

11-2014

La mia Londra



Lady Powell, grazie alle sue amicizie, conosce i segreti dei politici che fanno storia. Ma ecco qui di seguito l'intervista che la nostra collaboratrice Sagida Syed ha tracciato per i nostri lettori.

Q - You are originally from Piedmont. Can you tell us a bit more about your home town and what brought you to London?

A - "I came from a small village called Druogno, Valle Vigizzo, in the Alps only a few kilometres from the Swiss border. We mountain people are renowned for being strong-willed (as we like to say) or obstinate (as others describe us). My husband has been coming there since we first met at Oxford in 1962 and is now an honorary citizen. Although nowadays I spend much more time in Rome and London, we always think of the Valle Vigizzo as home. Indeed I gave my husband a burial plot there as a 70th birthday present!"

Q - You lived in England for over 40 years. How has the English society changed in the last four decades?

A - "It has changed beyond recognition since I first came to Oxford in 1962. The Swinging Sixties were not yet upon us and the Beatles and Rolling Stones still lay ahead. Britain was a conservative society, class-conscious, quite deferential and old-fashioned in its attitudes, its institutions remarkably unchanged since the previous century, despite two world wars. But the Sixties were when it all began to change, things suddenly became trendy, casual, satirical, with the new pop-culture creating distinctive fashions, mid-Atlantic accents and so on. Now we live in a state of permanent frenzy and seek instant gratification. I suppose at my age you are always prone to nostalgia, but I am not convinced all the changes were for the better. I find I miss the more tranquil and stable England of the past".



Q - You had/have a career writing for major UK papers and as consultant. How best can you describe yourself and your work?

A - "I enjoy writing both about Italian and British politics. I have had the good fortune to meet many of the leaders of both countries over the past fifty years which helps me give a particular perspective. I rarely pursue specific causes though I have written quite a few pieces promoting the political career of Prime Minister Renzi, starting several years ago. I was convinced he was the new face which Italy needed and would bring fresh energy to the

sclerotic and caste-ridden Italian political system. I am happy to write for whichever publication will invite me. My fairly brief business career was great fun. I worked at Hambros Bank with Sir Michael Butler, former Ambassador to the European Union and one of Britain's greatest diplomats, and my role was to seek new opportunities for Hambros to launch joint-ventures in Italy and to bring in new clients. I would lure them to intimate breakfasts (but completely innocent) at the Ritz and then suddenly, 'spotting' Michael Butler entering the room I would invite him over to conduct the more substantial part of the conversation! I loved the cigar smoke-infused atmosphere of Hambros executive floor and the sense of tradition. I can't imagine what they made of me: impulsive, noisy and exotic at least by Hambros conservative standards. «She's Italian you know», Margaret Thatcher would always add when introducing me to No.10 Downing Street guests as though this would be an adequate explanation if I suddenly took it into my head to dance a cancan on the dining-room tables”.

Q - You met the most powerful people of the last years. How is it to have to do with people who carry an international profile and have the responsibility of their countries?

A - The short answer is that it's a huge privilege. Margaret Thatcher generously invited me to all the lunches and dinners for Presidents, Prime Ministers and other foreign leaders in No.10. Meeting them brought to mind how enormous are the responsibilities they bear and how much life at the top of government and politics takes out of you. Perhaps that's why our own Prime Ministers are getting younger, simply to have the stamina to stand up to the strain. From the Eighties I recall particularly President Reagan and President Gorbachev as they wound down the Cold War and the outstanding Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore; then in later years Nelson Mandela and the Pope. A steady procession of Italian Presidents and Prime ministers came through No.10, amongst whom I particularly recall President Cossiga who had a passion for Margaret Thatcher and used to reprove me as a fellow 'rosminiano' for allowing my Italian to become too anglicized. I was once called in as an additional interpreter at an Anglo-Italian summit and soon discovered that I fell well short professionally: I had to ask them to change the subject as I didn't understand the one they were discussing! But often the greatest fun was to be had at the bottom of the No.10 dining-table, where we invariably sat as the least important guests, in the company of such luminaries as John Cleese and Michael Caine. It was guaranteed to be the rowdiest place in the room!”.

Q - Your husband was a consultant for Margaret Thatcher. What is your personal memory of her?

A – “My husband was Margaret Thatcher's Private Secretary and adviser on foreign affairs and defence, and served an unusually long time in Downing Street, the better part of a decade, so we got to see a great deal of her in action. She was enormously impressive in her inexhaustible energy, her determination to master every problem she encountered, her resolve to change Britain for the better however great the obstacles. She was very driven which made it easier to admire her than to warm to her, though we used to have great fun discussing clothes and shoes which were her secret passion. I think she appreciated the role I took on myself to look after guests while she was occupied with Heads of State. But in her later years she came to stay with us regularly in Italy and then I saw a different and more vulnerable side of her character, as we drove around to visit the country's great monuments and museums, as she picked our cherries and played with our dogs (especially a rather soppy Alsatian called Tony Blair!). It was then that I came to love her as well as admire her. I am certain she will be remembered in Britain and beyond as one of the towering figures of the twentieth century”.

Q - Why did you decide to move to Lazio?

A- "It was actually largely by chance. We had been looking for a second home for some time and somewhere warmer than the Alps or London. I searched in Florida, in Spain, in the South of France but never found anything I felt really happy with. Then I thought: I am Italian, I feel Italian and Italy offers as much and even more than any other country, including sunshine. I was at a party in Rome and someone mentioned a rather dilapidated property in the countryside, not far from Rome, with an early Roman ruined tower. I fell in love instantly with the tower and the magnificent view. Would I have bought it if I had known in advance what an amount of toil and trouble I would encounter in doing up the property and creating a garden? Yes, definitely. It has brought me immense pleasure and satisfaction; as I look out at our olives and cherries and peaches, our lawns and our roses, and see the animals grazing in the field I get a wonderful feeling of unchanging history and of peace".



Q - Have you ever had a love for the countryside? How is life surrounded by nature?

A – "Although I grew up in the countryside in my Alpine Valley, I never paid much attention to it, rather taking it for granted. Then our life became focused on London and other capital cities like Washington where the countryside didn't feature. I didn't share the English passion for a 'place in the country'. I only re-discovered the countryside and animals quite late in life. Now I revel in it and in my dogs (eight of them), horses, donkeys, mules, chickens and rabbits. The rest of my family think I am bonkers and they are probably right. But after 70 hectic years I love the tranquility and simplicity of country life".

Q - As all ex-pat you have experienced some problems with the local authorities. Can you tell us the major differences between Italy and the UK from this point of view?

A – “Well, first of all I am not an ex-pat, I am Italian and proud of it. But I have to say that, unfortunately, the simple things of life are very much more complicated, and unnecessarily so, than in England. The opacity of our laws, the multiplicity of often contradictory rules and regulations, the myriad taxes and charges, the need to get documents stamped, the impossibility of doing your admin online, the endless queues for any public service. The frustrations are endless, particularly in this part of Italy. It's common knowledge, because I made such a public fuss about it, that I had to struggle for years to get a supply of clean drinking water just 20 miles from the centre of one of the world's great capital cities: Rome. It would have been easier in Somalia!”

Q - Let's talk about the positive aspects of living in Italy.

A - Now you are talking! The positives are numerous: our history and the works of art it has left us, our joy in life itself, our enthusiasm, our warmth and generosity, our sense of family. What's frustrating is that life could be so much better still with a bit more sense of civic duty and responsibility and if we had politicians who put the country's interests before their own”.

Q - Finally, what are your future projects?

A – “At my age, to see my sons, their wives and grandchildren flourish and succeed, dispersed as they are around the world, to see more of my husband and persuade him to put family ahead of duty, and to see Italy at last reformed and restored to its former glory”. (Nelle foto Lady Carla Powell, l'Ambasciatore Terracciano, ed il marito Lord Charles Powell.)