The Language of Ugo, Alexander & Sam

Letizia Airos Soria (June 09, 2008)

Interview with Alexander Stille. Author and journalist Alexander Stille is the San Paolo Professor of International Journalism at Columbia University. Stille’s father, Ugo, was a famed Italian journalist and director of Il Corriere della Sera.

An evening with Alexander Stille and his son Sam can turn into an important and endearing reflection on the relationship between father and son and its infinite nuances. The son of the great and unforgettable journalist Ugo Stille (born Mikhail Kamenetzky), an Italian-American with Russian origins, recounts memories of his relationship with his father and their link to the Italian language.

Alexander, himself a famous writer, journalist and professor at Columbia University, opens himself up with emotion recalling some specific, and at times difficult memories.

“Our father never taught us or spoke to us in Italian,” he begins. Aware of the surprise that this statement could provoke, he adds, “I know, it sounds weird. He had a job that was focused on the relationship with Italy, in 50 years he wrote thousands of articles in Italian and no one in his family was able to read them…”

The air is full of emotion but it is eased by Sam Stille, three and a half yeas old, asking his dad what the carrots he is eating are called, and if they speak Italian or English. The lovely boy will not stop attracting my attention for the entire evening trying to speak in Italian, with a few sentences and some songs that I hadn’t heard in a long time – like “ma che bel castello, marcondino-dirondella… San Martino campanaro, suoni tu … suoni tu”.

While Alexander speaks, I try and follow the memory and create an imaginary line that unites the three Stilles. Generational passages are the foundations of our lives. His tale unfolds as he tells the story of his father, forced to emigrate first from Russia, due to anti-Semitism, and then from Italy for the same reasons, when the Fascist regime enacted the racial laws in 1938. The past enters the room we are in, amongst the books, magazines, toys, knick-knacks, the Jewish chalice placed in a corner and a backpack full of papers laying on the floor. The past touches the present, the year 2008.

From the window you can see the north end of Manhattan and Broadway splitting into two. In 1941 the Kamenetzkys headed for the United States and that must have been the year Ugo Stille decided to never look back. But his son was able to change his mind, with his passion for learning a language and a culture.

“Yes, I studied Italian on my own, in different phases. When I was 17 I was lucky enough to do it in school, and then I went to Italy for a while on vacation. I was in London, a relationship had just ended, and so I called my dad and said: I want to go to Italy, where should I go? I was taken in by an American woman and I found myself in an Italian and Anglo-Saxon environment that I found very beneficial…”

Alexander Stille’s relationship with Italy continues to grow more intense. After the ‘escape’ he returns to the United States and finishes his studies, but decides to study Italian more in depth thanks in part to an aunt who also spoke the language. He returns to Italy looking for work, willing to do anything to be able to speak Italian in everyday life. From this moment on it is a crescendo thanks to school, work and a professional career.

“I started reading my father’s articles… I think he was happy. Even if he never actually told me – I had the distinct feeling that he was perplexed but pleased. I started to understand a lot more about his world. But he wanted it to be my decision, he never did anything to facilitate this reconciliation.

And my sister doesn't speak Italian."

I try to understand why. Alexander is working on the story of his family and this is in part for him a very delicate reconstruction process

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It was the forties and Ugo Stille, like many other Italians who emigrated to the United States, decided to speak only English, abandoning the Italian language in order to fully integrate himself into American culture:

"Maybe in his story there are some affinities with the Italian-American Diaspora. But his journey was different. An Italian-American friend of mine told me that when she asked her grandmother: 'where do we come from?' She would answer, 'we come from poverty, forget it.'" For Alexander Stille's father it was another kind of poverty. The one tied to the absence of humanity. "My father was middle class, deeply tied to Italy, but he had to leave because he wasn't welcome. He had grown up as an Italian child, but wasn't considered one." Ugo Stille had a deep bond with the country, and after the tragedy of having to leave it "he chose to never look back, to marry an American, to never speak Italian with his children."

And so, one of the most important figures in Italian journalism acquires Italian citizenship only when he needs to in order to become editor-in-chief of Corriere della Sera [2]. "I think that my efforts to learn Italian helped him make peace with Italy. I tried to enter his world."

And Sam? During our adult conversation Sam has promoted me to Italian sister. In a few hours he has told me all the Italian words he knows and has asked me to translate others. "With him I try, as much as possible, to speak Italian sometimes. He listens to Italian CDs for kids, he has some books. I often take him to see people who speak Italian. But I think he also needs a full immersion. This summer we're going to Italy and I'll enroll him in an Italian kindergarten. Next year we will stay in Italy for six months. I think it will be important for him. When he comes back he will definitely have a base."

And who knows what it will mean for Sam, when he's older, to read his grandfather's columns in Italian. His grandfather who would never have imagined that it would be through that language – the one that he didn't want to pass on to his son Alexander – that he would be able to reach his grandson, his grandson Sam.

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From Talking Italy. A special 12-pages print issue dedicated to Italy's culture and language. [3]

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