

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 50 (2023)
Heft: 1

Artikel: When Ilaria saved Emilio from a life of celibacy
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051795>

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When Ilaria saved Emilio from a life of celibacy

In his 1954 debut novel “Gli Ostaggi” (The hostages), Giovanni Bonalumi tells the story of young Emilio who stays in a Catholic seminary in the 1930s.



Giovanni Bonalumi
(1920 – 2002)

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Following the death of his father, a railway worker, Locarno lad Emilio enters seminary at Lugano in 1931 to prepare for celibacy as a Catholic priest. Emilio is initially intent on joining the clergy, but the world outside proves too vibrant and too great a draw for the young man, who feels like a hostage to God in the austere, sterile, oppressive setting of the seminary. A slap in the face from the seminary prefect; an intrigue, albeit one in which he plays the role of bystander; a massage from the rector with distinctly erotic overtones; and, above all, Ilaria, the happy-go-lucky farmer's girl with whom he is secretly in love, escaping the shackles to have a surreptitious relationship with her – all these factors mean that Emilio is sad but relieved when he is eventually expelled from the seminary for rebellious behaviour.

Autobiographical

This is the storyline of “Gli Ostaggi” (“The hostages”), the 1954 debut novel by then 34-year-old Giovanni Bonalumi, who was an Italian secondary school teacher in Locarno at the time. By no means is it an invented narrative. Indeed, much of it is autobiographical, the author – like Emilio – having attended the Seminario San Carlo di Lugano (from 1931 to 1941) before dropping out without finishing. However, Bonalumi was not thrown out but left of his own accord. Nor did the real-life equivalent of Emilio's fling with Ilaria take place. Whereas the novel ends with Emilio returning home, Bonalumi eventually managed to pass his exams – this time at the Catholic seminary in Einsiedeln. He subsequently studied literature in Fribourg and worked for many years as a teacher and translator, before lec-

turing as a professor of Italian literature at the University of Basel from 1973 to 1990.

Decried in Ticino, celebrated in Italy

That Bonalumi's novel was more than just the whim of fantasy was not lost on the Ticino clergy, which still held great sway over the public in 1954. Far from interpreting the book as a sensitive representation of a young man's journey through puberty, the

groundswell in Ticino was that the work was an attempt to discredit the educational practices of Ticino's cantonal seminary. The local press ignored it. Some people even decried it as blasphemy. In contrast, critics in Italy and French-speaking Switzerland could not have reacted more differently. The book won the Charles Veillon Prize in Lausanne and was acclaimed in Italy, where Nobel Prize winner Eugenio Montale spoke of the “honesty of a writer who may still be shy but is incapable of lying”.

A classic of Swiss literature

Bonalumi, who died on 8 January 2002 in Locarno, published notable studies on literary history as well as other books including the novel “Per Luisa” (“For Luisa”, 1972) – in which a Locarno intellectual goes through a deep personal crisis during the Hungarian uprising of 1956. In a collection of short stories called “Il Profilo dell'eremita” (“The hermit's face”), 1996, Bonalumi also shares stories of his time at Einsiedeln. However, none of the author's later works attained the same heights as “Gli Ostaggi”, which was republished numerous times and is available in French and German. Even in Ticino, the book has long been regarded as a classic of Swiss literature.

“Her stare was continuous. Without the slightest hint of shyness, she asked how many of us were attending the seminary. She said she watched us in the courtyard during break-time. The lights from our cells were visible from her room in the evening. I pointed at the windows of our dorm. ‘If I spot you from the courtyard, I will give you a wave.’ She seemed to like my suggestion. She was a tall, slender girl – and could not have been older than 15.”

(Excerpt from Giovanni Bonalumi's “Gli Ostaggi” [The hostages]).

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “Gli Ostaggi” is available in Italian from Edizioni Casagrande, Bellinzona; Danielle Benzonelli's French translation (“Les Otages”) is available from Metropolis, Geneva; and Giò Waekerlin-Induni's German translation (“Die Geiseln”) is available from Verlag Th. Gut, Zurich (volume 28 of the “Reprinted by Huber” series).

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