

Homecoming

In the seventies there was a great spiritual and intellectual ferment that led to new generations through the streets of the world to explore new possibilities of life. By train, hitchhiking and other means, multitudes of young people went to India, Europe, U.S. and anywhere else in the world. Leaving, chasing dreams and hopes, that was important. Armando Maglio is also ready to challenge the way to realize his dream.

On horseback of his faithful bicycle, going against the trend, taking a trip south to discover himself and his origins. Runs through the "boot" discovering our peninsula. But his is a journey of initiation in particular back in time, a return to his home in Novara. In this diary, free from the claims language, tells us with precise writing and essential, as the pace of its rides, the moments and emotions of an unforgettable adventure for young people.
(nb)

August 1977

July the 2nd I was finally sure of bringing to an end the Domodossola-Sicily crossing, which I had planned for a couple of years. That day the bogey of the Simplon Swiss side was no longer so: I reached the Pass with ease as well immersed in the strong sun of the Alps and I didn't hesitate plunge down the descent toward Italy. In a nearly perfect shape I was sure of my possibility. The last test, the ride at Zermatt with Giuseppe, was a confirmation. It was a month before starting and I could further improve my form to reach the best at the right moment preparing myself along two base routes: the ring of "fifteen" and the route Domodossola-Crodo-Viceno-Smeglio-Domodossola.

Day 1

Finally on the 1st of August I get ready. I'm not in ideal state, but favorable wind and fine weather promise well. I leave home at eleven in the morning. I'm taking upon myself an enterprise which probably exceeds my possibilities but by now I am involved. I have been waiting for this moment since, after awful efforts and years of failure, I learned to ride. It's the last present I want make to this sport generous of infinite satisfactions, a journey in search of myself... Thinking again about my folly I come to the Orta lake. From now on I won't have any fair wind. First stop at Borgomanero. It's warm in spite of the bad weather of the last days. Not to remain with my thoughts I get on my bicycle and I go straight to Novara. The average is quite good, the physique replies well but it's little sustained by my will. Early in the afternoon I pass through Vespolate, Mortara and other Lomellina villages. Suddenly I find Tortona (160 kms). After all it's early. My common sense advises me to stop although I fixed in this little town the end of the first leg.

I have a chat with somebody then I start again. At Serravalle Scrivia, after 180 kms in the plain, the ascent begins, first slowly in the false plane, then in some heavy pull. I cross the Appennino Ligure villages without appreciating its typical spots. The route climbs up the Giovi Pass and at the end of the ascent I am exhausted. The 240 kms daily distance is my record. I telephone twice to feel less alone in the chaos of Genova. "All right".

It's getting dark and I must think about a bed. I'm successful at the first attempt: guest of poor people in a house between the road and the sea I feel like a king lying on the mattress in a store room with the bicycle near me, but the tiredness keeps me from falling asleep.

Day 2

In the morning I awake in rather good shape, the wish to pedal has come back and I leave in a merry mood in the saltish coolness of the new day. A half hour passed before going out of the town trying to get accustomed to the sea air and at once the slopes appear harder than I imagined. I stop to rest and I have breakfast at Recco, then I begin again the sequence of ascents and descents till Chiavari. I don't succeed in sitting and I resist a short time standing because the heavy knapsack furrows my back. After getting over Sestri Levante I'm climbing the Bracco Pass. The road winds inexorably from the sea up to the 615 meters in height. Here the mountain has an other flavor; I feel

homesick and the ascent is harder also for that reason.

I finish the bar of chocolate forgetting who gave it to me. The descent encourages me again. Liguria passed as well, so the regions are two. Into the plain I make good time. Some people encourage me and after each rest I leave with a different speed. I see at a distance the tower and the Baptistry of Pisa. By now I am launched: I prefer to wait for a stop at Livorno twenty kms away. Interminable. After ten hours I'm still pushing the 50-14. Near Livorno I reduce my speed to read some indications. I brake to avoid a car at a stop, the cable breaks and I bump. Catapulted onto the roof I end up in the middle of the road. I adjust my knapsack and control the bicycle. At first sight it seems undamaged. The driver, an aged lady, advises me to get for first aid. Fortunately she doesn't notice a dent in her bumper but the effects turn out to be more serious for my cycle. feeling low I hesitate to give up after this accident which fill me with anger. I walk into the town in search of a mechanic without the energy to enquire. I go on my way for another ten kms to Quercianella, a few houses sloping on the sea, a holiday resort.

I stop in the two pizza-shop for as many pizzas and giant beers. I ask for a little place to sleep, I get two sharp replies. I call home: everything all right ! It's getting dark and the zone doesn't offer attractive choices. I lay my sleeping bag in a meadow and I slip in dressed quaking with fear because of suspicious noises among the bushes, then I gropingly gather my sleeping bag, my sport shoes and the bicycle and I flee into the road. The car lights pierce the dark. I see dimly a hut beyond a wall. I arrange my bicycle and I fall asleep on the straw. There is enough room for me.

Nightmare: two meters distant from Aurelia, at about ten the railway. The trains flash 150 kms per hour and the trailer-trucks also don't stand on ceremony. Between both tremors some strange noises persist in my hut. I pray for these moments to pass quickly hoping for better times.

Day 3

Early in the morning I resume my way to the next village. While the mechanic sees to tidying up the brakes and the stand I visit the beach and eat a kilo of fruit strolling across the streets. The third day of my travel is an implacable struggle against the wind. The road widens into endless straights; it's one of the most monotonous parts of the way and my low morale is again put to a hard test. I have an iced drink and I'm ill at once. After about a hundred kms I get to Grosseto. I move into the town aimlessly drinking at each fountain. The sun beats down strongly, I feel like a rag...

Without realizing I resume my way southward. A couple of kms and my back tire is punctured. Coming back into the town I get a mechanic to replace the tire. The forced stop avails myself, but I wonder whether it is worth continuing or better yielding to the temptation of the train. I approach again the sea then I proceed landward. I pedal like a mad determined to advance as much as possible. I eat something and continue until my physique and my spirit say that it's enough. I am near Montalto di Castro, a little north of Tarquinia, 116 kms from Rome. I raced 190 kms, negative record, but the average, considering the wind, is remarkable. I sleep in a ANAS wood hut at the edge of the Aurelia road. I have at my disposal a square meter to lay my sleeping bag, a big bottle of water and so sleepy that I forget all my troubles.

Day 4

The dawn in Lazio is something extraordinary, a sight which is worth some minutes of contemplation before pushing my shoes in the pedals. I go along some kms and soon I have the confirmation of a feeling: an other puncture. At 15 kms from Civitavecchia I learn to stop the holes. Fortunately in a providential signal box they have a pump and some fresh water. After a rich breakfast and a visit to the mechanic Belloni (the best in the zone, as a policeman declares) I resume the Aurelia way running along the sea. After three days of travel the air of the Capital makes me hungry. I go on in the heavier traffic of the wide road crossing the loop-line at ten kms from the City. The heat gets unbearable, I am still pushing the longest ratio across the sloping up-and-down of the hills around Rome as far as the turn into the Pontina way. The Aurelia nightmare is over: 527 from Genova to Rome. Awaiting for a deserved plate of spaghetti I talk with the surprised waiters surrounding my bicycle.

I am almost halfway and I don't hesitate to announce it to my family. The 148 state road is not too favorable to me, practically a very tedious highway beaten by the wind from the sea. At Aprilia I go into a bar as if it were an oasis; when I leave again the table is covered by papers and ice lollipop sticks. The way is now flat, a long straight road as far as Latina. I look at the position of the sun over the horizon: there is enough time to try reaching Scauri by evening. I pedal hard in the Circeo district and at Terracina I see that the hope of managing is getting concrete.

The sites are familiar to me: Sperlonga, one of the most characteristic villages with the white houses over the sea takes me back a few years. I go beyond Gaeta and I get into Formia. At 10 kms from the goal suddenly my legs refuse to work. I drink two cans of orangeade and this crisis is over too. It is one of the finest sunsets I have experienced, a variety of fantastic feelings appreciable only on a bicycle at the end of a ride which is worth 260 kms, my new record. A short ascent and a plunge into the evening traffic of Scauri to enjoy after four days of fatigue my first magic moment.

Day 5

Sunday at ten o'clock: it's hard to leave again in the sun, to begin cursing the asphalt conversing with my bicycle. On the outskirts of Naples I recover the rhythm, my pedal stroke scans the time like a sublime music. I face some short slight ascent, in view of my thousandth km. from Domodossola. At Fuorigrotta the road level is quite good, but in the town I get an unpleasant surprise: the badly set paving stones, absent here and there, represent a kind of pavement which is lousy. I go down across the Vomero's gallery at a slow pace in nearly total darkness. The seaside promenade is asphalted for a couple of kms, but soon the way takes again its vomiting physiognomy... It's past midday and there are few people about. I wish to concede myself some respite but I prefer digesting as quickly as I can this disgusting road which damages my bicycle. Beyond Naples the disconnected cobblestone paving, part of the way with porphyry cubes alternated with vulvanic-stone slabs, follows for kilometers the endless succession of houses, without a sharp distinction between one village and next.

I cross in bright sunshine the most densely populated area in Italy and I baptize it again as "South Hell". The way improves at Pompei rising then as far as Cava dei Tirreni and getting again to the seaside at Vietri near Salerno. After 140 hard-earned kms I have the time to cover an other good part of Italy before evening. Along the seaside promenade little before Paestum I must repair an other puncture. With greasy hands and face I get myself looking like garbage. I'm going into the deep south: a continuous up and down of hundred kms waits for me in one of the less populated inland region in our peninsula.

First stop at Ogliastro Cilento; a couple of ascents followed by dangerous descents and I get to Omignano. The street is blocked. I proceed on foot across the crowd gathered not to cheer me but for the village holidays. It's late and I go on as far as Vallo Stazione to spend the night there. The people are very diffident and there isn't a place for me in the only hotel. As soon as I hang up the receiver I'm pervaded with a deep gloominess in front of this uncomfortable reality. The station doesn't offer a decent place; a hope remains: the carabinieri barrack. More diffident than ever they don't want me either. The shutters of a country house lets some light out. After knocking in vain I call aloud. At last a boy leans out of the window followed by his father. Kindly they fix me up in the store room with a comfortable mattress and the company of rabbits and hens. I hear some pigs too in the other room but the important thing is to sleep dreaming that in two days everything will be all over.

Day 6

Early in the morning my hosts bring me some coffee, an act of kindness which suffices to encourage me. I begin at once my sixth day on the bicycle to gain ground before the sun gets strong. The first part of the way is sloping, pretty hard to Vallo della Lucania, then less engaging towards Montano Antilia, 750 meters above sea level, the highest point of my journey. The road continues with bends toward the river, then ascends again at Torre Orsaia, where the descent to the Policastro bay begins. The route among cliffs steeply over the sea offers wonderful landscapes. The blue of the sky, the dazzling sun light, the burning asphalt create an unforgettable medley of emotions.

I stop at Sapri and Maratea, the last charming locality before going to Calabria. At Praia I take the panoramic super-way. I eat a kilo of figs and run the risk of feeling ill drinking a frozen orangeade in one go. I proceed without respite with the 50-14 ratio, seven and a half meters every pedal stroke. I gobble kms like cherries but I feel some symptom of indigestion. The warm wind blows unceasing by the sea, my knapsack penetrates into my back and I still have 350 kms to go.

The long ascent to Paola would be the final blow if I don't have some hope, if there were not some sweet thoughts in my mind. I still have a couple of sun hours and allow myself a nap in the shade. Looking into a mirror a don't recognize myself, but I will have the time to recover and look respectable enough for a concert. Among the mountains over there at the end of the plain I leave a part of me, my crazy heart. At Sant'Eufemia Lamezia the tragic problem of the night occurs again. I must look disastrous: not even in the parish do they trust me: they only give me a blanket which I will use as a pillow. At least I can safely leave my bicycle. Going to the station I have a meeting

with a group of boys in conditions similar to mine. After introductions we decide to camp on a field. They offer me some food and for an instant I feel a rare sensation of relief. Searching for a safer spot we go from end to end in the station till tiredness prevails. Then we lay our sleeping-bags all near, in a row, on the first platform. The passengers of each train pass in review inventing witty remarks about as which get on somebody's nerves. I will succeed in sleeping for three hours totally, too few after a day of sun and crises, of sea, wind and vague sensations through 260 kms.

Day 7

The seventh day: I go to get my bicycle, I have breakfast, a prayer and I begin to pedal again. As far as Pizzo Calabro the road is flat, twenty kms of warming-up in search of the rhythm. As I can't awake up the ascent sees to waking me up, from the sea to Vibo Valentia (more than 500 m. of altitude). From Rosarno to my goal it should not be more than 150 kms, but I'm still afraid that I won't succeed.

At Gioia Tauro the road rises again. By now only conviction makes my legs move, not because they bear the effort any more. I must remain under the jet of a fountain to recover from the heat and revive my reflexes that don't respond any more. At Palmi I fail to see a signal and after going uselessly across the village down to the sea I have to remount at the intersection. This time isn't my strength or conviction to move me on, but the rage. The sun is relentless, I swear at it. an other two kms and the mountain ends. It is the S.Elia hill, at the boundary between the earth and the sky. The sea spreads under my eyes. The prolonged strain, the seven most suffered days, surely among the most authentic, the endless kilometers and hours, all gratify me with a priceless feeling.

I see a large part of Sicily and I have to take a photo to remember this magic moment. I give vent to my badly concealed enthusiasm along the wonderful descent toward the sea. The people on the Bagnara bends seem to have met for a revel. This time the sun is part of a scenery of colors and life that I have never seen. I get strengthless to the Villa S.Giovanni wharf. Waiting to get on to the ferry I answer the questions of the usual group of onlookers. Crossing the strait I fill myself with rise-oranges and I enjoy the breeze at the prow.

For the fatidical final part of my travel I choose a route across the mountains which allows me to save a score of kms. The slope gets often the 20%. Considering the peek hour an other crisis appears inevitable. How many I have already had with over 1500 kms behind me ? I hardly reach Colle S.Rizzo, I have sore wrists and running down I'm not able to brake because I can't feel them any more, but by now it is worth bearing this strain too. I try to regain my composure dedicating the last 40 kms to style. I push regularly on the pedals gliding through the houses of the last villages by now in sight of the last villages.

Finally I can see the Rocca Salvatesta: I am back home...

Five o'clock p.m.: I arrive in the silence as when I left. Winning the competition with myself and finding myself I can contemplate from the beach the illuminated coast, enjoying in the evening sea quiet the last thrills offered to me by this extraordinary experience, an unforgettable adventure rich of fascination and aesthetical meaning if under the simple act of a pedal-stroke a work of art is hidden...

Armando Maglio, son of Concetta and Giuseppe



"Alone, against Italy, I won"