

Chapter 6: Modena, Italy & The first examination (1971-1972)

After replacing the Beetle's engine— for which I paid the equivalent of two months sustenance allowance —I loaded it with all my possessions, tying the mattress on the round roof, and on a rainy day headed north to Bologna. In 1971 Bologna was so popular among students that not only its Medical Faculty refused to accept my transfer from Siena but also it was impossible to obtain any accommodation in that town. After two weeks of sleepless nights among snoring, drug using "tourists" in the youth hostel, at the outskirts of town, I migrated further north, on *via Emilia*— built by the Romans in 109 BC— to Modena. This was a mid size medieval town famous for its Maserati and Ferrari cars, Balsamic vinegar, sparkling Lambrusco wines, Luciano Pavarotti and beautiful blond girls with small sharp or slightly hooked noses. But on that gray, early November day I did not know anything about Modena and its delights; all I wanted was a roof over my head and to start studying.

At the students' office I met another Israeli, Jochanan—now a chief of anesthesia in Jerusalem. Together we rented a two-room, one shower complex at the *Casa Dello Studente*, just above the *mensa*. Our neighbors were mostly from the south of Italy, collectively termed by the stuck-up northerners as "*studenti meridionali*", and a bunch of Arabs: Palestinians, Syrians and the rest of the Levant. In the corridor and the *mensa* we attempted to exchange words with "the enemy"—these were the years after the Six Day War and prior to the 1973 October War. Some greeted us with a smile, others looked away, not wanting any contact with the "murderous Zionists".

Three months after arriving in Modena we planned another day trip to Lugano, Switzerland, to stock up on cheap chocolate and "gas coupons". Car gas was extremely expensive in Italy and tourists driving cars with foreign license plates could buy discounted gas coupons at the border. It was illegal for us, students, to do so but we took the risk. We would drive across the border, buy the maximal allowance of gas coupons at a Swiss Bank; back in

Modena we would sell half of the coupons to owners of gas stations, sharing and pocketing the difference, around \$ 150 per trip. But that January morning when we descended to the parking lot my beloved Beetle was not there; it was gone, so was my passport. I called the Israeli Consulate in Milano and was told: "You idiot. Leaving a passport in your car with all these Arabs around you. Now one of them is entering Israel with his picture on your passport and a bomb in his pocket..." The car was never found; until the summer break I walked and studied.

I started attending lectures in the huge amphitheatre. There were more than 500 students in our class; this was considered a small class—in Bologna they had a thousand first-year students. The lectures were in Italian of course and I understood absolutely nothing. So while everybody was hysterically taking notes, I had the chance to study my new colleagues. More than half were locals, northern Italians from Modena and its vicinity: eighteen year old kids, fresh from high school. I was struck by how well dressed they were, according to the prevailing fashion: tight bell shaped trousers, superb Italian shoes, fancy shirts—very narrow at the waist—and overcoats reaching down to the floor. At least half of them, if not more, were females. Lovely girls, invariably slender and, already at nine am, dressed to kill: high heels, mini skirts, full make up. The rest of the class consisted of the much less extravagant *meridionali* and us—a tiny group of *stranieri*. Each morning, while we would *schlep* ourselves in the deep, wet snow, the locals would arrive in their new cars, which ranged from the tiny *Fiat Cinquecento*, *Fiat 127* or *128*, to *Lancia*, *Alfa Romeo* and even *Ferrari*. At lunch break the *meridionali* and we would slog back to the *mensa* for a plate of hot pasta whereas the locals would speed off home to dine with mama or papa, or to one of the fancy restaurants in *centrocitta*. This is when I was first exposed to the feeling of being "poor" and a "stranger".

After a few weeks of attending lectures which I did not understand, and several futile attempts to pick up one of those leggy princesses—the

only “success” was cute Simonetta Muzini (the one name I remember) who during lunch agreed to walk with me around the *duomo*, and allowed me to buy her a *gelato*, but in the evening was “busy”—I decided to skip lectures altogether. My brain was dry— not that it was disused but it has never been properly used. During the preceding three years in the army my highest intellectual activity, beyond that of studying navigation and manuals of *claymore* mines, involved reading old Playboy magazines in dark, dusty bunkers, or at night, in tiny field tents to a candle light. The only literary book I read during those years was *Fanny Hill*...and here I was sitting with huge volumes of *Biologia*, *Histologia*, *Biochemia* and *Physiologia*.

I started with the first book. Using an Italian-Hebrew dictionary I translated it word by word. In red ink I entered the Hebrew translation above the Italian. When the meaning did not make any sense I used the Italian – English dictionary and often had to open the English-Hebrew dictionary when I did not understand the English term. When the book filled up with red Hebrew characters I could increase the pace because many words became familiar. In parallel, I listened to the Italian radio and at the *mensa* I chatted with the *meridionali*. When I finished with the *Biologia* I started to “paint” the *Histologia* book in red. At night I paced up and down the length of my tiny room citing aloud long paragraphs from these books. I could not talk Italian but I could talk biology and histology in Italian. Even today I can cite whole paragraphs from these two books. In mid-year, when the course of *Biochemia* commenced, I attended the lectures: I did not have to take notes because I already knew the book by heart.

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The first examination

In May the period of examination started. As I have already mentioned, this was a totally “free system”—you could take all the four, first year examinations or none—you could continue to be a first year student forever. You had a small book called a “*libretto*” in which the exams you passed, or failed, and their scores, were registered; once you passed all the

numerous required examinations you became a *dottore*. The examinations took place in a lecture amphitheatre before a committee of three professors and in front a large, frenzied crowd of spectators: students awaiting their own turn—many of them had failed previously and now preparing for a re-examination –and hoping to learn how not to fail, or to enjoy the fiasco of others. The passing minimum score was “18”, the top score was “30”. Those who did even better received “*trenta cum laude*” (“30 plus”).

My first test was in *Biologia*. The long roster posted on the doors of the Medical School announced that I would be walking up to the guillotine on the first day of the examination period—which would last a few weeks. The chief examiner was to be *Professore Cognetti*, an elderly gentleman with protruding ears, known for his super-nervousness, short temper and —worst of all—an alleged dislike of *stranieri*. At the *mensa my meridionali* buddies jested merrily at me, sliding their forefingers across their necks and adding “*Cognetti... fascista*”. They predicted my looming slaughter. Two days before the exam I stopped studying. What for? I have no chance. I should go home and join a kibbutz. I got a haircut and purchased a tight Italian shirt in the market. Then I bought the first bottle of whiskey in my life which was empty in the morning of my execution.

Morning, nine O’ clock. The amphitheatre is filling up with the gladiators on their way to glory, or death, and numerous spectators, some with their families, ready to watch the blood bath. Jochanan and I sit together, pale and soaked in sweat. We watch how the ferocious professor Cognetti eliminates Italian candidates who sing fluently in beautiful Italian--like Pavarotti. What about us? Would we be able to say anything meaningful in Italian? Abdullah —a mustached Jordanian we know from the *mensa*—who already failed twice—is dismissed by Cognetti with a sarcastic comment: “why don’t you go back to Jordan?” The Italian audience chuckles lightly—this is not the day of the *stranieri*...especially not when the chief examiner was a known supporter of Mussolini, eh?

One more to go before me; it is Mihai, a Jewish Romanian from Bucharest. We know him from the synagogue; Romanians speak Italian like Italians and Mihai boasted that he is not going to accept, in any subject, a score of less than 28. After ten minutes of torture the Romanian escapes from the room, head hanging low, with a lowly "18" stamped in his *libretto*. My turn. I walk slowly down the steep stairs towards the stage; my head is throbbing and my stomach aching—a nasty hangover. I sense the crowd in my back and see Cognetti wiping irritably the sweat from his forehead and looking impatiently at his watch.

I climb up the elevated wooden podium and collapse on the hard wooden chair facing the three inquisitors. I focus my eyes on Cognetti's bald scalp and his fanning hairy ears. Without raising his head, or showing any interest, he says loudly: "*Signore Schein, could you please tell us about Mendel's Second Law of Genetics?*"

"*Si professore, certo...*", I look in my mind at the relevant pages from the book, including my Hebrew translation, and start reciting. As I continue the alleged *fascista* lifts his head up and I note his clever brown eyes gazing warmly at me. He nods his head repetitively, agreeing with each word and sentence. The answer to the second question brings a smile to his face. The auditorium is dead silent in expectation: would he ask another question—the one for the *trenta cum laude*—the 30 +? Cognetti nods to the young chic *professoressa* on his left; she, a parasitologist, inquires about some worm. I forget the creature's name so I imitate, gesturing with my two hands, how it crawls. Loud laughter behind my back. Cognetti lifts his hand and orders *silencio*. He smiles at me, zealously shakes my hand and announces "*trenta cum laude.*" I climb up, nay—I fly up—to the doors where Jochanan is waiting. I treat him to a cappuccino and *dolce* at the nearby bar.

This was my first scholarly victory—no academic success would ever be as sweet. I called my father: satisfied with the unexpected triumph of his hitherto retarded son, he generously offered, "Well son, why don't you get yourself another old car, get it from one of the graduating foreign students, now leaving the country." The next day I drove around in a beautiful red

Volkswagen 1500, 1968; not yet another Beetle but a round bodied *Berlina*, with a rear engine and a huge front boot. This car would play a crucial role in my short and long-term future.

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What I remember most of the years in Italy is studying day and night. Studying anatomy during the second year—not on cadavers but from atlases and texts—was even harder. It reminds me of Chekhov’s short story, *Anyuta*, where the hero paces across his tiny room, mumbling to himself: “The right lung consists of three parts...Klotchkov raised his eyes to the ceiling, striving to visualize what he had just read. Unable to form a clear picture of it, he began feeling his upper ribs through his waistcoat.” This exactly is how we used to study anatomy. After the first exam’s *trenta* I would not compromise for anything less.

What I remember about Modena are the chalky fogs, which for days and nights would engulf the Po Valley, the wet chill penetrating our poorly dressed bones. I remember the cobblestone pavements in *centrocitta* glistening in the rain and the early spring bloom of the gardens in the *vialle* surrounding the old town. I can still smell the scents emerging from crowded, dark *salumerias*: *Prosciutto*, *Mortadella*, *Salamini* and *Coppa* hanging from the ceiling; and on the floor huge *Parmesan* cheeses—from the nearby Parma.

I remember the small synagogue and its irritating Rabbi, where we were “discovered and adopted” by Mr. R. and his family, who would regularly treat us to delicious Friday dinners at their small villa. Overfed with homemade pasta and fortified with *Lambrusco di Modena* we listened to Zigi R.’s story. He had been 18 years old when World War II ended and the sole survivor of his central European family. In 1946, he was making his way on foot through Italy towards the south, where he hoped to board one of the illegal ships sailing for the British ruled Palestine. But on a street in Modena, penniless, hungry, dressed in rags, he had met Lena—a corpulent Catholic Italian girl who was ten years his senior. Thus his journey to Palestine had been interrupted forever. Zigi had taken over the family’s glue factory, Lena

had given him two daughters while her mother—the diminutive *nonna*—commanded the kitchen; and she cooked so well that by the time we met them Lena was double the size of her skinny husband, and looked as if she were his mother. I remember Lena chain-smoking *MS* cigarettes and sipping *aperitivi* followed by her beloved *Lambrusco*, which was like water to her. It was at their table I learned that there is little pleasure in eating good food without wine. “*Bevi, bevi,*” (drink, drink) and “*mangi, mangi,*” (eat, eat) Lena would constantly command, heaping more *tortellini* on my plate. “You look like a *pulcino*” (a small chicken). What happened to them? The *nonna* broke her hip and died during my second year in Modena. Last I heard was that Lena had passed away from emphysema.

What about women? Local *studenti* did it in their small cars; often at night one could see bare legs sticking out of the retractable roofs of a tiny Fiat *Cinquecento*. The *meridionali* frequented the railway station where, for a few *lire*, aging toothless whores provided a relieving *boccino* (*bocca* means mouth). I remember my first trip to Venice; it was the spring of 1971. Piazza San Marco at dusk: fading sunrays, salty canal fragrance, doves fluttering above; couples walking hand in hand or sipping white *Vermuth* at the cafes; fried sea-food on the plates; orchestras playing Charles Aznavour’s “*Que c'est triste Venise*”. So many beautiful women around—I was needing one so badly.

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Late June, after the examinations, students who had where to go, and the means to do so, would escape Modena and the sweltering Po Valley, until autumn. I flew home to Haifa. Haifa had then a relatively new medical school, that admitted a selective number of Israeli students from Italy, directly into the fourth year. Encouraged by my unexpected success in Modena, my father tried now to admit me into the second year in Haifa. An interview with the Dean was arranged. When I arrived at the Office of Dean, who had been also one of Israel’s greatest surgeons—the man who invented the “central splenorenal shunt”—I was told that he would be late and that the

Vice Dean will see me instead. The latter was Professor Bental, the head of neurology.

Behind the heavy desk in the dark room, shaded from July's dazzling sun, sat a large, dark, bald man who looked at me gravely. The great professor of neurology did not waste any moment on preliminary pleasantries with the lowly first year student from Italy.

"So your father thinks that you are ready to enter *our* medical school? What were your matriculation scores in math and physics? Sixty percent?" His face showed contempt. "And you think you'll be able to cope with *our* curriculum? *Our* medical school is affiliated with the *Technion*—one of the best technological institutes in the world, our goal, the reason for our existence, is to create physicians-scientists. You, you my friend won't have any chance at all to compete with *our* carefully selected students. You will be left behind. My advice: go back to Italy and try again for our forth year "Italian class", or try in Tel Aviv, and (he shrugged) not everybody has to be a doctor."

In the corridor, on my way out, I stumbled upon an elderly gentleman. He stopped me: "You must be the young Schein, eh? Sorry to be late, my name is David Erlik." He led me into his spacious Dean's chancellery and after learning what the neurologist had told me he smiled kindly: "Oh, math, physics, doctor-scientists, they really believe in it. *Nu...*let them. I wanted to create a medical school in Haifa, and in order to justify it we had to come up with a few gimmicks, but you and I should not take it too seriously." With a fatherly tone he continued: "Go back to Italy for another year and I will admit you into the third year, and don't worry about *him*", he pointed to the wall, "this is how some of them are."

But I was to return to Haifa's medical school, not a year later as planned, but eighteen years later—as a senior lecturer and deputy head of a department. Then I would meet the now retired and ailing nasty neurologist, and I have to admit that it gave me some satisfaction to talk to him as a doctor to a patient. I did not think much about Haifa's Medicine as a Mecca of science; the opposite is true. However, that neurologist—he died

meanwhile—who implied that I am an idiot, may have had some vision: in 2004 two professors of Haifa's medical school received the Nobel prize for chemistry.

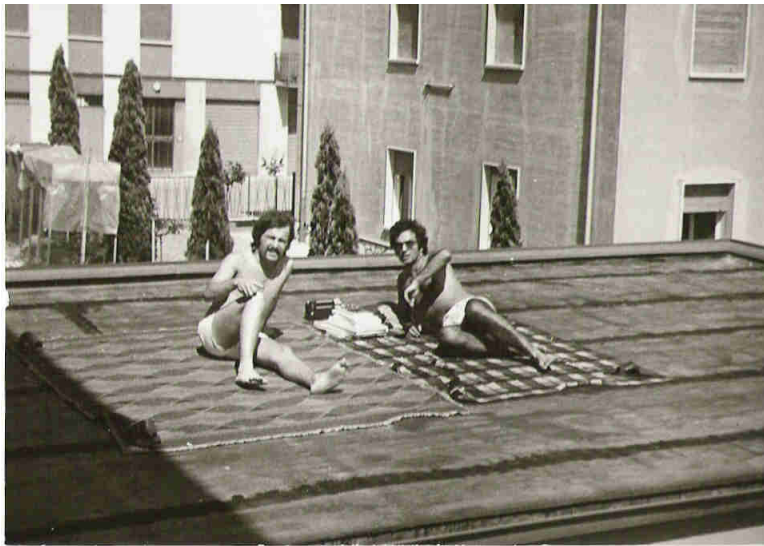
After a bright Israeli summer and many glorious days on the sandy beaches of the Red Sea I gloomily returned to Italy. My pessimism deepened when I found that my lovely red Volkswagen 1500 has meanwhile turned into a wreck. Eli Landau., the Israeli student whom I had left my car—he eventually became a cardiologist in Tel Aviv, and a newspaper food columnist—reported to me laconically: “After I’ve dropped you off at Bologna Airport I returned to Modena. Suddenly the front axle collapsed and I rolled over. I am lucky to be alive....” Instead of offering compensation he accused me of almost killing him. At a small garage where my wreck had been dumped the mechanic said: “Your friend must’ve driven like a *pazzo*, he’s crushed into a lamp pole and rolled over; the *machina e’ finita*.”

What to do? I was expecting my parents’ visit in a month or two and I had promised to show them around Modena and Bologna. I had no money for yet another car. But the sly Modense *mecanico* came up with a solution: “The body is *finito* whereas the engine, tires, and all other parts are in excellent shape.” He led me to his back yard where an empty body of an older Volkswagen 1500 was rotting. “To merge the two will cost you 150 *dollari*, paint job, another fifty; we’ll use your German *Zoll* license plates and your documents, which obviously won’t fit the hybrid’s body number. But you are not going to show it to the police, eh? And for this body you pay me \$ 25 *dollari*, total of 225, *va bene*’, All right?” Two weeks later I was driving the new white/azure “hybrid”—which less than a year later will deliver me into an Italian jail.

See pictures below...



Modena, in front the *Casa Dello Studente*, 1972



Modena, studying on the roof with Jochanan, 1972



Modena, *centrocitta*