

Barzini Jr. May Be Forgotten in Italy. But Not in New York

Damiano Beltrami (December 21, 2008)



"Journalism between Two Worlds" last Thursday December 18. The event, supported by the Consulate General of Italy in New York and moderated by vice-editor-in-chief of Corriere della Sera Massimo Gaggi, celebrated at the Italian Academy of Columbia University the centennial of Barzini's birth

"The Baroque is the mood in which most Italians live," said Luigi Barzini Jr. in a 1969 PBS documentary (producer Bernard Birnbaum) on the Italian national character. "Baroque is when you can draw a straight line, but you prefer to draw a curve. Baroque is when reality is too cruel, so you bend the truth a bit."



The documentary enticed and entertained the audience that participated in the symposium on the famous Italian journalist Luigi Barzini entitled "Journalism between Two Worlds" last Thursday December 18. The event, supported by the Consulate General of Italy in New York and moderated by vice-editor-in-chief of [Corriere della Sera](#) [2] Massimo Gaggi, celebrated the centennial of Barzini's birth.

"Together with Montanelli and Buzzati, Barzini Jr. was one of the greatest Italian journalist of the last century," said [Beppe Severgnini, columnist of the Corriere della Sera](#). [3] bestselling writer and founder of a 10-year-old online forum called *Italians*, after Barzini's well-known book published in 1964. "[Yet, Barzini was victim of a collective amnesia. The year is almost ended and this anniversary was basically ignored in Italy.](#)" [4]

Most of the debate focused on the reasons why such an outstanding correspondent was almost forgotten in Italy.

"He has always been an outsider, in Italy and in America," said Andrea Barzini, son of the journalist. "From this condition of outsider comes the ambition of giving explanations about the Italian and the American national characters."

These tight, ironic Barzini explanations displeased some Italians who are not really into self-deprecation.

"His critique of the Italians is not to despise his fellow countrymen," said Francesca Barzini, Andrea's sister. "It is an excess to love for the Italians. But he was totally misunderstood and he suffered from this."

"Sometimes people don't like to see their faces in the mirror," commented Severgnini, who took part at the conference primarily as a fan of Barzini. "And people don't like the person who holds the mirror."

America, unlike Italy, however, has always realized the talent of Barzini. He was admitted to Columbia University's journalism program and after that, as his older daughter Ludina said, "his greatest ambition was to write for American newspapers like the New York Times." America loved him and consecrated him as a tremendous writer and an extraordinary detective of the human nature.

"When I was interviewing Sinatra I noticed that in his library he had a copy of *The Italians* by Luigi Barzini," said American writer Gay Talese. "I thought, this is what makes Barzini so necessary, then as now; he was the first Italian who gave Americans of Italian extraction like Sinatra something to read about the country of their parental origin."

But the book is also widely enjoyed by Americans who have no Italian background at all.

"I used *The Italians* a number of years ago in a freshman writing class in an art college in New England," said Anthony J. Tamburri, dean of the John Calandra Italian-American Institute (Cuny). "The students were white Anglo Saxon Protestants who had absolutely no idea what Italy was. But it was a great success."



Professor Tamburri's students enjoyed learning what expressions like "Fare spettacolo" or "Non farsi far fesso" meant from The Italians, a book he considers the best available in English to the non-specialist reader to make sense of a people as fascinating as they are mysterious.

Barzini helped not only Italian Americans who wanted to know more about the country of their parents or Americans who thought of Italy as an exotic county where people eat pasta and tiramisu' all the time. It also helped foreign correspondents based in Italy; one of the most demanding jobs on earth given the complexity of the country, the land and human nature.

"I read The Italians before I went to Italy as a correspondent in 1983," said Roger Cohen of the New York Times. "It really is a masterpiece. It gets a central characteristic of the Italians, this deep wisdom that sometimes seems to express itself in extreme frivolity. Knowing so much about how hard life can be, the Italians choose to dress this up in this captivating, magical, impossibly seductive show."

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