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## Wartime Childhood

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I was born in Torre a Cona near Florence in the Villa Padoa-Corinaldi, originally the home of my grandmother. In those days, words I thought belonged only to the elderly, children were born at home surrounded by their parents, a large number of relatives and the faithful servants who lived with them until they died of old age. They hardly ever married because they were devoted to the point of never leaving what they considered to be their own family.

I particularly remember Gemma, a maid, Elisa, Nella, my mother's personal maid, Giuseppe, the cook, "la Bongi," the lady companion whom everybody teased, and the British Miss Hoblin, known as "Miò" who always wore purple, all of them dear people from the past. Gemma died many years later in the house of Aunt Teresa di Frassineto in Florence, as did Miò as well as Nella, while Elisa died when she was with us in Lucca after the war.

My older sister Isabella was born in Florence in the *villino* in Via Frà Bartolomeo, and Emilio (whom we called Midolo), a few years

## A Life of Lights and Shadows

before me, in Torre a Cona. They said that, as often happens to children, he was a bit jealous of this new arrival, but then resigned himself when they found him alone near my cradle saying under his breath, “Well, she is really a good looking Niccola!” and he accepted me.

The villa was huge with 365 windows situated on three hundred hectares of land surrounded by avenues of spectacular cypress trees, a large park, vineyards, and olive groves, in the heart of Tuscany. It was spectacular, but my recollections of that time are practically non-existent since I was so young. The villa was then sold to the Rossi di Montelera from Turin. Many years later, I went to see it and thought it was beautiful beyond description. Majestic and impressive, it dominated the entire hill. The villa had a chapel where we were baptized. There was also a theatre where our mother, as a child, performed with her young friends.

We moved to Naples when I was not yet three years old. Our youngest brother Paolo was born there at Piazza Sannazzaro 200 where we lived. They kept me at home as I was still small, but Midolo and Isabella went to stay with friends. The doorman hung a large blue bow on the front door of the building to announce his birth, as is the custom in Naples. I could never forget the Neapolitans: their expressive faces, their skill in knowing how to do everything, *l'arte di arrangiarsi* (the ability to manage, to get along), true geniuses with a unique vitality, their sing-song way of speaking with an Arab inflection typical of street vendors and old-clothes peddlers, the music, the mandolins, and their songs that have set the whole world dreaming. And also the *scugnizzi* (street urchins), the poverty of certain districts with the day's wash perpetually hanging from windows, the agonizing melancholy mingled with an inexhaustible craving to live, without ever thinking of tomorrow. Neapolitans have their own instinctive way of life.

In the days when Paolo was born, I remember that Papà took the three of us to the Odeon movie theatre to see a cartoon. So my



Villa Torre a Cona in Florence, where I was born

earliest memories go back to that time, and I can't imagine a more beautiful sight than the one that must have appeared to my childish eyes: Vesuvius facing our windows, the golden sun, the expanse of the sparkling blue sea, the fishing boats with the *lampare* (fishing lights) at night reflected in the water like thousands of fireflies, Posillipo, the moon, Castel dell'Ovo in the distance.

Our mother who belonged to the St. Vincent de Paul charity society used to take us to visit the other side of Naples in the poorest districts, to show us, from earliest childhood, how some people lived in squalor but seemed nevertheless happy. I remember very well where we were living: I can still see the big building, the hallway of our apartment, the playroom, the dining room, our doorman Romano Andrighetti who used to build the most beautiful crèche in Naples, so beautiful that people would come to see it from far away places. In the Piazza Sannazzaro there was a pool with a splashing fountain. We used to go out with our *balia* (nanny), Rosina Soccol



With my dog Flic in the garden.

from Belluno whom we called “Baba” and were very fond of, since she was a dear and we loved her.

She had dark skin, almost like an African, very white teeth, very black eyes, and she was always cheerful. *Balie* dressed in traditional costumes of the region, in beautiful, gaudy colors and over these she wore a snow-white apron with frills, an extremely picturesque outfit. Baba enter-

tained us, sang with us, told us fairytales. We listened to records, playing them on a crank-up phonograph. I particularly liked a song called “Paesanella,” and I still remember the words; also “La bella lavanderina” was one we would sing all together. *Balie* were nice, good; they never scolded us. Naples was definitely the central and most important part of our life as children. That’s where we grew up, where the first precious memories blossomed, the ones that you never forget. The Gioias are originally from Amalfi, near Naples, before moving to Apulia, and that’s why those places are deep inside us in a special way.

Papà was born in 1898, had three brothers and two sisters, one of whom, Marianna, became a nun. I remember some of them well, others vaguely. He was sent to study at the boarding school of Montecassino, near Rome, one of the most spartan, rigorous and severe in the whole country. He was up at dawn for a cold shower every morning, even in freezing winter. All this unquestionably influenced his personality, with his inflexible discipline, punctuality, strictness, though it was mainly to give an impression. He wanted to be obeyed, giving orders with authority, but he was also good, tolerant, devoted to his family and to traditions. He was great fun and everybody loved

him. Some years later, he had attended the riding academy of Pinerolo and Tor di Quinto which were famous for being the toughest, most difficult and dangerous. Papà fought in World War I and also in World War II.

Mammà was born in Padua in 1906 in Palazzo Corinaldi, three years before Uncle Renato and eight before Aunt Teresa. The opposite of our father who was given a rigorous education, she was of a more



With our dear Baba Rosina Soccol

cheerful nature and had a marvelous childhood in Padua that continued in Torre a Cona for many years. She was worshipped and spoiled by everyone, and was always set on a pedestal. Clever, discerning and witty, she had a very strong, domineering personality and was gifted with a tremendous sense of humor. In spite of having been privileged as a young girl, over the course of her life this absolutely never affected her behavior; on the contrary, she was able to adapt to the times and restrictions with the greatest of ease, skillfully coping with the most difficult situations through her stoic attitude.

She adjusted resolutely to any circumstance, especially during the war, as she was always comfortable with people of all ages or social conditions. In her youth she was good at sports and was energetic: she liked swimming, but most of all horseback riding at which she excelled. She was not a beauty in the actual sense of the word, but she was more than beautiful since she had a unique personality which, added to her intelligence and liveliness, made her special. She had everything that a young girl her age could wish for, and Torre a Cona was her “royal” palace! She was constantly surrounded by amusing,



Palazzo Gioia a Corato in Puglia

delightful guests, sophisticated in music and conversation, or just fond of simple walks; her youth must have been an enviable one.

In Naples, father's attendant was Francesco Succurro, who did a little of everything: he waited on table in white gloves, polished the silver, shined shoes—Papà's black boots with spurs that he had to wear with his captain's uniform. Father was a cavalry officer in the Lancieri Aosta regiment with King Victor Emanuel III. His attendant also had the task of taking us to school. At the end of my first day at Ravaschieri when all my schoolmates were leaving one after the other, I remember I was left by myself waiting for him who never seemed to turn up! Those minutes were like hours and the hours like months. When he finally arrived, I was in tears. I hated school from the very first day!

Baba used to take us for walks on the avenue along the sea called Via Caracciolo which skirted the villa, a lovely park with statues, where we could run, jump and play with our friends. In the winter we wore handsome, warm overcoats called *Casentino* (from the area in Tuscany where they were made), in classic orange with fur collars.



My father Arturo Gioia, officer of the Cavalleria Dei Lancieri Aosta



My father and my future husband Carlo Pes Di Villamarnia Del Campo in France



My father (center), Prince Umberto Di Savoia (far right)



My father (left) and my future husband Carlo (right) at Palazzo Reale Naples

The four of us always dressed alike, and people in the streets would ask Baba who we were. Isabella and Midolo had red hair, a beautiful Titian shade of red, eyes that were a mixture of green and hazel-brown, and freckled faces; while Paolo and I were blond with blue eyes. Baba used to comb Paolo's and my hair, since we were the little ones, with a big forelock at the top of our head called a "banana" curl. We played in the playroom with our friends, who were older than me, a game we called naval battle that consisted of throwing pillows, covers and dolls at each other. There were few toys, so we invented them, and the room was always a mess, but Baba straightened up right away. Midolo's favorite game was toy horse races, which was his real passion. Isabella had a life-size doll called Gennarino who eventually became mine. Gennarino even had a real baby carriage.