

INTRODUCTION TO GRAMSCI JNR

*That Gramsci had a family in Russia is well known. But for many decades after his death, little reliable was known of what became of it, nor of his relations with it before or during his imprisonment. With the fall of the USSR, partial opening of official archives has allowed new light to be thrown on this side of Gramsci's life. The richest source of information has been his grandson Antonio, born in 1965, who in the talk we publish here describes how he became fascinated by the figure of his grandfather during a visit to Italy in the early 1990s, and how, on returning home to Moscow, he set about collecting all the documentation he could find. This lay principally in the extensive correspondence of the Schucht family, in which Giulia (1896–1980), a Bolshevik and the mother of Gramsci's two children, was one of five daughters, her sister Eugenia (1889–1972), also a Communist, preceding her briefly in Gramsci's affections in Russia, and Tania (1887–1940), another sister, becoming Gramsci's devoted support in Italy during his imprisonment. In his book *La Storia di una famiglia rivoluzionaria* (2014), Antonio Gramsci Jnr reconstructs the remarkable history of the Schucht family from the late Tsarist period—when Lenin, a family friend, was godfather to another of the sisters—to post-Stalinist times—when Giulia had to appeal to Khrushchev for the re-admission of Eugenia, who had once served as secretary to Krupskaya, to the party. The family escaped the worst of the darkest years between. Giuliano (1926–2007), the younger son, recorded that even in the years of 'tragic persecution and generalized suspicion' the family lived untroubled by the authorities, and for this mercy was inclined to credit the Italian party leader, Togliatti—the same Togliatti who, as Giulia complained, regarded her husband's notebooks as party property, and who nursed thoughts of getting one of the sons back to Italy—either one—as a living token of the continuity between his party and their father's. The grandson touches on the contrasting characters and careers of his father and his uncle, Giuliano and Delio (1924–1982); describes a hitherto unreported encounter between Gramsci and Lenin; and rebuts some of the legends that have sprung up about Gramsci's last years. He does so, as he makes clear, not simply out of family loyalty, but political awakening—the disgust aroused in someone hitherto little concerned with politics by the corruption of the Russian intelligentsia and degradation of public life in the post-Soviet regimes of Yeltsin and Putin. Against these, and all their consequences, the work of his grandfather is a living inspiration.*

MY GRANDFATHER

BEFORE THE FALL of the Soviet Union my grandfather was a blur to me, a figure enveloped in legend.¹ This was due to my father, Giuliano, who was a great romantic—a talented musician and composer, and a student of art history, especially that of the Italian Renaissance, of literature and poetry. His favourite author was Leopardi. It was as if my father chose to hide among the classics not only because of his natural leanings but also because the twentieth century, to whose terrors he had been a direct witness, was the site of such painful memories, of which the worst was undoubtedly the loss of the father he had never known but missed so much. For all his education and filial regard, he was someone entirely lacking in political feeling, who would often say: ‘Damned politics, why did he have to get caught up in politics? Why couldn’t he take the advice of his professor, Bartoli, and become a linguist, when he showed such promise in the field?’² ‘But Daddy’, I’d reply, as a joke, ‘you wouldn’t be here if he’d done that!’

Delio, his elder brother, was very different. A colonel in the navy, a ballistics instructor and a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, he had great political ambitions. It emerges clearly from his family correspondence that during the war Delio seriously considered moving to Italy to become a leader in the Resistance. He wanted to participate in the creation of the future Italian navy, believing as he did that Italy after the fall of Fascism would be socialist. In other words, Delio wanted to further the cause for which his father had given his life. It may be that these ambitions were encouraged by Togliatti, who, as well as organizing a steady flow of assistance for the family, kept up a regular correspondence with Gramsci’s elder son at this time.³ Many years later, when our uncle came to visit, I became an involuntary witness to the sometimes heated disputes between the Gramsci brothers, two men so different from each another. I have to say I got almost nothing out

of those discussions. At the time I was very young (when Delio died, in 1982, I was only 17), and had no interest in politics.

I often went with my parents to visit my grandmother Giulia Schucht, who until 1980 lived in a sanatorium for Old Bolsheviks in Peredelkino, outside Moscow. Although bed-bound, she retained her mental faculties to the end and was deeply interested in the lives of her loved ones and in everything that was happening in the world. That said, I don't ever remember her spontaneously bringing up memories of my grandfather. She talked about him rarely, in letters to Italian relatives and during interviews. While she lived at our house she put together, along with her sister Eugenia, a kind of museum of Gramsci's personal effects. In a large glass cabinet with four shelves were displayed a traditional Sardinian woven doily and wooden cutlery he had made himself, a cigarette-holder and other objects. I remember those old things, to me so mysterious, as an inexhaustible source for my games of make-believe. Most of them were donated by my family to the Casa Gramsci in Ghilarza in the late seventies and early eighties, but we kept a few things at home as family relics—the ashtray that my chain-smoking grandfather had with him until the end, or his copy of Machiavelli's *Prince*, an inspirational presence in the Prison Notebooks.

Twenty years ago the Soviet Union collapsed—a society that, with all its defects, had represented the bastion of actually existing socialism and—paradoxically—helped ease the contradictions of western capitalism. It was around that time that I began to be interested in my grandfather. The Italian Communist party and the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci arranged a trip to Italy for me and my father to celebrate the centenary of his birth. We stayed in Italy around six months, in that time visiting all the places that had strong connections with the life of Antonio Gramsci, from Sardinia to Turi. (One of the most moving highlights of our pilgrimage was the concert I gave for the inmates in the prison in Turi, together with Francesca Vacca.) During those months, full of so many other fascinating events, I steeped myself in Italian culture and realized how important my grandfather is to it. Back in Russia, full of

¹ This text was first published in Angelo D'Orsi, ed., *Inchiesta su Gramsci*, Turin 2014, based on a talk delivered at Turin's Teatro Vittoria on 20 January 2012.

² Matteo Bartoli (1873–1946), dialectologist, for many years Professor of Linguistics at the University of Turin.

³ Palmiro Togliatti (1893–1964) succeeded Gramsci as PCI general secretary, and led the party until his death.

enthusiasm, I started to study Italian systematically and also read what little there was of his writing in Russian translation. My interest in Gramsci's thought grew more and more strongly as I tried to understand what had happened in my country through the lens of his work. It was thanks to him that I now grasped the destructive role played by our intellectuals, who were responsible for the molecular shift in public opinion in favour of the new regime, which had led to the plunder of Russia, a process already begun during the years of *perestroika*. I didn't become a Gramsci scholar—I'm a biologist and a musician—but my mental bearings had radically altered. Speaking of our own time, I can say that it is precisely at this turbulent historic moment that I sense the real need for the rise of an intellectual voice of Antonio Gramsci's calibre to unite various factions that are divided and ideologically uncreative. These various factions can hardly be called an opposition, fused in the 'historic bloc' that alone would be capable of developing a correct strategic line in the struggle against the oppressive forces of the new regime, corrupt and cynical, that has ruled Russia for two decades now.

The decisive step towards my embrace of Gramsci occurred in the 2000s, when, as part of my collaboration with the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, I began to look into the history of his Russian family, not knowing back then that those modest and disconnected attempts at reconstructing Gramsci's history would turn into a proper research project. With it, I hope to have made my small contribution to the reconstruction of both the history of my country and the life of my grandfather. Giulia Schucht's family was deeply involved with both.⁴ On the one hand there was the very interesting historical precedent of a part of the Russian intelligentsia, noble in background, betraying its class in the name of Revolution, distancing itself from its social 'preconceptions' and attempting to embrace the country's new value system. On the other hand the Schucht family left a strong mark on my grandfather's life,

⁴ Giulia's father, Apollon (1861–1933), son of a Tsarist general with Saxon antecedents; ennobled, most likely in recognition of his distinguished service. Married Julia Hirschfeld, daughter of a distinguished Jewish lawyer from Ukraine. A Populist from his student days, charged with organizing clandestine revolutionary cells in the army; arrested at the same time as Lenin's brother Alexander, in 1897, and exiled to Tomsk in western Siberia, later to Samara. Returning to Petersburg some six years later, Apollon soon decided to move the family abroad, first to Switzerland, then France and Italy, where he remained until 1916. Back in Petersburg, he joined the Bolsheviks in early 1917. Eugenia, already there, and Giulia, following him shortly afterwards, both joined the party in September the same year. Like them, he came to hold salaried positions in the new state. The sisters first met Gramsci in 1922.

both personally and politically. This unusual family became the essential link in the extremely tight bond between Gramsci and revolutionary Russia. And Russia, I argue, is sometimes the key to explaining some of the most important and yet most puzzling episodes in Gramsci's life. Let me talk about some of these.

The first centres on relations between Gramsci and Lenin. It was already known in the 1970s that the leader of the Bolsheviks had met the future leader of the Italian Communists in 1922. We know from Soviet archive material that the two men met in Lenin's office at the Kremlin on 25 October 1922. The register of the *Biographical Records of Lenin*, first published in 1972, includes a list of the matters they discussed, all very important: the specificity of Southern Italy, the state of the Italian Socialist party and the possibility of its fusion with the Communists. At the time when the *Records* were in preparation, my father was commissioned by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism to find other reports of this historic encounter, with the help of Italian Communists. The only letter he received came from Camilla Ravera, who, as well as relaying the detailed report that Gramsci himself had given her, offered the bold hypothesis that it was probably this encounter that inspired Lenin to make my grandfather the leader of the Italian Communists, in preference to Amadeo Bordiga, who had disappointed him with his rigid and sectarian mentality.⁵ But why didn't Ravera say this in her memoirs, which she published just a few months later? Why have all Gramsci's biographers missed it, including the eminent Giuseppe Fiori?⁶ And why didn't Gramsci ever mention this in any letter or article, despite his great admiration for Lenin and the strong bonds of friendship between the Schucht and Ulyanov families? It could be that this strange silence is linked to the modesty my grandfather displayed towards Bordiga, whom he greatly respected as the real founder of the Communist Party, political differences notwithstanding, and valued as a friend. But perhaps the explanation is not so straightforward.

The second matter concerns the attempts to free Gramsci from jail. Here too, despite the efforts of the finest scholars (notably Angelo Antonio Rossi and Giuseppe Vasca in *Gramsci tra Mussolini e Stalin*, 2007), the truth remains uncertain. Neither did I myself find anything significant

⁵ Camilla Ravera (1889–1988), politician and founding member of the Communist Party of Italy. Amadeo Bordiga (1889–1970), co-founder and first leader of the PCI.

⁶ Giuseppe Fiori, *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary* (1966), London 1971.

reading through our family archive. The most likely hypothesis is that despite giving the prisoner significant material support, the Soviet authorities did nothing serious to free him from his Fascist prison. They replicated the fervid activity in which Tatiana Schucht, probably purposely misled, was also engaged, pursuing endless paperwork to no avail. Here again we have a less than satisfactory explanation. It may be that a better one awaits focused research in the Stalin archive, which remains inaccessible to this day.

The greatest mystery concerns the final months of my grandfather's life, from the end of 1936 until his death. Despite all the research that has been done, we still don't have a full answer to the simple question, important both historically and biographically: what did he plan to do once he regained his liberty? According to one hypothesis, supported by contemporary scholars, Gramsci wanted a permit from the Italian authorities enabling his expatriation to the Soviet Union, where he could be reunited with his family and perhaps continue his political struggle. This idea, which is based on the testimony of Piero Sraffa, oversimplifies reality, in my view.⁷ Tatiana's correspondence for that period, which I recently discovered in our family archive, allows for a more accurate reconstruction of the facts. Similarly, the documents that Silvio Pons of the Fondazione Gramsci in Rome discovered in the early 2000s in the Russian State Archives present a more complex picture. According to these documents, around the turn of 1936–7 representatives of the Soviet security services, the NKVD, asked Gramsci to tell them everything he knew about the Italian Trotskyists. For two months they persisted, and Gramsci's reply was that they should establish good relations with the Italian embassy officials and in that way find out everything they needed to know. He suspected a new provocation. On this point, further questions arise: were the Soviet authorities making a possible return to Moscow conditional on his collaborating with the secret services, whether with formal status or not. Or did they simply wish to make him aware, indirectly, that he still carried the taint of Trotskyist sympathies, having written the famous letter in defence of Trotsky to the central committee of the CPSU in October 1926? Either way, as his niece Edmea Gramsci recalls, it was precisely then that Gramsci wrote a letter to his family in Sardinia begging them urgently to find him a room in Santo Lussurgiu. But what did he want to do in Sardinia? On

⁷ Piero Sraffa (1898–1983), neo-Ricardian economist and close friend of Gramsci.

24 March 1937 in a letter to Eugenia, Tatiana wrote: 'Antonio believes that it would be a lot easier to escape from Sardinia than from Italy. We can't mention it or rumours will start.' How should we interpret this passage? As Vacca rightly argues, it is unlikely that Gramsci was capable of escape. I believe that my grandfather was indirectly warning the Soviet authorities that he was not planning to stay in Italy, retiring forever from political life as Bordiga had done a few years earlier. It is possible that Sraffa's testimony might have served that same purpose. However, Sraffa had occasion to see Gramsci in 1936 and gave him the latest news of the Moscow trial, the first of the series, which had ended with the death penalty for Lenin's closest collaborators, some of whom had been accused of being Trotskyists. Gramsci's reaction was silence, a 'no comment' that probably hid dismay and indignation. He chose silence so as not to compromise himself or his family. From Tatiana's correspondence (and from other sources) it is clear that my grandfather's health was in a desperate state and that he was perfectly aware of this. This too would have made a transfer to Russia unlikely. Gramsci wanted Giulia and the children to come to visit him before he died. My own reconstruction of the entire affair is this. Up to the beginning of 1936 Gramsci was indeed planning his expatriation to the Soviet Union. However, by the end of the year, with the deterioration of both his health and the Russian political climate (as Sraffa had reported and the behaviour of the NKVD had somehow confirmed) he decided on a radical change of course, opting now, as Fiori believed, for retirement in his native land.

My relationship to my grandfather goes beyond my interest in his life and his ideas. As his grandson and in a way his disciple, I feel a duty to defend his memory and also the cause for which he lost his life, from manipulation and all kinds of speculation. Recently, new attempts to place Gramsci in opposition to the communist movement or even make him a victim of communism have intensified. Many Italian writers from Massimo Caprara to Giancarlo Lehner are very partial to this view.⁸ So it is said, for example, that Gramsci was abandoned by the Soviet party

⁸ Massimo Caprara (1922–2009) PCI journalist, writer, politician and functionary, after 20 years as Togliatti's personal secretary, aligned himself for a time with the *manifesto* group, then turned to Catholicism renouncing his communist past and becoming a publicist of the centre-right. Giancarlo Lehner (1943–). Prolific publicist of the right and a fervent anti-communist, closely associated with Silvio Berlusconi. The reference here is to his *La famiglia Gramsci in Russia*, Milan 2008.

as well as by his Russian family. According to Lehner, it was the Italian interior ministry that paid for his very expensive medical treatment between 1934 and the time of his death. Now, having recently found Tatiana's letters to his family, we know for certain that this was not the case. In fact Giulia regularly sent large sums of money to Tatiana for the care of her husband, money certainly granted to them by the Soviet authorities.

I won't go through all the rubbish that has accumulated over the years, starting from the fantasies of Caprara, Togliatti's former secretary, who insinuated that Giulia Schucht had been sent by the Soviet secret services to seduce Gramsci; that her sister Tatiana had been hired by the same secret services to spy on him; that the Schucht family left Gramsci's children in ignorance of their father's ideas . . . This rubbish piles up all the way to the reverend Luigi de Magistri's claims of a deathbed conversion, and the testimony of an old lady who had also been cared for in the Quisisana clinic to the effect that my grandfather had committed suicide by jumping out of a window—or been murdered.

Would that these were the last myths about my grandfather and our family. But they are not. The mythology on Gramsci (and not only him) continues to proliferate, in conditions of general cultural degradation. That degradation, reinforced by the mass media's manipulation of consciousness, is characteristic of what Herman Hesse in his novel *The Glass Bead Game* called 'the Age of the Feuilleton', an absurd time when creativity and true research are replaced by reciprocal citations. I believe it is our duty—as activists, as scholars, as intellectuals and also as simple citizens—to fight these malignant tendencies, if we want to survive with dignity in 'this great and terrible world'.