

1 **DAVIDE SAPIENZA**

2 *As If 1918 Never Happened*

3 You will pardon me if I am going to use a personal incident—and a series of disparate
4 but interconnected episodes gathered from my life over the years—to tell this story. A
5 very simple story indeed. A story like many others that are unfolding in almost every
6 country even as I am writing here in the heart of the Italy’s Orobic Alps. As many of you
7 know, almost every country has been forged out of wars, litigation over borders, land
8 claims, ongoing ethnic conflicts, never-ending hatred, and an ultimate wish to
9 overthrow “the other.”

10 It seems to me that reconciliation may not be possible among human beings, and the
11 funny thing is that we still don’t know why. In the year 1500, only twenty percent of the
12 countries that exist today were geographically defined as we know them now; those
13 twenty percent are precisely the ones that have gone on to rule the remainder, and to
14 determine their geographical and anthropological “affairs.” It has happened in my
15 “bigger nation,” Europe, and in my “smaller nation,” Italia. It has happened in Asia,
16 Africa, and Australia, and it has happened in the Americas. It will happen in Antarctica,
17 too, because most of the nations involved in the Antarctic Treaty—precisely that same
18 twenty percent—can’t help but “conquer and exploit” the resources at hand. The Last
19 Frontier.

20

21 In the first half of the twentieth century, Europe had the frightening record of being the
22 largest, most efficient and thorough slaughterhouse of men and women. Starting in 1914
23 and ending in 1945, one huge civil war occurred in Europe. For history’s sake, the war
24 has been given two names—the First World War and the Second—and the adjective
25 *world* because all of the major countries fought on our territory and millions died on
26 our grounds. These wars have created a sort of strange brotherhood, especially
27 considering that Americans came here to rescue Europe from the Hitler regime—as if
28 Europe, the homeland of most Americans, reappeared in their consciousness only
29 during these three decades.

30 Whether this was a reunion between America and Europe is debatable. In fact, many
31 places in Europe had never had a reunion of their split personalities. Germany, for
32 example, was cut in half like a chocolate cake. Beautiful Berlin, located at her heart,
33 became embedded in barbed wire, and thousands of soldiers guarded the invisible line
34 that separated the West/Us from the East/Them. To me, growing up in the sixties and
35 seventies, the 1973 Pink Floyd masterpiece “Us and Them” captured this situation:

36 *Us and Them*

37 *And after all we’re only ordinary men*

1 *Me, and you*
2 *God only knows it's not what we would choose to do*
3 *Forward he cried from the rear*
4 *and the front rank died*
5 *And the General sat, as the lines on the map*
6 *moved from side to side.*

7 Because of the generation I was born into, I have found from a very early age that all
8 conversations were ultimately about the Second World War (1939–1945) and the
9 Holocaust, in which the Nazi regime murdered six million Jews in concentration camps.
10 (Others too, were killed by the Nazis, such as the hundreds of thousands of nomadic
11 peoples slaughtered in those same camps.) But prior to that war came the Turkish
12 government's genocide of 1.5 million Armenians, the mention of which can still rattle
13 international relations, as we saw during the recent debate between the U.S. Congress
14 and the Turkish government. People of my generation would have thought that 1918, the
15 year marking the end of the First World War, was old news, forgotten, belonging to
16 "grand-dad days." And therefore it was something our collective memories needed to
17 erase, not least because it had never been resolved.

18

19 Let me jump ahead and tell you about a stupid little episode in my life as a man, as an
20 Italian, as a writer touring his own country to promote his new novel. My book was
21 titled *La Valle di Ognidove* (The Valley of Everywhere) because I wanted my character
22 to travel in space and time and to express what he knew about our relationship with our
23 surroundings—with nature, humanity, and the spiritual life. It so happened that the
24 book's first "episode" had come to me one cold, crystal-clear October day in 2004. The
25 main character was seeking the "everywhere," an alternative, borderless place without
26 divisions and slaughter, without the raping and pillaging of Mother Earth.

27 Some time ago, I took a day off and hiked to the world-famous Asiago Plateau, both
28 for the sad, terrible memories of the First World War that it evoked and for the
29 wonderful countryside and beautiful, friendly trails. The plateau witnessed some of the
30 major atrocities committed by Austrians and Italians from 1915 to 1918, the years of
31 Italy's participation in the war. Two major artistic achievements, directly linked to
32 those years, are associated with this place. One is Emilio Lussu's *Un anno sull'altopiano*,
33 a book published eighteen years after the war's end, but in France, and then only with the
34 tireless encouragement of the author's friend in that country, because no one else would
35 publish Lussu's story about *that* war. The movie inspired by the book, *Uomini Contro*,
36 was made by one of our great filmmakers, Francesco Rosi, and featured our great actor
37 Gian Maria Volonté as one of the leading characters. Filmed at the Asiago Plateau in
38 1970, the movie stirred enormous controversy.

39 On this cold October day hiking the Asiago Plateau, I headed straight to the top of
40 Mount Ortigara, a solitary mountain rising to a little over two thousand metres (seven
41 thousand feet) and having two peaks, both beheaded by the bombs that fell for months
42 during the war. In the solitude, I decided to sit down, be still, and listen to the wind. I was
43 sheltered by an old wall belonging to positions held by Austrians, then Italians, then
44 again by Austrians and then again by Italians and again by... In a horrible week in June
45 1916, almost forty thousand men were killed here. When you hike to this place, when the
46 old military dirt roads are not yet covered in snow, you can envision what went on.
47 Stunted larches, birch trees, and spruce are all around, staring at you, and you wonder if
48 they are a reincarnation of those thousands of young beheaded lives, none of whom
49 wanted to die there.

1 When my film crew and I later made a television documentary of this place, we filmed
2 empty trenches and spaces and the rolling mountains on the horizons; we had had
3 enough of looking at borders. Our film documentary, called *Scemi di guerra* (War's
4 idiots), is dedicated to all those young men who never came back from war with their
5 hearts and minds intact, because of the dramatic and irreversible changes that occurred
6 in their mental landscapes. Based on personal diaries and documents, this film is like no
7 other in my country. It will be aired on History Channel Italy and another major
8 national channel in 2008—ninety years after 1918. Some of the historians we
9 interviewed told us that such a project was unprecedented, and we thought, “How
10 strange.” Ninety years after the events documented in the film, we would like to call its
11 making a reconciliation.

12
13 My deep concern with the First World War came mainly from hiking such places in my
14 country's eastern and central Alps, because that is where the “front” used to be: a four-
15 hundred-mile stretch from the Adriatic Sea to the mountains. I always felt that this place
16 and the war were emblematic of the story of Everyman, the one who seems always to be
17 moving on the long ridge between madness and joy, fury and hope. In 1914, Everyman
18 decided to descend from that ridge into the fields of madness. His decision was a
19 defining moment in the twentieth century: at that moment he chose the Machine over
20 Humanity. The horde was magnificent to see: armies of volunteers, young and furious,
21 legions of believers churned out by the machine called War. A spectacular carnival of a
22 kind Man had rarely, if ever, seen. Alone in these places, you can *feel* the beheaded lives.
23 Looking into the emptiness, you do not want to ask yourself *why*, because an answer
24 may arise. And it will not be a nice one.

25 From the west to the east, empires declared war on the bases of motives that would
26 sound hilarious if you didn't know they had turned life into a hellish nightmare. The
27 thirst for blood, the mindless game, the furious oblivion of the war led to the death of
28 over ten million human beings in the span of just four years. Mankind seemed to need a
29 Pentecostal cleansing, as Jack London described it in his final days. The truth is that
30 Everyman did not know what he was going to face; in the very moment he started to
31 realize what he had ventured into, he ceased to understand the reality of life.

32
33 Bolzano/Bozen Province was established in Alto Adige, sometimes called South Tirol in
34 English. Brenner Pass, the border between Italy and Austria, is less than sixty miles to
35 the north; however, for the ethnic, German-speaking “minority” in the province, this
36 border has never existed. I should explain here that the German speakers are in fact not a
37 minority. Two-thirds of the Italian citizens in the province speak German as their
38 mother tongue. It had once been part of the Roman Empire. Then, in the Middle Ages,
39 the province began to be Germanized; gradually, the Italian presence was reduced, but
40 the Italian population was significant enough to ensure that a strong tie to Italy was
41 maintained. Eventually the region became part of the Austrian Empire. In 1866, at the
42 end of the Austro-Prussian War, the region was awarded to Italy. But by the end of the
43 century, the Italian presence in present-day Bolzano/Bozen had fallen to only nine
44 percent of the population. The First World War “solution” to the imbalance between
45 Italian and German citizenry—following the terrible loss of life I have already
46 described—was to establish the border of Austria and Italy at the natural geographical
47 divide, Brenner Pass, and conclusively to annex the region into Italy, which was
48 confirmed in post-war treaties.

1 With the advent of the Mussolini regime in 1922, most such places, in the northern
2 provinces, were Italianized, by which I mean village names were changed, people had to
3 learn to speak Italian, and so forth. This caused the ethnic rivalry between Germans and
4 Italians, which already existed, to flare up—particularly when the Italians capitulated to
5 the Allies in 1943 and Germany invaded Italy, once again giving dominance in the region
6 to German speakers. A strategic focal point of the war, the region endured the Battle of
7 the Brenner from 1944 to 1945, when the Western Allies dropped over 10,000 tons of
8 bombs to capture it.

9 In the following decades of the twentieth century, the “German problem” started to
10 resurface—a “problem” that concerned not a “minority,” but actually a “majority”
11 which had been called a minority. Get the picture?

12

13 It is September 21, 2007. My new book and I are invited to Castel Firmiano, a beautiful
14 castle that overlooks the capital city of Bolzano and is part of Rienhold Messner’s
15 Mountain Museum Project. Messner, a world-renowned mountaineer, owns the castles
16 in Alto Adige/South Tirol. He has many projects and is a controversial Italian character,
17 always ready to stress his non-Italian nature and origins in his way of speaking and
18 thinking. A great example of troubled ethnic duality. Those who invite me decide
19 everything: the route, the place, the time. People, they say, come to *share*. I happen to
20 write books. Let’s see what we have to share, what *they* have to tell me about their idea of
21 *Everywhere*. The event is organized by the Trento Film Festival, which annually screens
22 mountain and exploration films.

23 The province of Trento along with the province of Bolzano/Bozen forms the region
24 known as Trentino–Alto Adige. Austria is to the north and Switzerland to the
25 northwest. Trento is mainly Italian-speaking, and Bolzano/Bozen mainly German-
26 speaking, but, as I have said, tensions have never been resolved. Everything that
27 happens in Trento is ignored in Bolzano, treated as if it does not exist. Tell me about
28 reconciliation.

29 Augusto Golin, the man in charge of the Trento Film Festival’s programs, is from
30 Bolzano, and I am sure he would like to reconcile a little. Nevertheless, he has warned me:
31 “I hope someone will come. No matter how much publicity we do for your book, no
32 matter how many articles are written in the local press about your visit... We’ll see.”
33 Indeed, we have seen. I drive four long hours to Bolzano/Bozen full of hope, and when I
34 get to the small city, I admire the Sciliar plateau far in the distance, a beautiful door to the
35 Dolomites. A full chapter in my novel has been inspired by the plateau. It was written
36 while I was looking down at the city in the distance, imagining a day when
37 Bolzano/Bozen wouldn’t cause a funny bell to ring in my head.

38 The funny bell rings clearly when I get to the outskirts of the castle. I see flocks of
39 tourists from all over the world visiting and leaving the place. On the entry intercom, I
40 ask if I can drive in for a minute, unload my stuff, including the big photographic
41 reproductions that I usually display in my *Everywhere* talks. A firm but empty and cold
42 voice says something in German I can barely grasp from a faraway memory of studying
43 German in high school. She says I can’t go in—no one can. And while she says this, a
44 van drives out from the castle. I start hearing the bell again.

45 For any Italian not accustomed to dual ethnicity, it is always a surprise to be greeted
46 around here as *persona non grata*. Inside Castel Firmiano, no sign or posters say
47 anything about my public presentation. The woman on the entry intercom says she does
48 not know anything about it. Augusto, the man from the Trento Film Festival, suggests
49 we park, that maybe they will give us a little trolley to carry the books and the big

1 framed photographs representing the seven stages of Everywhere. I ask, “*Parla*
2 *italiano?*” No, she does not speak Italian. “Do you speak English?” No, she does not
3 speak English. A lady from Bolzano tries to talk to the woman at the other end of the
4 intercom. The answer is no.

5 This is the moment when I lose my temper. My pent-up frustration explodes like
6 shrapnel on the battlefield. “Do they know what happened in 1918?!” All hell breaks loose.
7 Augusto offers to pay me my expenses for the trip “right here, right now” and cancel
8 my reading. Undeterred, I repeat the question, and by then we’re on the verge of a major
9 falling-out. I demand they understand my frustration—that I drove four hours to
10 discover Bolzano/Bozen doesn’t give a flying s**t about an Italian author, even someone
11 who has written about the “problem” in a sympathetic way.

12 Those are the moments when all the things you have learnt should help you. Years
13 ago, I was speaking with a friend from Val Badia, a beautiful jewel of the Italian Alps
14 only fifty miles from Bolzano/Bozen. The people there are *not* Germans, *not* Italians;
15 they are Ladini. They speak three languages. They see things from a unique perspective.
16 They are now working for independence, “for a free Ladinia.” I suspect it is all for
17 economic reasons rather than spiritual ones. Anyway, my friend brought up the
18 horrible days of The Option. In 1938, as Mussolini and Hitler had become allies, pro-
19 German feelings resurfaced in Alto Adige, which Mussolini had aggressively
20 Italianized. The German and the Italian governments therefore gave the people The
21 Option to relocate to the Third Reich or stay in Italy as citizens there. Seventy percent
22 took The Option and decided to leave. However, because events of the Second World
23 War moved too quickly, only 70,000 out of 185,000 citizens actually left the country.
24 After the war’s end, many returned. Those who had opted to stay were considered
25 traitors by their fellow ethnic Germans, and those who opted to leave (or returned)
26 were condemned as Nazis.

27 I’ve got my mind set on this when, in a split second, I start to feel deeply ashamed of
28 my outburst. We park the car. We carry the books’ heavy box. The landscape
29 photographs stay in the car: my silly revenge on an invisible enemy. Besides, no one
30 really cares about them. We enter the castle. We are only five people in all. No one knows
31 anything, no one can help us. The lady at the other end of the intercom has a face: she is a
32 pale young creature working at Castel Firmiano’s information desk. The atmosphere is
33 strange and discouraging. We step up to a window overlooking the city, and a surreal
34 atmosphere descends on us when I sit on an ancient stone and look out on the Sciliar
35 plateau’s rocky walls. The walls look like another castle in the distance, and I want to be
36 there instead—outside looking in, rather than inside looking out.

37 When I start reading from my book, I feel like an intruder. But I read on. And
38 suddenly my small audience of five focuses in on what I’m saying as if they, too, are
39 trying to reconcile themselves with the situation. Augusto, the man who organized the
40 event, is listening eagerly, and I can see he wants to bridge the gap between us. He
41 interrupts, saying very interesting and thought-provoking things. His speech is
42 flowing, and we smile. We had not meant to confront each other: we had only fallen to
43 the huge historical trap, the unbridgeable gulf of so many, many tragic centuries. We
44 both know that the powers that be have tried to make a future for both of us.

45
46 After the Second World War, Austria wanted the region back, and many ethnic
47 Germans agreed. Italy and Austria reached a compromise in 1946, giving the Alto-
48 Adige provinces special autonomy and the Germans special rights. A 1992 agreement

1 tried to further resolve the “problem”; however, it clearly remains. Neither side seems
2 ready to take a simple step forward and say we really are a unified Europe now.

3

4 We walk through the castle, listening to Augusto brilliantly explain the different rooms
5 of Reinhold Messner’s Museum. When we sit in the next wing, some goats look at me
6 while I’m trying to read. A beautiful sun is on us. No one here is really concerned with
7 being German or Italian. We’re just people trying to share an experience on the same
8 ground, on a reconciled afternoon. I am puzzled when I see that Messner has designed a
9 room of charts and one big map of the Land of Imagination—even more so when I listen
10 to the music he has selected to be played in the different parts of the castle. As the 6 P.M.
11 closing time approaches, we head down the last stairs and through a narrow corridor of
12 hope. Leaving the “castle experience,” we are accompanied by Bob Dylan singing, *The*
13 *answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.*