



Conference Proceedings:

,Italo Balbo, Iceland and a Short Story by Halldór Laxness - Notes on the Conference "La trasvolata Italia-Islanda del 1933" (Reykjavík, 7 June 2003)

by ***Maurizio Tani***

“Naturally the citizens of Reykjavík will celebrate this important and unique event, the visit of the Italians, as it deserves. The event of their arrival, however, is not only unique in the history of the nation, but it is also of absolute importance, since it could favour the choice of Iceland as part of the transatlantic route, one of the main aerial routes in the world.” This passage appeared on the 2nd July 1933 in *Morgunblaðið*, the leading Icelandic newspaper, on the eve of the arrival of Italo Balbo’s flight. For some time, on the island, they had been preparing the welcoming party for twenty-four Italian seaplanes, headed by Italo Balbo, Minister for Aeronautics, transporting about a hundred Italian citizens on their way to America.

The atmosphere was exciting. Many thought that a new age in the history of Iceland was about to begin. The arrival of such a large number of planes from a country, Italy, then considered “far away,” was to their eyes something exceptional. This widespread feeling of excitement, in hindsight was proven wise, since the Italian visit of 1933 did launch the international aerial routes of Iceland.

The importance of Iceland for transatlantic flights was to become paramount from the Second World War through the entire Cold War. During that period, Iceland would turn into one of the crucial hubs for civilian and military airborne transportation between Europe and the US. This fact would allow the young nation of Iceland, politically independent since 1944, to become economically independent as well, thanks to the bargaining power granted by its strategic location. On this point, the famous “cod wars” were most significant. They saw Iceland challenging the United Kingdom itself and gave the country unprecedented visibility within the anti-communist bloc. Nothing of this sort would have been possible, had it not been for the tactical significance of the NATO bases hosted on Icelandic soil. (Iceland even threatened to quit NATO in the days of the social-communist government.)

The same period would prove epochal for Icelandic history, as highlighted by the social and demographic changes following the militarization of the country. It is after the Second World War that Iceland witnessed a “biblical” exodus away from the



countryside and into the Reykjavík urban area, transformed by the war into a vast military camp. Indeed, until the 1970s, Reykjavík preserved this peculiar outlook, due to the Anglo-American military presence.

Also, until the 1970s, there existed in Reykjavík a bay called “Balbo sund” (“Balbo beach” in the Anglo-American maps), located by the seaplane station where the “Balbo Camp” had been established (a sign of esteem toward Balbo by the Anglo-American aviators of the early 1940s, despite the fact that both US and UK were at war with Italy). The bay was then converted into the Sundhof harbour.

Inspired by these events in Icelandic history, the University of Iceland (where Italian language has been taught periodically since 1940 and, thanks to a ministerial lectureship, regularly since 1994) thought of celebrating the flight that, on the 5th July 1933, took more than a hundred Italian aviators to invade—peacefully—the city of Reykjavík. In collaboration with the association “Il Gazzettino d’Islanda” and the Italian Institute of Culture of Oslo, an organising committee was set up that offered to Icelandic citizens and foreign visitors various high-profile activities: a conference, an exhibition realised and kindly lent by the Philatelic Association of Orbetello, and an official website of the celebrations (<http://here.is/trasvolata>).

The goal of these activities was to commemorate the arrival and sojourn in Iceland (until 12th July 1933) of Italo Balbo and of his hundred fellow Italians, directed to North America on their twenty-four seaplanes, along the route Orbetello-Amsterdam-Londonderry-Montreal-Chicago-New York. Hence, their goal was to commemorate not only an event of international significance, but also and above all an important episode in Icelandic history.

The Icelandic aspects of the Italian airborne expedition have been reconstructed accurately by Hildur Jónsdóttir (who holds a degree in Italian history of the University of Iceland, where she defended in the year 2002 a B.A. thesis on Balbo’s 1933 flight). It appears that the flight to Iceland had been prepared by Italo Balbo with great precision. In 1932, commander Cagna flew to Iceland, having already visited the previous year. Cagna stayed in Iceland from the 16th through the 26th of June 1932. He was followed to Iceland by Italian technicians, engineers, meteorologists and telegraph operators, whose task was to arrange Balbo’s expedition. Icelandic records mention in particular captain Altomare and consul Tomassi. During the preparatory works, the Italians rented thirty motorboats, in order to carry to the seaplane station of Vatnagarðar at Viðeyarsund (Reykjavík) the machineries needed for the seaplanes, more than eighty-three tons of “Stanavo” fuel and four tons of motor oil. The squadron of twenty-four Savoia-Marchetti seaplanes, having left from Londonderry at 11.07, reached Reykjavík at 17.05 on the 5th July 1933, flying at an average speed of 245 km/hr. When all the seaplanes had landed, Balbo was helped out of his plane by captain Altomare and consul Tomassi. He was welcomed by the Icelandic Prime Minister Ásgeir Ásgeirsson, together with Dóra Þórhallsdóttir (Ásgeir’s wife), Anna Guðrún Tryggvadóttir (a young child who presented Balbo with a bunch of flowers), and Jón Þorláksson (the mayor of Reykjavík). Journalists,



photographers, and a large crowd attended the event. The Italians, surrounded by the cheering crowd, were driven to Hotel Borg. Around 19.00, a press conference was held. The following day, Balbo and the two commanders Pellegrini and Largo were taken by the secretary Stefán Þorvarðarson, the writer Kristján Albertsson, and some journalists to the area surrounding Hveragerði (where they visited the Grýta thermal spring), Selfoss and Stokkseyri. At 21.00 they were already back in the capital, to dine with the Prime Minister. The resident diplomatic body, several journalists and the highest Icelandic State officers also attended the dinner. The Prime Minister gave a brief speech of welcome, recalling the twofold discovery of America by the Vikings and Christopher Columbus, the cultural and commercial relations between Italy and Iceland, and invited the guests to toast to “His Excellency the Minister Balbo, who has already conquered the heart of the Icelandic nation” (*Morgunblaðið*, 7 July 1933). On the occasion, Balbo thanked his host and recalled how “the art of aviation helps the mutual knowledge of nations, strengthens their friendly ties, and may avoid terrible conflicts [...] I pay homage to the King of Iceland and Denmark, the Icelandic government and the Icelandic nation” (*Vísir*, 7 July 1933).

On the 7th of July the Italians were taken to Þingvellir, where Balbo explained to his crew the importance of the place and where booklets in Italian were distributed, containing historical information on the ancient Parliament (Alþingi) and Iceland. On the 10th, a farewell party was held, where the Italians sang “Giovinezza” (a popular fascist song) and other songs. Their departure was planned for the following day. However, it had to be postponed, because of a problem with the fuel filter of Balbo’s seaplane. Eventually, their departure took place on the morning of the 12th and the last seaplane took off from Reykjavík at 8.24.

On both the 11th and 12th, a large crowd, including the city mayor, went to bid farewell to the Italians. The local population showed warm appreciation and hospitality. Only the organisations linked with the communist party expressed open dissent. Despite the preventive seizure of most of their propaganda material by the police, the Federation of Young Communists succeeded in distributing some antifascist leaflets, written also in Italian, inviting the Icelanders to welcome Balbo and his men with slogans such as “Down with Fascism!”, “Down with Mussolini! Down with Balbo!”, “Long live Terracini and Gramsci!”, “Long live Communism!” (samples of the leaflets are kept at the National Icelandic Library and, photocopied, in the archive of “*Il Gazzettino d’Islanda*”). It seems, however, that few, if any, followed such polemical invitation.

Only the satirical periodical *Spegill* (“Mirror”) dealt critically with Balbo’s flight, in two articles published in the 15th July 1933 issue. They targeted not only Balbo, nicknamed “minister Bóbó” and accused of having fished bare-handed a salmon in the Ellidá river (“we do not know who will have to pay the fine”), but also the Icelandic women, accused of being overly “hospitable... even towards you, brave ones [Italian aviators], who have witnessed all sorts of things.”^[2]

In the year 1937, Halldór Laxness, Nobel-prize winner for literature in 1955, and



pillar of the cultural and political life of Iceland for most of the 20th century, wrote about Balbo's flight. He published a short ironic story in the avant-garde literary magazine *Rauðir pennar* ("Red Pens"), not yet translated into Italian, entitled "The Defeat of Italian Aviation in 1933 Reykjavík" ("Ósigur Italska loftflotans í Reykjavík 1933"). In it, Balbo, named "Pittigrilli" [pen-name of Dino Segre (Turin, 1893–1975), Italian writer known in Iceland for his satirical and erotic works], and his men have to face a series of humorous mishaps due also to the fact that the employees of Hotel Borg believed their uniforms to be identical to those of the Italian aviators. One of these humorous mishaps sees Pittigrilli-Balbo furious at the waiters and "speaking the most beautiful Italian that may exist—up to four hundred words a minute, throwing around both arms and legs."^[3]

Memory of that event is still alive today, amongst those who, in 1933, were children. The conference "La trasvolata Italia-Islanda del 1933" ("The Italy-Iceland Flight of 1933"), held on the 7th June 2003, was very successful, also thanks to the extensive press coverage received. Coordinated by Maria Rosaria Coda, lecturer in Italian at the University of Iceland, and opened by Anna Agnarsdóttir of the Philosophy Department of the University of Iceland, and by Lidia Ramogida, director of the Institute of Italian Culture of Oslo, the conference comprised the contributions of: Hildur Jónsdóttir; Gregory Alegi, lecturer of history of aeronautics at the Italian Academy of Aeronautics and fellow of LUISS University of Rome; Ragnar Borg, vice-president of the Dante Alighieri Society of Iceland and former General Italian Consul in Iceland; Maurizio Tani, lecturer of Italian history at the University of Iceland; and Sigurður H. Þorsteinsson, member of the European Philatelic Academy. The contributions were very well received by the audience (the programme included also the projection of two documentaries), who enjoyed the opportunity to appreciate more deeply the history of aviation, hoping that it may lead to the improved understanding of the relationship between Italy and Iceland.

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^[1] English translation by Giorgio Baruchello.

^[2] JÓNSDÓTTIR 2002, pp. 29–30.

^[3] JÓNSDÓTTIR 2002, p. 31