

# PIEMONTESE NEL MONDO OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

## BOLETIN BOGIANEN IN ACTION

Andrew M. Canepa, *Editor*

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### The Piedmontese Study Group

It all started back in 1998 in the kitchen of a flat on Shrader Street near USF. There, Gerald L. Fabian, aka Gegin, helped a handful of Piemontesi nel Mondo brush up on or actually learn their ancestral language. Among those few original students were Sebastian Maggiora, Cathe Cornello, and the present writer. With time, the group grew; classes were transferred to a meeting room at the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library; and, finally and definitively, to its present North Beach location in Fugazi Hall, 678 Green St. Gegin—May he rest in peace!—acted as moderator for ten years until retiring to a senior residence in Santa Monica. His role was taken over by his protégé, linguist extraordinaire Kevin McCabe. (Yes, *McCabe!*) McCabe, aka Testaplà, guides the participants in the *Cit Sircol dē Studi Piemontèis* in speaking and reading the language, its grammar and spelling, and listens to their reminiscences and anecdotes *sèmper an piemontèis*. Classes meet at 1:30 PM, the first and third Thursday of the month, from Fall thru Spring. They are free of charge to club members. If you're interested, send Testaplà an email at [contacc@att.net](mailto:contacc@att.net).

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### A Piemontese in the Movies

The 2018 film *Mary Queen of Scots* is the tragic story of the French-bred Roman Catholic monarch beheaded for plotting against her cousin, Queen Elizabeth I. It features one of our countrymen, Davide Riccio aka David Rizzio, born around 1533 in Pancalieri, about 30 kilometers south of Turin. He arrived in Scotland in 1561, a musician in the entourage of the Count di Moretta, ambassador of the Duke of Savoy. Rizzio stayed on, first as the bass voice in a quartet and eventually as the confidant, favorite and personal secretary of the Stuart queen—quite a trajectory! In the movie he is portrayed as a pathetic figure, a prancing cross-dressing sodomite, indeed one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting. The actor who plays him vaguely resembles Mandy Patinkin's character, Inigo Montoya, in *The Princess Bride*. In point of fact, Rizzio was a swarthy hunchback generally considered ugly, but at the same time he was an accomplished lutenist and singer, fluent in French, intelligent, wily and ambitious...perhaps too ambitious for his own good. Add to that his devout Catholicism in an increasingly Protestant country, a circumstance which fueled rumors that he was an agent of the Pope. Rizzio was savagely stabbed to death (57 dagger wounds) by a frenzied mob of Scottish noblemen on 9 March 1566, while clinging to the skirts of his queen. It was regicide by proxy. The scene in the movie is excruciating.

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### Giorgio Barbero: Alpino, Partigiano, Pacifista

Remember Henry Fonda's monologue at the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*? "Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there..." Watch it on Youtube. It fits George Barbero to a T. When he died on August 18, 2019 at age 101, George was the oldest living member of the Piemontesi nel Mondo. His life was eventful and purposeful. Born in San Mateo on June 4, 1918, he was taken by his mother to Ceva, near Mondovì, in 1930, where his deceased father had purchased a farm. There, Giòrs became an outstanding track and field athlete, representing Piemonte in the Italian national games. (His physical fitness was maintained into old age, regularly riding a bike until he was 97.) Fate had it that he would be drafted into the Alpini corps of crack mountain troops in 1939, a year before Italy entered the war. He lucked out in 1941, when he was chosen for officer training in Italy, while his Alpini unit was sent to the Russian front. He thus avoided almost certain death—death for an ideology and ill-fated adventure that he did not believe in. After the armistice with the Allies on 8 September 1943, Giorgio joined up with the Partigiani fighting the Nazis and diehard Fascists, where his knowledge of English served him well in assisting downed British and American pilots. Shortly after the war, with his bride Catterina and son Marcello, George returned to California, where a second son, Guido, was born. He settled into a custodial job at the Lawrence Berkeley Lab, from which he retired. In spite of working in an institution which hosted military research, George was no militarist. On the contrary, witnessing the butchery of war had made him an ardent pacifist, to which he added secular humanism and a deep-seated concern for social justice and the environment. He marched in antiwar protests and would regale anyone he happened to meet with his progressive views on climate change and current affairs—sometimes to the point of hectoring. Remember Fonda's monologue? Well, George actually did something concrete so that hungry people could eat. In the 1980s and '90s, on a daily basis he would gather up surplus bread from the Acme Bakery in Berkeley and personally deliver it to homeless shelters and soup kitchens. At the memorial service at the Fratellanza Club, Guido's wife Debby deftly summed up her father-in-law's public persona. She said that Giorgio Barbero was "the angriest pacifist and the most Christian atheist" that she had ever met. Amen to that!

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## Another Valuable Website

I've been touting *gens.labo.net* for finding the regional distribution of Italian surnames. There's another site, *www.namespedia.com*, for finding the worldwide distribution of those same last names. All you have to do is type in the surname and click on "Go." What you'll see is information regarding the number of times the surname appears and in how many countries, plus a graph showing its occurrence in the leading countries. I typed in a few last names I know to be common in the Astigiano, with interesting results. For example, Fassio occurs 973 times in 20 countries with the leading ones being, in descending order, Italy, the U.S., and Argentina. The same transnational distribution is found for Maggiora, Orecchia, and Viarengo. Fausone, however, has the U.S. leading the pack, before the home country and Argentina. As a bonus, there is a guide to writing the name in Chinese pinyin characters! Not all surnames appear, though. Bo and Caimotto, common in the area of Asti, can't be found.

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## Letizia Eratostene Vedova Zaccaro: An Appreciation

On October 3, 2018, my last aunt died at age 98. She was born Letizia Eratostene, on July 25, 1920, into a peasant family in La Morona, a farmstead in the hills above Rocchetta Tanaro in the province of Asti. Her parents, Pietro and Pina—*coltivatori diretti* and not sharecroppers or tenant farmers—grew grains, fodder, fruit and grapes, and raised barnyard animals in a situation of what sociologists call "subsistence affluence" (that is, they had all that they needed, plus some). Hers was, however, a numerous family of five children, and at the age of twelve Letizia was employed as a domestic in the household of the Montalcini family of Asti. It was a Jewish family of professionals, jewelers and goldsmiths, and bankers. There, Letizia learned proper Italian, urbanity, what we might call "multiculturalism," and fusion cuisine. During the dark days of the German occupation of Italy after the armistice of September 8, 1943, Letizia did all she could to shelter the Montalcini family from sure death. She is one of the Righteous among the Nations, and was recognized as such by the Italian Jewish community after the war. In 1952, Letizia married my mother's brother, Giuseppe Zaccaro, and settled in San Francisco. Here, she adapted Piedmontese and Northern Italian cuisine to local circumstances. Besides gnocchi, ravioli, *tajarin* and minestrone, Zia would prepare *bagna cauda* and *bagnet verd*, *vitel tonn *, *frittura dolce*, and, in her heyday, *baci di dama*, and *marrons glac s*—the last two delicacies extremely time- and labor-intensive. In the meantime, she raised a family, worked first at Levi's and much later at Macy's, and cultivated a world of friendships among her *compagne* in the Portola and Excelsior districts and Southern Hills. Zia was a loving wife, a doting mother to my cousin Frank, a faithful and loyal friend, a paragon of politeness and courtesy, a passionate and consummate cook, and an unending font of history and folklore. One of her sayings was "La veja a veur nen mori p r ampar ine un-a tuti ij di," which can be rendered thus: "The old lady doesn't want to die so she can learn something new every day"—and Zia was indeed mentally sharp and intellectually curious until the end. I cannot say how much I miss her.

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## Caritas Christi Urget Nos



That's the motto of a whole chain of homes for the physically incapacitated and mentally handicapped in Italy called *collolenghi*. They are named for San Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo (1786-1842), born in Bra and one of a number of "social saints" active in 19th-century Piemonte—urban saints imbued with an altruistic spirit of active, practical compassion. Cottolengo, canon of the church of Corpus Domini in Turin, was shocked by the case of a pregnant woman, who was infected with a contagious disease and whom no hospital wanted to admit. Moved by that case, he founded the Pious Institute of Divine Providence in 1828. Initially, the institute housed and cared for persons who were not admitted or "covered," so to speak, by other healthcare facilities in Turin. With time, its vocational specialty concentrated more and more on psychiatric cases, to the point that, in the local dialect, *cuttu* (from the first two syllables of Cottolengo in *piemont is*) meant mentally deficient. "Caritas Christi Urget Nos" is today seen inscribed over the main entrance of each *cottolengo*.

The Piemontesi nel Mondo of Northern California is a non-profit organization incorporated under the laws of the State of California. Its mailing address is 4807 Calderwood Court, Oakland, CA 94605