

A love-hate relationship with Italy and Germany

by Matteo Fusella

It's 11 o'clock in the morning and I'm at the central station in Milan, Italy, getting on a train to Frankfurt, Germany. I just visited the Christmas market in the Protestant church of the German-speaking community in Milan, which is organized here every year.

The chairs on the train are partly made of plastic. There are pros and cons to the utility to each of the different types of plastic available.

One particular type of plastic, *polypropylene*, was discovered and created in Milan in the 1950s by two scientists: *Giulio Natta* from Italy and *Karl Ziegler* from Germany, for which they were jointly awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry on 10 December 1963.

As I walk through the carriage to find my seat, I hear a great variety of languages being spoken by the passengers: Italian, German, French, English, to name but a few. The announcements are being made in all these languages, so they seem endless. I take my seat. In front of me is a French-speaking woman, to my left a woman from the United States and a man from southern Italy. A few people in suits are reading German newspapers, such as *Die Zeit*, whose editor-in-chief is the German-Italian *Giovanni di Lorenzo*. An Italian-speaking mother offers her child something to eat: "Mangia una barretta di muesli se hai fame." I think: "Ein interessantes Ambiente." Then I realize that the Italian mother just borrowed the word "Müsli" from German, and that I borrowed the Italian word "ambiente" and made it into German.

The train makes its first stop at Lake Como, where the Villa Vigoni, a German-Italian centre for European dialogue, is located. Lake Como is also home to many tourists, especially from Germany.

At lunchtime, I take a look at what the on-board restaurant has to offer: Italian wine, German beer, ravioli, pretzels, espresso, and tea – all products associated with Italy or Germany.

Hours later, we arrive in Mannheim, Germany. In 1969, the son of an Italian ice cream shop owner living in Mannheim created "*Spaghettieis*" – a type of ice cream in the shape of spaghetti. This ice cream invention became very popular in years to come and continues to delight ice cream lovers all over the world.

My train finally reaches its destination: Frankfurt. Many of the passengers, a lot of them of Italian descent, have to continue their journeys to other German cities: Hamburg, Berlin, Cologne, or they will go on to international destinations, such as Brussels, or Amsterdam. Whatever their final destination may be, all of the passengers exit the train in Frankfurt. It is officially estimated that there are around 800,000 Italian nationals living in Germany. That is a whopping 1% of the German population! The *Corriere d'Italia*, which has its headquarters in Frankfurt, is a newspaper available in Italian, especially for topics of interest to Italians living in Germany.

In Frankfurt, amidst all these impressive skyscrapers, there is a museum dedicated to the birthplace of *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, who is famously known, next to his literary heritage, for his



educational travels and his romantic approach to Italy as well. *Goethe* spent a few months in Rome with his friend, the painter *Tischbein*. Today, you can also visit the *Casa di Goethe* - Goethe's house in Rome. *Goethe* dedicated the poem *Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn* to Italy. Other German artists who spent time in Italy, or did work related to Italy, are *Jacob Philipp Hackert*, who died in Florence and painted the *Italienische Landschaft*, and *Friedrich Overbeck*, who died in Rome and painted *Italia und Germania*, the personification of Italy and Germany. *Karl Heinrich Ulrichs* came from East Frisia and chose to auto-exile himself in *L'Aquila*, Italy. He was one of the pioneers of the first modern homosexual movement in the 19th century.

Meanwhile, I have to catch my connecting train to Hamburg. On board, I see someone reading a book by the Italian writer *Umberto Eco*, whose wife was from Germany. The train stops in Hanover. My maternal grandfather was a *Gastarbeiter*, a guest worker in this area for a few years in the 1960s. In 1955, Germany made a pact with Italy, and later with other southern European countries, to allow foreign laborers to work on the same economic terms as their German counterparts for a period of time, as they were needed to fill labour shortages. This strategy was partly responsible for Germany's economic miracle in the 1950s. Most of the work offered was in the fields, in factories, in mines and on construction sites. It was hard and dirty work. The living conditions weren't the best either, as the workers mostly lived in simple barracks. Partly due to the language barrier, there was a general mistrust of guest workers. Mistrust specifically of Italians has existed perhaps since the end of WWII, when Germany felt betrayed by the sudden strong rebellion of Italians against the fascist regime. Hitler had been partly inspired by the fascist ideology of Mussolini, the Italian dictator. During the 1950s some restaurants even had signs saying *Kein Zutritt für Italiener* – “No entry for Italians.” 80% of the guest workers returned to their home country after a short period of working in Germany. My grandfather also returned to Italy. But some people wanted to remain in Germany, and they did, despite all the difficulties that this implied. However, very few of the immigrants who remained in Germany decided to actually become German citizens. I have the honour of being a citizen of both Germany and Italy.

I am finally in Hamburg. On my way home, I see a huge freighter on the Elbe, belonging to the Italian shipping company *Grimaldi Lines*. I pass by the *Istituto italiano di cultura*, a cultural association to promote Italian language and culture. The next morning, as I walk through the city, I see a German news programme on television, this time hosted by *Ingo Zamperoni*, whose mother is from Italy.



Among the graffiti in the city, I spot some Italian words that stem from the *ultras*, the extreme supporters of a football (soccer) team. Both nations love football. Germany won the 1990 FIFA World Cup in Italy and Italy won the 2006 World Cup in Germany! In 2024 Germany will host UEFA Euro 2024; let's see what happens! (-:

Here is an example of how the soccer fans of the team *Werder Bremen* show their affection towards the Hamburg sports club - interestingly in Italian!

Hamburg is home to the largest Italian military cemetery in Germany. The Italians who fell victim to the Nazi regime in Hamburg and the surrounding area are buried here. There is a Neapolitan child buried here. He had been a victim of the *Bullenhuser Damm massacre*, a mass murder of prisoners that occurred at the homonymous school. These prisoners had been part of medical experiment done at the concentration camp *Neuengamme*, in which they were injected with live tuberculosis bacilli to see if these could be used as a vaccine. Deportees and soldiers captured after the Italian armistice in 1943 are also buried here.

Time has passed, and I am now on my way to Berlin to visit a friend I made at a German school in Italy. She has told me about a lot of culinary and cultural initiatives that stem from Italians living in Berlin. There are Italian (Christmas) markets and supermarkets, restaurants, patisseries and delicatessens that you can find not only in Berlin, but all over Germany. In Germany's capital city, it is not rare to find spaces for artistic exhibitions. There are readings, experimental theatre productions, music producers and comedy shows, all associated with Italy, for example done by *Gianpaolo di Nardo*, who makes fun of the cultural differences between Germany and Italy. There are some Italian DJs who play in Berlin's famous nightclubs, and a few years ago you could have had the honour of listening to the *Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra*, conducted for many years by the world-famous *Claudio Abbado*.

I am now walking through the city, and I spot a plate remembering *Ferruccio Busoni*, who was a lesser known but still relevant Italian composer, and died and was buried in Berlin in 1924. Many German-speaking composers made their art by creating operas in the Italian language, as it was standard to have opera in Italian, especially in the 18th century. *Richard Wagner* premiered his opera *Lohengrin* in 1850 at the *Teatro Comunale di Bologna* - the opera house of the Italian city of Bologna - but his opera is in German.

I put my earbuds in and start listening to some music by *Lucio Dalla*. Italian pop music, especially from the 80s, is an eternal classic loved worldwide, and Germany is no exception. In fact, several Italian artists have successfully toured Germany with their songs translated and sung in German as a form of gratitude towards the good resonance from the German audience. *Menschen an der Macht* by *Milva*, *Liebelei* by *Raffaella Carrà*, and *Unser freies Lied* by *Lucio Battisti* are a few songs. The last song was translated with the help of *Udo Lindenberg*, Germany's rock icon!

Milva's song *Alexanderplatz* is now being reproduced. As I leave Berlin, she sings "Alexanderplatz, auf Wiedersehen" into my ears.

Nowadays, although this worldwide mania about Italo-pop has diminished, it is still present.

A currently active group *La Rappresentante Di Lista* has released a song in German called *Klammern an den Zähnen*. *Pufuleti* is an Italian-German rapper with the peculiarity of having songs in German and in Italian, but mixed with a Sicilian dialect.

And what about the other way round?

Many second generation Italian immigrants to Germany have made their careers in the music industry by releasing songs in both Italian and German, including *Giovanni Zarella*, *Christian Meringolo*, *Ricardo Marinello* or *Riccardo Doppio*. There are also German groups that compose music in Italian. One of them is *Roy Bianco und Die Abbrunzati Boys*, who express their comical spirit by constantly romanticizing Italy. Another example is the *Crucchi Gang* from Berlin. Their speciality is to perform German songs in Italian. One example is their translation of *Element of Crime's Weißes Papier* into *Carta Bianca*. *Crucchi*, by the way, is a derogatory term but, depending on the context, it can also be a sarcastic way of teasing Germans or any other "Nordic people" in Italian. The word

comes from WWI, when Italian soldiers called Austrian prisoners of Croatian nationality *crucchi*, because when they were hungry, they always asked for *kruh*, or bread in Serbo-Croatian. This word was later used by Italian soldiers fighting in Russia, and then by Italian partisans fighting the German military.

Two German derogatory term for Italians are *Itaka* or *Itaker*, short for *Italienischer Kamerad* - Italian comrade, and they come from the period when the two countries were allies in WWII. The terms acquired a pejorative connotation after the war. Other terms include *Spaghettifresser* – as in spaghetti eater.

Here, you see a picture of me, many years ago in *Würzburg*, in Franconia, in northern Bavaria, where I grew up. I am now here again to visit some old childhood friends. We meet for a walk, and we pass by all the majestic baroque architecture in city, for example the *Residenz*, the former palace of the Archbishop. In its beautiful entrance, it hosts the largest ceiling fresco painted by the Venetian *Giovanni Battista Tiepolo*.



We continue our walk, reaching the *Elefantengasse*, which literally translated as elephant alley. One of my friends spots a sign that says *Pizzeria Capri – Blaue Grotte*. I actually know the history behind this special *pizzeria*, and I start telling my friends all about it. My father moved to *Würzburg* in 1974 from Italy at the age of 15 and started working there. *Capri – Blaue Grotte* is one of the first, if not the first, Italian *pizzeria* in Germany. The two founders, *Nicolino Di Camillo* and *Janina Di Camillo-Schmitt*, opened it in 1952. The two met in Nuremberg during the post-war Nuremberg Trials. She was a ballet dancer at the Nuremberg Opera House, and he was a member of the Italian military, who had been brought to Germany by US allies from the Italian region of Abruzzo. This is where the famous Gustav Line, one of the last major military lines controlled by the Nazi regime to slow the advance of the Allies, had been established.

As we stand there talking, people come out with their take-away pizzas in convenient carry-out boxes. And yes, these boxes come from here as well.

The modern pizza box was invented here by the same persons who opened the restaurant, although they did not patent it at the time. For this reason, it is difficult to officially give them credit for it. However, this information has been confirmed by the *Haus der Bayerischen Geschichte* - a government agency that promotes Bavarian history.

We can't just stand around outside, we have to go take a look inside as well. The restaurant has changed over time. In addition to Italian cuisine, it now offers German and Spanish cuisine as well. We get greeted with a warm *Servus*. This is hello in Bavarian dialect, but interestingly, it means "slave" or "servant" in Latin.

In the Middle Ages, it was common to greet someone with *servus humillimus domine spectabilis* – or translated into English, "I am your most humble servant, oh admirable Lord." Later, it was shortened to simply *servus*. In the Republic of Venice, the same expression was used in the Venetian language, but they used their own word for "slave," *schiavo*, which is the same in modern Italian. Through

linguistic evolution, it then became *sciavo*, then *sciao* and finally *ciao*, the Italian way of greeting that everybody knows.

A new day has begun, and I am now returning to Italy again, this time through Munich, the largest city in Bavaria, famous around the world for its *Oktoberfest*. Many people travel even from abroad to experience *Oktoberfest*. A study has shown that Italians are the number one foreign visitors by number, with a whopping 200,000 people coming from Italy to the *Oktoberfest* each year. *Oktoberfest* is so popular that there are many Bavarian-style pubs in Italy, and sometimes they also organise their own festival.

The city of Munich is home to the largest Italian immigrant community in Germany, with 30,000 people, making up around 2% of Munich's population. This is why Munich is sometimes called the northernmost Italian city.

My next stop is Lake Garda, which is full of German tourists and many holiday home owners. Lake Garda welcome approximately 1.8 million German tourists every year!

From a radio somewhere near me I hear German being spoken. In the summer, *Antenne Bayern*, one of the biggest radio stations in Bavaria, sets up a station on Lake Garda to inform German tourists in German about the area around the lake. A song is now being played on the radio. It's the Bavarian brass band *LaBrassBanda* playing *Autobahn* and dedicating one line to the lake, "*Davorn kimmt scho da Gardasee. Da duads scho blos no hoib so weh,*" which, translated from Bavarian to English means, "There comes Lake Garda. There, it only hurts a little," in the sense that all worries are forgotten at Lake Garda.

I see a tourist reading the language magazine, *ADESSO*, which is based in Munich and written by people who live culturally between the two nations, with the aim of enriching German-speaking readers about the Italian language and culture.



The radio program continues with a documentation about a village. A group of farmers from *Lower Bavaria* had decided to set up their own village in the Italian region of Umbria in 1982. They called their village *Utopiaggia*. Today, 17 adults and 2 young people live in four houses on 94 hectares of hilly land. It's an egalitarian community that lives as ecologically as possible with and on the land. Their main income comes from services and crafts outside the community, mainly from the sale of cheese and olive oil produced by them.

My last stop is Bologna. On my way there, I spot some cars. The region is famous for their car industry due to brands like Ferrari, Maserati, or Lamborghini. The last brand is now owned by the German Volkswagen group.

At this point in my life, I have moved back and forth between Italy and Germany five times, and I am currently studying in Italy.

I have the feeling that many foreigners, especially Germans, romanticize Italy too much. Even *Goethe* had an idealized view of Italy. But the truth is that *la dolce vita* can only be enjoyed by the most privileged.

In closing, I encourage you to watch two short films: *La Deutsche Vita* by *Alessandro Cassigoli* to see how Germany can be depicted through the eyes of an Italian immigrant, and *Man spricht deutsch* by *Hanns Christian Müller* and *Gerhard Polt* to see how they depict Italy from the perspective of a German tourist.

Appreciating qualities and tolerating some flaws is part of a healthy relationship, in my opinion. It is a real privilege to live on a continent where you can find a completely different culture within a few hours' drive and still have exemplary diplomatic and economic relations through the European Union. When it comes to culture, I am Italian and German. When it comes to patriotism, I am European!

Thank you for listening, Matteo Fusella