ado Furlan, the relatives of Rino Russian and Pino Petean, and I did not imagine that the tone of their voices was sufficient to restore dignity to that defeat of the workers.

I suggested a subject to Renato Sarti. In the past, planning to work on the episode, Sarti had recorded a conversation with some former prisoners of Yugoslavian detention camps. Imagining the hypothetical disappearance of a shipyard worker following his arrest and internment on Goli Otok, we decided to write together a story with great symbolic

value, a self-critical reflection on the errors and horrors of the left and the parties linked to the labour movement.

I remember the first time I met Renato. The first thing he said to me was: I want to take a stand. I don't want to be taken for one of those who do historical revisionism today using every pretext for a reevaluation of the Fascist period. I answered that it was my intention to put at the center of the story the experience of the labor movement; that it is a value in itself that cannot be reduced to the Stalinist option. I explained that I had thought of the theatre because I liked a story enclosed in a black box with one side open to an audience of those who had never thought for a second of siding with Fini or Cossutta, with the Cosulichs or with the torturers of Goli Otok. We began to talk.

Few of the men from Monfalcone were arrested, only about 10 of them ended up on Goli Otok. None of them disappeared, but we decided to tell it this way: the most tragic labor defeat.

It was with Renato Sarti that I visited Monfalcone and Fiume for the first time, that I met some of the historians who I then interviewed for this book and I listened to Mario Cavenago tell the story of his emigration. It was with him that I thought about this affair for the first time.

The title of our play is: *Vittoria* [Victory].

About the Author

Andrea Berrini is a 60-year-old writer and the publisher of *Metropoli d'Asia*. He started writing short stories and essays at the end of the 80s, collaborating with the most important literary magazines and journals in Italy, as well as writing reports for the mainstream Italian press. He has published four books: *L'Animadei Bulldozer* (a report on the slums of Kenya's capital town, Nairobi); *Storie Africane* (a collection of short stories about people in villages and cities in Tanzania, a country where he lived for almost two years); *Quattrini* (portraits of people engaged in microcredit projects around the world); and *Noi Siamo La Classe Operaia*, of which its English translation *A Far Better Thing I Do* is published by Ethos Books in Singapore.