

Chapter 4: Siena, Tuscany (1971)

So let us then leap forward to the summer of 1971, when I arrived in Italy. What I remember most is the first evening in Siena, the everlasting reddish twilight, how the slanted, gentle rays of the setting sun lighted up the narrow alleys of Siena on that late summer day, which to us, arriving from the Middle East, seemed to last forever. One always remembers the day of arrival; the days that follow tend to fade away.

Siena, Tuscany, Italy. It was late August 1971. Earlier that day my friend Eli and I had landed at Rome's Fiumicino Airport. For both of us, discharged only two weeks prior from three years of military service, it was like landing on the moon.

In Rome we boarded the train to Siena. We rode second-class in a compartment packed with Italian soldiers traveling from Sicily to Milan: dark, gesturing, sweating in the sweltering heat of the non-air-conditioned carriage, they appeared to us like Arabs. We offered them duty-free Marlboros to which they helped themselves enthusiastically. They in turn shared with us their bread, cheese, and wine. The Italian we knew encompassed only "*si*, *no*, and *grazie*" but it did not take long to establish convivial comradeship with these soldiers. This foreshadowed our relationships with the Italians during the next two years—what a gentle, warm, welcoming, and non-xenophobic people they seemed to us!

Why were we going to Siena? To study medicine. Why Italy? Because only the "brightest" had any prospect of getting into one of the three Israeli medical schools, each admitting fewer than a hundred students per year. To have any chance of admission one required top scores in the matriculation high school exams—ours were below average—and a star performance in an elaborate set of psychometric tests and interviews. Many hundreds of those who were rejected, and those like me, who knew that they had no chance, took off to Italy.

Italian medical schools, from Bari in the south to Milan in the north, attracted foreign students, not only from Israel but also from the United States, Greece, and the Arab countries. All that was required was a valid passport, evidence of high school graduation, and the ability to pay for tuition and living expenses. In Italy there was no *Numerus Clausus*. Any university could admit as many students as it wished; the more it admitted, the more it profited. And so an average first year class at a medical school would include well over a thousand students. However, fewer than twenty percent of those who enrolled would eventually graduate—still too many for the overly congested Italian doctors' population. The dropouts occurred mainly during the first three years. Those who managed to progress to the "clinical" years tended to graduate, with many needing more than the minimum of six years to do so.

The academic program was "liberal": attending lectures was not obligatory; even the clinical years were voluntary in that one was not required to have any contact with patients. The emphasis was on examinations: one had to pass a certain number of examinations listed in the curriculum, and that was it. And one chose to sit before the examiners—all exams were oral and public—only when he felt prepared. Indeed, not a few students procrastinated: I remember Bob, a stout American who used to dine with us in the students' *mensa*; the guy was over fifty years old and spoke Italian like a local.

"Oh, I've arrived in Italy fifteen years ago," he explained. "Tuition is cheap, the dormitory costs almost nothing, and food is so good..." He swallowed a mouthful of meat *tortellini* and proudly declared: "Yesterday I passed *Patologia Chirugia*, finally! You know, that SOB *Professore* Manzoni failed me ten times. Hey, don't smile...wait until you fail *Anatomia Humana*; no one passes it the first time. *Professore* Garibaldi tends to fail foreigners, especially you Israelis..." Bob shook the last drops of red wine from his glass and chuckled, the malicious laugh of an eternal medical student.

You may be in awe: red wine in the students' *mensa*? Yes. Most Italian students had pasta, meat, salad, bread, cheese and wine for lunch, and

pasta, meat, salad, bread, cheese and wine for dinner, numerous coffees in between, and not one of them was obese. The food was delicious and almost free—no wonder many of them wished to be students forever.

It was late afternoon when we got off the train at Siena's provincial-looking railway station. We chose this small, medieval Tuscan town and its ancient *Faculta di Medicina e Chirurgia* over Bologna, which had been very popular among foreigners, or Rome or Milan, because someone at the Italian Consulate in Haifa had marveled about how fantastic Siena is; and indeed, what we saw that first evening was magic. The narrow alleys leading to the Piazza del Campo lit by the fading Tuscan sun; elegant small antique shops, fancy shoe boutiques; well-dressed girls trotting hand in hand in trios on high heels, the click-click sound on the cobblestones echoing from the walls. Restaurants: white tablecloths, candles flickering, waiters standing on the porch, folded white towels on their arms: "*Prego, signore...*" But can we afford it? And how would we order? After three years in the desert and trenches we were like savages coming to civilization.

We registered at the *Universita*. The students' *mensa* was closed during the summer but for a nominal fee we received subsidized coupons, accepted for food—and wine—by many of Siena's *trattorias*. In the *trattorias* we started to learn Italian: *bistecca di maiale, osso bucco...* We noted that the locals pronounce the "c" or "k" like "h," the "bucco" becoming "buho." We understood that *maiale* is pork, and because we had heard the words "*Madonna di maiale*" in the streets, we tried to order it in the *trattoria*, not realizing that the phrase is an extreme profanity.

We rented a flat near the medical school. I purchased a 1957 white Vespa 150 cc, but a day later a speeding Alfa Romeo forced me into a wall. I survived, but the Vespa did not. With the academic year still weeks away we loitered around the cafés surrounding the Piazza del Campo. The local girls, attractive as they were, did not seem to care much about poorly dressed young *stranieri* (foreigners). Many American and European tourist girls

frequented the piazza; most came to Siena for a summer course in Italian. I remember approaching a blond one who sat alone, sipping a cappuccino, absorbed in an Italian dictionary. This was where I learned the phrase “fuck off,” which she uttered without lifting her head. A few minutes later she was successfully picked up by an ugly Italian, her goal surely being to learn Italian.

Rejected by the opposite sex, we kibitzed at the tables of the Israeli medical students who had arrived in Siena before us. We looked with great admiration at those who had managed to pass the third-year examinations. Our respect for them grew when we heard that just recently an Israeli student had ended his own life by jumping from a window after failing, for the fifth time, in *anatomia*. The apparent leader of the veteran group—anorexic, poorly shaven, and chain-smoking *MS* cigarettes, which he held between shaking, yellow-tipped fingers, told us gravely: “Listen guys, if I were you I would leave this cursed town as soon as possible. Examinations are impassable...forget about *anatomia*...I almost died.... They force you to know all the volumes of *Chiarugi Anatomia* by heart. Do you know what this means?” He looked around to receive a loud affirmative response from the other veterans. “It is like studying by heart Tel Aviv’s phone directory...no...add to it Haifa’s and Jerusalem’s. You still have six weeks before the semester starts, take my advice and go to Bologna, in Bologna any idiot graduates. Even the women here *lo mizdainot* (do not screw around)...” With disgust, he pointed at an elegant woman passing by and concluded his apocalyptic message with a juicy “*vai faiculo*.” He licked dry his cup of cappuccino. Coffee was rather expensive at the piazza—not for the rich tourists, of course, but for us it was.

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We decided to abandon ship and leave Siena, but where should we go? And how? I called my father in Haifa. “Look *Aba*, Siena isn’t for me. Too difficult. I’ll fail.” A few days later he called me.

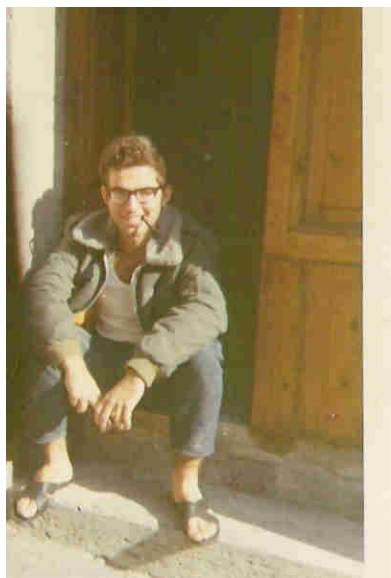
“Son, I spoke with the Chief of Orthopedics in Munich; he’ll help you get into their medical school. Leave your things in Siena and go to Munich;

you can stay with the Schwartzes. I've already talked to them, and they are waiting for you. Who's Schwartz? He'd served with me during the war, married to a Russian peasant. When he was imprisoned in Siberia I was helping his wife and children, now he works for the Voice of America, you know, transmitting propaganda to the Russians. You'll need money, eh? Go to Appel's Apoteke in Schwabing. Herr Appel will give you two thousand *Deutschmarks*—he owes me his life. Yes, during the war. Everything happened during that war."



Siena, Toscana (Piazza di Campo)

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Siena, 1971: in front of our flat; dining with Eli L and Eli H.