

## Perugia - La Dolce Vita

*Note – Usually when I write a draft copy about a time in my life, reviewers tend to enjoy the story part more and the opinion part less (“more narrative, less rant”). But we are talking about life in Italy, the land of fare la bella figura and calculated histrionics (the opera singer Maria Callas knew exactly when to throw a tantrum at La Scala). I am not good-looking enough to cut a fine figure, but I do reserve the right to have some well-thought out rants about certain subjects, since they have been tested by bitter experience.*

The way I spent my third year in college, in Italy and France, was the type of learning experience that today would be considered expensive, not helping one’s employability, and, probably worst of all, a whimsical detour on the road to getting a degree and finding a job. Yet the experiences I had were in many ways vital to my ability to learn later in life, and showed me before I was 20 that I could make arrangements, travel, and live independently in another culture and be responsible for my own actions. I’m not sure many students could do that now.

But spending two semesters abroad and coming home still as a rising junior was possible because the world in 1975-76 was different.

First, despite the Yom Kippur War in the Middle East in October ’73, and the subsequent steep rise in oil prices, the Jeffersonian contract between public universities and state governments still held, and I (naively) thought it would continue. Tuition at public universities, especially if you were in-state, was not that expensive. (When I arrived in Raleigh many years later, I couldn’t believe how little the excellent engineering and computer science classes cost at N.C. State.) These universities could give a broad spectrum of students a chance to get middle-class jobs. Many courses, especially the first two years, were considered important to take regardless of your major, since it allowed the student to get a broader view of the world. A great example at UVA was Professor Kroll’s two-semester course on the history of film. It was about the history of cinema but included history, culture, ideology, advances in science, literature, and art history. This was no gut course, and two students I liked to chat with after class were mathematics majors.

When I was choosing classes my second semester of sophomore year, I decided to take Italian 1, taught by Francesca Langbaum. I was pretty good in French and wanted to learn another language. Choosing Italian today would be seen as a mistake, but at that time Italy still “counted” in world affairs. During the Cold War Italy was second only to Germany in importance, with its very strong Communist party and radical terrorist groups that would eventually bomb the Bologna train station and execute the former PM, Aldo Moro. (I suppose nobody today remembers the Italian Red Brigades.) On a lighter note, my mom every Saturday used to listen to the Texaco Opera at the Met, and while operas in French were easy to understand, I wanted to understand just as easily Italian librettos and musical score annotation. I had also studied *fino in fundo* (deeply) the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, and wanted to see for myself the sites. (In the 1800’s, touring historical sites was part of an aristocrat’s education, and the “Grand Tour” was supposed to broaden your mind before you became an adult and assumed responsibility.)

I could write many pages on the evolution of public universities, but in essence they have become just another business model, with consultants wanting to “leverage” a school’s “academic integrity” and “knowledge assets” to maximize a “recurring revenue stream” while streamlining input

sources.” Sorry for all the quotes, but I heard all of these phrases in my corporate career, and I myself was laid off whenever upper management felt a need to streamline input resources. And the best example of this is right at UVA, when the president was at first fired because she “hadn’t gotten the memo” to “get with the program” to ensure the school would minimize resource expenses while maximizing profit, profits which in most cases would not go to the University or its employees.

Second, the cost of living abroad just about anywhere except northern Europe was not that expensive. In fact, up until the mid-80’s, living in most of the world was cheaper than the U.S., as long as you were willing to live a non-middle class lifestyle (a walk-up apartment, public transportation, getting local produce daily). You usually became healthier as a result, although one could argue that critical items, such as bread and public transport, were heavily subsidized, and the dollar was still a strong currency.

Finally, UVA and the *Università per gli Stranieri* (University for Foreigners) in Perugia already had in place a program that allowed you to take courses in Perugia and receive credits for them at UVA. This was mainly for Italian majors, but I decided not to major in Italian so not all of the credits would count. I would therefore need to spend two more years after Perugia to get my Bachelor’s degree. My father wasn’t pleased since I was the youngest and he wanted to get the last child through college, but my older siblings had been to expensive private schools, and the expense of UVA would in any case become moot when I worked on a fishing boat when I returned. (Refer to *Life as a College Boy on a Fishing Boat*.)

The Italian 1 course was a lot of fun. Signora Langbaum was an older woman and assumed (correctly) that the students wanted to learn. Even then I was forming general opinions about the culture, since S. Langbaum had been in the *Italia Gioventù* (Italy Youth), and although it was supposed to instill in you Fascist principles, she said everybody joined because of the socializing and smart-looking uniforms. This contrasted with the *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth), where young people really learned the skills to become professional soldiers, with some seeing their duty to “pump some sense” into certain ethnic groups by exterminating them.

Towards the end of the semester, when I decided to go to Perugia, the process was easy. You filled out a form, paid \$600, and you were enrolled in the fall Italian language class. Class would start on a specific day, and by then you should have gotten your passport, flown over, and found a place to stay.

I got my passport renewed and planned to fly out of JFK to Milan (*Milano*), take an express train to Florence (*Firenze*), and finally grab a local train to Perugia. People wouldn’t believe it today, but getting a plane ticket for \$200 less than the normal price was a big deal (\$200 was a lot of money back then). One way to get a cheaper ticket was to call the airline office at the just-built World Trade Center (WTC) at 4 a.m. (9 a.m. in Europe). If cheaper tickets were available you had to physically be at the WTC by 9 a.m. to pick them up. Luckily, I had my friend Kim in Westfield, N.J., and being young, he didn’t mind driving me down to the WTC at 6 a.m. before the true rush hour began. I actually continued to do this for the next several years, since I made Kim’s parents’ house my starting point for my European cycling trips. (Hard to believe, but back then a bicycle in a dealer bicycle box was one free piece of luggage.)

*Note – Although this has nothing to do with Italy, I did go all over New York City and nearby Jersey with Kim in the mid and late 70’s, and noted how the city was in obvious financial trouble with the continuing flight to the suburbs. (My father grew up in Hell’s Kitchen so to him there was always bleak side of New*

York). But Kim and I were young and thought nothing would happen to us, and we saw the pockets of New York that made it a vibrant place. I mention this because of the book *City on Fire*, a long book about that time in New York written by a young author. I'll have to see if he includes places such as the main bus station off Times Square. It was drab and run down, a place you had no business being past 9 pm. But it had the best egg bagels for 15 cents. There were still old cavernous book stores on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue; my favorite was run by a Ukrainian who fought in WWII. And Steinway Hall was still a public space, if you were a decent player they would let you play in the basement, where I once saw Rudolph Serkin trying out a piano with a technician. I happened to be visiting Kim in January 1978 when Horowitz made his re-appearance playing the Rachmaninoff 3rd piano concerto, and you could feel the excitement in the city. We also bicycled all over Asbury Park and saw what a great ocean resort for the lower middle class it must have been. These areas are now much safer and cleaner, but that world is gone.

I flew out of JFK 10 days before class began, since the material UVa provided said it normally would take a week to find a place, and I wanted a three-day buffer.

The trip from Milano to Perugia was like going back in time, as the trains became older with each leg. My first sense of history was when we passed the shore of *Lago* (Lake) *Trasimeno*, where Hannibal defeated the Roman army in the second Punic War. (Nerds get excited by these types of things.) The station in Perugia had not been updated in decades, and in my impressionable brain were scenes in Fellini films such as *La Strada*. You had to walk down a long flight of stairs to get to the street. (When you're young, you don't realize the indifference there is for the disabled.) I took a bus to *Il Centro* (the old center of the city). At *Il Centro* was a beautiful water fountain and a large city hall, not quite Siena but still impressive for a "minor" town.

Off the main square were many winding narrow streets, almost all going downhill. I found a *pensione* that was not too expensive and the family said one room was still available. So I dumped my (by now) unbearably heavy bags and prepared to walk around town. I noticed that around the family refrigerator was a chain and padlock; this was not the U.S.

I spent the rest of the day visiting the city sites, especially the *University per gli Stranieri*. It was one large building that took up a block and was six stories high. The classrooms were still closed (with the old keyhole-above-doorknob locks), but the large halls and café were open. The basement had the café as well as the student bulletin board.

I tend to look at most cafés and café chains (think Starbucks) with disdain, but I was spoiled by that café. The coffee machine wasn't that large, but it was a high-end professional model. The barista was an older man (in his 40's), who I learned later had been there many years, so this was his real full-time job. He made every order a mini-performance, calling out your order in the Italian idiom (a cappuccino was a *capuccio*), and would fling the small plates and cups with one hand and catch them with the other. Maybe it was because the coffee was Turkish, but the taste of the coffee was definitely different than the States, and in my opinion better; an espresso really had the bean oil with an oil slick on top. The cappuccino had the coffee with just the right amount of milk so you could barely tell where the foam ended and the coffee began. My favorite drink became the *latte caldo* (hot milk), only later did I realize it was raw milk, with the barista injecting just enough steam so that it tasted like hot ice cream. I could order one while studying and nurse it for quite a while, all for 50 lire (about 8 cents).

The bulletin board had ads for rooms to rent (*camera a vietato*), and the one whose name struck me was MissChianti, so just for a lark I went there the first thing next day to see if a place was available. It was two stories up an old building, and MissChianti was the only one there. I'm glad my Italian was decent because of the UVa class; she talked non-stop about everything, but somewhere in the stream of words were the details about what was available. The apartment was laid out perfectly for renting; the bedrooms were in two groups, each group with its own bathroom. She could therefore have two males at one end and two females at the other, with her room and the kitchen in between. There was one male room still available as a German student had taken the other. I didn't really know if the price was ok, but I could afford it and it was only a five-minute walk to school. I paid the first month's rent and told her I would get my luggage, but first she said we needed a drink to finalize the deal, and so she brought out a bottle of Anticho Rosso and two small glasses. Again, like so many tastes, sweet vermouth at first overwhelms you with the sugar and alcohol, but soon you have no problem having a few. I'm sure it was terrible for my health, but youth is the only time you can drink poison and still function.

Once I brought over my luggage and set up my room, I realized I had a full week before class started, and it became a week I still recall as "La Dolce Vita," since in Italy having free time, enough money, and good weather makes any day intensely enjoyable. I took the pilgrimage walk from Perugia to Assisi (getting up at 6 a.m.), and spent the late afternoon in the Assisi church studying the Giotto works, which were still vibrant with color. I saw them a few more times during my time in Perugia and subsequent years, and prefer not to think about the damage done by the earthquakes starting in 1997. A bus departed every morning for Firenze, so a day trip to Firenze was in order. I walked many miles there and took note of what places I was going to really visit. I spent one day back in Perugia on the rooftop of an expensive hotel, where for a fee you were allowed to use the rooftop pool with its view of the Umbrian mountains. Some American students who had just finished their studies were spending their last day here, and told me that summer was the best time to be in Italy. This made me briefly ponder what Fall and Winter were going to be like, but the weather was still beautiful and so I gave it no thought (yet).

Whether I was gone for the day or staying in town, I tried by 7:45 to be at the *Mensa* (cafeteria). The idea of a subsidized public cafeteria for any student would have seemed strange in the U.S. then and impossible now; most colleges today have meal plans that include visits to chain/franchise restaurants or cafés. But at the *Mensa* you could have a plate of pasta with real tomato sauce for 150 lire (25 cents), and a simple salad (with real olives and tomatoes) for 100 lire. For protein, a boiled egg was 100 lire, and a triangular carton of (raw) milk was 100 lire. So for less than a dollar you could have a meal that was nutritionally better than most meals in the States. If you wanted meat it was prohibitively expensive for a student (1000 lire for some strips of beef), but unless you had a meat craving you would be healthy.

After the *Mensa*, I would join the other adults (and some students) going *su e giu il Corso Vanucci*, or up and down the Vanucci street, the main street that started from the main fountain and ended at a park on the edge of town overlooking the mountains. In the States I wouldn't think like this, but here with the shops and the atmosphere, just wandering along the street was enjoyable. For a treat you could splurge and get a scoop of ice cream for 150 lire; it was small but incredibly rich so the portion was fine. In the small park with the overview you would watch each mountainside village self-illuminate until around 9, when it became dark and the shops closed. It was then time to go home or to a café.

In the university there was an open music hall with a grand piano, but one person was always there, practicing middle-period Beethoven sonatas. Luckily there was a small music hall with an old upright, *aula venti-tre* (room 23), and it was usually free, so I bought an edition of the Chopin études and thought with a few free afternoons I could really practice. I remember my piano teacher telling me how gratifying it was to spend the entire day at the piano and really working through pieces. I found that two hours at that level of concentration was my limit, but later realized in the real middle-class world that two uninterrupted hours for music every day was a rarity unless you were a professional musician. In any case, my long-term goal was to get to a point where I could play all the études at 25% concert speed. Then later, perhaps when retired, I could return to focused playing on the piano and take up the études again. The irony of course is now I have the time but can only sit for very short periods of time. If my hips get better, however, I still resolve to get back to those études.

For concert-speed concerts, there was a music hall about halfway up *il Corso Vanucci*, as well as a large symphony hall in the city hall building. The music hall was for solo recitals and chamber music, and several concerts were held every week, with each concert announced on a large yellow poster with black letters. These would appear all over town, with a new poster plastered over any just-finished performance. The concert season was just getting started, and I saw an American pianist who was one of Rosina Lhévinne's last pupils at Juilliard. (Rosina Lhévinne was the wife of the great pianist Joseph Lhévinne, and she was a great pianist and teacher in her own right.) His concert included Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* and Chopin's 3<sup>rd</sup> *Sonata*, and it made me wonder what had happened in Mr. Brucker's life since he had also been a pupil of Rosina Lhévinne's master piano class at Juilliard. But more on Mr. Brucker is in the story "*Hampton Institute: a Time and Place.*"

Sunday was the last day of La Dolce Vita, and I started to go through the main textbook, co-written by the teacher of the class, Katerina Boriosi. I liked its method, where you slowly went through a series of pictures with objects, people, and places. You learn the questions words first, then the vocabulary, then putting both together to learn the *to have* and the *to be* conjugations. Only then do you start sample conversations.

I had already checked out the main classroom on Friday when I found it unlocked, and it was for about 80 students. The classroom itself was at least 100 years old, a narrow room that rose towards the rear. Each row was a long oak desk and bench, with a right side and a left side created by a single aisle going up the middle.

On Monday I was studying in the café and at 8:50 was about to go to the first class, when I saw an older woman in the classic female Italian outfit: mid-length skirt, one-inch heel leather boots, and a high-quality sweater. As she approached the café, the barista put down his current order and went right to work on an espresso. She took the espresso, added a lot of sugar and quickly stirred it in. She swallowed the espresso in two quick sips, and then walked up the stairs. By then it was 8:55 and I followed her, since she must have been the teacher. I remember at UVa when I saw students at 8 a.m. classes with black coffee and glazed donuts, but to ingest that much caffeine and sugar so quickly was impressive.

The class, I would find out, would invariably start 10 minutes late each hour and so end 10 minutes late, no matter what happened. At first this bothered me, but soon I got into that time rhythm, in Italy you can't act German or you'll go crazy, you just build in a "late" factor for whatever you are trying to schedule.

The students were completely non-homogenous groups of nationalities and agendas. I'll summarize here but have more details on the ones I got to know better. There were Americans who didn't get into an American medical school but were trying to get into an Italian one, and so were serious in their studies. (In fact it was one of these students playing the Beethoven sonatas in the afternoon.) There was a group of three Germans, a male and female who were both good-looking and probably brother and sister, and another female who was pretty. There was Yappo from Gabon, always dressed in expensive clothes and probably on a study-vacation from a wealthy/high-level government family. He would always lapse into French when under stress. A fourth German was my apartment mate. There was a Dutch woman who didn't look Dutch, she had dark (i.e. dirty) colored blond hair. Her English and French were good so she was just picking up another language. There were two young Spanish women who would smell each other's armpits before class; this horrified me but it was what it was. Two women were from New Zealand. They were always together so you knew they wouldn't learn Italian that well.

Those who happened to be near my table/desk were Yutaca (male) and Iroko (female), who seemed to be in Italy for no real reason, I assumed they just wanted to be outside Japan for a while. From Cameroon (in West Africa like Gabon) were Francis and Flevius, who were fluent in French and English, and again I wasn't sure why they were there other than to be somewhere else.

S. Boriosi was obviously strong-willed and extremely knowledgeable, she reminded me of TBD, who wrote the series of *Le Truc* books on learning idioms in multiple languages, and *le truc* (the trick) was whatever helped you remember a vocabulary word or grammar rule.

S. Boriosi's discipline was like a good football defense: flexible until you crossed a line. One time the German male was asking out the third German female by talking over his sister. (I knew some German.) The third German female looked scared, and when S. Boriosi tapped her desk, meaning silence, the German male barked at her in German like an SS officer. I didn't understand, so it must have been gutter-level vocabulary. S. Boriosi walked over and yelled into his face a torrent of incomprehensible German like a higher-ranking SS officer. He was stunned and stopped talking. We then went back to the lesson.

The only times S. Boriosi was not high-energy was when she missed her 8:55 espresso. She would do her best, but at 9:55, instead of taking questions, she would quickly go down the stairs. One time I followed, and as soon as she entered the basement the barista dropped his order and made her espresso. I couldn't imagine being that dependent on caffeine, but I hadn't been in a true office environment yet.

The first two weeks I was pretty focused on studying in the afternoon, unlike many students I didn't need a long afternoon nap. It was also easy to study in the few cafes that were open in the mid-afternoon. Like P.K. Rowling, every student knew how to nurse a cup of coffee and get a few hours of work in. (I wonder if that world is also coming to an end, since for franchise coffee houses this is not cost-efficient.) It is true that you take to a language quickly if you are surrounded by it and so it isn't abstract. Also, S. Boriosi's book had you able to ask questions and learn vocabulary quickly.

I also got to know the students that sat near me, since we would chat between class or go to the *Mensa* for lunch or dinner.

Getting to know Yutaca and Iroko was an interesting look into Japanese culture, but first of all since they spoke no English we had to speak in Italian, so our Italian improved quickly. He and Iroko were not boyfriend and girlfriend or related, but somehow he was responsible for her. He was staying at the main youth hostel while she had a nice apartment room. Yet he was the one always worrying about money, he was proud when he could say "*Ho smesso di spendere dinaro,*" or, "I've ceased spending money." They would spend hours studying Italian but rarely traveled. One day Yutaca invited me to see a Japanese friend who had his own place. It was a studio apartment, and when Yutaca introduced me he mentioned his friend had already been here two years. We spent the afternoon listening to cassette tapes of Mozart piano concertos, drinking black coffee every time the *cafetiera* would boil, and looking at the friend's travel pictures. He was proudest of the one where he was standing next to Kierkegaard's grave, so he really was in some sort of Western existential state. I was naïve and assumed all students eventually got some type of job and settled down. I viewed studying abroad as a time of learning but also as a "time-out" in life, like paddling behind a large rock in a river with large rapids; eventually you would have to peel out of the eddy and keep going downstream. I didn't realize that even 40 years ago there was a large segment of young people who would become perpetual students since there were no jobs for them; that segment is now an army. But I did get a look at that segment when I visited Firenze, coming up later.

The German who was my apartment mate could have been the inspiration for the *Saturday Night Live* skit "Sprockets." He took himself very seriously and thought anything he said was profound. He wore the standard German student outfit: black sweater, black pants, black shoes or boots, and a dark leather jacket that he wore when he went out, regardless of the weather. He would close himself in his room for hours studying while smoking unfiltered cigarettes. I once proposed he try out S. Boriosi's method for teaching me German. It started out ok but when I made the first mistake, he yelled "Nein!" and talked louder. I finally said "*Das ist genug*" (that's enough), and realized some aspects of the German character are eternal.

MissChianti was fine as far as landlords were concerned, and since I was quiet and studious I didn't bother her. But she did bother me, when on the first Wednesday evening I was there she went *pazza* (crazy), and went into the kitchen talking to the furniture and dishes as if they were people. I thought it was just a bad moment, but the next Wednesday evening she did it again, which really spooked me.

But talking about MissChianti's behavior gave me a subject to talk about with the two females at the other end of the apartment. My Italian by now was to the point where I could converse fairly well with a native speaker, and while one of the females was quiet, the other more talkative one was Marisa, and we immediately clicked. She had a natural energy (what Italians call *slancio di vita*), but was not obnoxious, so talking to her was great fun. When I mentioned MissChianti's behavior, she assumed it was probably when she received the news her husband had been killed in WWII. I asked Marisa why she didn't see a psychiatrist and she responded with the Italian idiom "*Dai!*" meaning "You're kidding!"

In any case we would have a long chat a few times a week, and if the weather was nice we would go out for a walk. She was from Gubbio and was studying pharmacology, which I found relieving since with this she could get a job. I noticed there were law offices everywhere, and I read later Italy had the highest per-capita number of lawyers in Western Europe, in contrast to Japan which had the lowest. (But maybe the U.S. has caught up. I remember hearing on public radio that after 9/11 there was a surge in graduate school applications, with the highest number in law. That's a set-up for a lot of

comedy routines.) In any event talking with Marisa was great for my Italian, and like most young people there were a handful of idioms that made up 30% of their conversation. The one I heard over and over from her and other young Italians was *Che macello!*, meaning literally *What a massacre!* to describe any funny or tragic situation. For fun I walked her through the first 20 pages of S Boriosi's book that I changed to English. I stressed that learning English would help her down the road, and she agreed to get around to it.

I think we both saw in each other the "Front of Bender's" aspect of our relationship, in that it was too enjoyable to be spoiled by anything sexual, and in Italy at that time to do anything at our age was simply out of the question. Then again, I'm probably naïve since I couldn't believe what was being described at Amanda Knox's trial. Marisa would even invite me into her room where she was always dressed in leotards. She had a lithe beautiful body, but knew that with me she was safe.

The one time we traveled together was a day trip to Firenze sponsored by the University, for \$20 you got a round trip by bus and a tour guide who took you all over the city. On the bus, Marisa asked where and when the bus would depart to go back to Perugia, and when we got off at the first stop (the Brunelleschi Dome), she said we could go off and tour the sites ourselves. We did the Duomo and the Ghiberti doors with the group, but then we walked to the Uffizi gallery. She insisted she was a better tour guide than the one we had, and I wasn't going to disagree. I can still remember her lecture on Giotto and the part of the gallery that goes from no *chiaroscuro* (shadow to create depth) through Giotto, where *chiaroscuro* is now in almost every painting.

In the middle of the afternoon there was a communist (?) rally back near il Duomo. A motley crew of maybe 500 people walked through the streets, carrying various banners but Marisa said all far left parties revolved around the phrase "*La lotta continua,*" or "The struggle continues." This motto was in fact used in almost all southern European far-left parties in the local language. But from the people in the rally, it wasn't clear what they were struggling against or what they were struggling for, especially when I saw a woman dressed all in black holding up a portrait of Mao; how exactly was a peasant Chinese-style communist revolution going to happen here? But with Marisa it was just part of living in Italy and so we laughed about it. Somewhere I have a photo of that rally, there wasn't much light and the camera was not steady, but I'll see if I can dig it up.

We joined the bus in the early evening after a bite at the café. She didn't eat much, or maybe I was too American. As we were boarding the bus everyone was in a good mood, and so I squeezed her hand and she squeezed back; we both sort of knew it would never get better than this for the two of us.

I took other day trips sponsored by the University and toured Assisi (again), Siena, Spoleto, etc. I knew I would have to come back to Italy in the near future and tour by myself so I could spend more time.

I did take a full weekend to visit Rome as well as Venice. I'm glad when youth is not wasted on the youth; I knew the history of both cities and could walk for hours touring the sites I had studied. When I arrived at the Rome train station the first site I had to see was the Pantheon. It was on the cover of my Western Civilization book, and I wanted to compare this picture to what I would see. It didn't disappoint, as it was a clear day, and although there was no longer marble, the "*occulo*" illuminated the space to add a sense of dimension. I then went to all the usual sites, and I do want to revisit the Sistine Chapel since I have read the restoration shows the true greatness of the work. I also took a long walk



along the Tiber River early Sunday morning, and was struck by all the single rowing shells. I thought how great it would be to work here, be close to such sites, and be able to row as well.

I didn't get to Venice until early December, and the weather made the trip both beautiful and troubling, as the train arrived Friday night in a cold winter fog. This was the first winter-like weather I had seen, and the cold went right through me. But the trip from the station to San Marco Square by one of the boat-taxis (*i vaporetti*) was wonderful, as Venice loomed up in the fog like in a dream. I had visited Venice when I was ten with my parents, but now I saw it as an historian, knowing how Venice went from the richest place on earth to now, where the politics to save the city can be seen as high tragedy or low farce. I also remembered when I was here with my parents I was pickpocketed in San Marco Square, so for once I wore a money belt.

One great opportunity living in a place like Perugia was the large number of concerts you could see for very little money as a student. Every Wednesday night there was a recital in the hall, and I ended up going to almost all of them, especially since Wednesday night was MissChianti's mad scene. Quite a few pianists came through, but the one who truly impressed me was a Soviet pianist who was doing a brief tour of the West, and then going back. He may not have been Sviatoslav Richter, another Soviet pianist who played in the West later in his career, but it was pretty close. He played *Petrouchka*, the same piece I heard when I first arrived, but it had an urgency and energy that jumped out at you. He played both Chopin piano sonatas as well, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> sonata again was nothing like the American, he played the piece slower and yet you could hear all the notes and harmonies so it didn't sound slow, something I heard at another concert a few weeks later. When he finished there was a standing ovation and shouts of "*Bis!*" (Encore!), but he shook his head and walked off, too exhausted to continue.

In one concert I saw how Italians show displeasure in the musical piece selected. A two-piano recital featured a variety of works, such as Brahms' *Piano Quintet in F Minor* as written for two pianos, which the audience found exciting. In the second half of the concert, however, one of the pieces was a two-piano sonata by Pierre Boulez, a modern composer, and while it wasn't a 12-tone piece it was pretty close. A group of old women near the front very quietly but definitely rolled pieces of cellophane in their hands for the entire piece, which must have perturbed the pianists, but they carried on.

On a side note, while people told me when I was growing up that the era of great pianists was over, this is one area I have real optimism. I think right now is the greatest ever era of pianists, but like Zen and the tree falling, the culture does not hear it. I find it interesting that the two greatest pianists today (at least for me) are Periah and Pollini, and one was championed by Horowitz and the other by Rubinstein. Both Periah and Pollini have combined Horowitz's keyboard skills and Rubinstein's musicianship. In fact, the last piano recital I attended was Pollini in Munich, and it was in some ways like the recital I heard by the Soviet pianist in Perugia 30 years before. The one difference was the price, \$50 instead of \$1, although there were some young people (obviously piano students) in the back of the stage, I assume for free. The first half was all of Beethoven's Bagatelles, a chance for Pollini to show he was a master of early and middle Beethoven. For the second half he played Beethoven's Diabelli Variations. It is one of the greatest but most difficult of all piano works and so it is rarely played. Pollini took the entire audience through the work, almost 30 minutes, but his playing and our attention never flagged. At the end we were all on our feet cheering, realizing what a great performance we had heard, but like the Soviet pianist he shook his head to an encore and walked off stage, exhausted.

I also saw a number of symphonies and piano concertos in the larger hall, but the one I will remember forever was the Moscow Symphony with Kondrashin, who had conducted with Van Cliburn during the 1958 Tchaikovsky competition. Like many older great artists, his tempo for pieces was slower than before, but the clarity of the melody and harmonies was more deliberate, so the pieces actually sounded at the “right” tempo since there was so much to listen for and absorb. His playing of Prokofiev’s *Symphony #1 (“Classical”)* was like this, and the effect was magical.

There was also an almost-hidden movie theater called the *Cento Cinquanta*, or 150, the number of lira it cost for a ticket (about 25 cents, so I was back at the Langley theater in Hampton in my childhood). They played either silent films with the subtitles in Italian or dubbed early sound films. Many times, Yutaca and Iroko would come along, as it was within their budget. Quite a long way from taking children out to see *Frozen*.

As the fall semester was winding down, some friendships altered how I would spend the winter. I had become good friends with Francis and Flevius. During the summer, they had lived in a nice apartment but into the Fall they moved to the youth hostel, which was quite large for a town this size. I didn’t ask why they moved, but I learned later that Flevius had entrusted a large sum of money to a distant member of his extended family, and the money had disappeared. (I would see another version of how money disappears in a film I saw during Peace Corps training.) I would visit the hostel and sometimes Marisa would come with me; unlike many Italians she had an openness and kindness to strangers. One example of this being a lost world was when I was there with Marisa and there was a large black and white TV in the meal room, and it had been set up to show the Ali-Frazier fight, the Thrilla in Manila. We joined Francis and Flevius, and I tried explaining to her in Italian why this fight was highly anticipated, and it was indeed a great fight to watch. All for free, and for food of course was biscotti and Nutella.

In any case they were barely getting by, and so I “loaned” them enough money to stay at the hostel through Christmas. I also decided I would make December my last month with MissChianti and would join them in the hostel. Life would be more difficult at the hostel; you had to leave at 10 a.m. and not come back until 4, and there was rarely hot water. I would also spend a lot less money. But the real reason of course was that I knew Marisa and I had to go our separate ways. We had a lot of fun but she needed to meet Italian men (some of whom would be cads), and I needed to get out of the way.

As we got into December and Christmas approached, it was interesting to see how some situations resolved. I saw the Dutch woman had an Italian boyfriend, or at least I saw them in a semi-erotic embrace like the other couples at the park at the end of il Corso Vanucci. (I saw the same embrace when I saw young Chinese couples in Shanghai eight years later.) The last time I saw her was right after our final exam, she mentioned she had a train to catch and off she went. I hope she and the Italian got out of their relationship what each wanted. The New Zealand women were leaving as well. I would have liked to have gotten to know one of them, since she was smarter and funnier than me, but they were a true team and they left together, still not speaking real Italian. Yappo was going back to Gabon, well-dressed as ever in winter clothes and still speaking mainly in French.

I also received a letter (on actual paper) from my parents, and they had decided to visit London during Christmas and I should come up as well. England in the winter is not that great (you should either go to Scotland for a real winter or leave), but I booked a train and sent a letter back saying when and at what train station I would be arriving at. Since I had given a large sum of money to Flevius, I

didn't have much money left after paying the train ticket, but simple food was cheap. I bought a large loaf of bread and various local cheeses and spreads, and made it last the 20 hours it took to get from Perugia to London.

There was a gap of a few hours between trains at Paris, and I saw on one the old cylinder kiosks a poster for a concert by Rubinstein, the Beethoven piano concerto #3. I had seen many concerts, but would have traded them all to see this one, since these were obviously the last concerts he would be playing. (In fact I just heard on the radio his last recording of the concerto with Barenboim, and while in some ways eccentric, like Horowitz toward the end, the cadenza is much slower and you finally hear the harmonies you normally miss. I did get to see Horowitz at the DAR hall in D.C. in 1978, thanks to Paul Handley and the fact that a normal person back then could still attend these types of concerts.)

I met my father in London and we went to a Holiday Inn where my parents were staying and it was actually a pretty nice hotel. I mentioned it was expensive, but Dad said sending me to Italy was so much cheaper than UVa that it was affordable. But again my father was too naïve about money, assets, and taking the long-term view, as explained in the Epilogue.

Returning from Perugia in January, you felt the difference in the atmosphere. Although it never got bitterly cold, there were days when it was 5°C (upper thirties) and raining all day. On those days one is thankful if one is healthy and has healthy joints.

I went to the hostel and paid one month's rent. I chose a semi-private area (four beds), and asked Francis and Flevis to join me and I would pay the difference. (Like any dorm or military barracks, sleeping next to certain people can wreck your sleeping habits.) I asked them how was Christmas, and they said everyone left the hostel when they had to, 10 a.m., sat on the city hall steps until 4, and then went back in.

I went to the University to ensure I was enrolled in the history, literature, and art history classes, all taught in Italian, and so I had to learn a lot of vocabulary fast. But the courses were well-taught, especially history. I nicknamed the professor "*lo spettacolo*" or the spectacle, like the barista his energy during the presentation kept you on your toes, and he would gladly explain (in Italian, of course) any vocabulary questions you had. If only life could be like that, a Fellini movie where you are truly learning new things.

Since you could not return to the hostel until 4, I stayed at the university building during the siesta period, 1 to 3. In cold weather, taking any sort of nap doesn't make sense. Aula 23 was not being used at all and so was unheated. But I still wanted to work on the Chopin etudes. Luckily, there was a restroom that had an electric hand dryer, which was a mistake for the university. I would place my hands under the dryer until they were almost sweating, then practice until my fingers were going numb, and then repeat the process. I probably caused a bump in their electric bill, but that floor was deserted and so nobody caught me. On the coldest days I could see my breath, and I wondered how pianists practiced in northern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the winter. I need to research the film *The Pianist*, since in the film Adrien Brody plays Chopin's *First Ballade*, a fairly long and difficult piece, for a German officer in a bombed-out building in Warsaw in January. I simply don't see how he could have done it. If I were the screenwriter, I would have him play Chopin's *Mazurka #41*, one of his last works. In two pages Chopin captures every human emotion

I got to the point where I could play the etudes at quarter speed, and thought that while it may take decades, certainly in retirement I could get back to these. The irony is I have the time but cannot sit at a piano.

Another way I spent free time in the winter was at the indoor community pool, sort of like the YMCA, twice a week. It was a 20-minute bus ride each way and I swam 45 minutes, but I could take a hot shower and a shave. For a student the total cost was about 1200 lire (two dollars). It helped make living long-term at the hostel tolerable, and to this day I use my Y membership to shower and shave as much as to swim.

I still visited other cities on the weekends, almost all in the south, but in winter Italy is not a place to travel; the hours of sites were drastically curtailed, and the weather was not that different than in the north. It seemed like everyone was marking time, trying to survive until the warm weather returned and you once again could sit at an outdoor café.

But in the indoors of cafes I saw Italians spend a lot of time and money they didn't have on *futbol* (soccer) matches. Italians are crazy about *futbol* and can talk for hours on end about a game (with ESPN we have caught up with them). It made me sad watching Italians of lower social classes spend money on government sponsored betting forms, called *totocalcio* or all soccer. I was naïve, and in Virginia there had been no lottery system yet. I couldn't believe people would spend money to fill out forms where you had to guess the winner of all the matches as well as the difference in team scores (the spread), making the odds of winning millions to one. Being older I am more cynical and see all governments taxing the lower classes, since politicians dare not ask money from the wealthy. But I guess the desperate desire for the disenfranchised to be wealthy is universal; 35 years later when we had to evict a tenant from the farmhouse for not paying rent, amongst the trash left behind was a pile of lottery tickets.

I enjoyed the classes and took the exams in mid-April. Since the summer session started the first week in June, it made sense to leave. My parents agreed to support me until the end of May, so I decided to spend a month in Paris to get it out of my system. There was so much I wanted to see in Paris and now was the time. Luckily, Hitler's order to reduce Paris to rubble (see the book *Is Paris Burning?*) was not obeyed, and it was one of the few great European cities to survive WWII fairly intact.

**Note:** The other two cities to survive are Prague and Krakow; by the time I got to Prague, Havel's jail cell was a \$200 a night room, but I did see Krakow before the hordes of tourists (especially the English) discovered it. Standing in the main square of Krakow is when it truly hit me just what Hitler had destroyed and how could a culture allow him to come to power. When I was a child on campus, certain teachers would say Berlin was the greatest city in Europe, but it was also where the greatest evil was allowed.

As I packed up to leave Perugia, I said goodbye to Flevius and Francis and wished them well. They were trying to enroll in various colleges in Perugia as well as other Italian cities, but in my American mind it just seemed strange that a large segment of a population were essentially professional students, with little prospect of finding a job. Of course, not only does this class exist, but it has exploded in the last few decades.

I also took a few final walks *su e giu il Corso Vanucci* and one time saw Marisa with an Italian student. We said ciao and exchanged pleasantries, and she told the good-looking male companion that

we met at the university a few times last fall. It was all very cordial, but it was good to see her with an Italian male, probably one of many suitors who were all better looking than me.

My time in Paris did indeed allow me to get the city out of my system. I took the advanced grammar class at the *Alliance Française* from 9 to 12 and was free the rest of the day. I guess the German in me took over, the Michelin Guide to Paris has 16 walking tours, each taking four to five hours, and I took them all. While not as cheap as Perugia, I saw classic French movies at the Trocadero, and Stravinsky ballets at L'Opera. (The beginning of *Petrouchka* almost overwhelms your senses.) Paris in the mid-70's was changing, but there was still enough left to go back in time.

I also visited the cemeteries. It may be ghoulish, but I have always found peace in cemeteries, looking at tombstones and figuring out at what age they died versus my own at the time. And in Paris you can spend all day at gravesites, not only visiting the graves of those you have studied, but realizing who has stood where you are standing, such as the grave of Chopin at Père Lachaise. I at last got to see Eloise and Abelard, seeing that doomed relationships didn't pertain only to me. At Les Invalides I stood exactly where Hitler stood as he gazed at Napoleon's tomb, about to make the same mistakes, and surpass Napoleon on the death and destruction he would cause right up until his suicide.

With Paris finally out of my system, I took a train to Milano, went to an Al Italia airline office, and easily reserved a flight returning to JFK in two days. Things were a lot more civil, even for those of us in steerage, when the airlines were regulated. (With the web it's all changed; after de-regulation there were flights that were initially too cheap; now flying is exhausting and stressful, the airlines are almost always in debt, tickets are once more expensive, but some web-service travel sites have made a few people very wealthy.) With two days there was enough time to see some local sites and the *Last Supper*. Like the Giotto works at Assisi, I am glad I got to see this work before restoration, since all I had to do was take a bus to the *Santa Maria delle Grazie Chiesa* (church), buy a ticket, and walk in. Now you must reserve a ticket well in advance and enter an enclosed climate-controlled room. I know it was necessary, but someone else can go experience this. I remember a photo in WWII when the church was basically flattened but the wall with the *Last Supper* was still standing; I wonder if the traffic and modern pollution accelerated its deterioration.

The return flight home was uneventful, but the economic conditions at home had changed, unbeknownst to me. (This would happen again when I returned from Saudi Arabia.) The summer before I left, I knew relations between my father and the new president were strained, and I never could figure out why, and neither could my father. (Dad's relation to the previous president, Dr. Holland, was good and I got along with their children). It was the first time I saw my father act irrationally because of politics (although when I became a manager many years later I was caught in some absurd situations). He got upset when I picked him up at his office and went 10 feet down a one-way road, which everybody did, because he was scared Hudson would notice. Whatever the reason, my father resigned (was fired) as Dean of Faculty by the College Board, members of which in the past supported Dad. Here is a case where despite its critics, tenure does save careers and families; he was demoted back to full professor but (I assumed) would still get a decent salary. And there was only me in college, with the rent on the yellow house still cheap. And when I was with Mom and Dad on a train when I visited them in England over Christmas, Mom did put on her "get on with it" cheerfulness saying Dad still had a job and things would turn out okay.

But back at the yellow house one could sense that money was tight. Going to the Hampton bank, Dad asked me to hand over whatever money I had left. Dad could never say the truth about money, so I turned to Mom. Apparently about 6 months after my Dad resigned as Dean of Faculty, Hudson himself was fired by the board as they saw how incompetent he was. The forced resignation brought out the old-world side of mom, as she described how Mrs. Hudson “invited” Mom over to say goodbye, and how sorry she was things turned out the way she did. I could feel Mom’s anger under her words, I’m sure Mom wanted to slap her; it was the old-world protocol where the enfranchised person screwing you hopes that by being contrite you actually might feel sympathy for the screwer and not feel as bad being the screwee. Little did I realize I would play the part of Mom a number of times in my career.

I guess Dad was feeling the usual emotions of the disenfranchised—anger and despair—since he had applied for dean positions at other colleges and was turned down, probably because of his age (so this phenomenon of anyone over 50 being unemployable for any real job is not new). I saw his office, as he went from a large office with an admin to a cube. (I myself went through that, but my cynicism saw this as something I could write about some day.) And I guess (since nobody talked actual numbers), his actual salary was much lower than Dean of Faculty, maybe something Hudson engineered.

Luckily when I went to the campus library the staff said I could still work at the reference desk when the summer session started, so Hudson hadn’t poisoned everything. I thought of another summer retrieving and returning books in stacks, but a completely different job awaited me.

## Epilogue

After I finished college and Peace Corps, I had a few free months free before taking the Foreign Service Office (FSO) exam, since I came back from the Peace Corps in early September and the exam was the beginning of December. I thought this would be a good time for (another) European bicycle trip, so I contacted Kim about coming up, buying a bike, and then putting it back in its shipping box and going over, especially to Italy. I hadn't done much traveling on the northern coast (across from what was then Yugoslavia), and I wanted to revisit Perugia as well.

To get some exercise I bicycled a good bit of the Apennines. It may not be the Alps, but it was hard work. Life was still different than now, sometimes in the late afternoon I would just knock on the door of a monastery and ask if I could spend the night, and speaking Italian was probably what made this possible. I remember having dinner with a group of Catholic school boys on an immense table so we could all sit together. Until the Father showed up, kids were swearing and throwing bread at each other; Fellini's spirit was still alive.

I also knew a bit about Italian wines and would simply show up at a vineyard (somewhere I have some photos of the vines and grapes, the grapes are large but very dry). After chatting about the type of wine, I would ask for a sample and in what town I could buy its brand name. I would buy the bottle and put it in the middle of the clothes in my duffle bag. Luckily one never broke, and at the next *pensione* or hostel I would offer the wine as our drink for a meal. It generated good will, and back then some great Italian wines (such as *Machiavelli*) cost \$5.

I cycled to Perugia not knowing what to expect, but at least it was still September and the weather was perfect. I went back to the same *pensione* I started at 6 years ago and took my evening walk *su e giù il Corso Vanucci* while eating an ice cream cone.

The next day I went to MissChianti's apartment. MissChianti had died and the family of a relative was living there. They assumed she kept records of her tenants but had never found them. It was then on to the University, and I was shocked with what I saw. With the fall of the Shah there was a diaspora of Iranians who feared (rightly) the retribution and suppression of Khomeini. Many students both for and against the Shah were here, and slogans in Farsi were painted everywhere. I went down to the *Mensa* just for nostalgia, since I was no longer a student, and a fight broke out.

Going back to the classrooms, by some miracle I found S. Boriosi. She looked the same but a little wearier. She remembered some of our conversations between classes. I of course remembered all of them, especially when she would recount how so many great musicians had passed through Perugia. She did see Rubinstein a few times, but never Horowitz. She said those were the good old days, and after this year she was retiring. I told her about my time in the Peace Corps and that I used some of her language teaching ideas when needed, and she was glad that her methods worked in another language.

S. Boriosi was one of those Italian women I've always admired, not afraid of anything or anyone. When I had asked her years before what Italian journalist to read for simple, clear Italian, she responded Oriana Fallaci. I did read some of her articles, and would soon read her book *Intervista con la Storia* (Interview with History). Fallaci could be a little histrionic, but she was right (in my opinion) on the important issues and knew who or what was truly evil. She wrote in 1980 that Khomeini would rival Hitler in the poison and death he would unleash not only during his life but after his death. She caused a

stir when she said regardless of her personal position on abortion, the abortion of Hitler and Khomeini would have been the right thing to do, and this was before she interviewed Khomeini and made him laugh in disbelief when she refused to put a scarf over her head during the interview.

The strangest and most implausible reunion was with Flevius. I went to the hostel and assumed nobody would remember someone from hundreds of students ago, but the woman who still worked there remembered his name and even knew his address, as he had married an Italian woman and was living in an apartment about three blocks away. I found the apartment, knocked on his door, and there was Flevius. He hadn't aged a bit, and behind him was his wife. He was amazed to see me and said I could stay as long as I liked. (I had after all given him money at a crucial time). So the next few days always ended with a large meal and watching Italian TV. The wife's father was there as well, he looked frail and this was the old-world rest-home system at work.

I never got into too much detail, but Flevius really had integrated into his adopted home. I didn't ask much about how he met his wife and how he was able to become a citizen and have a job in an Italy where there are never enough jobs. But this was a time for nostalgia, and the wife was very nice to me, so maybe Flevius had told her about our history.

I also for diversion decided to spend one evening watching *The Empire Strikes Back* at the *Serinissima* film theater, a long way from the *Cento Cinquanta*. The film by now had been out a while, but the quality and dubbing was still very good. I had seen the film before, but for some reason only by watching it in Italian did the underlying themes of societal myths become obvious. I still remember vividly the line by Vader, "Obi-wan ti ha insegnato molto bene, veramente non hai paura."

Perhaps meeting the wife or talking about the past affected me, as one day I took a train to Gubbio and thought, if seeing Flevius was such a long-shot, maybe I would run into Marisa. Of course I didn't, but nostalgia must always include sadness.

As I planned my cycling trip along the northern coast, I asked Flevius about Francis, and he said they now and then exchanged letters. Francis was living in an apartment in Milano and trying to get into some type of cinema school. Francis was very smart so I couldn't understand why he would be studying the wrong subject at the wrong place. But I did get his address and promised I would see him before I left for the States.

Cycling up the coast was a lot of fun. I was lucky that my cycling trips in Europe were when all the M-roads (major freeways) had just truly replaced the A-roads (national two-lane highways). All the touring and high-speed drivers were on the M-roads, and the A-roads for a while went back in time about 20 years. (When I visited England in 1999, the A-12 road I used to cycle on when going out of London was now a clogged four-lane highway, so that era was over.)

The weather held and the main objective was Ravenna, which I hadn't visited before. Many Americans see history as Rome falls, the dark and middle ages are an interlude, and then the Renaissance has "progress" start up again. But the period 476-1400 was not when history stopped. The Byzantine church flourished and the Islamic Caliphate had its golden age. To an Osama Bin Laden, the Italian Renaissance was not a rebirth but a catastrophe, and only returning to the glory years of 632-1254 would the world be right again. (If you believe in the importance of history, I rarely hear mentioned that the caliphate ended when Genghis Khan's grandson captured Baghdad in 1254 and



killed close to one million men, women, and children. Yet you never hear about this as Islamic extremists cannot forgive what the Crusaders did in Jerusalem 150 years earlier.)

Anyway, Ravenna is a window into what happened after the Fall of Rome; it became the capital of the Byzantine Empire in Italy. Although it eventually went back to being controlled by the Pope, and Charlemagne took much of the art to Aachen when in 800 he claimed himself both Pope and head of the fictional Holy Roman Empire, it still had enough Byzantine art to be worth the trip. The mosaics are over 1000 years old (unlike Byzantine art in Russia), and the art and colors are at their zenith.

After Ravenna, it was on to Bologna to see the after-effects of the bombing of the train station. The Communist threat was still real and police with dogs were everywhere, walking among the flowers and cards on the platforms. Then finally to Milano to see Francis, the last person I would meet from my Italian student days. For some reason, I still remember the address, Via Marco Polo Nove (9).

It was fun and depressing to see Francis. Flevius had written and told him I would be arriving soon, so it was no surprise. But he lived in basically a garret with an old Italian man who made a living as a barber in the shop on the ground floor. We went around town and talked of old times, but I didn't see what future Francis had here, he was so smart and was living like this. He did mention that while visiting Venice a few years back he saw a very old Rubinstein sitting outside a café in the main San Marco square, and lying next to him was a homeless vagrant. I think every generation when visiting the places of their youth see how something has been lost.

Just before I left, the barber offered to shave me to get some money, and I agreed just for the experience. There is a resurgence of getting a "real" old-fashioned shave, and it is fun once in a while if someone else does it, since you want a professional passing the blade over your throat. The reason I remember the shave was the end, where he took a string, pulled it back and forth in his mouth, and then rubbed the string quite hard on my face. Not very hygienic, but my chin and face were perfectly smooth.

And that was the end of my return to Italy. I thought that I would pass the FSO oral exam and maybe someday go back to Rome at the embassy, even rowing a shell on the weekend. But that did not happen, and I've never been to Italy since.

When I went back to UVa, I did take another Italian class with Langbaum, and she was almost like a Rosina Lhévinne in her kindness and generosity. It doesn't surprise me that she lived to be 88, dying in 2010 in Charlottesville and having her obituary in *The New York Times*.

*PS Note – On more of a rant, the US job market in the world economy has evolved to the point that employers blame schools for not providing students that are "ready" for the jobs they advertise. But in reality what both schools and employers want is to avoid spending real resources to prepare young people for real jobs (enough salary and benefits to have middle-class beliefs and politics). A concise essay on this is "Mind the Gap" by James Surowiecki in the New Yorker.*

*I laughed when I read an interview with Eisner, the former CEO of Disney, his ideal employee would have a true special skill but a broad background in many areas so he could work well on teams. We have come full circle; in the end there is no short-cut to a real education. I could write another 10 pages on this subject, and quote mostly forgotten authors such as Weber, Spengler, Popper, Schumpeter, etc. But I'll save that for another story if anyone shows interest and wants to hear what happens when Big Data meets Creative Destruction.*