Naples 1962

In the summer of 1962 I was in Naples for about six weeks. We were flying for NATO evaluating member radar sites around the Mediterranean.

One Sunday afternoon several of us decided to go see some of Naples we had not visited before. We heard opera being sung in a park and decided to check it out. It was a restored Roman amphitheatre and they were staging *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi. We stood at the rear since all the seats were filled on this sunny afternoon. Most interesting. Everyone was in street clothes including the cast. At every high note everyone cheered. At the completion of *Libiamo ne'lieti calici* (Drinking Song) everyone stood and cheered until the opera was rewound and the passage was done over twice more before they were allowed to finish the opera.

Later we wandered through the park and found a zoo. It was a bright clear Mediterranean afternoon and we were in civvies. Somewhere around the lion den a couple of our party met girls and disappeared. We were looking at the camels when a middle aged Italian man asked, in American English with only a hint of Italian, if we were Americans. We admitted that we were and that we were in the US Navy. I asked where he had learned English. He said he had joined the Italian Army in 1940 and had been sent to North Africa. He said he was already disillusioned about Hitler and the war and only hoped he would survive to return home to Naples.

We found a table at a sidewalk coffee shop. He ordered a round of espresso and we sat in the shade sipping while he told his story. In western Egypt his unit had been cut off and surrounded by American soldiers. He was taken captive. He was deloused and given a clean uniform, and since he had been a regular GI and not been wounded, he was sent to the American invasion headquarters for interrogation. Because he knew nothing of value he was included in a group of his fellow Italian prisoners and shipped to a prison camp in Bryan, Texas. He had been apprenticed to his uncle in a small restaurant and was assigned to the kitchen. To him the food on the troop ship and train to Texas was wonderful.

He rapidly learned Texas-style English. There was an incentive. Many of the prisoners who spoke English were loaned out to farmers and businesses to replace men who had enlisted or been drafted into the war. It wasn’t long before he had landed a position in a small restaurant. The restaurant gradually shifted it menu from burgers to pizza and spaghetti based on his cooking.

Near the end of the war as American troops returned home there were several incidents where Italian prisoners were beat up because of their relations with local girls. The prisoners were locked up until they were sent home to Italy a couple months later.

Our hero returned to Naples and, with the help of his family, opened an American restaurant catering to the occupation troops and, later, to tourists. American food. Burgers and fries. Shakes. Chicken fried steak. Many of his supplies were imported directly from friends back in Bryan.

He practiced his English at every opportunity and invited us to visit his place. We had every intention of taking him up but did not have time because we were transferred to Athens for a month before returning to the States. A chicken fried steak sure sounded good.

Carl Lahser

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