

A Life Dismembered

4. Italy 1968 (or 1969?)

In the summer of 1968, between finishing my A-Levels and starting at the University of East Anglia (UEA), I took a 'gap month': my first solo trip abroad. Now I had signed up to an international student work camp in Italy.

The camp was in San Felice Circeo, a village south of Rome. This was a time long ago, before we had to pretend that persons of every culture are the same under the skin. So without any qualms about 'racial stereotyping' I soon discovered that the Italians are indeed a voluble, enthusiastic, sociable nation, full of a *joie de vivre* (why do we use a French phrase for it?) which was totally new to me. On one day-trip up into the hills, when the coach stopped at the summit Gianna jumped down, gestured at the view and exclaimed, "Ah, che bellezza! Il silenzio delle montagne!!" at the top of her voice.

Amongst the other students, the most exotic were a group from Prague. None of us had ever met youngsters from behind the Iron Curtain. But in January a self-effacing, amiable fellow named Alexander Dubcek had somehow become First Secretary of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. He introduced 'Socialism with a Human Face', as part of which travel-starved citizens could apply for tourist visas to the West (provided they or their parents could lay their hands on the necessary hard currency). I got on very well with them; I discovered that the Czechs had a dry, cynical sense of humour very like the British. They invited me to visit them in Prague the following summer. Well, you know what happened next: the following month Warsaw Pact tanks rolled in to crush what became known as the Prague Spring. But for a few brief months people had dared to dream of building a new society in which they could make decisions about their own lives. I did reach Prague eventually – but that's another story. Once the work camp ended – without any significant work having been done – I made my way back to Britain by train and hitch-hiking. I recall buying a newspaper in Rome with a huge headline screaming "Scesi!" above a grainy photo of Neil Armstrong stepping down onto the lunar surface. But the Moon Landing was in 1969, so I must have revisited then.

Passing through France I saw a few traces of the student and worker revolution of May 1968, later known as *les Evenements*, which had almost toppled de Gaulle's Fifth Republic. There were fading wall graffiti, slogans like 'Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible!' and 'To have governments is unnecessary, to have to elect them is bizarre.' The revolution had been crushed by the riot police, the Communist trade unions and its own anarchic incoherence, but for a few brief weeks people had seen the possibility of building a new society in which they could take control of their own workplaces, their own neighbourhoods. Hitching through France in '68 or '69, every concrete bridge over the road was daubed with either 'OTAN NON!' or 'OTAN SI!' after de Gaulle had withdrawn France from the NATO command structure – as Le Pen wants to do today.

Back in Bournemouth, feeling very deflated, I heard about a pop music festival which was due to take place in a field on the Isle of Wight at the end of August 1968. I wrote a long letter to the Belgian girl I'd teamed up with at the camp, telling her about my travels – camping in the woods in San Marino, visiting the Swiss girls on their National Day – and inviting her to it. I waited, but no reply. A week passed. Then the festival date passed. Finally, one morning my father brought me a large envelope the postman had delivered. Inside was my letter, torn to shreds by the Royal Mail franking machine because it was too thick.

Like Tommy in *Events*, I had only experienced the Swinging Sixties vicariously: watching Top of the Pops on TV. Like him, my only direct contact with that dreamworld had occurred one evening when I was walking along Westover Road with my parents. A youth in a black leather jacket and mop-top hair came running towards us, then turned into a side alley, pursued by a posse of screaming girls. My father asked a passer-by what was going on: "It's one of them Beatles," we were told. This places the event to August 1963, when the Fab Four played six nights at the Gaumont cinema.

I wonder how my subsequent life would have differed if I had attended that first IoW Festival with Pauline (to see Jefferson Airplane, Fairport Convention, the Move, the Crazy World of Arthur Brown*; admission 25/-). Or rather, wondering what an identical copy of me is doing now, in the parallel universe created, according to the Many Worlds Theory of quantum mechanics, in the collapse of the waveform of the stream of photons in the optical detector of the franking machine – which had safely diverted my missive to the 'small packet' stream.

If you read *The Pentacle Papers*, you will see how I have used these memories in the novels.

*: In this world, I did get to see Arthur Brown at UEA – but that's another story.