



Books. A Day in the Life of Lucia

Stefano Vaccara (December 14, 2007)

A book about Lucia Servadio Bedarida, the first female graduate from the medical school of Rome who became the first woman physician in Morocco.

In a world where thousands of lives are woven together but never intersect, sometimes it will happen that one of the more extraordinary of those lives, after having faced and survived the darkest century, at the age of 106 – and just a month before her death – would meet another, only a quarter her age, and destines her to be the witness to the strength of her passage.

Lucia Servadio Bedarida, born in Ancona in 1900, died last year in Cornwall-on-Hudson, a village 50 miles from New York. Between these two places is the life of a woman that everyone will now be able to know and be moved by her: a woman that embodies the value of attachment to life, the value of every life.

This is how it all came about.

Olivia Fincato is a young freelance journalist, born in 1980 in Bassano del Grappa. After getting her college degree in Milan, she was offered a job by an esteemed professor, but instead of accepting she left for New York.

Olivia knew a few people among which Giovanna Adler, another Italian woman living in the Hudson Valley. Giovanna was friends Lucia Servadio Bedarida and felt the urge to introduce her centenary friend to the young and sensitive Olivia. “I introduced Lucia and Olivia in the fall of 2005...I listened in silence, feeling their vibrations. On one side youth, ready to embrace life, searching for the secret of survival. On the other side Lucia, wanting to reveal that secret to someone ready to listen and understand her words...” so writes Giovanna in the preface to “Un giorno con Lucia” [A day with Lucia] (ed. Zeropuntozerozero, 2007) by Olivia Fincato and Renato D’Agostin.

But that first exciting meeting between Olivia and Lucia is interrupted almost immediately. Olivia asks Lucia about that beautiful antique chair, and she answers that it was her mother’s, who died at Auschwitz along with her grandmother: “Please go now. Come again.”



“Her calm and quiet recollection suddenly soured and became painful and the thin membranes can’t hold the weight. We slipped down to the depths of the most terrible memories of humanity.” Olivia will write in the book, of why she has to leave that day, certain to return.

Some weeks later Olivia calls Lucia, who responds: “What took you so long? When are you coming back?”

Olivia goes back to Cornwall but this time she brings Renato D’Agostin with her, another young Italian talent living in New York: a photographer born in 1983. She has just met him, but all she needed was to look at a couple of Renato’s photos to have an intuition. “Would you come with me, there is this wonderful 106-year-old lady...I don’t have a budget, I’m not sure what I’m doing...want to come?” “I said yes immediately,” remembers Renato, “because I felt an incredible energy coming from Olivia. I didn’t know what to expect but I knew I had to go.”

“We both liked the idea of taking portraits of her during the conversation,” Olivia will write, “without being indiscreet or intrusive. We didn’t know what Lucia’s reaction might be in front of the camera. We were going to see her the coming week.”

On March 16th, 2006 in that village on the Hudson it was “one of those first spring days, fresh, bright. Lucia was in her study when we arrived. A small desk, two small armchairs and dozens of photos hanging on the walls filled the room. It was her life. It could be seen by how every memory had its own specific place. From Ancona to Vasto, from Tangiers to New York. What was left, what had survived through time and space, was there, in that room, with us.

Lucia immediately broke the veil of embarrassment by asking me to reposition her hearing device so she could hear. I had never done it. I approached her head and delicately inserted one of those tiny devices in her ears.”

“Thank you. Now I feel like a normal person. Ask me anything you want, I belong to you now.”

In the hours spent with the two young artists in the room facing the Hudson, Lucia Servadio Bedarida remembers her life, opening herself up to 106 years of memories. Olivia and Renato’s book tells the story of Lucia but it’s not a biography as much conversation between her and the author as the photographer adds depth to the dialogue with images. Lucia’s hands become the guiding force of the story. Olivia only has to hint at something that Lucia brings words to life with her hands. “Those hands that gave so much to life” Olivia writes.

“The sharp cuts of life, the horrible loss of her mother, the suffered separation from her daughters, and finally the death of her husband. These are events that Lucia was able to face with courage while continuing in her mission as doctor...”



Dr. Lucia Servadio Bedarida, was first the youngest doctor in Italy and then the first female doctor in a Muslim country and mother, Mama Rida, of all her patients”

“... I had a revelation and I knew that studying medicine was the path that I was to follow. I have to say that in my 65 years in the medical field I have never regretted it.... When I remember how I felt, this influence on the female spirit to cure those in suffering, it must have been strong in that moment because many young lives were being shattered and many others were subjected to incredible suffering”.

Lucia Servadio receives her medical degree in 1922 in Surgery and Obstetrics at the University of Rome. A short while later she marries a doctor from Turin, Dr. Nino Vittorio Bedarida. They have three daughters: Paola, Mirella, Adria. He is transferred to the hospital in Vasto. They are in this small town in Abruzzi when suddenly they lose everything due to the Racial Laws of 1938. Nino and Lucia have to save their family, and try to leave Italy. They succeed, after many unsuccessful and costly tries, thanks to one of Nino’s former students, who is able to get him a job in a private clinic in Tangiers, Morocco.

Lucia tries to get her mother Gemma Vitale Servadio to come to Tangiers as well, succeeding through many difficulties in getting a permit for her, but Gemma is not able to leave her own mother, Nina Levi Vitale – Lucia’s grandmother – behind. Both will later suffer the wrath of the Nazis and Fascists.

Nino and Lucia work side by side in North Africa, with great success. He dies in 1965, after a long illness, and she continues alone, practicing her profession in Morocco until 1980. At the end of the war she had sent her daughters to study in the United States, where they would be able to start new lives. She crosses the ocean many times, but she never lets go, as long as she has her strength, of her Muslim women who only want to be treated by “Mama Rida”, for years the only Jewish, as well as female, doctor in an Islamic country.

In the early eighties Lucia goes to the United States to live with her daughters in Cornwall-on-Hudson. A quarter of a century later, and a few days before her death, comes the meeting with Olivia and Renato. A book emerges from this incredible meeting between two women captured in D’Agostin’s amazing photographs (the photographs are on exhibit at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York).

When Olivia asks “what has guided and accompanied her through that century – witness to violent changes, survivor of the unjustifiable Nazi hatred and courageous in letting herself be affected” here is Lucia’s answer: “Having faith in life, life is stronger than death. The Jewish faith emphasizes life”.

Last Thursday the Italian Cultural Institute in New York celebrated the book. In an overflowing room, Renato Miracco, director of the Institute, spoke of how moved he was and how he had believed in this project from the beginning. Even though he hadn’t met Lucia personally, he say that he could feel her presence in the room and at the end of his opening remarks he addressed her, thanking and welcoming her.



The Consul General Francesco Maria Talò in his remarks mentioned he was curious to know more of the story of the “Italian Citizen of the World” that was known by his employees at the consulate because in the last few years she would often go there to pick up her “Certificate of Existence”.

Giovanna Adler spoke as well, the person responsible for introducing Lucia and Olivia, and more than friend - Lucia called her “my adopted daughter”. Historian Stanislao Pugliese, who read an excerpt from a speech Lucia gave at a conference in 1996 on Italian Jews held at Hofstra University. Stefano Albertini, the director of NYU’s Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò, remembered how Lucia was the only one, amongst thousands, that responded to all the invitations for the Casa Italiana events, even when she was unable to attend...Albertini remembered how Dante reminded us that we all carry the scars of our own existence, and that those wrinkles on Lucia’s hands, forever immortalized in the photographs by D’Agostin, transmit the courageous message of that life.

Olivia Fincato and Renato D’Agostin founded a publishing house to produce their book. When I asked them how the meeting with Lucia would influence even their professional lives, they paused for a second...then they said they would continue to try and give a voice to lives that deserve to have their stories told. This will be the purpose of the publishing house, created with limited funds and means, but made strong by Lucia’s message of how life should be faced.

Olivia Fincato and Renato D’Agostin “Un giorno con Lucia” [A Day with Lucia] (ed. Zeropuntozerozero, 2007)

For more information on the book contact@zeropuntozerozero.com www.zeropuntozerozero.com

Sunday December 16th at 4 pm, at the Center for Jewish History the event: “Lucia Servadio Bedarida: from Rome to Tangier, the journey of a Jewish doctor.” (15 West 16th St, New York, tel. 917 606 8202)

(Translated by Daria Masullo)

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