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Piero Bianconi, *Albero genealogico (Cronaca di emigranti)*: Book Review

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sizes the emotional depth of Else's experiences. In an unpretentious way, the young author created a thought-provoking story that rings true and that contributes to grasping the frightfully devastating effects of a totalitarian regime on individual human beings. In short: Schnetzler fills the cliché of the "unbewältigte Vergangenheit" with moving life.

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Piero Bianconi, *Albero genealogico (Cronaca di emigranti)*.

Lugano: Edizione Pantarei, 1969/1973. 147 pages, Fr.14.--.

Der Stammbaum, Chronik einer Tessiner Familie. Deutsch von Hannelise Hinderberger. Zürich und Stuttgart: Werner Classen Verlag, 1971. 183 pages, Fr.18.80.

"C'è più distanza effettiva tra l'infanzia e la vecchiaia di mia madre che tra lei bambina e gli uomini delle caverne" (There is more real distance between the childhood and the old age of my mother than between her as a little girl and man in the stone age), the author exclaims, as he observes from the new power dam, which has been constructed in his native Verzasca valley in the canton of Ticino, how a great part of the rural world of his ancestors is being submerged for ever. In such surroundings his mother had not been allowed by her parents to use a match, when she had to light the fire in the kitchen stove, because to profit of such an article of luxury would have been an inadmissible waste of money, but she had to run to a friendly neighbor in order to catch there an ember from their hearth. In her old age, however, she simply had to turn on an electric switch when she wanted to cook the "minestra" for her supper.

Beside the author during his visit to the new power dam in the Verzasca valley, stands his son, a geologist to whom this modern world of technology is quite familiar, whereas the old man, lost between the ages, describes his state of mind as follows: "Non appartengo più al mondo dei miei antenati, né ancora a quello di mio figlio, sono isolato tra un passato ormai estraneo e un presente che per me è futuro" (I don't belong to the world of my ancestors any more, but also not yet to that of my son, I am isolated between a past which looks strange and our present time which to me is like the future.)

We choose these two quotations from the Italian original text for two reasons, first to show Piero Bianconi's powerful language and second to explain why in our minds his narration

strikes such resounding cords in our minds. What he tells us about his forebears and their struggles as emigrants to rural California, their hard life as craftsmen and farmers in both continents, their passions and their ardent devotion to their family and its property, is in no way idealized by Bianconi, even if all this is seen through the colorful filter of very personal old letters found in a family chest and of the author's own childhood memories. Those letters, in their odd mixture of naïve directness and old-fashioned politeness, reveal two sides of the life of the emigrees and their relations at home: the struggle for existence in all its crudeness, but also an almost superhuman capacity of endurance and an iron will to keep one's own dignity. Bianconi does not shut his eyes before the negative aspect of such defensive qualities, consisting in a lack of initiative for finding new ways of life, but in our own perspective, spoiled as we are by the gadgets of our consumer society, the feeling of admiration for the gentle acceptance of their condition by the author's ancestors prevails all the more as it is an attitude which we may very well have forsaken in the midst of our material luxury. Piero Bianconi has been able to preserve this traditional state of mind and even to adapt it to new tasks, as a venerated college teacher full of understanding for the personality of his students from similar backgrounds, but above all as the sensitive interpreter of the unobtrusive beauty of rural Ticino, for instance in his charming book "Cappelle ticinesi" ("Tessiner Kapellen" in the German translation), published in Basel by Urs Graf Verlag in 1944.

Whereas Bianconi, as a conscientious historian, kept himself painstakingly to the documents, another author from the canton of Ticino, Plinio Martini, wrote on the identical subject a novel, entitled "Il fondo del sacco" ("Nicht Anfang und nicht Ende" in the German translation). It was reviewed in the January 1976 issue of the SAHS Newsletter. Martini's book is based on similar human experiences of emigrants from his home village in the Valle Maggia, but he selected for publication only the most striking features and composed them to a compact ensemble. "Il fondo del sacco" therefore reads like a sublimation of "Albero genealogico."

The German translation of Bianconi's and Martini's texts is excellent; almost nothing gets lost of their concise original style, even if the Italian original has, of course, a sonority nothing else can equal. It would be fine if the Swiss American Historical Society could sponsor an English translation.

Both authors confront emigration history of a bygone period with our own, radically changed life time. As a matter of fact, when we visit ourselves in our old age the places of our childhood, we all may very well feel like real emigrants who, on their return to their home village after an absence of many years, find everything there strange and different. And suddenly

we realize that the study of emigration history is not only a concern of specialists, but also a very direct means to understand and accept our own situation, whether our forebears were emigrants or quite sedentary people.

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Bänziger, Hans, Zwischen Protest und Traditionsbewusstsein: Arbeiten zum Werk und zur gesellschaftlichen Stellung Max Frischs. Bern: Franke Verlag (1975). 121 pp. sFr. 17.80

Neben der Achtung vor dem Werk, dem Dichter und dessen Umwelt hat mich während der Arbeit die Absicht geleitet, Laien und Fachleuten informatorische Dienste zu leisten: durch simples Tatsachenmaterial, durch Hinweise auf Vergessenes wie nirgends verzeichnete Aufsätze, durch Zitate von Pressestimmen, die nicht jedermann zugänglich sind, durch Notierung von nicht-redigierten Textstellen wie die aus Melchingers Andorra-Rezension, kurz durch Kleinigkeiten, die in den grosszügigen Interpretationsversuchen selten Platz finden. ("Vorwort," p. 6)

Lest the reader be frightened away by the author's promise to recount in the service of information those minor details which seldom find a place in "broad attempts at interpretation," it should be mentioned at the outset that this book has more to recommend it than such a pedantic statement of intent might lead one to believe. Indeed, Hans Bänziger, appropriately for a peripatetic review of Frisch's work, takes us through a knowledgeable discussion of the major tenets that have long informed the thinking and writing of this most interesting, engaging, and thought provoking contemporary, reminding us of Frisch's abiding concern with the thinker as skeptic, the writer as iconoclast, and convention as liability.

There are, of course, also discussions of specific works, and in one of the more interesting of these the author compares the social difficulties experienced by Frisch's Stiller and Hesse's Harry Haller (the "Steppenwolf" in the novel by the same name), both of whom suffer from what we have come to term an identity problem. Hesse's Haller reads in the Treatise on the Steppenwolf that those people of unusually delicate perceptions who discover that the unity of personality is an illusion and that they are rather a "bundle of selves" are placed under lock and key and labeled schizophrenics, so that humanity is protected "from the necessity of hearing the cry of truth from the lips of these unfortunate persons." This