ADANO: AN AMERICAN EXPERIMENT OF GOOD INTENTIONS

In the climax of World War II, the most atrocious military conflict in human history, when the European continent was torn between two belligerent camps, Adano was just a tiny spot on the map. A rural town on the Italian Mediterranean coast, it was a strategically important, but otherwise inessential territorial acquisition for the American army on its way to a military victory. Later, administered as a part of the Occupied Territories by American Army officials under the skillful guidance of an Italian-American major, this small piece of land in Fascist Italy was to turn, ironically, into a truly democratic place in wartime Europe.

For its parental Italian civil affairs officer, Victor Joppolo, Adano bore an emotional significance. Sentimental by nature and very much aware of his roots, from the very first day as an Amgot representative Major Joppolo demonstrated willingness and zest to restore to normalcy his tiny island of peace. However, he decided to accomplish it in a way his American upbringing dictated him. Adano was to be governed in a democratic fashion.

A part of a bureaucratic, hierarchical system himself, Major Joppolo preferred to administer Adano without the restrictions and complications of a huge governing machine. Instead, he transformed the town into a model of simple democracy where ordinary people could make their voices heard in the truest spirit of the democratic tradition. In fact, Joppolo’s approach to administering, guided by the native Italians, seemed to be the easiest way to fulfilling his tasks in a situation different from his New
York reality. His flexible decisions, which replaced the rigid military norms and impracticable instructions, helped him not only to address the immediate needs of the town, but also to win the approval and gratitude of the local people.

In a way, Major Joppolo’s understanding of authority as the power that “spring[s] from the very people” (Hersey, p.78) and is not imposed, but determined by the mere interest of the ruled, represents the American idea of democratic government, as opposed to the totalitarian type of government. It might seem ironic that a young American nation, symbolized by Major Joppolo’s personage, whose Founding Fathers so much admired the Ancient Roman Republic and chose to connect America’s future to a tradition belonging to the European Antiquity, dared teach democracy in the land that gave birth to democratic tradition. It might even appear hypocritical that once again America was trying to be John Winthrop’s “City Upon the Hill”, first occupying and then preaching, hiding its real ambitions behind the mask of good intentions.

It is true that the desire to spread democratic principles had long become an essential part of United States political ideology. That ideology had its religious predecessor in the Puritan view of a progressive American society that was endowed with a mission to perfect mankind by teaching American values. Since the second half of the 19th century this political ideology had been successfully used by American diplomats to justify certain US foreign policy practices around the world. In fact, to a certain extent the ideal of spreading and strengthening democratic principles in Third World countries continues to be the greatest guarantee of securing American dominance around the globe.

During World War II, however, much more than American political and economic interests were at stake. The totalitarian regimes in Italy and Germany combined
political propaganda, terror, and military force to rule their own population and wage a war for dominance on the European continent against bastions of democracy, such as England and France. With France being occupied and Great Britain greatly weakened by its military efforts in the war, the balance of powers in Europe, and, in fact, the mere survival of democracy in the Old World depended, paradoxically, on the military capability of the Soviet Union. A totalitarian country and a great power in its own right, the Soviets country was the communist experiment whose leadership at the time was obsessed with the idea to spread proletarian revolution and communism around the world. Europe was torn apart, and liberty and democracy, the leading American ideologies since the colonization of the North American continent, seemed to be endangered in the territories where they were conceived as political doctrines.

Upon arriving in Adano, Major Joppolo was not preoccupied with wartime strategies or political ideologies. Good-natured, dedicated, and resourceful, he was determined to exercised the fairly restricted authority he had been granted to serve the people of the town to the best of his abilities. Perceived as a native in a culture he was, in reality, hardly familiar with, he was trusted and respected because of his Italian looks and speech. Yet, he was much more admired because of his peculiar American way of getting things done.

From the very beginning, Major Joppolo restored to the people of Adano the basic civil liberties they had been denied for decades by the Fascist regime. Freedom to express an opinion without being threatened or imprisoned allowed ordinary people to speak their conscience. Equality before the law, regardless of social status emboldened citizens to question police involvement in their everyday activities. A right to petition the
government and request a change for the benefit of the whole community made Major Joppolo aware of problems, such as inflation, that had to be taken care of. A right to a fair trial in a court of law, or the improvised trials decided by the major himself, ended up with unbiased sentences or acquittals. In a sense, the people of Adano entered the sphere of public life, and gained the confidence of real citizens.

Yet, American attitudes and judgments not always bring about equitable results. In fact, more often hasty reactions on the part of American officials end up with tragic consequences. A dead mule and a dilapidated Italian house in the narrative of “A Bell for Adano”, however, cannot be explained simply with the fury of a high-brass American military man, or the drunkenness of party-loving soldiers.

In the novel, General Marvin’s attitude represents a certain practice in the American political tradition that disregards the right of the weaker side in a conflict to an opinion, and even denies it an opportunity to take a stand in its own defense. If we compare General Marvin to Major Joppolo, we might reach the sad conclusion that, very often, constructive initiatives in foreign policy can be obstructed by the imposition of oppressive higher authority.

Yet, when we deal with political relations between different cultures, at times even good-intended initiatives, though initially acclaimed by those affected by them, can be motivated by erroneous perceptions. Major Joppolo had his own biased view of the significance of the bell of Adano. To him, the bell, which had sounded in the town for seven hundred years, symbolized the free spirit of the people of the town. That spirit had survived throughout centuries of bloodshed and oppression.
It was easy for Victor Joppolo to make an immediate connection between the significance of Adano’s bell and the symbolism of the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia that was a relic of the American War for Independence and, consequently, represented the American strife for liberty. To find a new bell for the people of Adano, not an ordinary bell, but one of some historical importance, at a critical moment in their lives would represent a recreation of the strife for freedom that turned the United States into that “City Upon the Hill”.

To the people of Adano, however, the old bell was an incarnation of their cultural heritage. They viewed a new bell simply as an opportunity to restore their ravaged community, to bring back the time, and heal the wounds of the raging war.

Leaving Adano, Major Joppolo probably believed that the ring of the new bell would connect his two motherlands forever. The people of Adano, on the other hand, nurtured the hope that the sound of that bell would signify a new beginning. We all know that, after all, the end of the war brought a lasting peace and an opportunity for the European peoples, with the financial help of the Marshal plan, to rebuild their lives. And even though the attempt of an ordinary American major to experiment with American ideas of democracy in a rural wartime Italian community caused certain misunderstandings, it was certainly a sign that cooperation among different countries and different cultures in a modern world might be possible if a certain amount of good will is involved in the process.