

PERSONAL VOICES

Luigi Scali, My Friend

MITCHELL LEE EDWARDS

"LET'S TRY THE PARK for a while; the only people at home now are old ladies who slam doors. Maybe we'll find a family there." I always enjoyed talking to people in Giardini Scotti, a beautiful park with palm trees, fountains, and remains of elaborate stairways within the crumbling walls of a medieval fortress. Even when people stared at us for a few seconds with their "you've got a lot of nerve to talk to me, you worm" arrogance, and then slowly turned their heads away, I enjoyed the park. One refusal no rebuff, said Byron. The splendor and enchantment of the medieval ambience were enough to mask the letdown of refusal.

We saw no people as we passed through the moss-covered, stone arch at the entrance, but wanting to assimilate the atmosphere of the fortress, we continued walking. Late summer is beautiful in Toscana: the palms were swaying in the gentle Italian breeze, and the sun lazily filtered through the leaves. Seeing no one by the staircases, we headed for the fountains. Because the water pressure was low at that time of year, little more than a trickle slid off the marble lips of a yellowing nymph squatting in the middle of a pool. I had always wanted to see the nymph in the spring, when the melting Appenine snow enabled her to produce the regal fountain she was famous for. But the Appenines hadn't even thought about receiving snow yet, let alone about melting it for the sake of the nymph. So, as always, I dropped the thought.

He was sitting on a bench in the shade, smoking a cigarette and watching the pool of water. "Even old people are children of God," I said, and we turned toward him. Looking at the ground to gain my composure and think of the appropriate conjugation of the verb *interessare*, my eyes stumbled onto his

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toenails. In hand-crafted Italian leather sandals, the nails were exposed for all to see. Warped surfboards, I thought. The longest I had ever seen, his toenails extended far beyond the length of his gargantuan toes, and then curled down to touch his sandals. But size was not their only remarkable feature; they had ridges that ran parallel to their length, and in the canyons between the ridges a bright, luminescent purple reflected the light. Purple striped, ridged warped surfboards, I thought.

"Excuse me, um, sir, um, we're missionaries from the Mormon Church. May we speak to you for a moment?" my companion, in Italy for only two weeks, asked him in broken but understandable Italian.

"Cosa?"

My companion must have caught a glimpse of the toenails then, because he didn't repeat his approach. He just stood there, silent, probably in awe. I rescued him with a terse, "We want to speak with you for a few minutes."

"Prego. Accomodatevi."

We sat down on the bench next to him. He was different: tall, overweight, and clumsily dressed in plaid wrinkled slacks and a mismatched, plain smoking jacket. His voice was brash, improper and overbearing, and he would occasionally spit on the ground in front of him. He was, in short, the complete antithesis of mannered class. Yet his sincere answers to our simple questions about God and religion intrigued us, and we asked for an appointment at his house to teach him about the restored gospel.

"Sure, come on over. I'm quite busy with several paintings now, but come anyway. I'm generally at home in the mornings." He left his address, stood, and slowly walked away.

"Did you see those toenails?!" Elder Cantwell exclaimed as soon as he was out of range. We sat in silence and watched him pace away.

Several days later I sat in the Sunday School class next to Sister Salvo, our investigator. I was nervous; I wanted everything to go perfectly, so that she would have a good impression of the Church. All was proceeding calmly and smoothly. Then the door suddenly swung open, and in walked our huge, brash, wild, rough, outspoken artist. With no pause, he launched into a discourse about the weather and the city bus system and the Italian Communists. We all sat in a state of semi-shock. I finally leaped out of my seat, put my arm around him and managed to quiet him down and get him into a seat. Everyone in the class was pink with embarrassment. But he started up again in his thundering voice. No one really knew what to do—I was mortified, and positive that Sister Salvo would never want to set foot again in the church.

The teacher, likewise mortified, managed every now and then to make a comment or two, but only when our artist wasn't rambling. He finally asked the artist to express his feelings about the Church. "With much pleasure," he replied. "I noticed one thing here this morning. Your church is nice and all, but you've got just one problem. There's no doorbell out front." It was too much; we all began to laugh. As he ad-libbed about everything from California to John Wayne (pity he died) to the Aztec Indians. We finally gave up

struggling and laughed at one of the funniest monologues we had ever listened to. He got up and left at the end, while we just sat there, trying to regain our composure. Even Sister Salvo loved it.

One morning, we finally got up the nerve to visit our artist. We didn't even know his name, but he had scribbled his address on a small piece of paper and had told us to come by some morning. Down a small cobblestone road, about one hundred yards from the Arno River, we located the metal plate on his door: "Luigi Scali—painter." He answered our knock in wrinkled boxer shorts and a sweater, a paintbrush in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "Oh, come in!" he shouted.

We walked in, and stopped in our tracks, stunned. Every inch of every wall was covered with paintings. As he showed us through the apartment, our amazement grew. Hundreds and hundreds—perhaps thousands—of the strangest paintings I've ever seen in my life. Now there is a generation of painters in Italy that produces the most bizarre and unique art I've ever seen. Not unique in style: Miro, Duchamp, Dali, and even Kandinsky have already pioneered the style; not unique in medium, and not even unique in subject matter. It is the combination of all three—subject matter, style, and medium that has produced this unique, quite revolting form of art. Scali obviously had joined this company. The motifs of his art were either still-lives of expressionistic fruit, ink and temperas of scenes from Macbeth (witches and kettles of boiling brew), or oils of atomic bombs and monsters. After showing us through the apartment, he took us to the "parlor," and we sat down around a table.

It took me almost two hours to teach him the first half-hour discussion. "Brother Scali," as we called him, had an attention span of no more than two minutes. Literally *no more*. As I slowly made my way, through the Joseph Smith story, he talked about everything else. I am not using hyperbole here. About politics. About seventeenth-century nobility. About the food Napoleon ate. About horse races. About his digestion. About "the war." About art. About automobiles. About the Bible. About domestic pets, and the difficulty in finding good food for them. His mind was incredible. It raced from one end of the globe to the other, from century to century, from one subject matter to another, with no pattern or reason.

Yet despite his cerebral rambling, he seemed to pick up and understand everything he had allowed me to say, even though he'd never give me more than two minutes at a time. I thought it remarkable how well he understood the Joseph Smith story—he recounted it to us at the end. He agreed to pray, and though it wasn't exactly the usual Mormon prayer, it was a good start. There was something about him that caused me to make another appointment. Usually, we'd leave a man like him and look for more "quality men," as our mission leaders called them. We'll do more for the Church if we teach doctors and lawyers and accountants, they always said. Individuals and certain eccentric people just aren't what the Church needs at this point. So often, men like Luigi Scali were quietly left behind in the race for lawyer and family

baptisms. But Scali was not your normal eccentric. He fascinated me, and I wanted to return. And we did—many times.

As we slowly taught him the gospel, he became more and more interesting to us. I learned much from him—at times his brief tirades were as those of college professors. He had incredible knowledge; he just lacked mental organization. I learned to let him talk when he wanted to. At first, I would yell at him in an effort to stop him from talking: “Brother Scali, would you shut up!!” Such efforts were futile and in vain—when he didn’t want to listen, he didn’t. When he did want to listen he did. It was as simple as that. It was just a lesson I had to learn; a lesson in patience and empathy. Lesson learned, however, our encounters became mutual learning experiences, not struggles and conflicts. When we wanted to present him a half-hour discussion, we planned on two hours. He taught us about history and pet food, and we taught him the gospel.

At the end of our very first visit with him, he did something that he continued to do with unerring consistency for the remainder of our visits. After teaching him, listening to him, and praying with him, we would all leave his apartment, and slowly walk down the cobblestone street to a pastry shop on the banks of the Arno River. He would hook our arms with his, as all Italians do, when they take their evening strolls, and we’d ever so slowly saunter towards the river. We’d go into the pastry shop, and he’d buy us a mug of warm, frothy milk and an incredible Italian pastry. We’d smile at each other as we devoured cream-filled eclairs and Napoleoni. The excursion was repeated after every single visit.

Time passed, and his knowledge and appreciation of the gospel grew. Some evenings, after eating our pastries and warm milk, I’d say to Elder Cantwell, “Goodness, I love him.” Scali didn’t blend very well in society, but as I commented the first time I ever saw him, he was a child of God and therefore worthy of all the blessings and joys we know. The members at Church thought he was strange. Some even advised us not to baptize him. I resolved not to let the fickle opinion of men influence our decision or actions. If the members would not eat with the poor in heart, it would just be to their condemnation, I concluded. Christ, eating with publicans and sinners, said “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. I will have mercy, not sacrifice.” We asked Brother Scali to be baptized, and he accepted.

When we arrived at his house the morning of his baptism to make the final arrangements, he was in classic form. I asked him to say the opening prayer: “Oh great and wonderful God, we are gathered here together this morning Brother Edoardo, Brother Cantvell, Brother Eggett, and Brother . . . um . . . let’s see . . . what’s your name? . . . um, yes, aah, Brother Burnham . . .” We all laughed a little, but he didn’t notice it.

We passed by again in the late afternoon to accompany him to the baptism. It was a great trip in the bus; his overpowering voice drew the attention of everyone as he rambled on about Joseph Smith and World War II and the gamblers today who waste all their money at the racetracks, leaving no money for their kids. Scores stared at us, but we ignored them, concluding that

Brother Scali's self-esteem was more important than the opinion of men. We must have been a strange sight, though; two Americans in weird short-sleeved white shirts and a giant, misproportioned, man with a booming voice. After forty-five minutes as the center of attraction we finally got off and walked to the church.

Brother Scali's personality and attention span, though unique and a part of him, worried me some before the baptism. I had a great fear that either during the meeting, during the baptism itself, or during the confirmation, he would embark on some grand discourse. As he pulled my once-beautiful white socks over those incredible purple-ridged toenails, I told him at least ten times that he couldn't say anything during the meeting; there would be hymns, talks, prayers, but he must not say anything. He agreed every time.

"...dedicate this meeting to thee in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen." Applause. "Applause?" I asked myself. Brother Scali was gleefully clapping, yelling "Bravo bravo!" I stared, mortified, for several seconds, but I finally regained my composure enough to put my arm around him. "You're not supposed to do that in the chapel, especially after a prayer. 'Amen' is all you need to say," I told him. We somehow made it through the meeting without further incident and approached the font.

It was Elder Cantwell's first baptism. They couldn't quite figure out the "arm game," as Brother Scali called it later, but they went ahead. After a nervously-uttered prayer, Elder Cantwell lowered Brother Scali into the font, but his head remained out of the water. Brother Scali seemed confused, so I stooped down and informed him we would be repeating the prayer. As he stood there, all hunched over and tight and confused in the water, he misinterpreted the pause and decided to baptize himself. "Oh God, our Father in Heaven, . . ." and began lowering himself into the water. We quickly stopped him, Elder Cantwell finally managed to baptize him correctly.

As he came up out of the water, he cried out: "Oh, that was wonderful! I felt like I was in Galilee with our Lord Jesus Christ!" Everyone smiled warmly—he was so sincere about it. We changed clothes and turned to the confirmation. I was giving him a blessing, concentrating as hard as I could and trying to listen to the Spirit, when he started thanking me for it. "Oh, what great faith you have in me, Brother Edoardo, to say such beautiful things! Oh, thank you so much!" I continued with my blessing as tears came to my eyes.

We took a bus to his apartment along the banks of the Arno River. As we walked along the cobblestone street under the wrought iron street lights, and he hooked my arm with his, I thought, "I love this country." The moon was large and full, yet low in the sky, as it reflected off the limpid Arno. All was calm, especially our hearts. We had helped the Lord bring another soul into his Church.