A Hidden Sicilian History
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To Sebastiano Cannizzo
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Everyone has a unique history and a special life. Some people—prophets, great philosophers, musicians, artists, kings, heroes, and so on—have left a mark on the books of history. Good or evil, the ones who have stood out are remembered by posterity; people like Julius Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolph Hitler, Josef Stalin, and others. At their demise, the lives of ordinary people are like dead leaves swept away by the wind when fall arrives. They sink into oblivion as history pays them no mind. In addition to the history of individuals, there is that of nations, but no book can include the biographies of all the people who formed the nations of the world.

In truth, if it were possible to write an enormous book of history, it should record the life stories of everyone who has populated the earth through the centuries and millennia, for each living being has something different and particular to say, often worthy of being handed down through the generations.

Each person follows their own special path; it is impossible to find two lives that match perfectly. Even members of the same family have different stories. It is like seeing birds in the sky. They may look identical, but they are all different in both shape and character. There are long and short lives, and the loss of someone young is like a bud cut by the gardener before it blooms fully.

In Greek mythology, the Fates, three ladies dressed in white, symbolized man’s fate. The first of them, Clotho, spun the thread of life on her spindle; the second one, Lachesis, measured its length by her rod; the third, called Atropos, cut
the thread of life at her will. Nobody was able to oppose them. Even almighty Zeus was powerless against them; he was unable to change the destiny of a person even if he firmly wished it.

Countless people over the years have wished to know their destiny and future. For that reason, there have been astrologers, magicians, wizards, and oracles to consult. In ancient Greece, the Oracle of Delphi was renowned, as was Cuma in Italy. Inside the temples, usually sacred to the god Apollo, there were virgin priestesses called sibyls who told people their future, and it seems that their predictions were always exact.

It is not only in mythology, but also in the Bible that there are many instances of the prediction of the future. In fact, the prophets were inspired people that told of future events. They predicted the destiny of Israel and events linked to Jesus's life, as in the case of the Prophet Isaiah, who lived around the eighth century BC.

Nowadays, horoscopes and astrological forecasts rage. Even disbelievers read their daily astrological forecast in the newspaper or on the Internet, or they listen to it on the radio or while watching television.

The issue about the existence of destiny more or less remains unsolved. People's lives look like numberless straight lines, each one a different color and nuance, which emanate from a common center. Like the rails of a railway, they never meet, and each of them follows its own predetermined course. According to many theologians, and even in some passages from Martin Luther and Saint Paul, the trajectories of our lives follow a route already set. They believed that God has prearranged everything.

Poets, philosophers, and writers think in the same way. Free will is just illusion; man cannot act apart from the events that drag him here and there like a flag, which changes direction according to the wind that is blowing. It is as if a great architect had already designed a path for every living
being to follow, as a director does when giving the actors roles in a play.

When I was a high school student I asked my philosophy teacher this question: “If God is omnipotent and all-seeing, He knows what is going to happen in the future since He is beyond space and time. Therefore, where is our free will? If the life to come is already plotted and known, what can people do to change a scene already set up?”

My teacher was a beautiful lady from Catania. All the schoolboys had fallen in love with her. As for me, I was enchanted by her Junoesque bearing and the way she arranged her hair, which she gathered up and kept fast with a hair slide every day new. She had the habit of sitting at her desk and testing the students who stood by her. We schoolboys couldn’t help watching her legs when she was sitting on her chair and her skirt was pulled up a little bit.

Despite her beauty and gracefulness, she was very strict. She gave me her answer by paraphrasing Saint Augustine. “If I see a man standing on the edge of a ravine, I know that he is going to throw himself down. Yet he is free to give up his resolution to die.” She meant that despite the fact that the future is already known, our free will remains.

Her answer didn’t convince me then, and I am still not convinced. In my opinion, if God knows our future and the events to come, it means that the railway tracks that we follow are already laid.

The length and quality of every person’s life is different. Many lives are gloomy from the beginning, others are luckier. However, most lives are made of ups and downs—that is, continuous alternation of joys and sorrows. Many personal stories consist in struggle: to make a living, conquer the heart of a loved one, come to power, and attain freedom. However, each life is like a piece of a huge jigsaw puzzle in the sky. You cannot find two pieces that are identical.

I am fond of technology, but sometimes when I see youngsters looking at their smartphones all day long a question
arises in my mind. Is this the goal of life? And whenever I see a self-employed worker or an employee working tirelessly on Sundays and public holidays, I ask myself again, “Is this what God wants from us?”

On that point, I cannot help thinking of a surveyor from my town who was married to a charming wife and had a daughter. He had a job at a state firm that did road maintenance. He was an indefatigable worker. His office was by the side of the Palermo-Catania freeway, and many times when I went to Catania on Sunday I spotted his car in the parking lot near his office. Obviously, his work was everything he had in his life, as he worked continuously, but it was probably just an escape from something he considered unbearable. Apparently, his family appeared to be close-knit in public, while in the privacy of their home things were quite different.

If you run away from situations that cause you stress, anxiety, or uneasiness, you have the illusion of ridding yourself of unbearable problems, but that is a false impression. You cannot resolve your troubles by escaping. You should cope with your issues and overcome them.

Later, the tireless surveyor was found dead in his chair with his head laid on the desk in his office, a revolver still gripped in his hand. That was evidence that his overzealousness was just an escape from his family problems.

I have seen many people who read books continuously. At first glance they look very learned, but if you observe them carefully, you’ll see that their so-called love for books is just an escape from reality. In other words, any action that is repeated too often and which goes on without interruption for long periods of time is assured to be pathological.

Even going to Mass may be an escape. I once noticed a person that attended a 6 p.m. Mass and then headed for a 7 o’clock Mass in a different church. He had nothing to do, so he moved from one church to another just to kill time.

A dear friend of mine who was a Protestant pastor once confessed to me that he had had many arguments with
members of his congregation and was on the verge of quitting his office, but he didn’t because he didn’t know what he would do without his church.

There was a shop seller who had a notions store, and even though he was too old to run his business and no customers bought anything from him, he continued to keep open his shop just to have a way to spend his time. Otherwise, he had no idea what he would do.

A trader of building materials used to struggle daily to manage his firm. He was always overwhelmed with debts, and had a lot of trouble honoring his bills of exchange. He finally went bankrupt and all his worries vanished. One day I stumbled across him. I didn’t know he had quit his job, but he looked much too flabby; moreover, he was pale.

“How is business?” I asked.

“I don’t work anymore!” he answered with a disconsolate air.

“You should be more relaxed now without anything to do. You have no worries!”

“No, it is not quite that easy. When I worked, I had lots of worries about my customers, my suppliers, the bills and taxes to pay, and I had many things to do. I had so many concerns that I couldn’t sleep at night. But I felt alive and satisfied. Now, with nothing to do, I am like a dead man.”

Some individuals seek shelter inside their family or get married to feel safe and stable. Often, people become engaged to someone who is a second-choice lover. They cannot get the person they truly desire, and resort to living with someone they don’t love just for the sake of safety.

For some people, meeting friends seems to be a daily challenge. They go to dance schools, gyms, bars, and similar places in an attempt to meet friends. But the more friends they get the more they feel alone, because their search for friendship comes from the void they have inside. Running after friends might be considered as an escape from reality as
well. People fear remaining alone. They dread having to look inside themselves, so they flee from their loneliness and try to fill their inner void through friends.

All the cases mentioned above are clear examples of escaping from reality, from life. Some people are unable to live as they want, and flee from their painful condition to take refuge in some activity that can give them the illusion of being alive and safe. I have always avoided watching too much TV or staying in front of my laptop too long, as it can also signify an escape from reality.

I don’t set myself up as an expert. I am just a good observer of people and situations. I have realized that anything we get involved in so much that we become identified with it, takes us away from real and authentic life, which requests that we live it fully and in all its facets.

What is the meaning and goal of our lives? Over the years, everyone has tried to answer this dilemma. If our lives are predestined, we don’t need a goal, as our aims and targets have already been laid out in heaven long before we were born. So why strive for a target? We can confine ourselves to living just as it happens naturally and follow the stream of life, as the migrant birds do when they follow the airstream. We don’t need to improve ourselves to overcome our shortcomings that prevent us from reaching our target.

Not everyone has a goal, and many people live without aim. They just spend their lives with no purpose. Other people have short-term or long-term goals. There are innumerable variations in people’s ends, for as I told above, every life and story is different from another.

As for me, I am not sure about the existence or nonexistence of destiny or predestination. Therefore, I want to do my best to deepen my quest to know more about life, death, and the end of life. To do that, I started collecting data and information, not only through my travels, but also by reading many different kinds of books, even those that are old and rare.
The public library in my hometown is located within a few rooms of an old palace that long ago belonged to Andrea Chiaramonte’s family, who was one of the eminent noblemen in Sicily at the end of the fourteenth century. He fought against the Spanish, but was defeated by them and sentenced to death by beheading. He was executed in Palermo in front of the Steri Palace where he had established his court. Meanwhile, his family members forfeited all their assets in Sicily, including the prestigious palace in Enna, which later was split into three parts. One part was given to the Franciscan friars, one was used as a court of law, and the smallest part as a civic library.

The ancient and precious volumes are kept on the highest wooden shelves. To reach them you need a special ladder provided by the attendant. One day I was on the ladder looking for a book that told the history of my town, when something that looked like a scroll fell onto the floor after having slipped from a gap between two big volumes about the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily that were placed on the highest shelf. Therefore, the scroll was supposed to be a part of them, or was at least somehow connected to them.

I got down from the ladder and bent down to pick up the strange roll, which at first sight contained sheets of paper tied up with a string. Thinking they were precious rare writings, I headed for the director’s office to hand in the yellowish bundle of sheets.

I knocked on the door of the office and a man with a stentorian voice prompted me to enter. As soon as I saw the manager, I recognized him. He was one meter and ninety centimeters tall, which is unusual in Enna, where the average height is a bit more than one meter and sixty-five centimeters. Whenever he walked in the streets with his German shepherd he stood out, but I didn't know he was the boss of the local library. His nose was quite red, with small hollows similar to those of a raspberry, a clear sign of his tendency to drink too much wine. However, he was very well mannered.
“Please, sit down. How may I help you?”
“I found this scroll on the highest shelf in the main reading room. I think it belongs to the library.”
“When did you find it?”
“Just now, not more than five minutes ago.”
The director untied the roll and unrolled it on his desk. Then he sneezed several times. “Sorry!” he said. “I am allergic to dust.”
“That is no problem!” I answered.

The roll contained many handwritten pages. The paper was yellow with age and had a nauseating, moldy smell. The director examined the paper sheets very carefully. The writing was readable, even though some lines were discolored. However, from the expression on his face I got the sensation that he wanted to get rid of that bulk of old papers as soon as possible.

“These are not in the list of the things that belong to the library. However, I want to ask the attendant. He’s worked at the library for almost forty years. He is near his retirement and knows everything about the old volumes in the library. Who knows, maybe he can give us some useful information. Abraham!” he called out.

Instantly, an old short man with greasy white hair and prominent jawbones came along.

“Have you ever seen these sheets?” asked the boss.

The attendant, who wore thick glasses for short-sightedness, came near the director’s desk and bent his head forward to have a better look at the papers. He took off his spectacles to see clearly and eyed the bulk of stinky sheets narrowly, leafing through a few pages.

“No sir,” he said. “This is the first time I’ve come across this kind of stuff in our library.”

“Okay, that means that the shelves need better cleaning!” said the irritated director. “Tomorrow morning you must remind the cleaner to dust and mop all the shelves properly,
starting with the upper ones. Now go toss this filthy stuff that is soiling my desk and my hands.”

The attendant showed annoyance and replied, “The cleaner does her work irreproachably every morning. As soon as she comes she dusts off the volumes that are on the upper shelves. Then she sweeps and mops all the rooms.”

I was so engrossed in the squabble between the two that I didn’t pay attention to the attendant, who already was carrying the scroll under his arm. But I soon returned from my reverie and turned towards him when he was about to open the door to leave the room.

“No, please don’t throw away those sheets of paper. I can use them,” I said to the attendant.

The old man turned back and looked at the director, waiting for orders. “Res derelictae, res nullius,” said the director with his thundering voice.

“What does that mean?” asked the old man.

“It means that whoever finds a derelict thing has the right to take possession of it if it is not reclaimed by the rightful owner. This gentleman,” continued the director, pointing at me, “has the right to keep what he has found. You can give him the material.”

The elderly clerk stepped back and handed me the sheets. I folded and bound them with the string and left the library, rushing to my home.

Outwardly, they looked like very old and historical papers. I had the impression of having stumbled across a rare precious report about an *auto-da-fé*, which were held in great numbers throughout Sicily at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. According to some historians, 114 *autos-da-fé* were celebrated throughout Sicily from 1501 to 1748. The word *auto-da-fé* comes from the Portuguese *auto da fé*, meaning an act of faith.

An *auto-da-fé* consisted of a public ceremony where a sentence of the Spanish Inquisition was carried out. Before the enforcement of the judgment, the condemned person was
made to file between two lines of people, their hair was shaved, and then they were dressed with a donkey cap and a sack on which were painted the grounds of the judgment. If it was painted with a full Saint Andrew’s cross, it meant that the condemned person had repented in time to avert the execution; a half cross showed that he had been just fined, while the flames meant that he had been sentenced to death at the stack.

A solemn Mass attended by city authorities and a large gathering of the townspeople was celebrated where the auto-da-fé took place. People came together in great numbers as if there was a festival, and many street vendors flocked from the nearby towns and villages to sell cakes, carobs, licorice, and similar things.

In Enna, death sentences were enforced in the largest square, which is called Municipality Square. Near the scaffold was the small Church of the Lady of Sorrows, where the condemned person stayed and received the confession of sins and Holy Communion before filing towards the stake. Recent excavations in the Church of the Lady of Sorrows brought to light a niche where people sentenced to death spent the last hours of their life.

It was also possible that the old dusty scroll contained a report of one of the many capital sentences passed in Sicily against sodomites. It has been reported that at the time of the Spanish Inquisition, from 1547 to 1640, around a hundred capital punishments were enforced against homosexuals and people who had had “deviant” sexual intercourse, like oral or anal sex. Copulation with animals was also liable to bring a death sentence. In fact, any sexual activity not directed toward procreation was considered a capital sin. Sometimes the confession of those sins was wrung out by torture, even though at the time of the Spanish Inquisition it was not necessary to torture the suspect, because the mere sight of the instruments of torture was enough to persuade the alleged culprit to confess all their sins—or whatever else the inquisitor wanted them to confess, for that matter.
While heretics went directly to the stack to be burnt alive, homosexuals and sexually indecent people usually, as an act of mercy to make their death less agonizing, were strangled or hanged before being burned at the stake. In any case, those kinds of death sentences were enforced publicly to serve as a deterrent to others.

The main difference between the Medieval Inquisition and the Spanish Inquisition is that the former was directed by the Pope, while the latter was under the authority of the king of Spain, who enforced the Inquisition’s rules not only in Spain but also in the Spanish possessions like Sicily, Sardinia, and Mexico. Spanish kings used the Inquisition not only to judge heretics and witches, but also to get rid of their political opponents, on the pretext they were heretics.

One of the most atrocious instruments of torture was that called “the mouse.” The inquisitor inserted a live mouse into the vagina or the anus of the person suspected of heresy or witchcraft. The head of the small rodent was directed towards the inner organs of the prisoner. Sometimes the anus or the vagina was stitched closed. The little animal, striving to find a way out, penetrated the victim’s body, scratching and biting it, provoking shooting pain.

I was so anxious to arrive home that, lost in my reverie as I was, I didn’t even see the people in the street. I thought about how strange it was that one person’s trash is another’s treasure. I was sure of having found a document worth more than all the volumes in the library of Enna.

Once at home, I dusted off the sheets and laid them onto my desk, eager to decipher them. I wanted to know all the details of the trial against the heretic that had been sentenced to death and the exact protocol that was applied.

The handwriting was clear and readable. Nevertheless, the more I leafed through the pages the more I got disenchanted. Unfortunately, the papers didn’t contain either a report of an auto-da-fé, as I had hoped, or a detailed account of a death sentence of the Spanish Inquisition against homosexuals.
The first page held the title “A Hidden Sicilian History,” and about 300 numbered pages followed. The script was anonymous; its author could have been a man or a woman, young or old. There was no evidence to trace the author.

I read it line by line, day after day. To my surprise, the events told in the manuscript didn’t belong to the remote past. How was it possible that such recent happenings were written on such old, filthy paper? One of the plausible answers was that the author had stocked a considerable amount of paper at home, which had then turned yellowish due to the dampness of the place where it was stored. That was not unusual in Enna, where the fog wrapped up the town very often and not many houses were fitted with a heating system.

I don’t know why, but I doubted that the author knew what kind of research I was doing and had purposely put those sheets of paper on the top shelf so that I would stumble across them.

I also wondered why the author didn’t try to publish their work. There were a few probable answers. First of all, it is not easy to be a published author, and if you want to publish a book yourself, you have to spend some money. Maybe the author didn’t have the ability to do that. There was another likely explanation: maybe the author was so shy and introverted that they didn’t feel comfortable asking anybody for help in getting the manuscript published.

Nevertheless, the writing denoted the presence of a person of action, someone strong and extroverted. The only explanation I thought acceptable was that somebody had told the events to the author, who then wrote a tale that didn’t come from their own experience or imagination.

As soon as I finished reading the story, I was undecided as to what to do. In fact, in my opinion the tale was full of tortuous reasoning, and some passages were so absurd that nobody would believe them. It looked like a script for dead people. In fact, many of the characters seemed as if they had
come back from their graves to tell their lives to a world in which they no longer belonged.

I thought that maybe the manager of the library, who intended to throw away the useless, yellowed old sheets of paper, was right. But after much mulling over what to do with the strange finding, I at last realized that it might be worth something. It was absolutely not trash, as it contained some useful information about life and the traditions in Enna, a mountain city in the center of Sicily. Moreover, it described the ways that religious searchers went along their spiritual path.

I was hesitant about typing the contents, and considered giving the work back to the library, but I was not sure that the manager would accept the gift. After ruminating for a while, I came to the decision to translate the story into English and have it published. I opted for the translation of the manuscript instead of maintaining the original Italian, because by doing so I thought it would fulfill the author’s will. Indeed, he or she had intended to hand the tale down to whoever found it, in the same way somebody does when they fit a written message into a glass bottle and entrust it to the ocean. I thought by translating and publishing the story in English that it would be more likely to cross the ocean and reach faraway lands, as no country is devoid of English language readers.

_A Hidden Sicilian History_ is not a great literary work. Its contents are very deep, and it is neither engaging nor gripping, but maybe it can be useful to somebody who wants to know something uncommon. It is quite boring at times, and contains many abrupt digressions, but some of the information is really unique.

I decided to publish the work because, in my opinion, chance events don’t exist. In other words, if I stumbled across that script, it was not by chance but a superior will wanted it, and maybe the author chose me as a means to spread their thoughts. Furthermore, apart from its literary style, which is not lofty, the manuscript is worth reading because of the huge
amount of information that it contains. It will definitely broaden the reader’s mind.

Enna is a small town, but over the years it has fostered the hopes of great spirits and people that have devoted their lives to missions in faraway lands, like Blessed Girolamo De Angelis (1567-1623), a Jesuit friar who left his hometown to follow his spiritual path. At the beginning of the seventeenth century he went to Japan to spread the Gospel, but fell into fierce persecution against Christians and had his life ended by being burnt at the stake. Enna is the birthplace of good writers like Nino Savarese and Napoleone Colajanni—the latter was also an honest politician and sociologist—and musicians like Francesco Paolo Neglia. The spiritual path followed by the main character of this story is worthy of note, though minor in scale.

Not many towns in the world can boast so peculiar a lifestyle. It is possible that if I hadn’t published *A Hidden Sicilian History* some of Enna’s oral traditions would have been lost forever.

The events happen because they had to happen, not by accident. There is an invisible thread on Earth that links all people who have the same spiritual feelings, regardless of their race or skin color. They belong to the same spiritual race. The real races are not physical but spiritual, and you can feel it clearly whenever you have the chance to come across someone with similar feelings and nature. Through that scroll, the author wanted to create an invisible chain of spiritual beings, which he intended to become broader and broader.

Here is the translation …
Chapter One
The Church of Santa Croce

Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce myself to the reading public. My name is Vincenzino, and I am one of the characters in a drama that was performed some time ago in Enna on the stage of the deconsecrated Church of Santa Croce.

All the sacred objects had been removed from the church: the wooden altar, vestments, and holy pictures. Where once there was the altar, now a stage had been erected. Of all the statues and holy paintings that crowded the walls, only one portraying the Virgin Mary on the crescent with a snake under her feet had been left, and now it stands on the far right of the stage.

Our director was Paolo, a middle-aged stout man with a limping walk due to an untreated fungal infection in his feet, who had been the sacristan of the small church and who had developed a deep passion for theatre and poetry through the years. He was unmarried and lived with his single sister, who was also the costume designer for our theatrical company. Their house was very old; it had been built at least a hundred years ago and was connected to the church.

As a sacristan, he’d had the task of keeping clean the place and locking the wooden chairs, which were stacked at the entrance. In fact, at that time all the churches in Enna were furnished with just a few rows of pews. People who wanted a seat during Mass or a religious function had to rent the chair from the sacristan, paying a fee. Nowadays, Mass is held every day in Catholic churches, but before the last ecumenical council it was celebrated only on Sundays and holy days.
benediction was performed every evening on the weekdays. After each function, Paolo took care of cleaning the hall; moreover, he restacked the chairs and fastened them with an iron chain that he padlocked.

After the church had been deconsecrated due to the shortage of priests, Paolo lost his job as a sacristan, but he still had money to live on. While remodeling his house some time ago, he had found an earthenware moneybox in a walled-up niche full of gold coins that were minted at the beginning of the Kingdom of Italy. On the other hand, his sister worked as a nurse at the local hospital and contributed towards the living expenses.

As for our play, Paolo had organized the work by making each actor perform his own life story on stage. According to him, life is just a play, or sometimes a tragedy, but never something real.

In the play, seven actors dressed in white sat astride on chairs with the audience behind their shoulders. When it was one’s turn, the houselights were turned off and an usher, who wore a cloak fastened with a gilded buckle, lit a line of candles that formed a horizontal number eight, symbolizing infinite space and time. At the rear of the stage beside the candles, two musicians with a guitar and a violin constantly played their background music. Whenever it was their turn, one of the actors stood up, slowly turning their body towards the audience, and with a lofty tone started telling some episodes in their life.

Paolo used to say that this kind of play had a cathartic meaning, which is equivalent to inner cleansing, beneficial to the actors and the audience as well.

At the comment that the play would take a long time to get to the end constructed this way, Paolo answered that time doesn’t exist; it is just human work. It is our limited mind that creates the concept of space and time, but in the universe it is always now and there are no distances between one side of it and another.
Every day we performed that play, and a few people alternated in the hall of the church, now turned into a theatre house. For Paolo, it was important to play with a loud voice without lowering the sound at the end of the words. For him, words had to be uttered in their wholeness.

It didn’t matter if we moved along the stage or stood unmoving like statues. We were free to gesticulate as much as we liked. For our director, theatre meant freedom of expression. Life is freedom as well.

Someone objected that actors were not normally allowed to freely express themselves because they had to follow a script, but Paolo said that it was not like that in the beginning. Anyway, his job as a director was to restore the primeval freedom of expression, which was typical of the actors on stage. All the players alternated according to Paolo’s direction. He was a kind person as well as a qualified director.

When my turn came, the lights in the church were put out. Everything became pitch black, except my white robe. The background was the starry sky and the candlelit number eight that was silhouetted against the sidereal space. As the musicians struck up their instruments, I got up from my chair and a stage floodlight followed all my movements. I headed for the center of the stage and started off by telling a few episodes from my childhood and adulthood. I confined myself just to telling what, in my opinion, was most significant. My aim was to pass something interesting and educational on to the audience, leaving aside whatever might sound trivial.