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Report From Britain, 16 January 1950

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN
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Canzo-Asso, Italy
January 16, 1950

We have seen something of the country from the Swiss border to Rome, but when we think of Italy our minds will always go back to this quaint old-world village which nestles so snugly in the pre-Alps between Milan and Lugano, Switzerland. For here we have lived for two of our three Italian weeks and most of the storekeepers and townsfolk now speak to us and recognize us as the "Americans".

There are probably 8000 people -- 15,000 in summer -- who live here at the end of the Ferrovia Nord Milano in the narrow, winding streets which go right up the slopes of the snow topped mountains. The buildings, some of which date back to the 13th century, are anywhere from one to four stories tall, are of stucco and stone, surrounded by high fences, and are painted bright hues of brown, blue, pink, yellow, and green. Those belonging to the rich Milanese who migrate to escape the summer heat are sumptuous villas resplendent with all the evidences of wealth.

In the center of town next to a fine old church is the piazza where a traveling circus has been running full blast and where itinerant peddlers display their kitchenware, drygoods, shoes, olive oil, cheeses, candies, roasted chestnuts, fish, and baskets, particularly on market day, which comes each Wednesday.

The stores run by prosperous natives are filled with every conceivable type of merchandise, including pineapples, Coca Colas, prunes from California, and American cigarettes. One establishment is as modernistic as fluorescent lighting can make it while the next finds customers lined up with their bottles and pans to get their daily quotas of milk, still warm from the cows. Last night George Carbone arrived at the milk dispensary after hours but the enterprising entrepreneur dashed out to squeeze another quart or two into his containers. To shop, a housewife must visit separate stores to secure her bread, milk and butter, poultry, meat, vegetables and fruit, canned goods, and wine. Tobacco, salt, and matches are state monopolies, to be bought from the merchant who also sells stamps.

Apparently everyone here works hard and nothing goes to waste but I haven't run across the evidences of poverty which can be found in any small Southern town. I have seen women washing their clothes - and arguing about the choice spots - in the Lambro River and men with wooden shoes carrying huge bundles of leaves down from the mountain sides to be used for bedding for their donkeys and oxen. Later these will go back to the fields as fertilizer.

The town is completely political-minded with a predominance of Democratic Christians and Socialists, and a few Communists. The Risorgimento tradition can be found in the names of some of the streets: Via Garibaldi, Via Mazzini, and Piazza Turati, which honors the father of Italian socialism who was born in Canzo in 1857.

The local sports arena is dedicated to Cesare Tavecchio, thirty-year-old partisan martyr who was shot by the "Nazi Facists." These emotional people did not bring home their war dead; instead, there is a graveless memorial cemetery with a cypress in remembrance of each hero, and in the center of the village is a monument to the dead of all wars surmounted by a perpetual light.

You will be interested to know that the local share of Marshall Plan aid, by common consent, has been used to provide a noonday meal for children in the grammar school. And undoubtedly there is sincere appreciation for the helping hand of Uncle Sam. To most Italians the United States is still the land of promise; many have let me know that their fondest hope is the chance to set out for America.

As everywhere the oldsters are concerned about the lax morals of the war generation, especially of the ex-soldiers. The picture Duello al Sole now playing in the local cinema, whose only performance starts at nine P. M., is forbidden to children under sixteen. But there seems to be slight objection to small kids gambling at the roulette wheel offered by the traveling circus. I doubt, too, whether much is said about the rumored smuggling of watches, cigarettes, and other assorted merchandise from nearby Switzerland by the more adventurous souls among the younger generation.

This same bunch possesses little military fervor but when time for army induction comes, the boys in their green felt hats with the pheasant feathers are given the town for their carousing. This consists mainly of wine drinking and singing at all hours of the day and night to the accompaniment of accordions, mandolins, and guitars. On such occasions wary mothers keep

their daughters off the streets.

Local folk by habit are intensely religious and the church is a main center of their life. The countryside is dotted with shrines and a clear eye can distinguish crosses on the mountain tops. Saints' days are taken as holidays by the community. In contrast, the town has a strong anti-clerical history and a member of the local congregation has been known to rise up in the church to protest the priest's introduction of political material into his sermon.

These people are a happy-go-lucky lot. I'm sure there are speed laws in Italy but you would never suspect it as you jump from side to side in the midget streets which the local lads use as motordrome and racetrack for their power scooters and motorcycles. Which may explain the agility of even (or especially) the old men and women. At night the males of the community congregate in the trattorie to drink wine, sing, discuss politics or crops, play cards and gossip in general. They can't talk to me and I haven't been able to say more than bon giorno to them but I have felt a camaraderie here that I have yet to run across in Scotland.

Perhaps you can understand in part at least why the family will always look back to their Canzo days with a fond nostalgia.
