Journal of Modern Italian Studies

ISSN: 1354-571X (Print) 1469-9583 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmis20

Libere sempre: Una ragazza della Resistenza a una ragazza di oggi

Matthew Evangelista

To cite this article: Matthew Evangelista (2015) Libere sempre: Una ragazza della Resistenza a una ragazza di oggi, Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 20:4, 582-583, DOI: 10.1080/1354571X.2015.1066164

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2015.1066164

Published online: 21 Oct 2015.

reader work and consider independently what the collection tells us about Rome as a key site for the development of postmodern culture.

Stephanie Pilat
The University of Oklahoma

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2015.1066163

Marisa Ombra (2012) *Libere sempre: Una ragazza della Resistenza a una ragazza di oggi* (Turin: Einaudi), 83 pp., ISBN: 9788806211332, €10, soft cover

Toward the end of her ninth decade, Marisa Ombra composed an extended essay to a girl of 14, whom she had known from birth, after bumping into her dog Ettore (actually, the other way around) in the park of Rome's Villa Pamphili. Watching the girl, whose name we never learn, as she calms the dog with a word and a caress, the author writes: 'I understood that now it would be possible, even easy, to talk to you' (p. 6). Instead (or in addition), she wrote this book.

As the book's subtitle indicates, Marisa Ombra, born in Asti in 1925, served in the Resistance during World War II. At the age of 17 she became a *staffetta* with the communist Garibaldi brigades – a common role for female partisans. *Staffetta* is the word used for runners in a relay race, but in the military context it means a courier. During the civil conflict that broke out in September 1943, in the wake of Italy's surrender to the Allied forces, partisan bands fought against the Nazi occupiers and the 'republican' forces of Mussolini's puppet regime, the Italian Social Republic. They were particularly active in the Piedmont region where Ombra grew up in a working class, anti-fascist family. As Ombra describes (particularly in Chapter 10), the *staffette* played a range of roles, from scouting out territory to determine the presence of German or republican troops, to accompanying commanders, to transporting messages, flyers, or weapons. Much of the time she was on her own – women traveling were less suspect than men – making decisions on which her own life and the lives of many others depended.

The Einaudi publishing house, which has put out many memoirs of female partisans, sometimes promotes them by playing on the term *staffetta*: the female veterans of the anti-fascist struggle are passing on the baton – the lessons they learned – to the younger generation of Italian women. This book is very much in that spirit. Marisa Ombra was a fighter not only for liberation from fascism but for women's rights. Working during the war with the *Gruppi di difesa della donna*, she became an early member of the *Cooperativa Libera Stampa* and the *Unione donne italiane* and an editor of its journal, *Noi donne*.

What has inspired Ombra to pass the baton to Ettore's owner, the unnamed 14-year-old girl? She tells us on the second page of her book: 'It's the discomfort I feel every time I see a half-naked girl on a giant billboard or acting like an idiot on TV' (p. 4). She finds it incredible that with all the progress in women's rights since the war, especially during the 'beautiful revolution' of the 1970s – 'the most important and

peaceful revolution of the 20th century' (p. 18) – today's young women have to rely on their bodies for success. Much of Ombra's discomfort comes from the realization that many women themselves have accepted the situation as normal: 'I heard of a lady who, having met a splendid young woman, asked her – "You're very beautiful. What's your profession?" – and upon hearing the response, "I'm a judge (*magistrato*)", commented: "It's a shame, you're so beautiful"' (p. 23). Ombra decries the betrayal of the feminist slogan of the 1970s – 'Il corpo è mio e lo gestisco io' – that contributed to the legalization of divorce and reproductive rights. She scorns the 'arrogant self-defense' of women who claim the right 'to sell my ass' to get on TV or be invited to one of Silvio Berlusconi's parties, and quotes one of them: 'I do it and I'm proud of it – better a day as a lion than a hundred days as a lamb'. Ombra comments: 'She should apologize to the lions for reducing their royal power to the ranks of guests at a bunga-bunga' party (p. 26).

So how does Ombra make the connection across seven decades? What does she have in common with her intended reader? 'Being fourteen today is not very different from seventy years ago', she claims (p. 7). She writes in particular of an adolescent girl's preoccupation with the changes her body is undergoing and how others perceive it. She reveals that as a girl of 14 she herself suffered from a syndrome that one tends to associate more with the postwar era: anorexia. In the wake of the untimely death of her beloved grandmother in 1939, the young Marisa no longer desired to eat. Three years later she was cured. 'I didn't imagine then, at age 17, that the decision to join the underground antifascist struggle and then the Resistance would have cured not only my anorexia but many other problems that were agitating my adolescence' (p. 31). But it did.

Libere sempre provides a wide-ranging commentary on everything from Italy's current unemployment situation, where temporary *lavoretti* have replaced regular jobs, to the devaluation of the word 'mythical', which in her time was applied to real heroes (she mentions Stalin, Mao, Che Guevara – and Katharine Hepburn) but now can refer to 'a singer' or 'a pair of sandals' (p. 69). She reminisces about the meaningful achievements in feminist consciousness she has witnessed, from female partisans rejecting gender stereotypes by refusing to sew buttons on the shirts of their male comrades to Roman women going out as if on a vacation to demonstrate for housewives' pensions – but only after preparing lunch and dinner for their families to avoid any 'sense of guilt' (p. 58). Ombra recognizes – and is glad – that the peaceful life of her country in the twenty-first century will not provide the younger generation of adolescents the opportunity to overcome their childhood problems the way she did, in the forge of war and resistance. But she claims that today's young women will face decisions 'just as challenging' and moments when they must 'choose the building blocks to construct their own lives' (p. 78). Ultimately Ombra distills her message to the younger generation down to two concepts – freedom and responsibility – values she hopes her small book will help promote.

Matthew Evangelista
Cornell University

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2015.1066164