

The “Italia” chess set - memories and reminiscences

By Robert Cassano (Rome)



80 years after their appearance, and with the polemics around well forgotten, we can present some new and so far unpublished tangents about the “**Italia**” chess set – a form of chessmen conceived in the heady days of Italian fascism when the ideas of autarchy – that is, economic self reliance, import substitution, National produce – prepared the ground for an all –Italian tournament chess set, today almost entirely obscure.

So far, very little has been published on and about these pieces – mainly on the base of the polemics in the 1935 run of the chess magazine “**L’Italia Scacchistica**”, which were retrieved from limbo by **Rodolfo Pozzi** in his 2006 article (1) and which reported in detail the genesis based on the echo in **L’Italia Scacchistica** 1935. Now we can elaborate a bit –mainly because we have, with some effort

and a bit of luck, located a few surviving “**Italia**” sets, and also come upon some **photos** that permit some new assessments.

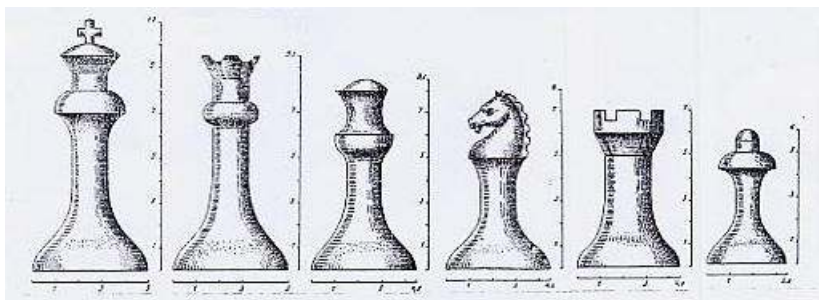
The historic background

In 1925 the Fascist government under Benito Mussolini created the **Opera Nazionale di Dopolavoro** (OND), meant to concentrate and control all leisure activities in Italy, including, sports, games, open air activities, and therefore fortify their mastery of all aspects of social life, and propagate the mainstays of the Fascist Ideology – a strident Nationalism, the cult of voluntarism, physical prowess and defense of Italian values against “Foreign” devilry. To sweeten the bitter pill of associations and clubs losing their autonomy, the OND offered authentic services and compensations – still, some of the traditional sports like the Boccia clubs and the choirs managed to keep clear of the all-encompassing control of the OND. (2)

The **Federazione Nazionale dei Scacchi** (Italian Chess Federation, **FSI**) in 1928 was subordinated to the Olympic Committee (CONI) of Italy, but obliged to change the name to Associazione Scacchistica Italiana (**ASI**) . Under the patronage of the CONI, the Chess Federation lost its autonomy, had to present all competitions previously for approbation by higher order, but gained a certain advantage in financing – the CONI being the Fascist organization for the nobler sports, while the lowlier leisure activities were confined to the OND. But in 1934, the then secretary of the Fascist Party decided to transfer the ASI to the **OND**, a clear demotion, which in terms of financing clearly discomfited the activities of the chess organization. While the organ of the FSI/ASI **L’Italia Scacchistica (LIT)** continued to be published, it more and more became an organ for the publication of the manifold announcements of the OND. And therefore the place where the substitution of imported chess pieces by all-Italian chess pieces would be launched. (3)

Salvetti’s proposal

The “**Italia**” chessmen were designed by the Florentine nobleman **Guido Angelo Savetti** who introduced them with a flourish in an article in 1935 in the cited chess magazine. These chessmen, according to **Salvetti**, should be produced from “**Italian wood**” !, be simple and cheap to make, and above all , different from French Regence and British Staunton chessmen, which “ are certainly not without their drawbacks”. According to **Salvetti**, Regence chessmen were tall, thin as needles and very instable, while Staunton chessmen were well made, but in strong contrast to “our (Italian) traditions”, especially with the bishops mitre instead of the **Alfiere’s** helmet. “With the new pieces”, so **Salvetti**, “ we have returned the traditional beaked helmet to the alfiere, instead of the mitre on the bishop, or the fools cap on the fou!” (4)



Salveti's design, published in *L'Italia Scacchistica* 3/ 1935/ p.50

Salveti's design certainly was not innocent or out of the blue: first of all, **Salveti** was the director of the Florentine Chess Club (**Circolo Scacchistico Fiorentino**), was the responsible director for all competitions in the ASI-OND, and also the organizer of both the 1935 6th National Individual Championship in Florence in Mai 1935, as well as the succeeding 7th Italian Championship in the same place in 1936 (5). In his article **Salveti** stressed the opportunity of "accelerating the chess activities after the incorporation of the ASI in the OND", as well as the need to conform to the "new discipline in importation, leading to the necessity of emancipating ourselves from foreign products". **Salveti** was optimistic that "Italian craftsmen will easily be capable of producing at a reasonable price, new, solid and simple chessmen, which although in a modern form will relate to the traditional form of Italian chess pieces". Besides trusting in local craftsmen – had he been in contact with them already? – **Salveti** was confident "that the ASI will adopt these chessmen for use in all chess competitions and for all chess players". (6) He also invited the LIT's Director (**Stefano Rosselli del Turco**, multiple Italian champion) to examine the new pieces, and suggest to the ASI their fabrication and introduction. On top of that, **Salveti** was a close friend of **Rosselli's**, having organized the ceremony to honour **Rosselli** for a chess career spanning 30 years in 1930- he also was a capable graphical designer, as several designs for bookcovers and certificates prove. (7)

Rosselli, despite his strong sympathies for the regime, seems to have had some misgivings. A bare month later, the magazine ran a disdainful review by the anglo-milanese lawyer **Henry St. John-Mildmay** (8), who while approving the aesthetics of king, queen, rooks and pawns, considered the knights head "too small and disproportionate in relation to the base", while the bishop "rather resembled a **Napolitan coffee percolator**". **Salveti** shot right back (9) – in the same number, having been contacted per telephone by the editor **Stefano Rosselli**: "In my article I asserted that the pieces were solid and simple, not that they should constitute a model of beauty, nor did I pretend to foist them on anybody or create a monopoly ... I have simply made a proposal, nothing more..."

On **Rosselli's** interjection "but he wants Staunton pieces" **Salveti** exploded: "No way, by the devil! For him that's his privilege, but not for everybody and therefore no! If we have to provide our Dopolavoristi (recreationists, trl. note) (10) with chess pieces made in Italy, we don't have to copy slavishly the foreigners – our chessmen have to be Italian, yessir, Italian in everything!" And on **Rosselli's** objection "but if they are considered to be bad?" **Salveti** replied hotly: "Thought of as bad? If people have any spirit, certainly not. And what about me, who have the ugliness, the small head and the percolator rammed down my throat? Good night to You!"(11)

The fact remains that the set went into serial production without the sharp point which **Mildmay** had objected to as “presenting a slight danger for the hands of a distracted player, that is most players, who are concerned more with their move than with the means to execute it” – not really because of this objection (this first set was presented in the same number as **Mildmay**'s review), but principally “in order to simplify the production and make the bishops head all on the lathe” as the decision went. Since nobody else suggested a different design nor other designs were forthcoming, this was the result:



The first actual chess set “**Italia**” produced (L’Italia Scacchistica 1935/4/p.73)

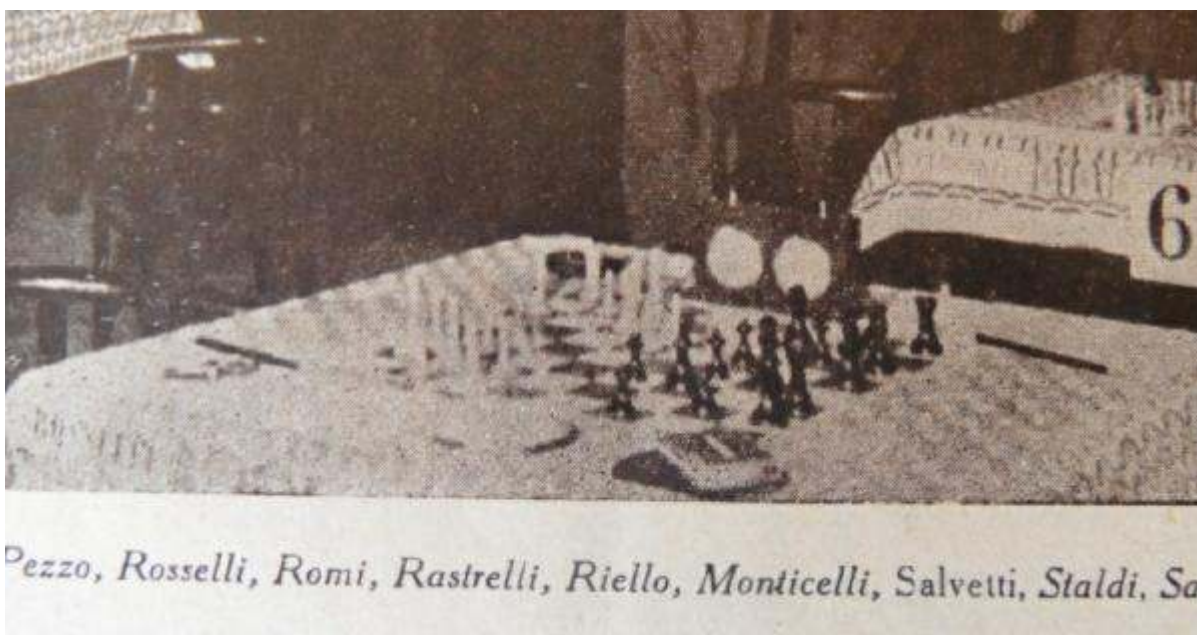
Please note that already at this stage the design had been submitted for legal protection (**modello depositato**).

In fact, the 6th Italian Championship later in May, organized by **Salveti** himself in Florence (12) already was played with **Italia** chess pieces – which means that the production had been organized very soon after the launching, and that a sizeable number of sets had been produced in the meantime.



6th Italian Championship, LIT 1935/6/p.123

The snapshot is copied from a faded exemplar of the chess magazine, details are hard to make out. The chess collector friend who sent me the photo (see below, Set 2) , also sent an enlargement of the first board - on the chess board closest to the observer we can make out the typical form of the Italia pawns, as well as the rooks and one of the white knights, precisely through the small horse head. The fact of **Salvetti** being on the photo, as the fourth from the right, serves as a guarantee that on all chess board games proceeded using the "Italia" chessmen! My collector friend himself was highly surprised: " On the enlargement , for the first time I have seen a set depicted like the one in my collection!"



Closeup of foregoing photo

Salvetti's hopes proved to be self-fulfilling prophecies: according to the official Communiqué of the **ASI –OND** dated 8.2.1936 /XIV, “the directors of the ASI have decided unanimously to approve the chess men “**Italia**” proposed to the Editor of LIT “ and the General direction of the OND has invited all provincial **Dopolavori** (OND) directorates “to take an interest in order to assure all **Dopolavori** sections be provided as soon as possible with all necessary material!” As there were quite a large number of OND Sections , as well as Provincial OND Directorates, it is reasonable to assume that a sizeable number of Italia sets were made and distributed. (13)

Elusive sightings

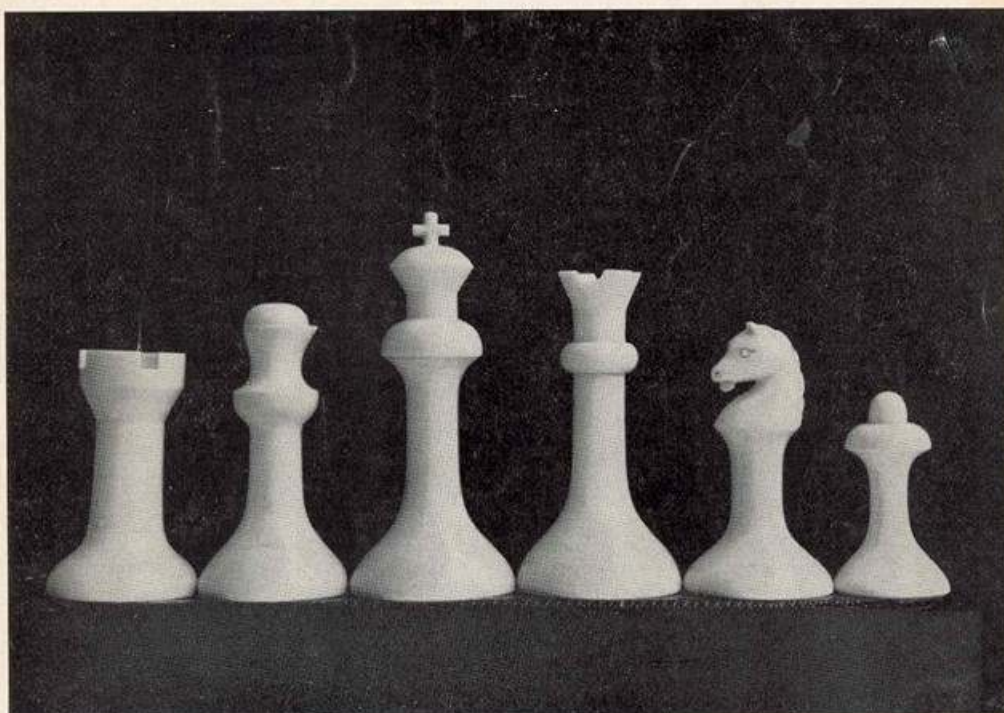
Evidence for the Italia set is very rare in recent times – as far as I know only three photos have appeared in recent years – all of the same set, a version in ivory and ebony formerly owned by chess historian and writer Adriano Chicco:

- On a 1969 cover of LIT,

l'italia scacchistica

E. N. A. L.

rivista mensile • organo della federazione scacchistica italiana



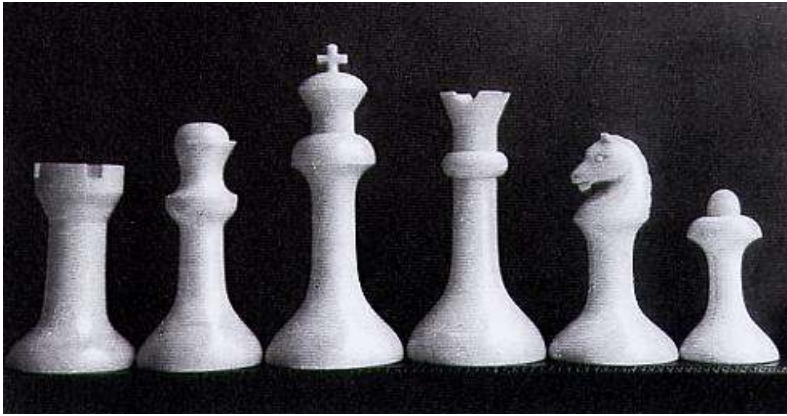
Scacchi «Italia» del periodo fascista

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MILANO • LUGLIO 1969 • ANNO 59 • N. 765

LIT 1969/6 – front cover

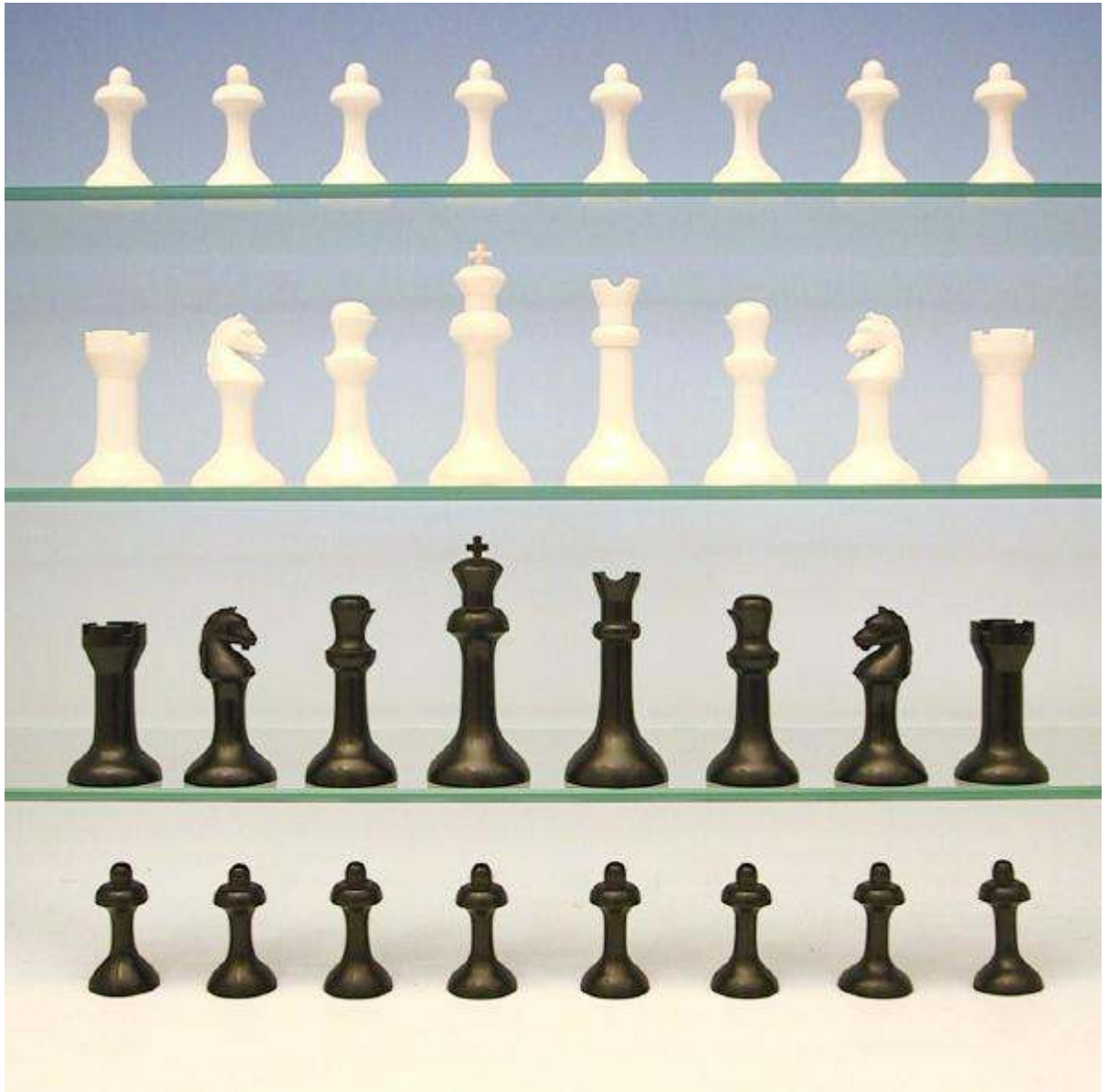
- The same set in **Chicco and Porreca's** Chess Dictionary (14,



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Ivory set owned then by Chicco in the Dictionary by Chicco-Porreca

- - and once again, the same set in the catalogue of the chess exhibit in Florence 2000 (concurrent with the CCI meeting)



The ivory set, ex. Coll. Chicco, shown in Florence 2000

This chess set cannot have been typical – it belonged to the collection of the late **Adriano Chicco**, still shows the beak on the bishops as in the first **Salvetti** design, and is today part of a private collection. Most likely it is a later reproduction, following the original design as published in LIT – vz. the beak! – and certainly does not conform to the original intention of having a simple set at low cost. **Sanvito's** assessment recoups the evidence from LIT 1935: “ This project in its time created quite a lot of controversy... and in any case was not widely distributed in its time. “ And **Sanvito** concludes: “ This set might well be the only survivor from those long-past days!” (15)

So far ,so good – but then one hot August afternoon a friend of mine was strolling up the antiquarian market in the medieval village of **Sarzana**, close to La Spezia – and among the exhibits espied a wooden chess set, which on closer look turned out to be – an **Italia** set!



set 1 - coll. Cassano

In this set (**Set 1**) the king stands 87 mm high (with a base width of 37 mm), the queen 72 mm (35mm), the alfiere 63 mm (32 mm), the knight 60 mm (33 mm) , the rooks 54 mm (33 mm) and the pawns 45 mm (26 mm), the pieces are loaded and felted. These measures are the same as those in the November 1935 edition of LIT where the Italia set pops up first for sale, with the following characteristics:

Wood pieces in boxwood for the white pieces, in maple for the black side, varnished in nitrolacquer, felt on the base, king height 8,7 cm , box in cedar wood, price 45 Lire per set, shipped free inside the Kingdom!

Over the years , I have managed to find two other collectors who own **Italia** sets, one in Lombardia and one in the **Venetian** region. The set owned by my Lombardian friend (Set 2) is practically the same as mine, loaded and felted.



Set 2 – private coll.

His story of how he came by the set is illuminating: “Around 1990 an old club member presented me with a chess set, saying it was “Russian” and that he had received them in the 30ies as a wedding present. Maybe he was a bit ashamed of his fascist past.... but he also mentioned he had taken them to the club now and then, and that they were only used if all the other sets were in action... the habitual coffee-house players did not like these pieces...”

The second set belonging to a friend in the Veneto (Set 3) is different – it is not weighted, and instead of felted has a cardboard pad stuck to the bottom of the pieces.



Set 3 –private coll.

He also sent a photo showing a black pawns with the pad pulled off .



Compare with a bishop and awn from Set 1 (coll. Cassano)



Fig 11 no lead !

Ephemere chess sets

From April 1935 onwards, the **Italia** set started to be a regular fixture of the back page of the LIT magazine – but the offer changes over the years.



LIT, May 1935, back page

From February 1936 till the end of 1937 the sales ad reads as follows:

- Chess men Italia, normal type, strong wood , waxed, smooth base, the set for 22 Lire (without lead?),
- Chess Men Italia, special type, boxwood, varnished, felted and leaded, each set 33 Lire.

From 1938 on, the offer changes:

- Italia chess men, Single type, king height cm 8,7 , boxwood, varnished, felted and leaded, pine box, Lire 40. For min. 5 sets, price Lire 38.- .for the same sets, for boxes in polished boxes with brass hinges, add Lire 3.- each.

In 1941 we read : Italia chess men, single type, king height cm 8,7, boxwood, varnished, feled and leaded, pine box, Lire 50.-

In 1942 we read : Single type for L. 70.-, Idem with polished box with hinges and lock L.80.- - in 1943 it is “ single type with felt and lead for L. 130.- , the same without felt and lead for L.110.- - with the addition that “each box is accompanied by a cardboard rollup board. “ Besides, several types of box are available: waxed cedar boxes, pine boxes, polished wood boxes with hinges, hinge stopper and lock. As far as I can conclude the standard offer for Italia chess men must have been “ King height 8,7 cm, boxwood, varnished, and either lead and felted , or without led and felt. (16).From 1943 the government forbid the use of paper, and the LIT magazine suspend publication till the very end of 1945. In 1946, the ads already offer Staunton chessmen for sale – and the Italia chessmen started their slide down the chute to the black river Styx....



LIT1935/8 , back page

The last notice in LIT dates from February 1952. Among other details of Federation live, the FSI (renamed after the war!) announces the following: “The FSI only has 12 set of boxed chessmen in the Italia style left which it can provide for the very low price of L. 1200.- each, free postage. Requests including the correct amount should be directed to General Secretariat, Via Pisacane, Milano”. (17)

And in a photo from 1953 we see all the chessmen set up for play, in the Leisure Club of the Navy members in the area La Spezia – the second board on the right is set up with Italia chessmen.



La Spezia Navy Leisure Club, 1953

The fast disappearance – if further information will not crop up to the contrary – is quite surprising, considering that “...in the two years from 1942 – 1943 **5.000 chess boards and sets**, 15.000 games of draughts and the Goose, 20.000 units of domino and tombola games, 10.000 packets of French playing cards and 50.000 of Neapolitan playing cards, 5.000 guitars, accordions, mouth harps, mandolins , as well as 50.000 ocarinas” were sent to the fighting soldiers at the front, each and every one of them duly stamped with the words “**Gift of the Fascist Party**” (18)

Contemporary reactions and memories

It was not just with **Mildmay** that the new chess set, created with the impetus of the Fascist desire of overhauling and controlling all aspects of society, found little favour. Hardly any chess player was enthusiastic with this invention – which found its parallel in the infamous German “**Bundesform** “ chess sets, created by **Ehrhardt Post** in the framework of the Nazi Chess Federation.

Giuseppe Vianello, a Venetian chess regular, described how the local chess fauna experienced the “Dopolavoro” benedictions: “ Sometime between one little war or another, I forget whether against Spain, Abyssinia or Albania, a local centre of the **Dopolavoro** (OND) was assigned (to us). Good old **Stalda** (Venetian chess player of some status) who provided the connecting link between us and that organisation, being of a docile nature, did his very best to convince himself and us that this was the best solution (for the chess player...) ”All we have to do is bend it to our will , and it will give what we want,” he used to say, but wasn’t very sure himself. We went to see the new section... it consisted of two dark rooms, with low ceilings, first floor of an old building. In the summer it was nice and cool, but in the winter the icy mountain winds swept though the place. As if this wasn’t bad enough, one of those functionaries gave us to understand that it was “**patriotic**” to play with a new type of chess men. Enough with this sick love of the foreign – self dependence is what we need! The model foisted on us, though not with a sticker of fascism on it, was below that or worse. Square pieces, rough and unexpressive. We thought them horrible, even for free with a waxed rollup chess board included. We did not last more than a few days in this hole: by popular decision we all

migrated back to the Omnibus Café. That dive, although pervaded by ammoniac draughts, had a certain poetic quality, some local colour... for example, the lady..., well known as the “**Belle from Rialto bridge**”, used to sip her coffee there! Here it was permitted to play with Regency pieces, with Stauntons, all filthy and cracked, but what the hell, Stauntons! Incomparable! “ (19)

Paolo Bagnoli remembers how he started playing chess in the Byron Bar in Ravenna at about 15 years of age. “ The Byron Bar was the only Café in Ravenna not to sport a **Mah-Jong** set – a game that has taken hold in Ravenna and which every Ravenna kid knows how to play in perfection. In compensation , the Byron Bar had a gigantic chess board in carton and with wood pieces **in Fascist style** (i.e., **Italia** style... , translators note) at the disposal of the clients. Every now and then the professor and the Vicequestore would confront each other on this board, causing all the locals to congregate around the board to watch the battle. Generally the professor, a small and delicate fellow in his 60ies, dressed in coat and basque cap in all seasons, would come out on top. As far as I know, Ravenna had no chess club in those days...”(20)

And Chess historian **Antonio Rosino** told me “there were still a couple of these sets around in the **Salvioli Club** (in Venice) when I started playing chess in the fifties. Nobody wanted to play with these sets, or other sets from Western Europe . After some years they disappeared ... maybe they are still around in some back corner...” and adds an afterthought “ maybe there are still some around in Florence” if they did not end up in the trash”. (21)

Photographies with the Italia chess set

Quite a few photos record competitions during the war and pre war years where the Italia set is visible – especially in competitions under the Aegis of the OND. Some of these pictures are very rare – even rarer than the Italia chessmen themselves – and of historic value.



This excerpt from the Fascist magazine **Gente Nostra** / Dec 1935 shows master **Mario Monticelli** playing a simul to beat the previous Italian record, on 70 boards (50 won, 13 drawn, 7 lost) – all the boards are set up with **Italia** chess men.



The photo above shows **Vincenzo Nestler** in a simul, probably in Rome on the 28.10.1938, an event organized to celebrate the Anniversary of **Mussolini's March on Rome** on the 28.10. of 1922, a founding myth of the Fascist Movement. The first two boards are equipped with Italia chess sets- since this was a Fascist feast, it is likely all boards were using Italia chessmen.



Roma, 1939 - Calapso gioca alla cieca 6 partite simultanee.

This photo is part of the monography dedicated to the Roman chess master **Remo Calapso**, which I received in 1996. Having read in a LIT magazine from 1938 that **Remo Calapso** provided a blind simul against 5 players in succession to the forementioned Nestler simul I looked up my biography of the man – and found this photo from a 1939 blind simul of Calapso against 6 players – possibly the succeeding years celebration of the march, the fascists always took great care to garland this day with all kinds of events. Two of the boards can be recognized as starring **Italia** chess men – so it is likely all the others are using them as well.



Nestler simul 28.10 1940



Nestler simul 28.10.1940

Here again a simul on the jubilee of the March on Rome, again in Rome, again with Vincenzo Nestler acting , but this time it is the 28.10.1940. Mind the uniforms of some of the players – all the chess boards are using Italia pieces.



Here we have the same scene, but in 1942 – all the boards are using Italia pieces!



Again Nestler simul in 1942

Afterlive

Ugly or not, the Italia chess pieces were a small part of history – they provided another proof of the all-pervading intention of Fascism to overturn old habits, insert their ideology in every nook and cranny of life, and dominate and manipulate all individuals, mobilizing them if possible in grand movements and organizations. With the end of Fascism, these pieces disappeared rapidly into the vortex of time. Of the sets sent to the front, probably very few have survived, the same applies to those issued to the various club and OND sections.

The wish to forget the dark years, or the desire to erase everything connotated with the Fascist intoxication, probably caused lots of them to be burned or thrown away. They are definitely a part of Italian chess history, though – and nowadays their great rarity coupled with the historic significance provides them with a value never imagined by the inventor in his day! It is astonishing they have never been copied – but still there is always room for a bit of surprise, isn't there?



A more recent set from the Cassano collection ...

Acknowledgements : My thanks for their invaluable help go to Massimiliano de Angelis, Mauro Berni, Paolo Bagnoli, Rodolfo Pozzi and Antonio Rosino – without their advice and providence of documents and copies this article would not have been possible.

Rather free translation Nicholas Lanier (c) 2015

(c) Roberto Cassano 2015

Notes:

- (1) POZZI R.: Scacchi "Italia" – un set del 1935, L'Italia Scacchistica n.1183, 2006, pp. 74-76, and www.cci-italia.it/salv.htm
- (2) https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opera_nazionale_del_dopolavoro
- (3) CHICCO A. – ROSINO A.: Storia degli scacchi in Italia, Marsilio Editori, 1990, p. 313.
- (4) ALVETTI G. A.: Scacchi italiani per gli scacchisti italiani, in L'Italia Scacchistica n. 3, March 1935, pp. 49-51, Florence.
- (5) Pozzi, ff.
- (6) Pozzi ff.
- (7) L'Italia Scacchistica , Anno XX,vol, 15 5.1930, pp. VIII
- (8) MILDMAY E.: Scacchi italiani per gli scacchisti italiani (reply to G. A. Salvetti), in L'Italia Scacchistica n. 4, april 1935, pp. 73-74, Florence.
- (9) SALVETTI G. A.: Italiani: sissignore! (reply a H. Mildmay), in L'Italia Scacchistica n. 4, april 1935, pp. 74-77, Florence.
- (10) Salvetti, op.cit. ff
- (11) Salvetti, op. Cit.ff.
- (12) LIT, 1935/6/pp. 123
- (13) LIT 1936/2/ pp. 37
- (14) CHICCO A. - PORRECA G. 1971: Dizionario Enciclopedico degli Scacchi, Milano, Mursia.
- (15) SANVITO A.: L'arte degli scacchi, Set "Italia" 1935, Milano, Sylvestre Bonnard, 2000, p. 97
- (16) LIT 1943/ 8

(17) LIT 1952 / 2, p. 52, Milano

(18) Ferrara Patrizia: Le fonti archivistiche: Archivio centrale dello Stato da pag.152 a pag. 163 - PUBBLICAZIONI DEGLI ARCHIVI DI STATO - SAGGI 25 - LE FONTI PER LA STORIA MILITARE ITALIANA IN ETÀ CONTEMPORANEA, Atti del III seminario, Roma, 16- 17 dicembre 1988 - MINISTERO PER I BENI CULTURALI E AMBIENTALI - UFFICIO CENTRALE PER I BENI ARCHIVISTICI, pubblicato nel 1993.

(19) TURCATO G.: Cronache del Caffè degli Scacchi – Cinquant’anni di vita del circolo scacchistico “Carlo Salvioli” in Scacchi e Scienze Applicate, anno I, n.1, 1981, p. 55.

(20) BAGNOLI P.: Noi del Byron, in <http://soloscacchi.altervista.org/?p=37204> published 22.9.2013

(21) personal communication from Rosino

