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An account of meaningful meetings with Romano Biancoli

Roberto Cutajar

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This short account relates to three meetings I had with Romano on different and – according to me – very significant occasions.

The first occurred in the early nineties, at a time when our Institute in Florence was experiencing a generational change. Along with Carlo Bonomi, Saro Brizzi, Anna Maria Loiacono, Luciano Gheri and Edoardo Grasso, and under the leadership of Virginia Giliberti, we were all engaged in the re-foundation of our Institute. The management no longer carried out its cultural role and the Institute was witnessing a lack of new candidates and new applications. At the time, the Institute faced two extremely important tasks, namely, the organization of the IFPS International Congress and a profound re-organization of seminars and courses. The latter activity was connected to the fact that the Italian Ministry of Universities had finally recognized the Institute as a qualified Post-Graduate Training School of Psychotherapy. At the time, most of us were quite unsatisfied with the Institute’s agenda and, in more general terms, with the way the management had been running the Institute up to that point. I met Romano during a meeting in Germany. Romano was working in Bologna within a group of analysts directly connected to our Florentine Institute. This was the reason I already knew him. In its training program our Institute had scheduled several residential workshops that involved both the Florentine and Bolognese Institutes. During that meeting in Germany, Romano and I spent some time talk-

ing about the future prospects of our Institutes. The Bolognese group had not yet asked for the ministerial recognition. Nonetheless, Romano gave me an account of what he had experienced during his years in Bologna. He told me that he had experienced some harsh criticism from the leading group – which was the same that ran our own Institute. He described the quarrel with abundance of details – some of which were utterly regrettable – and I am inclined to think that even the threat of a lawsuit had been used against him. Above all, I was struck by the profound feeling of both affective and cultural relatedness that pervaded our meeting. I had the feeling that we were both engaged in a daring process of change and liberation from the old leading group – a process which eventually led to the foundation and the development – in the late nineties – of the Fromm Institute in Bologna and of the Sullivan Institute in Florence. I do not know the details of the foundation of the Fromm Institute. At the time I was particularly interested in the cultural aspect of the change that was taking place in Florence and Bologna. Although Romano kept talking about his personal case with the detached and peaceful tone of a man who knows he is right, nevertheless, I was able to detect a hint of bitterness in his voice as he talked about his distressing experiences. Because of this, I chose not to ask him about the details of the situation in Bologna. Instead, we dwelt on cultural issues, and especially, also on future prospects in relation to the



possibility of a mutual collaboration between our Institutes. I was struck by the fact that he kept putting a number of questions to me about my personal development with regard to clinical theory. Although our Institutes shared the same perspective and took into account Fromm's thought within their syllabuses, the psychoanalytic technique we applied in our training analyses was much closer to the approach and the perspective of American Ego Psychology. What were the steps which led the Florentine Institute to embrace the interpersonal psychoanalytic perspective? I shall not summarize this discussion here. What I can recall is the intensity, the passion, the deep relatedness and – above all – a true feeling of hope for the future that characterized the dialogue between Romano and myself. What I will never forget is the faint glimpse of bitterness which I perceived in connection with the controversy with the leading group.

Time went by, but we soon had the opportunity to meet again at a series of meetings during which the bases for the foundation of our Association in November 1996 were laid. I report in particular on a meeting in Bologna for the foundation of OPIFER. The idea of building a national organization of Italian psychoanalysts that would unite different groups working outside the SPI delighted Romano. While the Fromm Institute had already been established, the Florentine Institute was still waiting to obtain ministerial recognition. Both Institutes were members of the IFPS, but what was lacking was a national link, a common ground in which we could reflect and talk about any topic within the psychoanalytic field. At the time, the prevailing idea was that OPIFER should be a national organization of psychoanalysts as an alternative to the SPI. While Romano strongly agreed with such an idea, I personally disagreed with it. I never liked to do something as an alternative to someone else. I would rather see initiatives develop alongside pre-existing realities. What we did share during that meeting was the feeling that we were doing something important, and that the nascent organization would occupy an important place in Italian psychoanalysis. It was a tacit, implicit and shared opinion which was concealed beneath our words and attitudes. I can still clearly remember the impression Ro-

mano gave me on that occasion. I perceived him as a travelling companion with whom I had left the same common home – a sort of Great Mother. I thought of Romano as an old companion one encounters after a long separation and with whom one can build a new common home. Nonetheless, I strongly believe that this was not a matter of chance. What we were doing was simply giving a factual and structured shape to a pre-existing cultural affinity and a personal, reciprocal liking for one another. Obviously, those feelings were embedded in a wider climate of enthusiasm displayed by all those who took part in the foundation of OPIFER.

Finally, our third meeting was especially important to me. We met at the 2006 IFPS Congress organized by SIPRe in Rome. We both took part in the final round table reserved for the three Italian Institutes – namely, the Fromm Institute of Bologna, the IPA of Florence and SIPRe of Rome. The topic of our discussion was free. We had to present the cultural issues prevailing within our Institutes. Nevertheless, we decided to coordinate our contributions in order to avoid any overlapping. Before the workshop, Romano and I spent nearly an hour exchanging ideas. Despite the fact that the title of our contributions implied very different subjects – Romano was supposed to talk about the “there and then” in the patient's past and the “here and now” in the session, whilst I was to talk about “Interpersonal psychoanalysis within relational models” – we both knew that there was room for common ground. We therefore agreed on our respective subjects. I was struck by Romano's contribution on that occasion. Throughout his presentation, he concentrated on the need for social change as an essential condition of complete human fulfilment. Romano had unexpectedly changed his subject. He now passionately linked the possibility of authenticity within human relationships and the need for an essential change within the capitalistic mode of production. Naturally, these were obvious connections for someone, as Romano, who drew on Fromm's thought, but how often do we hear these topics in our meetings? Everyone who was there will recall his passionate and resolute speech. Personally, I caught in his words



the spontaneous inspiration and the social passion of the Jewish analysts fleeing from Nazism, labelled by Robinson as the “Freudian Left”. Romano was firmly and sincerely convinced of what he said and I was struck by such unabated confidence. If it were not for the very nature of his contribution, I would not stress this aspect of a coherent and upright scholar such as Romano. Nowadays we are all locked in our offices and Institutes, careful not to go beyond the clinical boundaries and the narrow field of the close relatedness between analyst and patient. Romano’s idea that social change could foster man’s personal development and health was – once again – simply revolutionary.

I met Romano while we were both in training, then we went our separate ways. I was not a friend of his, since I did not have free access to the inner secrets of his soul, neither did I share the pains of his life journey. These three encounters, however, allowed me to see three features of Romano’s story, the first through intuition and the other two with a certain degree of confidence. The several scars in Romano’s soul – the remains of wounds he had received within the institutions where he had worked – did not stop his creativity. On the contrary, they strengthened his inner sources and his commitment to social change. Maybe these remarks are too personal, but what I have said about Romano are spontaneous thoughts which are meant to highlight the legacy of those encounters.

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