

## *Letter from Florence*

*First of all it is necessary  
to find yourself a country  
--which is not easy.  
It takes much looking  
after which you must be lucky.*

From *First of All* Kenneth O. Hanson

Each year, as the winter drags on for what seems forever, I make plans to visit Italy. I do not speak Italian and have little appreciation of its artistic treasures. I have no business or research to undertake here and I don't know anyone who lives in this country. It is enough to simply be in Italy, actually to be here in Florence where I spend most of my time, wandering through the narrow streets, listening to the people, astonished by their energy, and the beauty that surrounds them.

Occasionally, I go out in the country or spend a few nights in a nearby hill town. I recall an excursion that I made last year. It began with a picnic in the village of Borgo Pretale, followed by an afternoon exploring Montepulcino, Montaclino, and Monteriggioni. Those names! The heat, the light, the fields of oaks took me back to my youth in California. It is always like that. Later that afternoon, I found myself lost on a back road somewhere in Tuscany. It was of no concern. Everything seemed quite familiar.

I feel at home here, even though I am in a hotel and hardly speak to anyone and then only about the most mundane matters. No one contacts me. My family is a continent away. Yet there is something about this place that puts me in touch with my roots. Florence feels like home, or more exactly, a place that I would be content to call my home, indeed, could have been my home, had my life taken a different course.

I know that the warmth of Italy draws me here as much as anything else, the warmth that

begins at sunrise and lingers long into the night. That seems essential now and I know that I can count on it here, at least for a good part of the year. What is so important about the warmth? I wax and wane in thinking about this question. All I know is that here I am no longer plagued by dark and numb hands. I need not suit up to go outside, nor do I have to wear my hat all day, and wonder of wonders, it is even possible to dine alfresco much of the time.

I am also drawn by the pleasure of walking about this city. Here I go everywhere on foot, regardless of the distance. Never once have I taken a taxi or a bus in Florence. Never once have I ceased to be absorbed by my surroundings, as I saunter from one neighborhood to the next, most of which are not much different today than they were when the Medicis and Michelangelo ventured out. Those who live in Florence know this experience well:

*Florentines and Tuscans have this innate sense of taste that has remained during the centuries. Walking through the city is like walking through a fresco sometimes. It's as if the faces of the artisans have remained the same throughout the centuries. Their spirits have remained as well.<sup>1</sup>*

When I am in Florence or any of the Italian hill towns, I begin to understand the meaning of a livable place. I think about the mistakes that have been made in the cities of my country and why most are so unlivable. Where did we go wrong in America? More than anything I think it is the scale of things. You see that clearly in Florence, where everything is so much smaller than it is in America. The buildings are only a few stories high at most and the shops are often not much larger than a living room. Here the streets are narrow and irregular and it is sometimes difficult to find a place to walk. To pass another person you often have to step off into the roadway, which can be dangerous if the street is also wide enough to let cars go zipping by, for that is the way they are driven here in Italy.

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<sup>1</sup> Contessa Simonetta Brandolini d'Adda. *Robb Report*, April 2000.

Many of the buildings date from the Renaissance and before. Some are beautiful palazzos or civic buildings, meticulously preserved and thoroughly modernized within. On every street, there are many small merchants, each selling only a few items. The pattern is repeated in the next block and on the next street over. Shops that sell bread, fruit and vegetables, books, hardware, and espresso are close by. I go from place to place, gathering the things I need. Along the way, I try to exchange a few words with the people who I have come to "know"--that is, if they are not already chatting with someone else. I understand there are Supermercatos on the outskirts of Florence, but you surely don't need them if you live within the city.

Many small craftsmen have their workshops in the heart of the neighborhood where they live. They know nothing of long commute trips on heavily congested roadways. The homes and shops of the carpenters, leatherworkers, bookbinders, painters and metal craftsman are surrounded by hotels, restaurants, and boutiques. There are no broad highways that cut across this Florence. No doubt, that has made an enormous difference. Although there are cars in this city, they are forbidden in many areas and are far outnumbered by the small motor scooters that are the primary mode of transport of the Florentines. Fortunately, this city, unlike those in our country, was designed for the people who live here, not for anything like an automobile.

In every neighborhood of Florence, there is a central square and, in some, many smaller ones. They vibrate with talk and music and the activity of the surrounding banks, restaurants, bookshops, churches, artisans and whoever else is fortunate enough to be there. The piazza is the heart of any Italian town. It is the place to go and to be seen.

*Businessmen, farmers and students have a coffee and a croissant at the café on the square every morning, school-children gather to play soccer after school and a few hours later the whole town comes out for an evening stroll. In a country where the houses are often built one right on top of another, and most towns were laid out in a time when the concept of urban space just didn't exist, the piazza is the setting for social life. This*

*is even reflected in the expression in piazza, which literally means in public.*<sup>2</sup>

Whatever happened to the public square in America? Whatever happened to the kind of experience that occurs each day in the piazza of every Italian village and town? There are few such gathering places in the USA, places that encourage an informal public life, where the spirit is playful and the purpose is socializing and the main activity is good conversation. I bemoan the absence of such places in my own country. Here they are everywhere.

The sociability of the Italians is apparent the minute you step foot in this country. On the train from Milan to Florence, I sat next to two couples who were traveling together. Each pair sat facing the other. They were talking when I first sat down. They continued to talk until it was time to get off the train. All four participated in the jabber. Each one more animated than the other. Although, I could not understand a word, it was a pleasure to listen to them. Compared to my silent world, their's was a joy to behold.

Italians also love to stroll about their city. Much socializing is done this way. We may phone, or e-mail, or meet a friend for lunch. Italians often get together by going for a walk. *La passeggiata*, the early evening promenade that takes place in most Italian towns at the end of the working day, is a major social event, the Italian equivalent of our cocktail party. The tradition is said to be the strongest in the rural areas, where at the end of the day, most of the town folk amble up and down the main street, greeting and chatting with one another before eventually returning home for their evening meal.

It is not uncommon for Italians to walk arm-in-arm as they stroll down the avenue. Men with other men, women with other women, and mixed groups. There is nothing amorous about this, rather it is simply a reflection of the warmth of their friendship. Late one afternoon in Florence, I came upon a young Italian girl walking hand in hand with her father and then soon after, a young Italian boy walking together with his mother. Both

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<sup>2</sup> *Vista Magazine*. Essay on the Italian Piazza. Summer 2000.

children were engaged in a lively, carefree exchange with their parent. The experience came as a surprise, also with a twinge of envy.

These days the men and women of Italy also spend a fair amount of time chatting on their cell phone. They carry on animated conversations on the streets, in restaurants, in hotel elevators--everywhere. On the train traveling from Zurich to Milan a phone rang somewhere nearby. An elderly woman in the row ahead of mine opened her purse, took out her phone and engaged in a lively conversation all the while we were winding our way down the Alps into Milan. I was entranced by the novelty of this scene. No one else took the slightest notice.

It is not surprising that Italians are so musical. It comes with the language. When Italians speak to one another, they virtually sing, with a rhythm and lyric that is slightly operatic. Soon the words echo in your mind, although you don't have the vaguest idea what they mean. I don't think it would be difficult to learn Italian. It was not long before I found myself quite unexpectedly speaking an Italian word or phrase that from all I could tell must have been appropriate. When most Italians talk, they also gesture vigorously with their hands, as if they were conducting an orchestra. I suspect that if you tied a rope around their hands, they would not be able to utter a single word.

During lunch one day at the Bar Pasticceria Curatone in Florence, I observed a riotous display of friendship and camaraderie. A middle-aged man, who was sitting by my table on the terrace was engaged in an animated conversation with the Bar's owner. Soon some old friends happened by and when they saw him, each one, in turn, seemed to explode with shouts of joy and delight, followed by spirited conversation. In time, others passed by who also recognized one or more of the assembled group. Jump for joy, long embraces, happy smiles, long tales of Where have you been? What have you been up to? How wonderful you look. Oh, let me show you the pictures of my baby. As if that wasn't enough, soon after that, I sat astonished as I observed a similar scene unfold at another table.

While I experience these encounters vicariously, they are no less pleasing. Actually, they are probably more so. All my pleasures here are solitary ones. Indeed, here I am thrown back upon myself like no where else. There is no one I can understand. No one even tries to talk with me. The phone never rings. I am often asked if I mind being alone like this for so long. I always reply that I am never entirely alone in Florence. The city is too distracting, there is too much to see and hear. My days here are not the least bit solitary. Susan Jacoby put it well:

*I have never spent an uninteresting day in this city, never experienced small vicissitudes or deeper sorrows that could not be ameliorated by contact with the noble civilization of these stony streets.<sup>3</sup>*

Yet Florentines don't spend all their time socializing. One night at a *trattoria* in a residential district quite far from the city center, I was one of a group of 5 men who were seated alone for dinner. Two were laborers who had come in after a hard day of moving rocks or steel. Another was a white-collar worker and then a casual, but well dressed man, of clearly refined taste. I was reading my book, another his newspaper and three others were staring into space. Another night I watched a man punching buttons on a storefront machine in a residential area of Florence. It was an automatic video vender that operates like a cash machine. He inserted his card, read the menu of available videos, requested a brief review of those he was interested in, selected the one he wanted, and hit the button. Bingo it came rolling out the slot. All the videos were visible behind the window of this unattended mini-store. No human intervention. No exchange of cash. No talk or banter about the films. Just the person, the card, and those buttons.

Nothing is perfect or so I have been told. So I must confess then that the noise on the streets of Florence and elsewhere in Italy can be annoying. On the streets it comes primarily from the roar of the Vespas. But there is also the horrible music that is played in many places now--restaurants, bars, on the rooftop terrace, down in the lobby. And

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<sup>3</sup> *New York Times* Learning to Live with Arrivederci. October 12, 1997

each morning as I look out over the piazza, I am dismayed to see the litter (paper, containers, soda pop cans) that is strewn everywhere. Such a lovely square marred by all that carelessness, that total disregard for the public space. Eventually the men come with their sweeper and bags to clean it up. The mini-street cleaner follows to do the same for the pavement. Then, in the last of the morning light, the square looks quite lovely. But as the day goes by, the litter begins to accumulate, the crowds increase and by the end of the evening, once more the litter is everywhere. There are collection containers placed throughout the piazza. I am annoyed they are not more widely used. What is the great pleasure of throwing your rubbish on the grass?

It was hot and sultry on my last Sunday in Florence. The streets were quiet, the mood subdued and the usually bustling city became a sleepy hillside village in the molten hot air. And so I went to the Cascine, the enormous park at the south end of Florence that stretches for miles along the Arno. I wanted to take some pictures, Sunday in the Park, Sunday in the Cascine. But it was impossible. I could not intrude upon these people. The old man playing his harmonica, the lovers on the grass, the young boys playing soccer, the rollerbladers taking their spills. I walked deep into the park that day and have many lasting impressions, but none of to put in my album.

A light rain fell in Florence the night before I left so the air was clear on my early morning walk. Although I had walked along the street many times before, the buildings seemed so different in the half-dark of that time of day. Still I continued to take it all in. I thought it must be like a child's view of the world, echoing Doris Lessing's initial impressions of London, after arriving there from Rhodesia,:

*I was returned to a child's way of seeing and feeling, every person, building, bus, street striking my senses with the shocking immediacy of a child's life, everything oversized, very bright, very dark, smelly, noisy. I do not experience London like that now.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Roads to London, *Granta* 58: Ambition, Summer 1997.

I reached the station only a few moments before the train to Milan was scheduled to leave and so I jumped aboard the first car at the platform. It turned out to be the last car of a very long train. When we arrived in Milan, the car I was on did not reach the station platform area. To get off, you had to leap from the car's steps all the way down to the gravel bed. It was quite a distance from that last step to the gravel bed. I jumped off first with suitcase in hand. An old lady, perhaps from Sicily, wearing that marvelous Sicilian black followed me. I thought I better stay to help her. However, she was clearly not an expert jumper.

As I was guiding her down the last step, she came cascading back upon me. In turn, I fell back and thought, well, this is surely it. I could hear the bones cracking against the tracks and the siren of the ambulance off in the distance. It was horrible, the old lady falling off the step as I was heading directly for those shiny steel tracks. I was terribly bruised. The old lady just muttered something and walked away. No *scusas*. No one stopped to inquire how I was. All I could do was whisper an obscenity and hobble off to the airport bus.

I know Florence can never be my home. It is too late for that now. I rack my brains to think of a place in America where I can live as I do when I am here. I am doing much "looking" for one now. Here I see gaiety and friendship and community. I need only glance out the window or sit in a pizza. Smiles and shouting and good cheer everywhere. Sun and warmth throughout the day and night and more of the same tomorrow. Even if I am only a visitor, Florence brings me closer to the place I am searching for now, closer to much that is also absent from my life. Is it any wonder I keep coming back?