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Report From Britain, 30 December 1949

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN

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Canzo, Italy
December 30, 1949

If you are looking for advice on this business of carting a sizeable family around the world, I'm the guy to come to. Week before last we packed our bags in Aberdeen, Scotland, prepared to grab the 9:15 A.M. train for London, with reservations through to Italy. During the night Betty decided to continue the family's campaign to wreck the British National Health Service, with the resulting loss of four teeth and five days from our schedule.

We negotiated the intricacies of London traffic and channel crossing with the aid of doses of Dramamine and rolled through northern France without seeing it. The journey will always be memorable, though, because of my first try at a combination of high-school French and Indian sign language -- which netted a couple of beds for the kids. Missing and changing trains in Switzerland was sheer joy because of the gorgeous countryside but put us into Milan at night unmet and apparently unwept. My major accomplishment of the year came in getting through Italian customs, changing stations, and arriving on schedule by local train at Canzo, Provincia di Como, some twenty miles north of Milan, without meeting a single person who spoke English.

For the past week we have been soaking in this rare Italian atmosphere and George Carbone, my colleague from Ole Miss, and I have been swapping notes on Britain and Italy. We have come to some tentative conclusions.

Italy is a tourist's paradise. Meals are out of this world and the stores are crowded with merchandise, including almost every luxury item you can dream of. There are few controls and prices aren't too far out of line for the American who can afford to come over here. Plenty of sugar, steaks, butter, chocolate, eggs, cigarettes, -- everything. Bread is particularly cheap and meat runs about the same as in Britain or the United States. As in Britain, rents in older housing are controlled and reasonable but sky high in new buildings. Gasoline costs twice what it does in Britain and four times the price in America. Cigarettes run about a third more than in Britain where they bring two-and-a-half times what they sell for in Mississippi.

The catch to all this seeming abundance is that the workingman in Italy simply cannot afford

the standard of living available to his counterpart in Britain where rationing and price controls divide up supplies on a fairly equitable basis. Italian workers are lucky to get enough lire to take care of food and rent. They buy few new clothes. To help with the housework, the Carbones hire a woman whose husband is a metallurgist who doesn't make enough to keep his family going. The gulf between rich and poor is definitely closing in the United Kingdom but is more than holding its own here. Beyond that, unemployment raises its ugly head in this Mediterranean country, especially in the south. Forty-seven million Italians are just too many for the resources of their country.

Britons and Italians are extremely grateful for economic aid from the United States and are aware of its source. Both have as their supreme passion the continuation of peace. They realize that in the next war, as in the last, they will do the fighting first, in their own countries. They want no more of that. The scars of war are probably more in evidence in Milan than in London and new construction is going forward rapidly in both places.

Probably an eighth of the Italians have been driven, largely by extreme poverty, into the fold of Communism. The vast majority feels as did the Italian prisoners repatriated from Russia not so long ago. Met at the station by effusive Commies, they proceeded to beat up their would-be friends. There is no immediate danger of Italy going Communist.

Italians differ noticeably from the British in their emotional attitude towards law and order. It is doubtful whether rationing and other controls would work here unless enforced by an enormous police force. A local tobacco merchant says that he can't sell Italian cigarettes because of black market competition from Switzerland. The better houses in Canzo are surrounded by high walls and barbed wire fences. The Carbones lock their outside gate and bar the windows at night. Everyone cautions us to keep our eyes glued on our luggage. Minor ordinances such as those forbidding smoking in theaters can't be enforced. The normal reaction seems to be: "Did I make the law? No? Then to hell with it." Very few people pay all the taxes they are supposed to. While the British automatically queue up for street car, cigarettes, or theater, the Italians rush in and the devil take the hindmost. Yet the individual Italian I have seen is tops in grace and friendliness and so much easier to meet than the more reserved and disciplined Britisher.

Tomorrow we take off for a week in Rome and Florence.
