

“Remembering Lignano: 1986”

By Peter L. Hays

ED. NOTE: *This is the third in our series looking back to Hemingway Society conferences of yore. 2014’s remembrance of Paris 1994 and last year’s trip back to Schruns 1988 inspired us to look back even further to the time the Society met on the beautiful stretch of the Adriatic that Hemingway himself called “the Florida of Italy.”*

In 1986 my wife, Myrna, and I attended our second International Hemingway conference (after the 1984 conference in Madrid). We arrived in Milan’s airport, tired after the transcontinental, then transatlantic flight, but we had run into Jackson J. Benson and his wife, Sue-Ellen, at the airport, and they had offered to drive us to Lignano. I had met Jack at a Hemingway conference in Oregon in 1973 and possibly in Madrid, although someone would need to check the participation records of that conference to confirm his presence there. Anyway, he remembered me and offered to share the yellow Fiat Panda he had rented. Fiat Pandas were small two-door vehicles, with limited luggage capacity, and narrow back seats, but we were much more flexible then. Sue-Ellen drove across northern Italy, some 200 miles, and we arrived in lovely Lignano.



Helen and Tod Oliver, Jackson and Sue-Ellen Benson, and Myrna Hays, probably at the dinner at the Europa Hotel.

Lignano had a beautiful sand beach along the Gulf of Venice, the northern part of the Adriatic Sea. The town is situated on a narrow peninsula lying east west in the Adriatic; the western border of the town is (or at least was in 1986) the Tagliamento River as it flowed into the Adriatic, the Tagliamento that Frederic Henry dives into to avoid being shot, not far from Gorizia or Udine. I don’t remember the name of our hotel, but it was a short walking distance from the conference site, a circular structure, perhaps a conference center, on a pier extending into the Adriatic.

The mayor of the town in 1986 was a Communist. He had, however, the capitalistic notion that by inviting the International Hemingway Society to Lignano and making our stay spectacular, he would “put Lignano on the map,” a desirable tourist destination for the world. He did a marvelous job, but I don’t think many readers of this piece have ever heard of Lignano, and I have to hope that his town’s budget survived. Of course, much of the spectacle was arranged by the site director, Bob Lewis.

We had daily meetings in our conference center on the ocean. Lunch was provided by the town, a buffet of prosciutto, melon, shrimp, probably pasta (but I can’t recall specifically), and

the town specialty, veal with tuna sauce (slightly green in color). Myrna was repulsed; I enjoyed it.

Bob Lewis had arranged wonderful excursions. We visited the site of Hemingway’s wounding on the Piave, commemorated by a wrought iron marker, and drove into Venice, that marvelous city rising from the sea, which the Hemingway Conference recently visited again. That was our first visit, and we were enthralled. Bob had arranged an evening at the Europa Hotel (which I revisited at our recent conference, only to discover it’s now a Best Western hotel). Then, it floored us with its opulence. We had potato chips and bellinis on the patio (our first bellinis; we were so unsophisticated), looking across the Grand



Back when conferees had photo IDs for conference badges!



A postcard the Hayses sent home to their children, with the convention center that hosted the conference at lower right. According to Hays, “You can see the beach, more crowded than I remembered; the water was shallow and warm. I do not remember many topless bathers, though there probably were a few.”

Canal at Ste. Maria della Salute and the Dogana da Mar (the customs’ office). After imbibing the view (and bellinis), we were invited inside for dinner. I told Myrna to look around and absorb the hotel’s sights, because we could never afford such luxury in our future. The dinner room was spectacular, orchids on each table (which Jim Brasch said were Indonesian imports) and bottles of wine. Another buffet: more prosciutto, turkey, melon, pasta—a real feast.

On our return to Lignano we stopped at the winery of Gianfranco Ivancich. He had converted the walls of the barn-like winery into an art gallery, onto which he had affixed enlargements of photographs of Hemingway. Most were familiar, but some were Gianfranco’s personal photos, new to us and the world. In the kitchen, on the bulletin board, was a snapshot of Ezra Pound. As we left, Gianfranco was engaged in a heated argument with his daughter. Not knowing Italian, we did not know

what the argument was about. Later we learned that the daughter was excoriating her father, because our gracious hostess was not his wife, the daughter’s mother, who had died two weeks before, but Gianfranco’s mistress.

I do not remember much air conditioning, but there were sea breezes. And Myrna was disappointed that we were not enjoying the beautiful sand beach and warm waters of the Adriatic. So one afternoon, when Bob Lewis had arranged an excursion, we finally took our leisure on the beach with bookseller Maury Neville and his lovely wife, away from concentrating on papers, getting into buses, all the rush and fuss of conferences. A completely satisfying afternoon. Later we found out that we had missed a spectacular outing: Bob had bused the conferees to Udine where they were greeted by members of the Italian Army in WWI costumes. They had dinner on WWI messkits served from what appeared

to be WWI field kitchens. And they were serenaded by an Italian Army chorus singing WWI songs. Not to be outdone, our intrepid crew, led by Stony no doubt, answered them in English with our WWI songs, such as “Over There.”

The last night of the conference, the mayor had arranged for us to take a boat ride into the Adriatic, then back up the Tagliamento, past Lignano, to the city’s zoo, which had been reserved that evening for us (the relevancy of likening us to animals was duly noted). As we stepped off the boat, each woman was handed a rose, each man a plaque commemorating the conference, with the city’s coat of arms in a tile on the wooden plaque (it still hangs on my study wall). We were free to wander the grounds with glasses of wine and pickles (according to Myrna’s memory, almonds and chips in mine). Then, for dinner, we were invited into the zoo’s restaurant. More buffet, more melon, more prosciutto (one, I later learned, from horse), shrimp, etc. We knew this routine, so we ate, going back to the buffet several times, loosening our belts. Well satisfied, we settled back in our seats for the speeches. But then they brought the soup, and then the pasta, and then the main course. Overstuffed as Thanksgiving turkeys, and well lubricated by constantly served bottles of wine, we listened to the closing speeches, and somehow later, devolved into song. My final memory of the conference is of Stony and I, along with Countess Kechler, singing cowboy ballads at 1:30 am. It was a glorious conference, likely never to be repeated. Afterward, my wife and I returned to Venice and took the ferry to Athens for a tour of Greece and the Greek Isles. If only we had that energy now. ■

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