

Parliamo Italiano?

Domenica in Bologna

Many years ago I saw the film called *A fish called Wanda*. I was taken by John Cleese's seduction scene in which he spoke to Jamie Lee Curtis in Italian, sending her into a paroxysm of desire.

When I retired I set myself the task of learning Italian in the hope that perhaps one day I would meet Jamie and . . .

I enrolled for various classes at Centre for Lifelong Learning at Strathclyde University which included Italian, along with Painting, Drawing, Pottery, Latin, Creative Writing and Singing. Fifteen years later I am still butting my head against Italian vocabulary, grammar and in particular, pronunciation.

During my third year of Italian at Strathclyde I met a retired lady called Hilda. Her Italian seemed excellent. Travelling with her from Bearsden to High Street each Tuesday we swapped stories. I learned that her son lived and worked in Bologna. The secret of Hilda's success with Italian was uncovered. Each time she went to visit her son, she enrolled for classes at *La Scuola Cultura Italiana*, mainly to give her something to do while her son was at work.

I looked up *La Scuola* on the internet. After an extended haggle with my 'Commanding Officer' (my dear lady wife, Margaret), I was permitted to enrol for a two-week course. To avoid disrupting our 'other holidays', I must attend during early January.

(As an aside - I had ticked the box which said 'to live with an Italian family'. I have been alone to Bologna on this basis on four occasions and each time was 'placed' with a single lady. This is explained in another tale entirely - try "Travels of a Donkey" at www.thebuzzinbee.co.uk).

ooOoo

Prior to leaving Bearsden I was required to download a test paper and time myself while tackling the questions. Recourse to notes and textbooks was forbidden. On arrival in Bologna I was then interviewed, in rapid Italian, and 'awarded' the Level 1A (absolute beginners). Naturally, I was a bit miffed: surely I was much better than Level 1A?

I quickly learned the concept of 'immersion learning'. Within these classrooms only Italian was allowed. This was an expedient adopted by the tutors as our class contained a surprising number of Japanese ladies, (beautiful *Geishas*, all about thirty-five years old, mmm), two Swedes, a few Germans and a sprinkling of Australians of Italian origin. One day a noisy clucking of five Italian girls in their early twenties sat in for a morning.

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They had recently graduated as primary teachers and were trying to gain 'points', to help them find a position in a school and so start their careers properly. I was the dinosaur in the class, by at least twenty years.

Unaware at that stage just how poor I actually was, I blundered on, speaking pidgin Italian to anyone who would listen. Shopkeepers and waiters in *ristoranti* were obvious targets for my overconfident outpourings. Frequently my victims would reply in what sounded a bit like German. Puzzled, I thought they might be speaking an odd Italian dialect. (Years later I learned, with my Scottish inflected Italian, I sounded "tedesci" (German).

Being on my own, (my CO was back at base camp in Bearsden with no interest in visiting Bologna with temperatures hovering around zero and snow on the ground), I devoted my early afternoons to my set homework for the next day.

From late afternoons into the evenings there was a parallel programme of cultural activities and visits. In this way I was busy for the entire two weeks. I soon found that among us students, English was our default language, and we all got on well - great fun.

The teaching blocks were organised on a five-day cycle and after Week 1, I was 'awarded' entry to Level 1B for my second week.

On the middle weekend, changeover time for most of my fellow students, I found myself dining out alone on Sunday (*Domenica*) evening. At around 10 pm I was heading back to my accommodation, about to cross a wide and busy street. The weather was Baltic, with sleet and rain pulsing at an angle of forty-five-degrees. The cars were swishing past with full headlights on, searching for wayward jay-walkers to mow down. It was difficult to spot a gap to cross.

I saw the man standing directly across the road from me, his toes peeking over the edge of the pavement. He was wearing a raincoat, and a wide brimmed hat which concealed his face. He held a tall white stick in his right hand. If he stepped off the pavement, he would surely be killed.

My brain cell went into overdrive as I rehearsed and rejected several phrases in my best Italian before settling on one to pitch my offer of help. I plucked up courage and dashed into the traffic. Amid blasts from accelerating motorists, I dodged across to rescue the blind man.

When I arrived at his side I spouted:

"Signore, sono di Glasgow. Studiamo Italiano all La Scuola Cultura Italiana. Posso me help you, attraversare la strada. Il, eh, eh, il weather erano molto, molto brutto and the cars eriamo molto, molto dangerous e rapido."

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He did not respond, merely stared ahead with his sightless eyes behind dark glasses. I concluded that he might be hard of hearing as well as blind. Blundering on, I reformatted the same words and fired them at him again but louder, placing my right hand behind his left arm, gently but firmly.

It was then he replied, in perfect English with a very slight Italian accent.

"Thank you very much for your kind offer. I am a blind man. I am waiting at this bus stop for a bus. It is the same bus I catch at this bus stop every night."

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Biglietti Andato e Ritorno

(return tickets)

Although my dear wife understands more Italian than she admits, she is most reluctant to speak it. In any case, when it comes to dealing with officialdom in whatever setting, I am duly rehearsed and set loose to speak for both of us.

On this occasion we were travelling to Zug in Switzerland and had used our 'best friends Ryanair' to take us to Bergamo, a small, delightful town near Milan. We love Bergamo where we have several favourite restaurants, so stopped over for two nights.

Our plan was to catch a local train from Bergamo to *La Stazione Milano Centrale* then onward by the *TransAlpino*, a luxury express train which travels from Rome through Zug, then to many cities, terminating in Amsterdam. Margaret had told me several times over that we must be sure we reserved our seats 'both ways', (*biglietti andato e ritorno*). She had read about these long-distance trains being busy, emphasising she would NOT, under any circumstances, sit on our cases in the corridor.

If making such a journey today, we would almost certainly book online, but this was probably 2003 and I planned to purchase our tickets (*biglietti*) at the railway station in Bergamo. After all, we had lots of time and I had rehearsed the necessary phrases in Italian to include seat reservations. What could go wrong?

I joined the queue behind a dozen or so waiting at the tiny, low window. Despite its length, the queue moved quickly and in due course it was my turn. The ticket clerk was an elderly chap in need of a shave and a toothbrush, exhaling a reek of strong coffee infused with tobacco fumes. (Italy did not ban smoking in the workplace until January 2005.)

I pitched my request to travel to Zug via *Milano Centrale* with return tickets.

This request he received with a sigh and barked back something which I took to be:

"Zug, Svizzera? Andato e ritorno, sicuro?"

This was easy, I was cooking by gas.

"Yes, sorry Si. Si, Zug di Svizzera."

I sensed he needed more reassurance and added: "*Si*, of course and *mille grazie, con posti riservati per favore, andato e ritorno. Posti riservati eriamao molto important for us, for mia moglie, my wife. Oh, and not for today, but per domani. Andato domani, tomorrow, not today.*"

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Only then did I remember to slide across to him the note of the dates we wished to travel.

He was definitely not happy but I took this to be because of the extra work it would involve. My Assistant Travel Manager was muttering by my side:

"John, what is he saying? Why is he angry at you? How much is this costing? Have you got the seat reservations? Remember to get them for the return trip as well."

Unhelpfully, a tall business lady who had been standing behind me, her briefcase hard against my backside, now moved to my other side, eased me sideways, and stuck her head into the window, demanding something of the ticket clerk. (Italians are not good in queues). The clerk refused to acknowledge her and kept bashing forcefully on his keyboard. This infuriated the tall woman: she screamed at him then stomped off to join the end of the queue at the adjacent window. We took the muttering behind us as a sign that our complicated and time-consuming request was annoying everyone else in the queue. These were people who wanted to travel *immediatamente*. I should advise here, to travel on a train or bus in Italy without a ticket will incur a high fine, if caught. In addition, all tickets must be punched to authorise travel before boarding. This is a requirement of which we were blithely unaware at that time. As fares for public transport are deliberately set low to encourage people from their cars, the system works well.

Minutes passed then finally, a pile of tickets spewed from the printer, which our clerk then checked and stacked, just out of reach. His moment of power. We must pay before he would release them. I elected to do so by credit card and this caused further muttering from the clerk and those pressing hard from behind us.

Before ceding our place at the window, we checked our prize. Four tickets with seat numbers showing the correct dates for travel, train numbers, coach numbers and seat numbers, printed in Italian in one long, complicated and continuous script.

"There we are my dear one, our *Biglietti Andato e Ritorno. Perfetto!*"

The next person in line, a smaller, roundish, older lady, stepped up to window and hurled further abuse at the clerk. He slammed his window closed and pulled down the blind. The queue at once jostled to join the tall lady at the next window, casting vile mutterings and evil glances in our direction.

The next day the 'andato' part of our trip worked perfectly. We boarded the local train in Bergamo and soon arrived in the permanent chaos which is *Milano Centrale*. Our train located, we boarded the designated carriage, found our seats reserved as requested and travelled to Zug without let or hindrance. At the Swiss/Italian border our

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passports with the tickets inside were give a quick check by the Swiss conductor who gave us a cheery, "Good Afternoon. Welcome to Switzerland".

Our friend Stef met us at on the platform at Zug and led us to the local bus for the village of Meierskappel. This bus is timed to meet the TransAlpino. The Swiss know how to run an integrated travel system - everything timed to perfection.

Our stay with Stef and Pia was excellent. In fact, in our experience, everything in Switzerland is almost always 'excellent'.

We took ourselves to Zug station on the bus. The '*ritorno*' journey from Zug to *Milano Centrale* started without a problem. Two minutes after stepping onto the designated platform, the Eurostar arrived displaying our train number, all as stated on our tickets. Our seats which had been reserved from Zug to *Milano Centrale*. Ensconed, we settled back to watch the marvellous scenery. If there was a Swiss conductor, we did not see him.

On arrival at the Swiss/Italian border, our passports and tickets were requested by two smartly dressed Italian train conductors. My Assistant Travel Manager passed me the tickets which I in turn proffered to the conductors, inside our passports, as before.

After a quick check I was told to provide our '*biglietti*'.

"John, what is he saying?"

"He wants our tickets."

"I gave you them. Tell him he has them."

"Dear one, did we perhaps give him the *andato* tickets rather than the *ritorno*?"

"No, of course not. Look, here are the *andato* tickets."

Spying these additional tickets, the lead conductor, the smaller, older one, gestured officiously that I must pass them to him. This I did.

He looked at them then passed them to the younger who said:

"Sir, we need of you to give to us your train tickets for to travel. These *biglietti* are *posti riservati* tickets alone. We need of you to give to us your tickets for to travel."

In a mixture of Italian and English I told the conductors these four tickets were the only *biglietti* we had been given by the ticket clerk in Bergamo. The older conductor threw his hands in the air and extracted a booklet from his pouch. I suspected that we were about to be fined or possibly ejected from the train.

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The six-person carriage was full. A well-dressed woman speaking rapid German intervened on our behalf. I have no idea what she said, but the conductors retreated to the corridor, closed the carriage door. We watched as they argued for a few minutes.

When the door re-opened the younger conductor said:

"Sir, I am most sorry to say to you that we can only charge you for the part of your journey made in Italy."

The older man passed me a small piece of yellow paper with an amount written in a scribble.

Memory dims, but I think it was 23 Euro.

Margaret counted our coins and I proffered the amount in cash.

Our lady advocate muttered something under her breath and looked at our conductors with disdain.

On receipt of the money, the older man snatched the piece of yellow paper and scribbled the date and "Grazie". Only then did he return our passports which I in turn passed to my Assistant Travel Manager.

"There we are my dear one, *Andato e Ritorno. Perfetto!*"

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Later, much later, we figured our journey, *andato e ritorno*, four hours each way in a high-speed luxury train cost less than our local bus fares between Zug to Meierskappel, a journey of twenty-three minutes each way.

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Farfalle nei Capelli *(Butterflies in the Hair)*

We were in Italy with our friends Leslie, and Marge and Jo.

As background you need to know that many Italians rush to their local *Farmacia* (Pharmacy) at every opportunity, be it a headache which may presage a deadly illness, or a painful corn that cannot be borne one minute longer. In Italy, if you need to visit your GP, your hypochondria must be rampant. Doctors cost money while advice from Pharmacists is free. As a result, in towns and villages throughout Italy there is a *Farmacia* on almost every street corner. Mostly these are upmarket boutique-like establishments because a visit will almost certainly result in the purchase of a (costly) medication. At that long ago moment I was unaware of this situation.

Home or Away, my every day starts with a shower. To keep my itchy scalp at bay, I use *Head and Shoulders* anti-dandruff shampoo. Not for the first time I arrived on holiday without my travel-sized bottle of H&S. On the second day I felt my head becoming itchy.

When we saunter the streets of a town or village in group mode, I almost always trail behind, looking in shop windows, reading signage and savouring my version of the Italian words at low volume.

Spotting a *Farmacia*, I detoured in search of anti-dandruff shampoo.

The idea fixed in my head was a phrase for 'dandruff' being '*farfelle nei capelli*'

The dishy young lady behind the counter was almost certainly a grand-daughter of Sophia Loren. She offered her alluring smile and I was smitten anew.

'Boungiorno, bella signorina. Sono di Glasgow. Possa autarme? Suffero di farfelle nei capelli. Possa mandarme un shampoo anti di farfalle? Per favore.'

I hoped I had said: 'Good day to you, pretty young lady. I am from Glasgow. Can you help me? I am suffering from dandruff and need you to give to me an anti-dandruff shampoo, please.'

To emphasise my point, as one does in the Italian way, I added the suitable gesture of scratching my head and brushing invisible flakes of dandruff from my shoulder.

The girl sprang back in alarm and rushed away. When she returned, she was accompanied by another 'girl' who might have been and probably was, her mother; another Sophia lookalike.

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'*Signore, qual è il tuo problema, per favore?*' (Sir, what is your problem, please?)

I pitched my request a second time and Mummy looked intently at my short grey hair.

'*Ah, povero te. Tale condizione difficile da cancellare. E 'comune a Glasgow?*'

(Ah, poor you. Such a difficult condition to erase. Is it common in Glasgow?)

'*Si, quasi 50% della popolazione sufferono.*'

(I was advising that: "Yes, 50% of us suffer from itchy scalp or dandruff" - according to the H&S adverts on TV).

'Mummy' then clip-clopped to a shelf, searched, selected a small box and popped it into a paper bag.

She tapped at the till and smiled; I read: "12 Euro 50 cents".

Outside, my tribe were waiting, restlessly anxious and badly in need of a mid-morning coffee fix. My Interrogator in Chief launched immediately into her inquisition:

'John, why did you slip away again without a word? If Jo hadn't spotted you, we could have been anywhere. We want to find a coffee place and you just slope off? What did you buy? Let me see that bag. How much did this cost? What is it?'

'Anti-dandruff shampoo.'

'It's what? How much?'

I mumbled my reply.

'How much did you say? WHAT? Look, its only 75 millilitres. 12 Euro 50 cents for 75 millilitres! Go back in there and get your money back. But why shampoo in a Pharmacy? Look, there is a mini-market over there. What does this say?'

I studied the label:

"Farmaci per il trattamento del pidocchio del capo significa."

'I'm sure it means for dandruff, like that stuff you got me one time, what was it called? That was expensive wasn't it? The stuff that smelled like coal tar soap?'

On that day, on that Italian pavement we could not remember on that Italian pavement: and we cannot remember now, as I type. Of course I am stubborn and dislike conflict. I did not want to upset my two Sophias and so slipped the tiny box into my rucksack and pointed to a coffee shop as the storm of protest petered out.

Later, back at our *appartamento* I fished out my large English/Italian dictionary.

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Farfelle = butterflies

Capelli = hair

Forfora = dandruff

And, after a bit of working out:

Farmaci per il trattamento del pidocchio del capo significa

Is, approximately:

treatment for the eggs of head lice.