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REPORT FROM BRITAIN

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Milan, Italy
January 11, 1950

The family has just returned, bloody but unbowed, from a more or less typical American tourist's excursion to Florence and Rome. Our most difficult job was the decision on what we would try to see and what we would pass by. We couldn't expect to scratch the surface of Italian beauty and history if we had a year and were not encumbered with a couple of kids. Every little town has some attraction that is worth a day or a week, but time and no superabundance of cash make inexorable decisions necessary.

We handed out about 175,000 lire in a week, which sounds like big dough. But whereas the shilling has gone down in value from twenty cents to fourteen, the lira has deteriorated from about sixteen cents to more than six for one cent. (You can imagine what happened to bank accounts and the middle class in general.) There are no coins in circulation except a few made of aluminum. Even the huge thousand-lire notes soon become ragged, dirty, and almost illegible. They don't buy much either.

Italian trains are every bit as good as the American, even as regards schedules, and I would say that the Ristorante cars are superior. We traveled second class -- there is a third -- and would have been lost without reservations because everyone in Italy seems to be on the move. I have yet to see a continental train without some poor Joe standing up.

I have seen more terracing of farm lands in the past couple of weeks than the U. S. Department of Agriculture ever dreamed of. These people literally nurse every square foot of ground, most of which has been cultivated for more than two thousand years. Yet the rivers from the Arno to the Tiber are as muddy as Mississippi and Alabama streams after the spring rains.

The Carbones engineered a private audience with the Pope. They were as impressed as four Irish lads we met at our pensione who had been lucky enough to get into a New Year's mass celebrated by

Pius XII. Besides conducting the service in Latin, he spoke to the wildly enthusiastic crowd in fluent Italian, German, French, English, and Spanish. There is probably no more popular church official in the world. Yet, in our limited contacts, we have run into a great deal of anti-clericalism in Italy.

Italians are avid newspaper readers and apparently take their politics as seriously as they do their family life and eating. Rome, Milan, and Florence are plastered with political broadsides, sometimes three and four deep on the walls of every type of building. The Communists and antis must have a merry time pulling down and defacing each other's posters. Criticism of the government is outspoken, which must be something of a luxury after the days of Mussolini. Incidentally, his famous balcony in Rome is quite unimpressive, but significantly big enough for himself alone. I suppose that a hundred thousand people could have been jammed into the Piazza Venezia to hear him.

From the train window we saw a beautiful horse-drawn hearse followed by at least fifty people of all ages on bicycles.

Eating in the famous trattorie of Rome and Florence was always an adventure, not only because of our constant amazement at the food available, but also because we were never quite sure as to what we were going to get. In fact, we weren't too sure after we had eaten it. Saltimbocca, sgaloppe al Marsalla, ossobucco, and straciatella will be household words in the family -- for a week or so anyway. Southerners would soon take to a corn meal dish called polenta which is the mainstay of many a peasant's dinner. In Britain only Americans drink water with their meals; here we always have water on the table but wine has somehow become a very acceptable substitute. No connection, of course, but we have yet to see a drunk in Italy.

We were among the first few hundred to go through the newly opened porta santa into St. Peter's. Tens of thousands of Americans will visit Italy in this first Holy Year since 1925.

While prices in Italy run about the same as in the United States, the value on human labor is phenomenally low. For instance, a shave runs something less than a dime. I'll have to admit, though, that every time I have gone into a non English-speaking parrucchiere, my gesticulations have sooner or later committed me to a massage or haircut which I didn't think I needed. That

would run me another twenty or thirty cents.

From twelve to two p.m. over here you might as well succumb gracefully to the happy custom of the siesta because every place of business is closed. As in Scotland most stores are completely shut off at night from would-be window shoppers by heavy wooden barricades.

Our pensione in Florence was half a block from the River Arno. Here the bombed out area is worse than anything I have yet seen, and reminded me of the ruins of ancient Rome. In July, 1944, the Germans blew up every bridge except the Ponte Vecchio, along with a good many of the buildings. American troops were held up about eighteen days before crossing the river. Five years later hundreds of men are working to erase the scars of war but it will be a long time before Florence is restored.
