

FROM ARTURO SCHWARZ IN

MILAN:

Toscanini, the apolitical politician

I met Toscanini in 1950, it was an unforgettable experience. I must say I consider myself a very lucky person notwithstanding the years spent in Egyptian prisons on account of my political activity; I had the privilege to enjoy the friendship of some of the people I most admired and of whom, in the years 1956-1960, I also published, in Milan where I live, some of their writings: André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Albert Einstein, Benjamin Péret and Leon Trotsky although I never met the latter: our appointment, in Coyoacan, had been scheduled for 1941, but he was murdered in 1940.

But let us go back to Toscanini. His fundamental contribution to the world's musical culture took place in the period between the two world wars. These were the darkest period of European history. Darkest not only for the appalling tragedy of the Shoah, but also because it was the period in which Stalinist and bourgeois and reactionary forces competed to whitewash the bloody dictators: Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. Darkest also because an evil alliance among the so-called democracies and neo-fascist regimes took place in order to suffocate any independent thought and to break the dynamics that the October Revolution had impressed on revolutionary thought and practice.

Humanity, like the working class, weakened by the Stalinist leprosy and attacked by the brown and black plague, underwent its worst defeats. Every hope was betrayed in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Spain. We witnessed a total reversal of values. The authors of the October Revolution were imprisoned, exiled, murdered, or committed suicide. Not only were they and their families attacked, but their revolutionary honor was reviled as well. History was re-written, and this task was assigned to the judges of the infamous Moscow trials.

This recent period of our history, that the books written by the trained dogs of bourgeois historiography describe as that of the fight between the western democracies and the German and Italian totalitarianism, in reality witnessed the most shameful collusion between the two. From the farce of the sanction against imperialistic Italy, to the tragedy of non-intervention in republican Spain attacked by Franco, to the shameful Munich agreement, western democracies raced to blandish fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and the sinister general Franco. Moreover, they allowed Germany and Italy to experiment with their new death devices: in Guernica and in Ethiopia for example, encouraging them to prepare for an assault that the western democracies foresaw against the loathed Bolshevik power but that instead turned against the west.

Allow me to recall some of the circumstances that illustrate the intellectual honesty, the moral rigor, and the courage of which the Maestro gave proof. Although Toscanini had Socialist sentiments, he never joined a political party. But when the First World War started, illustrious cultural personalities, on both contending sides, let themselves to be caught, on both contending sides, and by the chauvinistic fury that contaminated even Sigmund Freud and Stefan Zweig. Even Toscanini was not immune; in 1915 he was an interventionist. At that time Mussolini had an extreme left republican program that entailed the convocation of a constituent assembly, the abolition of the royally appointed Senate, an international outlook in favor of peace, the confiscation of all wealth from religious organizations and of a partial expropriation of all property. It is therefore not surprising that on November 16th, 1919, Toscanini accepted to become a candidate in the Fascist list, that won only 4,657 votes (against the 170,000 votes for the Socialist Party, that became the ruling party of the new government). But less than three years later, noticing Mussolini's conservative and monarchical change, he became one of his bitter enemies. His first and only political deviation was recalled by Toscanini in a letter written to the devout Ada Mainardi on March 18th, 1938: "I have never been involved in politics and never will, rather only once did I take an interest to it, in 1919 for Mussolini, and I regretted it when he took power in 1922"; continuing, he added, "I've never been part of societies either political or artistic. I've always been a loner."

This stance did not stop him however from raising his voice when it the time came to condemn the tragic events of last century or to intervene when the cultural or artistic development was threatened. In 1919, at the end of the war, the people of Milan were demanding that the theatre La Scala---closed during the years of the conflict also on account of the financial situation--- would again reopen but the financial situation did not allow it. The then Socialist Mayor, Emilio Caldara, proposed that the Teatro La Scala should be transformed into an autonomous body, with a secure set up and budget. While waiting for the project to be carried out, Toscanini created an orchestra with one hundred musicians financed by a company nominally chaired by his wife Carla and with which he gave 134 concerts, from October 29, 1920 to June 16, 1921, before going back to a renewed La Scala.

On December 2nd, 1922 Toscanini reaffirmed his anti Fascist sentiment when he was asked to perform Giovinezza , the hymn of the Fascist party. He refused to do it, broke his baton and left giving orders to his musicians to go back to the dressing room. This was the first but certainly not the last anti-Fascist stance taken by Toscanini. When the director of the Milanese conservatory Giuseppe Galignani committed suicide by throwing himself out of the window because he had been fired by Mussolini, Toscanini sent a telegram to the Ministry, fearless of the consequences: "Maestro Galignani, who did for the Conservatory what no Minister or General Director could do, killed himself. Gentlemen of the Public Instruction, Minister and General Directors, this suicide will eternally weigh on your conscience.

The definitive break with Mussolini took place on May 14th, 1931, following the physical attack on the Maestro in Bologna, where he had gone to conduct, gratis, the first Italian edition of Tristan and Isolde in honor of his great friend, the composer and orchestra conductor Giuseppe Martucci. Toscanini found a group of fascists---who had found out that he had refused to perform Giovinezza ---waiting for him at the entrance and who beat him up black and blue, hitting him also at the temple and on the lip, that bled. His faithful driver tried to protect him and was able to leave after pushing him in the car. Maestro Respighi intervened and was promised that Toscanini and his family would be able to leave the city that same night and would be escorted and protected while it was deemed dangerous. But at dawn, when Milan was reached, their passports were confiscated and his visa. Toscanini was kept under strict police surveillance. The Maestro then sent a telegram to Mussolini, writing that he had been attacked, insulted and repeatedly hit at the face by a despicable gang. Mussolini did no reply and Toscanini answered in his own way by refusing from then on to conduct in Fascist Italy.

Five days after the Bologna attack, the Prefect of Milan reported to Mussolini that the previous evening, during the interval at a concert at La Scala, some youth had shouted "Viva Toscanini" and what was even worse, that the words had been received with prolonged applause from a sizeable portion of the audience that filled the theater. Nine youths were arrested. Previously seven more youths who had also dared to shout "Viva Toscanini" in front of the house of the Maestro in via Durini, had been arrested. These events were followed with great worry in by the international musical circles. The Russian-American conductor Sergej Kusevitzkij, as a protest against fascists, cancelled the concerts that he was supposed to conduct at La Scala. The Hungarian composer Bela Bartok had the Hungarian Musical Association pass a motion expressing the profound indignation for the events that had taken place. A similar expression of indignation and of esteem for Toscanini came from the United States, where the New York Times published a long report on the aggression on of June 15th, 1931. Fearing an international scandal, Mussolini was forced to order Toscanini's passport to be returned and allowed the Maestro to leave for New York where he arrived on November 16th, 1931.

That same autumn Mussolini issued the order that all university professors were to swear an oath of loyalty to the regime. All but twelve swore, among the latter was the old senator and jurist Francesco Ruffini. Toscanini thought of sending him a telegram---of which a the draft was found---to manifest his sympathy solidarity: "Profoundly moved, I embrace you and your illustrious university colleagues for your proud and noble behavior [Stop] groveling appears when the soul is bent" But then he refrained from sending it: feeling that while he was safe in New York, he might have harmed Ruffini who was at the mercy of the Fascists.

On January 30th, 1933 Hitler became Chancellor of the Reich and could rise to take power thanks to the betrayal of the German Communist Party, which obeyed Stalin's orders and by refusing the alliance with the German Social Democratic Party; the two leftist parties had in fact gained the majority of seats. It was in March of the same year, that Toscanini was asked to sign a message written by a group of musicians who were opposed to National Socialism. Toscanini requested---and obtained---the honor to appear at the top of the list of signatories of the telegram sent to Hitler on April 1st, 1933 and immediately published by the American papers. The next day Toscanini held a concert in New York. That was the chance for the public to demonstrate its solidarity: welcoming him with great ovations. Nevertheless, On April 3rd Hitler---pressed by Frau Winifred Wagner who wanted to have him return to Bayreuth Festival---sent a personal letter to Toscanini to tell him that he would have been particularly pleased to greet him in that city. Toscanini refused rejected the invitation. A few days later, on April 23rd, Toscanini conducted in New York the last concert of the season choosing as the soloist the thirty year old Ukrainian pianist Vladimir Horowitz, already very famous, who a year later would marry Wanda, the young daughter of the director. Thus, in spite of Hitler, Toscanini would soon have a Jewish son-in-law.

Toscanini reacted to the persecution of the Jews in Germany in the same decisive way that he had reacted to the Fascists. On May 28th he wrote to the Direction of the Festival: "The painful events that hurt my sentiment as a man and as an artist have not undergone, against every hope of mine, any change; it is therefore my duty to break the silence and warn you that it is better not to think again about my going to Bayreuth." He never went back on his decision also because the political situation kept worsening. On July 25th, 1934 the Austrian Chancellor Engelber Dolfuss was assassinated by Austrian National Socialists. Toscanini sent immediately to Salzburg and then to Vienna to express his solidarity to the Austrian people by conducting various concerts. On November 1st, in memory of Dofuss, he conducted in Vienna Verdi's Requiem refusing any compensation.

A little over two years later, another occasion arose for Toscanini to reaffirm his attachment to democratic values and to concretely manifest his sentiments and he did it---by defining himself being an "honorary Jew." The great violinist Bronislaw Huberman, founder of the Symphonic Orchestra of Palestine (today the Israeli Symphonic Orchestra) that was entirely composed of great talented Jewish musicians who had escaped persecution, invited him to conduct his orchestra. Toscanini accepted with enthusiasm and arrived in Tel Aviv on December 20th, 1936. To concretely demonstrate his solidarity, he refused any compensation and even the reimbursement of his travel expenses, declaring that, in these circumstances, it was, "the duty of each one of us, in these circumstances, it to fight according to our one's own ability, in these circumstances, and I do it for my heart. My heart goes out to these musicians, victims of Hitlerism and I wish that my solidarity to those persecuted to be made public."

Toscanini's emotion was a small thing compared to the enthusiasm with which he was welcomed. On December 28th, 1936, he wrote to Ada Mainardi: "When I arrived in Tel Aviv I immediately received a the most enthusiastic reception. It seemed as if their Messiah had finally arrived! I cannot tell you the enthusiasm that the two concerts on the 26 and 27 raised." A few days later, on January 4th, 1937, he again wrote again: "Since I set foot in Palestine I have lived in a constant state of elation of the soul. I am telling you that even today Palestine continues to be the land of miracles." To emphasize his closeness to the Jewish people, he dated the letter according to the Jewish calendar: 20 Tevet 5697. At his first concert were also present Chaim Weizmann, who in 1948 became the first president of the State of Israel, and David Ben Gurion who was to become Prime Minister. Toscanini, moved by the welcome he had received, wrote to his the faithful Ada on January 24th, 1937: "If you knew the good that my presence in Palestine did! My modesty does not allow me to dwell on it, but I can assure you that I have gained, I have become richer with much love. Many more people today love me." Among them there was also Albert Einstein, who wrote to him: "I feel the obligation to tell you how much I admire and revere you. You are not only the peerless example of universal musical literature, but even in the fight against fascist criminals you have proved yourself a man of utmost dignity."

In July 1936, the infamous general Franco rose rebelled against the Spanish republican government, beginning a bloody civil war. We were then witnessed to an unprecedented alliance of interests: both the western democracies and the totalitarian Soviet regime helped the military rebellion each in different ways and with different intentions. The so-called democracies invented the politics of non-intervention that, in reality, meant stopping the supply of weapons and ammunition to the legitimate republican government, while Franco received abundant supplies from Germany and Italy. On his side, Stalin was more concerned with the libertarian shift of the republican forces that could have strengthened his own internal opposition and he therefore sent his thugs, not to fight next to with the republicans but to get rid of murder the most resolute elements of the defense, namely of the militants of the FAI (the Federation of Iberian Anarchists) who were particularly active in Barcelona, and the members of the POUM (Partito Obrero de Unit Marxista). Toscanini, a consummate apolitical politician, wasn't fooled. On April 2nd, 1937, he wrote to his beloved Ada Mainardi: "the atmosphere of our country is infected. I don't stand it anymore. I think about those poor youths who go, forced and deceived, to get killed in Spain: and for whom? Not for their country but for some criminals called Mussolini Hitler Staline." [sic] It was on that occasion that Benedetto Croce sent to Toscanini the text of his response to the Republic magazine in New York, in which he defended the Spanish republic. On April 4th the Maestro sent the text to Ada Mainardi, accompanying it with these words: "Read these pages that Croce sent me. There are still men (a few, but there are) who stand tall because their soul isn't bent."

On March 2nd, 1938, the Anschluss took place: German troops occupied Austria annexing it to the Reich. Toscanini was devastated. In New York at the time, he conducted for a few minutes then, distraught, he took advantage of the mistake of a member of the orchestra to lock himself in the his dressing room. According to his friend Taubman, he gave vent to his feelings by himself by throwing hurling scores around, turning chairs and crying weeping. In April, Mussolini's Italy was in ferment due to the imminent arrival of Hitler, who was going to visit Rome, Naples, and Florence. Toscanini reacted in his own way, by going to Palestine for the second time on April 8th, (despite the danger deriving from the conflict between the Yishuv (the Jewish community) and the Arabs. On April 13th, from Haifa, he wrote to Ada about the festivities planned for Hitler's visit: "Will you stay in Rome during the foul feasts that the Great Criminal has prepared for his worthy companion? I hope not. I hope that all of non-official Rome, remains inside their homes and take no part in those Neronian or Borgian festivities worthy only of an enslaved people who have reached the last step of ignominy." After the Anschluss Toscanini refused to conduct in Salzburg, then in Hitler's hands. Back in Italy, Toscanini's passport was confiscated once more because during a tapped telephone conversation, he had heavily attacked the Duce dictator for his anti-Semitic policy, describing it "similar to stuffu from the Middle Ages."

At the eve of the second world war, Toscanini, with consummate lucidity, understood that for the umpteenth time the renewed capitulation of the western democracies in Munich, where Chamberlain, Daladier, Hitler and Mussolini had met, far from assuring the peace for 1,000 years, as Chamberlain had proclaimed, was giving a free hand to Hitler to invade, Poland after Austria and Sudetenland, also Poland thus actually starting the second world war. On September 22nd, 1938, a year before the beginning of the war, Toscanini writes: "It seems to me that we are going towards terrible, tragic days horrible thing to say but to rid ourselves of those Monsters that have subverted, humiliated and thrown into the a shameful slavery millions and millions of creatures, we have almost come to wish the war."

A year later, September 22nd, 1939, he was able to leave for New York. During the his whole time of his American sojourn he never stopped participating in every initiative of anti-fascist exiles, among them Gaetano Salvemini and Giorgio La Piana. The return to Italy, in April 1946, coincided with the eve of the institutional referendum with which Italians had been asked to choose between republic and monarchy. The inaugural concert at the Scala took place on May 11th, 1946, and was an extraordinary success. On September 23rd he wrote to the loyal Ada Mainardi: "I have been very happy to have come back to Italy, very happy to reunite with my orchestra and my audience. I cannot tell you the emotion I felt at my first concert! I was afraid I was going to faint on the stage!" The letter continued confirming Toscanini's love for his Milan: "I haven't had the courage to walk in the streets of Milan! The sight [of the rubbles of buildings] was too painful to endure."

In the climate of general political and cultural reaction that had descended over a disoriented Europe, voices that dared to challenge the dark climate that had fallen on our continent were few and far between. Among these voices, there was that of Arturo Toscanini. We owe, to the few men like him, the survival of the humanist thinking. It was people like him who allowed our civilization to cross, unharmed and enriched, the darkness of those years when repression when not only Stalinist but and Nazi-Fascist reaction raged. (Arturo Schwarz's address to the Italian Senate, at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Toscanini's death.)