

A short story of Exile.

1903 - 1924 Luigia Berni

Luigia Domenica Anna Pini was born on 21st December 1903. She was the eldest of child of Rocco Pini and Maria Conti. They lived at Menoni, a gated farm in Casanova, a village on the outskirts of Bardi, a town in the Emilia Romagna. She had 5 siblings, Pietro (b 1905), Angelina (b.1907), Maria (b.1909), Antonio (b. 1912) and Giovanna (b.1916). She met Giuseppe Berni at church and they married on 5 February 1923. Luigia was an ambitious: she was clever, fluent in church Latin. and wanted to train as a nurse but Giuseppe wanted a simple life without responsibility. They moved to the UK in 1924 to find a better life.

1900 – 1923 Giuseppe Berni

Giuseppe Berni was born on 14 October 1900 in Bardi. He was the only son of Antonio Berni and Luigia Lusardi. His younger sister Rosina was born in 1906. In 1912, Giuseppe moved to the UK with his uncle and cousin to work on the ice. They joined the impoverished Italian community in Kingston upon Thames. They returned to Italy in 1915 to fight in World War 1. He married Luigia in Bardi in 1923, and moved back to Kingston-on-Thames to set up a family home.

1879-1899 London to Bardi

Luigia's mother, Maria Conti was born in Holborn, London in 1879. She returned to Bardi to marry farmer, Rocco Pini, in 1899. "You had to work all the time – from early morning to late at night." Italian men liked to marry "in". They often returned to Italy to find a wife from their village known to be very hard-working.

Moglie e buoi dai paesi tutto

Wives and oxen from your own neck of the woods.

Luigia wanted a better life for her children. "Do not marry an Italian!" she advised her daughters. All three of them married "out".

THE ITALIAN DIASPORA

- 15 million Italians left Italy permanently between 1880 and 1980. They were mainly economic migrants because of *mezzadria* (farmers who rented their land from a padrone had to give a proportion of the produce as rent in kind) and rules of inheritance which sub-divided land equally among the children.
- 80 million Italian descendants (oriundi) globally live outside of Italy
- 1% of UK population are Italian British.

1923-5 Coming to England

Luigia and Giuseppe's first child Giovanna was born in Bardi on 8 November 1923. In early 1924 Giuseppe Berni returned to UK to set up home in Kingston-on-Thames. Luigia and Giovanna followed five months later. It was a long and arduous journey for a mother and a small baby over 3 days – traveling by ox cart to Varsi, coach to Parma, trains to Milan and Paris via Switzerland, and then the boat train to London. She would probably be travelling with an experienced *padrone* who knew the route well. Luigia would have travelled in her *Vestito Buono* (best clothes). She carried a small suitcase – what was in it? You have to imagine this: a shawl, nappies, baby clothes, a bible. Giovanna was five months old – still

breast feeding. Travel conditions were difficult and frightening for a young mother from a rural community. Giuseppe was not there to meet her when she arrived in London.

They returned to Bardi from London for Christmas in 1924. One morning, Luigia left Giovanna in the care of Giuseppe's younger sister, Rosina. Somehow, the baby pulled a pot of boiling water over herself. She died of the burns on 13 January 1925. Giovanna was buried in Bardi. Rosina later moved to London, but she and Luigia never spoke again.

La famiglia e famiglia (family is family).

Luigia and Giuseppe had 4 more children, all born in the UK:

Antonio (22 December 1925)
Giovannina (20 February 1927)
Alda (25 April 1929)
Angelina (26 October 1931)

Luigia and Giuseppe kept their Italian citizenship and went back to Italy to vote. All the children were British citizens as they were born in the UK.

On the Ice.

Giuseppe worked delivering ice to restaurants, pubs, hotels and ice cream parlours by horse and cart. He kept his horse in stables behind The Water Splash in Kingston. He loved animals. The best ice was imported from the clean lakes of Norway in blocks and brought by sea to Limehouse. The ice had to be collected in winter as it was stored in ice wells, one of the deepest was built in King's Cross in 1862-3 for Carlo Gatti, the famous ice Italian cream maker. It was 82 feet deep, 34 feet across with a capacity of 1500 tons. It can still be seen at the London Canal Museum.

1924 – 1932 Kingston-on-Thames

For 8 years, Luigia and Giuseppe lived in Kingston, moving house frequently. The three eldest children were born in a large house in the High Street. The family moved to Grove Road where Angelina was born and finally De Cousins Road.

In 1932, the family moved to Moreland Street, Clerkenwell in London – an area known as “Little Italy” which housed a very large, poor Italian community. Luigia ran a café, with a restaurant at the back. Giuseppe still worked on the ice. The family lived above the café. Giovannina remembers coming home from school and working in the café.

“If you want to know how they did it, it was the children. Straight back from school and straight into work.”

1932-6, London

The first generation always hoped to return permanently to Italy. They worked very hard for a better life. The children grew up in the interface caught between Italy and England often not speaking Italian although Italianness was part of them. Giovannina learnt to dance and became part of a tap-dancing troupe of kids who used to ‘go on’ at Collins Music Hall on Islington Green when an act let them down. Until an edict came through from Italy – “*Basta Ballare!*” - No more dancing!

The second-generation valued education for their children. The first of Luigia's grandchildren went to university in 1976.

1935 Survey of Italians living in the UK:

Italians who had moved to the UK were living in the following towns:

London	Hull
Bristol	Middlesbrough
Southampton	Newcastle
Birmingham	Carlisle
Manchester	Glasgow
Cardiff	Greenock
Swansea	Edinburgh
Burton – on Trent	Stirling
Sheffield	Dundee
Bradford	Aberdeen
Leeds	Dublin
Liverpool	Londonderry
Kingston on Thames	Belfast

1936, London

The lease came up on Moreland Street in 1936, and Giuseppe refused to renew it. He moved the family back to Kingston where he had lived when he first arrived in the UK. He didn't like responsibility. Luigia had no rights over the café lease. She refused to live in Asylum Road, a slum area housing Kingston's growing Italian community. They moved to a flat above a shop at 69 Surbiton Road which had no bathroom. Giuseppe continued to work the Ice, and stabled his horse at The Water Splash in Kingston. The rent was £1 a week. They stayed here for the rest of their lives.

1937, Felixstowe

Giovannina and Alda spent summers at the Convent in Felixstowe. Alda writes: "We hated the nuns. In 1937 Giovannina caught diphtheria, and I was told to sleep on the floor outside her room on a mattress. The nuns didn't inform the authorities about the outbreak even though all of her friends contracted it. They all died – Giovannina was the only one to survive. Most of the children were Italian. Mum wasn't allowed to visit."

1937, Bardi

Luigia's favourite niece, Angelina, was born at Menoni in 1937. Aged 16 she was seduced by the local priest. A great scandal followed - the priest was moved to another parish, but she had to spend the rest of her life in servitude to her family on the farm.

1922-1943 ITALIANS ABROAD – *ITALIONI ALL'ESTRO*

From 1922 – 1943, fascism was growing in Italy and among a few Italians in UK. Many Italians felt despised in the UK, and Mussolini gave them a sense of identity and belonging through his inclusive *Italians Abroad* policy. This led to the growth of the Italian Fascist Party in the UK. However, most Italians in the UK were a-political or anti-fascist.

10 June 1940, Mussolini declared war on the Allies

As soon as Mussolini declared war on the allies, Churchill ordered the arrest of all non – naturalised Italian men over the age of 16 – "*Collar the lot!*" On the night of 10 June 1940 Giuseppe was stabling his horse at the Water Splash when the police picked him up alongside many other local Italians who were still Italian citizens. Ironically, the well-known local fascist in

Kingston, Mr Assirati, who lived downstairs from the Berni family, was not arrested as he was born in UK and thus a British citizen.

1940: COLLAR THE LOT

Giuseppe had no political affiliations. The police brought him home and Luigia packed his suitcase. He was taken away on the spot. He was sent to a POW camp in Douglas, on the Isle of Man to work on a farm. He hated farm work which is why he had moved to England. Luigia was left with 4 children and no means of support. Giuseppe's money was frozen. The police advised the family not to speak Italian in public. There was growing anti-Italian feeling, and Italians had the windows of their shops and houses smashed in. Luckily, Luigia's local shops came to her rescue – the butcher gave her bones, the baker left over bread, and the grocer whatever he had spare. She never forgot this kindness, and shopped with them for the rest of her life. Luigia had to find work as a cleaner, and the children had to step up and help run the household. Alda writes:

“My mother was the hardest working woman I ever knew.”

1940, Kingston

Alda remembers: “Mr Light lived downstairs at Surbiton Road. He was a cobbler – and very kind. If people didn't collect their shoes, he gave them to us. In the winter I used to wear ice-skating boots without the blades.”

1940 Aliens

“You weren't accepted the, they scoffed at you: you were eating worms(spaghetti).”

Every week Luigia and the children had register at the police station. They got the word ALIEN stamped in their passports. Luigia found work as a housekeeper with a diplomat and his wife, but there was never enough money. Alda remembers: “One day we ran out of coal. Antonio and I went down to the basement to chop up a chair for firewood. We found half a crown in the padding and ran upstairs to give it to mum. We ate well for a few days!”

1940, speaking Italian

Luigia and Giuseppe had always spoken Italian at home. Antonio and Giovannina were bi-lingual. After 1940, the police advised the family, for their safety, not to speak Italian in public as there were an increasing number incidents of attacks on Italians. The family only spoke English after that. The next generation were not taught to speak Italian.

2 July 1940, The Arandora Star

On 2 July 1940, The Arandora Star set sail from Liverpool to Canada carrying 1500 “enemy aliens”. It was torpedoed by a German submarine and sunk. 446 Italians lost their lives, the majority of whom were middle aged and elderly men with no fascist affiliation who had lived in the UK for years. 48 came from Bardi. After that, government attitudes changed towards non fascist Italians.

1939-1945

During WW11, Bardi in Norther Italy became known as “Little London”. Many British Airmen and escaped POWs were fed and hidden by the Italian Resistance, many of whom had previously lived in the UK. The *Butcher of Bardi*, a local fascist in league with the Germans, suspected what was going on, but could never find any evidence of them. No-one was ever captured in Bardi.

19 September 1940

On 19 September 1940, a telegram arrived from Giuseppe. "I am well. Don't worry." Luigia had gone every day since his arrest to the townhall in Kingston to get Giuseppe released. Local shopkeepers and the local police who knew the family, signed a petition to support his release. He was one of the first to come home and arrived back home on 24 April 1941.

1994 & 1997

They lived long lives. Giuseppe Berni died aged 93 in 1994, and Luigia Berni died aged 94 in 1997. They both worked hard until well into their 70s – Giuseppe as a driver at The Vauxhall Cake company, and Luigia as cook and housekeeper to Mrs Bond in Kensington. They had 5 children, 14 grandchildren, and 24 great grandchildren who are all British Citizens and oriundi.

*Padre nostra che sei nei cieli, sia santificato il tuo nome, venga il tuo regno, sia fatta la tua volonta,
come in cielo cosi in terra. Dacci oggi il nostro pane quotidiano e rimetti ai nostril debitori
e non abbandonarci alla tentazione, ma liberaci dal male.*

AMEN