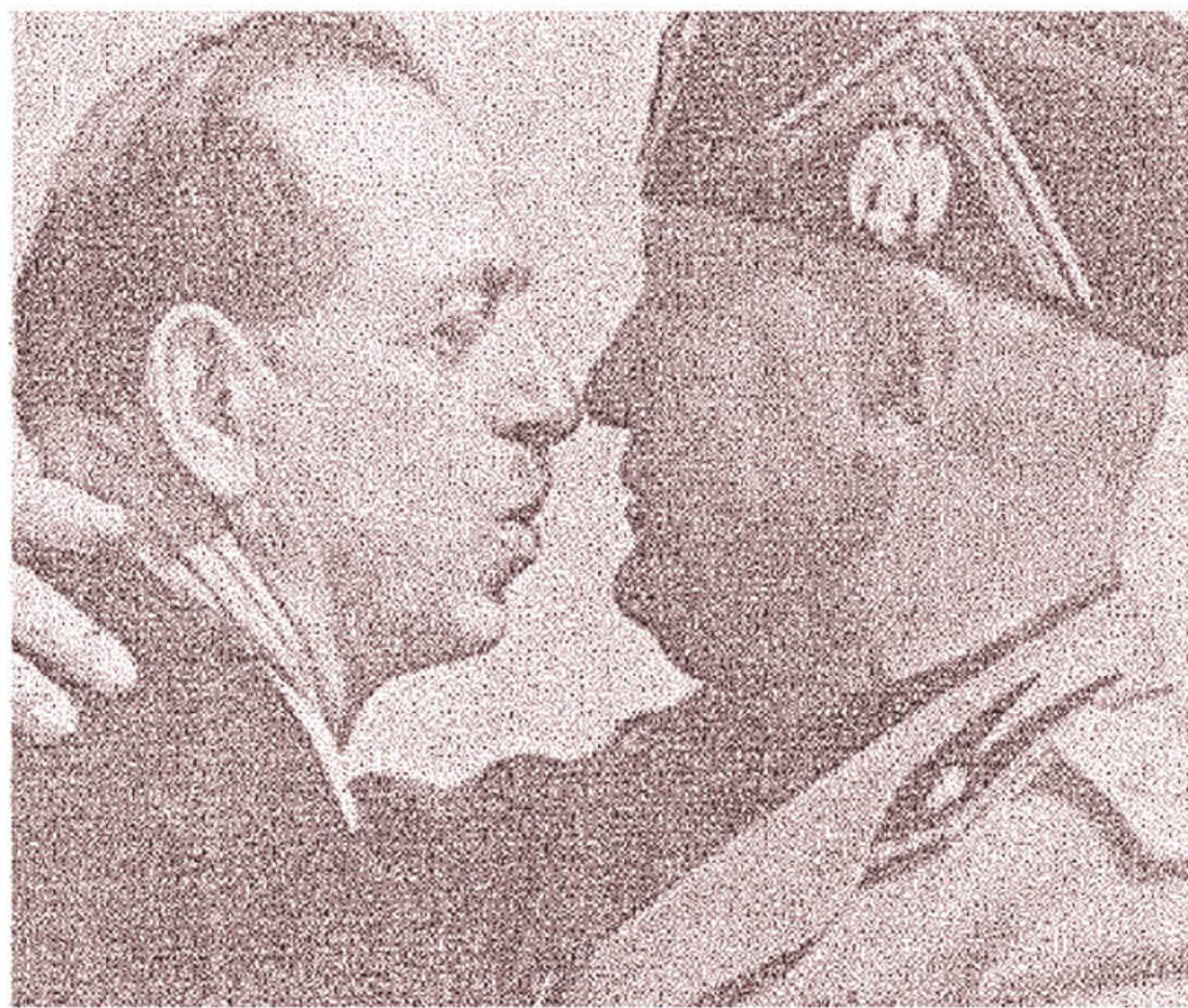


KEN

July 28, 1938

p.22

I WANTED TO GO TO ITALY



Foreign born sons don't all get kissed on the nose

Bella Italia! A marvelous country, Italia, but you'd better not go there if your father was a subject of Vittorio Emanuele who neglected to take out his U. S. citizenship papers. Unless, of course, you're willing to be shanghaied for one of Mussolini's wars. The State Department will tell you to get a "safe-conduct" from the Consolato Italiano—but just try to get one. The exploits of one American citizen whom Mussolini regards as a son of Italy rival the exploits of Tantalus.

BY GUIDO D'AGOSTINO

It all started with the little booklet given to bearers of passports by the State Department. In it I found out that because my father never became a naturalized American, I am considered a citizen of two countries, subject in Italy to military laws and the possibility of being held for service while traveling there, unless provided with a special "safe-conduct" by the Italian Consulate.

That had never occurred to me. Going to Italy meant simply jumping on a boat when I had the money, no more; and as no visa was necessary I would have done exactly that. Only it happened that when I wanted to go to Italy there were stories about Italian laborers and craftsmen virtually shanghaied by the fascists for the Spanish war. I found myself growing military-service-conscious.

OldMagazineArticles.com

Shangheid in Italy

Walking into the offices of the Italian Consulate General in New York one afternoon, I stood behind a counter and explained the situation to one of the clerks. I wanted to visit Italy, Sicily to be precise, only my father for one reason or another had neglected to become an American citizen. That was enough. He didn't give me a chance to go further, becoming very chummy. So long as I was going to Sicily, what a pity not to visit the continent! From that he went into an ecstatic description of the beauty of the country and wonders wrought by the Mussolini regime. "No visa or anything. Go ahead. *Bella Italia!* A marvelous country *Italia*, you will see—"

I interrupted gracefully. I knew all that. Only in the State Department's little booklet it said something about a paper of "safe-conduct."

He flourished his hand in the air. Thousands of Italo-Americans like myself plied back and forth from Italy every month and here I was worrying about a "safe-conduct." He almost made me feel ashamed. But in the booklet it said to be sure to get this paper and I was still thinking of the war in Spain and General Franco and myself young and healthy and just the right size. I insisted.

"I tell you, you do not need this thing."

"But I want it anyway."

It seemed I was trying his patience. He turned to another clerk, fat, pasty of complexion from eating too much spaghetti, and asked him what I had to do. The second clerk without even bothering to look at me mumbled a question in Italian.

"No," I broke in, "my birth has never been registered in Italy. See! it says here in the passport I was born in New York. Why should I be registered in Italy?"

That put an end to it. So long as I wasn't registered in Italy they couldn't issue a "safe-conduct." The second clerk said to the first, "He has to come here with two birth certificates so we can register him."

"But I don't want to be registered in Italy! I'm an American, can't you understand? I just want to make a little trip and the booklet says to get myself this paper. Or doesn't the American Government know what it's talking about when it issues these things?"

The first clerk drew himself up haughtily.

"This is the *Consolato Italiano*. We

Shangheid in Italy

know what we know about our own country. About the United States?—” he shrugged a shoulder.

It was the law they couldn't issue a "safe-conduct" unless I was registered; and if I wasn't registered, then I didn't need the paper in the first place: it was all so absurd and out of reason. . . .

He had me convinced. I was just making a mountain out of nothing. I started to walk out, thankful to get out of range of the derisive glances coming from every direction. At the door, however, something occurred to me and I went back.

"All I want to know is what happens in the case of a general mobilization while I find myself in Italy?"

The second clerk came suddenly to life. He puffed out his cheeks, assumed the air of an outraged patriot, and cried:

"When it comes to defend the Flag everybody goes! Nobody stays home. You go too because you are an Italian!"

The first clerk immediately went to work scoffing such a possibility. But I had heard enough.

I WROTE to the Department of State and received a pleasantly informative letter from the Chief of the Passport Division. In substance:—The Italian Civil Code in effect at the time of my birth contained a provision reading, "A child whose father is a citizen is a citizen." However, pursuant to Article VII of the Italian Nationality Law and Article V of Royal Decree No. 949, which the Department understood to be still in force, it was possible for me to divest myself of Italian nationality upon coming of age. I was advised to return to the Consulate and inform myself as to the proper procedure in obtaining this renunciation and, if denied, to report to the Department on what grounds I was held ineligible to make it. Without the renunciation I had no assurance whatever of not being held for military service while visiting Italy. And in such case, diplomatic representation made in my behalf by United States authorities might or might not prove effective because of absence of an inappropriate treaty.

I saw the death of all my fears with the simple expedient of a renunciation of Italian nationality. Armed with the Law of Italy itself I returned to the Consulate and planked myself down in front of the original clerk the

Shangheid in Italy

second time. When I finished explaining my business he looked at me, incredulous. "Renunciation of citizenship! A paper to say you are not a citizen!"—he never heard of such a thing. I was just coming back to create more disturbance by insisting on papers I didn't need and didn't ex-

"I don't care what you know it's what you've heard! It's the Italian Law. According to Royal Decree No. 949—" I went through the edict and learned by heart.

The clerk was mystified. The nature of the problem involved higher authority than his. He took me out to the reception-room to arrange an interview with the Vice Consul.

His manner was affable, delightful. Like the clerk, his conversation immediately turned to Italy; and when he talked your mouth watered and yet felt a nostalgic pain for sight of the land you'd never seen. But when he came to the question of a renunciation it was as if a kink came into his brain.

In vain I brought out a page from my letter, with the Department of State emblem at the top and the Italian laws neatly typed out, and suffered him to read. One minute he understood nothing, the next he understood everything and twisted things around to mean something else, making out was I who didn't know what I was talking about. It was a hell of a mix-up up for a while. I got annoyed and said I wasn't a dope and the same was true for the State Department and the words meant only one thing. What I wanted to know and hear from his own lips was, could I or couldn't divest myself of Italian nationality. The argument became heated, I could be heard all over the Consulate. Finally, I got too much on his nerves. In order to be rid of me he went and took the matter up with someone in another office.

A little later I was sitting across the desk from a tall, good-looking Italian whose position at the Consulate must have been considerable judging by the deference shown by the others. In a sullen mood I started my story over again from beginning to end. The man listened patiently. When I concluded, he simply spread out his palms and said in perfect English:

"Of course you may divest yourself of the claim Italy has on you, why not?"

The reply left me stupefied. I stammered, "But the clerks? The Vice

Shangheid in Italy

Consul? All the fuss . . .”

He smiled good-naturedly, consigning all unpleasantness to some scape-goat limbo of misunderstanding. To be sure, it was ridiculous and unnecessary on my part to go through all the bother and work myself into such a sweat; but the law was the law! And as for going through with the procedure—well, it was up to me. Only, I must understand, such a renunciation involved considerable expense—considerable! There was documentation, Royal Seals, taxes, stamps, etc., etc. . . .

The tone of his voice when he said, “considerable” made my heart sink. With a modest purse and the implication of this word hanging over my head there wasn’t much left to do. Were it not I had made up my mind to supply the State Department with as much information as possible concerning the “horse-play” attending such a renunciation, I would have picked up my hat, made my excuses, and taken exit. But a sort of obligation to find out something definite persisted. In the end I could admit the expense was not within means, and thus, supplied with details spare some future traveler in similar predicament the waste of time and annoyance involved in this “Comedy of Manners” at the Italian Consulate.

To a mumble of something about clarifying the amount, he simply screwed up his face, the better to emphasize the enormity of the sum.

“For some people I’ve seen in here two dollars may be considerable,” I said. “How much exactly do you mean?”

This question terminated my interview here. So long as I was still determined, the matter was out of his hands and into those of the legal department. Without a word he marched me down the hall to a third office where I awaited the pleasure of the legal advisor while he busily applied himself to the tribulations of a couple of workmen who, in their timidity, their desire to be respectful, hashed a monosyllabic English and a dialect Italian into a painful mixture.

Faithful to the Colors the lawyer did his little bit to dissuade me from the folly and unnecessary expense of a renunciation. But, being aware of the rumpus I already caused and figuring me to be a little crazy, he cut it short. Ignoring my reiteration of, “How much? I want to know how

Shangheid in Italy

much?" he called in a woman from still another corner of the Consulate and had her run back and forth several times with various papers while he delved into a book at his elbow. As yet I didn't know anything at all about price. A vision came to me of them settling the thing right there, and then slapping me with a bill for a couple of hundred dollars.

But it is not such a simple matter, this question of a renunciation, that it can be settled in a few minutes. When agreed on all points the lawyer turned to me. I was to present myself one week from date at ten-thirty in the morning to the woman in her office; I was to bring with me two witnesses who had known me for at least five years; papers of identification; my family history, and so on. Meanwhile, three lengthy copies of the renunciation were to be drafted: one to remain at the Consulate, the other for the civil registers of the Kingdom, and the third to be retained by me. At ten-thirty sharp on the appointed day all would be ready. . . .

And the cost, the charge for all this, would run—yes—about seventeen dollars and fifty cents!

I HAD put it over. After next week I could go anywhere on Italian soil, stay as long as I pleased, without the bugaboo of the fascist army to disturb my peace of mind. Early on the morning of the appointed day I gathered all my papers together and went looking for a couple of witnesses. At exactly ten-thirty I showed up at the Consulate with Henri Burkhard, the painter, and Pierre Simonet, the illustrator.

In a little cubicle of an office near the entrance the woman I was supposed to see stood talking to someone across a counter. We all moved in and sat down. Ten minutes, 15, 20 minutes went by. My witnesses began to grumble, while I worked up to that sickening feeling that things weren't going to turn out rosy after all.

I intruded and asked the woman if she didn't remember she had an appointment with me at ten-thirty. She looked at me positively annoyed, without a trace of recognition. I repeated testily all about the appointment and the papers which were to have been drawn up. She rudely turned her back and looked for the notation on her calendar. It was there. Without any comment she barged out

Shangheid in Italy

of the office leaving us to stare at the ceiling for another full 20 minutes. My friends were becoming uncontrollable; I had difficulty to keep them from walking out. It ceased to be funny.

When the woman returned she held out a little book and said, "There seems to be some difficulty in your case. We can't issue papers of renunciation unless you pay up all back personal taxes to the Italian Government."

"What taxes?" I cried. "What are you talking about? What have I got to do with personal taxes to Italy?"

She grew indignant. "I pay taxes. Every Italian pays personal taxes. Why shouldn't you?"

I lost my head completely. I began to shout while a crowd of employees gathered outside the door. My witnesses squirmed. I shouted I had had enough; I wanted to speak to someone who knew what it was all about before I lost my mind. The woman beat a retreat and came running back with the Vice Consul. I sailed into the Vice Consul.

"What do you call this? You say one thing, some one else says something else. Then the lawyer fixes everything for this morning with this woman. I make two witnesses lose a half a day and now she tells me I can't have the papers unless I pay up back taxes to Italy. Is it some kind of a game, or what?"

The Vice Consul calmly studied his finger tips, waiting for me to finish. "Is the law you have to pay the taxes. Is not much, maybe six or seven dollar."

"All right—and if I pay the taxes?"

He threw his hands up in the air. "What is the use? You make all this trouble. You become all excited. You do not need this paper."

I motioned to my witnesses and moved to go. As a parting shot:

"I get all excited! I don't need the papers! You mean you don't want to give them to me, that's it! Well, the Department of State in Washington will hear about this . . . !!"

This mention roused him from his torpor; he yelled back:

"Is a lie! You say a lie! I did not say that. I say, what is the use! Maybe the papers take three months, maybe six, maybe one year to go to Italy. What is the use, papers like that?"

IN a letter from Washington I was informed that the Department had suggested to numerous persons whose

Shangheid in Italy

status was similar to my own to try and renounce their Italian citizenship, and, to date, had received no information as to whether it was ever accomplished. If it was I would sincerely like to shake the hand of that person—he must have at his command some secret power I don't possess.

I wanted to go to Italy; instead I took a freighter to France. Just to leave nothing undone I made a few inquiries at the United States Consulate in Paris. There, the receptionist without even bothering to let me see anyone, was all for shipping me off to Italy with the assurance of every one of Uncle Sam's gun-boats to get me out if necessary. I balked. After all the difficulties I wasn't one to take chances on the mere say-so of a receptionist. I saw the right man, though it didn't do any good. I was told to write the American authorities in Rome for first-hand information. In Nice I received their letter. I could go to Italy if I chose—at my own risk.

So the nearest I ever got to Italy was Ventimiglia, where I stood on the borderline without daring to go over. I spent nights on the broad terrace behind the casino at Monte Carlo with a warm breath of the sirocco in my nostrils, the fancied lights of the Italian coast on my left, and dreaming of the time when I became an old man, of no use to anyone anymore—not even Mussolini. ●