

*"I would like to know," said the second lieutenant, "Lazarus' reply to those who asked him what he saw on the other side. Probably Lazarus, his head always in the clouds, replied that he had not bothered."*  
— Tempo di Uccidere, Ennio Flaiano

## **introduction**

It doesn't take an utterly pessimistic person to perceive we are presently navigating rough waters. Current events evoke an unsettling feeling of déjà-vu. There is concrete evidence that something is broken out there: old systems are failing, or have failed, while new ones are not yet in place or are struggling to become operational. As a result, many seem disoriented, falling back into the trap of looking for "easy solutions to complex problems," such as those offered by extremely destructive political movements and doctrines longing for an embalmed past from which they are unable, or unwilling, to actually learn any valuable lesson. In Italy, my home country, this has been the case for years.

People like myself, who have been educated to be reasonably open minded, are not necessarily faring better. There is a number of issues in my own family that have never been confronted because they were deemed "troublesome". One of such issues relates to the participation of my maternal grandfather to the colonial war against Ethiopia fought by fascism in the 1930s. As that war was fought by a "disgraced" regime, its legacy has never been fully assessed. My grandfather left an album of photographs documenting his participation in the war, and yet none of his close relatives attempted to understand what the object meant, unknowingly bestowing upon it a totemic aura that, not differently from a religious relic, by far survived its creator.

While thankfully a number of historical analyses on the war were published over the years, attempts at processing its less tangible aspects are much scantier. The reading of the album and of the context that made it possible I propose is, I believe, intended both as the groundwork for a reflection taking into account emotive sides of the story and as a way to look at its legacy from a conscious perspective.

## chapter 1

According to records, it was pouring on the day that Domenico Lucidi, my grandfather, set foot in Naples after over one year in East Africa, where he had been fighting in the second Italo-Ethiopian war as a member of the MVSN, the Voluntary Fascist Militia. It was November, 1936<sup>1</sup>. Among his few possessions, that day Domenico was carrying back home with him a collection of photographs, most of which he had taken himself in the course of the months spent overseas.

After his return, the photographs, 281 in all, were neatly arranged and stored in an album with a soft leather and silk cover<sup>2</sup>. On its front, in bas-relief, was a classical victory scene, garlanded by flowers, depicting horses and people in flowing garments, among which a winged figure on a Roman biga stood out. With the exception of the last seven, all the cardboard pages of the album, of a dark anthracite color as it was fashionable in those years<sup>3</sup>, were densely filled with photographic prints of various sizes, produced during and shortly afterwards the Ethiopian campaign. No name or label was attached to the album.

Not much happened to the album in the following eighty years. After crossing the seas in 1936, the photographs settled down. The original owner passed away, his children had children of their own and grew old. I too was born, sometime in the middle of all that. Sure, after its compiling the album moved houses a couple of times, and after that it transited through a number of shelves. For a time it was keeping company to grandmother's edifying homemaking literature; when she died too, it was allowed to sit together with a pile of expensive art books. That's where I saw it last, nine years ago.



I was reunited with grandfather's album last January, after it traveled a distance of about 1,600 kilometers, via land and air. As I held it in my hands for the first time in years, I could at first only make sure of its weight. It was wrapped in a crumpled plastic bag that was likely around for a while. I remembered that kind of bag, with its orange logo sitting

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of the event as published by the national press of the day, see Avenati, C.A., 1936. *Il Saluto del Duce ai reduci recato dal Generale Luigi Russo*, La Stampa, 16 Nov. p.5.

<sup>2</sup> To this count must be added an additional 12 photographs that are part of the album even though they constitute a separate group from the rest. This batch contains images taken at a later date, around 1940, in Albania.

<sup>3</sup> The plain page format in a dark hue gradually became the standard after the dismissal of the old *carte-de-visite* album, which usually featured bright paper stock and ornate frames around photographs. Albums from the 1920s and 1930s were either completely blank inside or had slits to keep the prints in position. The Ethiopian war album is an example of the former type without slits. See Langford (2001) and Stokes (1992) for comparisons between the Victorian *carte-de-visite* and later album designs.

on an expanse of green, one dubious line of text in white underneath. “We know you well,” promised the bag, and the unintended irony of that threat made me rather uneasy.

As I unfolded the bag, the musty smell of decay assailed me. It was a gust of foul air, the kind that meets one when entering a sealed room, or a crypt. I was put off. I wrapped the album again and locked it away. It would be another eight months after the reunion before I decided to enter it again.

### ch. 1.1

As I approach it after a break of nine years, I realize now that for a long time I confused the smell of grandfather’s “African” war album with that of home. It was a smell of no season, belonging both to torrential summer rains and to December’s blackest afternoons. Diluted in rooms that had other smells of their own, it created a continuity between the many *before* and *after* in a familiar chronology made of houses and people left behind, some of which I had known firsthand while others I could only meet when evoked by remaining family members. Grandfather was a specimen of the latter group, as he had died almost one decade before I was born. Even so, traces of him were still attached to our daily life: for instance, his was the name connected to our number in the phone book, his the name on our utility bills. Besides, all around were still scattered objects that he had owned or made. It seemed that, as a family, we would mostly exist within the sphere of influence of his persona, of his belongings and of the simulacra he had left in place. The album of photographs he had taken in Ethiopia was perhaps the most formidable simulacrum he had created: it was a construction fully enveloped within itself that seemed to exist in another time from ours. Only grandfather possessed the key to reading its contents, and he had never shared it with anybody. Thus this strange place populated by mysterious images, exotic and sinister at the same time, was like a private shrine of sorts that one would enter, explore for a short time, and then depart, leaving its enigma alone, as willed by its maker. Hands and eyes visited the pages for years, wearing them out little by little, and yet they didn’t manage to break the album’s silence, to unravel its riddles.

It’s therefore for lack of understanding that the album came to acquire its mystique, an impenetrable opaqueness that would only be matched by the intense smell of decay emanating from it. Grandmother, who was the keeper of the album between her husband’s death and her own, seemed to consider the book of photographs a vestige of past greatness, even though she couldn’t tell what this greatness entailed. Besides, there were clearly many elements in it she couldn’t place, since they didn’t have a direct relation with her own life. She would therefore just acknowledge a handful of photographs, always the same, mostly of women and animals, and then move on to chatter about other things. Her attention to images of animals and women—which included an alleged African “girlfriend” of her husband—expressed a desire to reduce the unexplainable to a kind of reassuring known, to find a kind of domesticity even in the exotic, depriving it of its threatening traits<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> For comparison, see the freudian *heimlich*, familiar vs *unheimlich*, uncanny (Freud, 1919).

The next generation, that of grandfather's children, also seem to have missed the opportunity to earn a firmer grip on the matter. My mother and her brother always affirmed that they "knew nothing," that their father "never said much about the war" or about anything connected with it. All they were told were curious anecdotes, about troops eating crocodile tails when suffering from extreme hunger for example, or about horses dying off in the desert. These anecdotes however had the taste of fables and cautionary tales and didn't allow to seriously question facts depicted in the album. Perhaps in accord with tendencies in post-war Italian society that preferred to ignore or forget controversial items from a certain historical period instead of giving them the means to tell their story, a discussion on the album and its meaning was never even attempted from either side.



At a young age, I naturally accepted the state of things without really grasping it; all the same, I often wondered who the intrusive *guest* that continued to exist within the paper boundaries of the "African" album was. Casual inquiries on the matter often proved to glide aimlessly at the surface level, leaving its core untouched, so with time I stopped bothering. Of course, basic information could be pieced together from various sources, and if I were to compile a biographical note about my maternal grandfather now, it would more or less read as follows:

Domenico Lucidi was born in Montereale, in the province of L'Aquila, in April 27, 1907. He was the oldest child of Giovanni and Domenica D'Amato (colloquially known as "Regina"); he had one brother and three sisters. Giovanni was working for the local prison, being in fact the only employee there; he died of cancer when Domenico was sixteen. Unable to care for the whole family, Domenica sent her oldest son to her brother David who was living in L'Aquila, so that he could finish school and find a job. There Domenico studied as a technical drawer, getting his diploma after three years. In the meantime, he was working as *canneggiatore*<sup>5</sup>, a job that didn't pay much but allowed him some independence and eased the financial burden off his family. It was in these years, through this sort of occupation, that he learned the job of chartered building surveyor, a profession he would pursue in his adult age.

In his twenties, he became a member of the PNF, the Fascist National Party; he then joined the Fascist Militia (MVSN), also known as the "Black Shirts<sup>6</sup>," volunteering to fight in the second Italo-Ethiopian war (1935-36) on behalf of the regime of Benito Mussolini. After a period of intense military training, he enrolled with the 202nd battalion "Cacciatori del

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<sup>5</sup> A *canneggiatore* was an assistant who helped building surveyors with transportation and handling of heavy instruments, as leveling rods and poles, used for taking measurements. It was a menial job frequently taken up by young boys who had yet to finish their technical studies.

<sup>6</sup> The nickname comes from the color of their garments.

Tevere,” part of the 1st CCNN Division, the “23 Marzo<sup>7</sup>,” whose boisterous motto was “Implacabile” (merciless, unstoppable). In the summer of 1935 he sailed from Naples to Massawa to take part in the war operations.

In 1937 he won a contest and was hired as a technical drawer by the public administration<sup>8</sup>. He permanently moved to the city of Rieti, which had become province through a decree in 1927. Rieti wasn't far from his native Montereale and had the advantage of being relatively affordable. It is here that, while working temporary jobs, Domenico had already made the acquaintance of Assunta Ermini, a young woman from Rome. Assunta was from an extremely affluent family, but her father, Gustavo, had squandered everything before dying of Parkinson disease, leaving his daughter in indigence. Domenico was engaged to another woman, but became infatuated with the destitute *signorina*<sup>9</sup> from the capital and was finally persuaded to marry her. They were married in 1938 and had two children, Gianfranco and Anna Rita, born respectively in 1940 and 1946. In the early 1940s, Domenico volunteered again with the Black Shirts, fighting in World War II in Albania on the Greek front and, after that, in Sardinia.

After the end of the war, like a number of other public servants Domenico risked losing his appointment because of his involvement with the Fascist Party. He was eventually allowed to keep his job and continued working, retiring with the maximum number of years of service. He died of cancer in April, 1972.

The impression is that these words and the facts they describe are not revealing much of the actual person they refer to. They remain generic. As a result, I struggle to connect the character of such a biography with the person depicted in the photos.

One of the issues about connecting biographic information with lived experience is one of balancing perspectives. In the scope of grandfather's biographical overview for instance, the space allotted to the war in Ethiopia should occupy at most a few lines. And yet it is clear that for him that war was a momentous event, something that would need a special care in being safeguarded as a memory. Mere biography states that Domenico Lucidi took part in other wars beside the one in Africa in 1935-36, yet traces of these events were barely, if at all, preserved. Weren't any mementos from these other wars worth saving, not even for an "avid amateur photographer"? Evidence suggests that, in fact, they weren't: just a dozen pictures remain from Albania; none exists from Sardinia. One could point out that these were different wars, fought in different circumstances, and that indeed the tide had already started turning at the time of the Greco-Italian war in the winter of 1940, and that the situation was even less promising for the pro-fascism forces in Sardinia. Besides, it is perhaps even more relevant to note that the spirit with which these wars were fought was not the same.

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<sup>7</sup> Several Black Shirt divisions were named after dates that were meaningful in the chronology of the fascist movement. March 23, 1919 was the day in which Fasci Italiani di Combattimento (Italian Fasces of Combat, predecessor to the PNF) were founded.

<sup>8</sup> For the results, see *Gazzetta Ufficiale* dated December 10, 1937.

<sup>9</sup> That's how, according to other members of the family, her mother in law would call Assunta, not without contempt.

Much has been written about how the fascist government reached the apex of its popularity in 1936. The historian Renzo De Felice is among those who, examining at length in his biography of Benito Mussolini<sup>10</sup> the ascent of fascism, connected the climax of its success with the handling of the war with Ethiopia. Not only this was intended as the first ever fascist war, but it would also put to the test "the virility of the Italian people."<sup>11</sup> From the very start it was clear that this was not to be mistaken with just another war, but it was supposed to be an epoch-making event, one that would finally restore Italy to its imperial Roman ancestry and contribute to the shaping of a "new man," envisioned as "serious, intrepid, tenacious"<sup>12</sup>. The "new man" was hailed by the regime as the answer to the crisis of the modern European male, which had worsened after the Great War; he was not supposed to be a professional soldier on the army's payroll, but rather a militant citizen, one in a nation of others just like him. Such a "man" was at the same time conqueror of empires and hardworking settler, the paradigm on which the Black Shirt militia was to be modeled.

But it wasn't the "new man" that won the colonial war against Ethiopia or, as it was called later, the "seven months war"<sup>13</sup>. What won it was, rather, lack of courage from international diplomacy, a number of tactical mistakes on Ethiopian side, and last but not least, Italy's massive deployment of troops and modern warfare machinery<sup>14</sup>. Regardless of its classification, the "seven months war" wasn't fought as a colonial campaign; it was effectively fought as a national large scale conflict. It was calculated that Italy's forces amounted to around 500,000 units between national and indigenous troops<sup>15</sup>; out of these, about 80,000 were volunteers from the militia, like my grandfather.<sup>16</sup>

Writing a full account of the war is beyond the scope of these pages. Yes, the campaign officially lasted only seven months, from October 3, 1935, when the Italian troops crossed

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<sup>10</sup> The volume on the years with a close connection with the present research is the fourth in a series of eight tomes. See De Felice, R., 1974. *Mussolini il Duce. Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936*. Turin: Einaudi.

<sup>11</sup> In Mussolini, B., 1934. *Scritti e discorsi*, vol. X. Milan: Hoepli, p.31.

<sup>12</sup> In Mussolini, B., 1934. *Scritti e discorsi*, vol. V, Milan: Hoepli, p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> This is the title of a volume on the war by Luigi Pignatelli, first published by Istituto Editoriale Del Mezzogiorno in 1961 and re-issued by Longanesi in 1965. The denomination has been used since by several historians when referring to the colonial war of 1935-36.

<sup>14</sup> For analysis and documentation on the role that advanced war machinery, such as artillery, vehicles and airplanes—which also includes use of forbidden poisonous gas—played in the outcome of the conflict, see Del Boca (2014) and Rochat (2008).

<sup>15</sup> Indigenous troops were mostly made of trained *askari* (colonial soldiers) from Italy's other colonies (Lybia, Somalia and, especially, Eritrea); mobs of untrained mercenaries from Ethiopia were also employed.

<sup>16</sup> Other than being massive in scale, it's been noted that the colonial war of 1935-36 was grossly anachronistic. It was the only war of its kind fought well into the 1930s, at a moment when, rather than on conquering empires, the largest colonial powers were focusing on their dominions' administrative decentralization and on consolidation of their exploitation. See Labanca, N., 2003. *Studies and Research on Fascist Colonialism, 1922–1935*. In: *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 37-61.

the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia, to May 5, 1936, the day they entered Addis Ababa.<sup>17</sup> But the effort was not only the one undertaken at the front. Before there was a substantial period of preparation. Fascism put enormous emphasis on the conflict that would finally bring forth Italy's virile spirit and fulfill its imperial dream, hence the regime mobilized the many far-reaching arms of its propaganda machine in an attempt, for the most part fruitful, to construct a phantasmagoria that would appeal to the masses and be able to unite the nation in its belligerent endeavor. Newspapers, magazines, and other kinds of publications, and besides them, radio and cinema, all contributed more or less in unison to the construction of the phantom that would hold the country in its grips over the period of 1935-36.

“For almost two years, from the spring of 1935 to the autumn of 1936, Italians forgot [...] everything, just so they would not break the illusion created by the promise of the Duce that Italy too shall have its empire, its ‘place in the sun’”.<sup>18</sup>

illusion —> media —> photography —> chapter 2

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<sup>17</sup> It must be recalled however that when Mussolini announced the birth of the Empire of East Africa (AOI) from his balcony in Piazza Venezia in Rome on May 9, 1936, Italy actually controlled roughly one third of the country.

<sup>18</sup> Caccia, P., Mingardo, M., (ed.) 1998. *Ti saluto e vado in Abissinia*. Quoted in: Labanca, N., 2005. *Una Guerra per l'Impero. Memorie della campagna d'Etiopia 1935-36*. Bologna: Il Mulino, p.56.

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