

Interview with Daniela Brignone

by Giuseppe Paletta

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G.P.: What we are interested in is the history of the Peroni Archives; its creation and its current relations with the company that generated it. Could you also tell us something about the synergies, but also the clashes between the cultural institution and the business? There often are contrasting priorities and, in the history of business archives, that generally leads to....

D.B.:... priorities!

G.P.: well... perhaps friction at times, but also collaboration with the business and its mission.

D.B.: I was joking.... *priority* is term most often used when a firm decides to reduce, or even eliminate investment in a cultural institution, even if it was created by the firm itself. The standard sentence "it's not a priority" characterizes the ups and downs of this situation.

The Peroni archives grew out of a valorization project whose aim was to reconstruct the history of the company on the occasion of its 150th anniversary. The fact that the family owned the 100% of the company surely provided a strong incentive for the decision. The President at the time was Giorgio Natali, Peroni on his mother's side. Since his family history corresponded with the company history, of course he was highly motivated.

My first contact with the company dates back to 1993, when I was conducting free-lance research on Peroni. I had examined the company's papers with particular interest in the ice factory. At the end of the study, the President asked me if I wanted to take on the writing up of the company's history on the anniversary of its first 150 years – which occasion would take place three years later. So, the first goal was the book, which was to be the final product of the valorization project. The next step--the creation of a historical archives – absolutely wasn't part of his initial intentions, quite the opposite! The company has always had a steadfast tradition of reserve that was considered a point of strength for the company and the family. This is why I think Dr. Natali abhorred the idea that his company's documents would become freely available to the public.

Anyway, little by little, the project of the archives' enhancement--including paper documents, but also objects – gained ground, thanks also to the increasing trust that we built up with the owners and the Archival *Soprintendenza* of Latium, who supported our efforts. It was a sort of miracle, considering the initial reserve and mistrust typical of Italian family capitalism. It was a slow awakening to consciousness, that turned into a period of great cultural growth for the company and, obviously, for me.

In the meantime, I realized what I had in my hands: an untouched archive made up of documents that had never been studied or sorted, and discovered almost by chance on a series of leads. We rummaged in cupboards, in archives that someone had taken home, and in storehouses. Most of the documents, absolutely untouched, were found in Rome. These papers recorded the company's history from the end of the 19th century to the 50s.

So, having realized what they possessed, Peroni became even more aware of the importance of the valorization project. For this reason, an inventory was first carried out in order to write the book. Then a series of meetings took between Dr. Natali and the *Soprintendente* Salvatori Principe whose advice proved invaluable. They developed a very fruitful working relationship, and the archives were officially declared “of remarkable historical interest” by the *Soprintendenza*.

Dr. Natali supervised everything personally, as company directors did in the 19th century, because he truly believed in the company's long-standing traditions. After the official recognition of historical interest, the company decided to build a physical space for the archives, inside the plant in Rome. Unfortunately there was no longer any link between the papers and the place where they were produced, because the Peroni's historical headquarters, in Porta Pia, no longer belonged to the company. The original plant closed down at the beginning of the 70s, and was left unused for a long time. For a while, the plant housed the general administrative department and recently, it was sold off. For this reason Peroni is no longer in its historical premises. Today the general administrative department and the Historical Archives are inside the newer factory of Rome, set up in the 70s.

The permanent structure that houses both the Archives and the Museum was specially built and opened to the public between 2000 and 2001. Actually, the plan to build the company museum precedes the project for both the historical archives and the volume on the company's history.

For 30-40 years, the company and its staff, the former directors and particularly, members of the family like Marco and Rodolfo Peroni, intended to create a museum and so, many old objects had been kept: old machines, keys, the cellarman's shoes, the telephone uprooted from the storage cellar... almost a kind of fetishism! So much has been kept that, when it was decided to create a company museum in addition to the archives, Peroni already had vast number of historical items to exhibit! It was only a matter of hunting around the working and the abandoned plants and reassembling the pieces. This very interesting operation lasted many years: we started in 1993 and the museum was inaugurated in 2001. All the plants, many current and former staff have

taken part in this slow and exacting process: it was a concerted effort that was very absorbing for all who were involved, and everybody did a great job.

Unfortunately, since 1996, the market has changed because Heineken bought Moretti, and Peroni lost the *leadership* it had enjoyed from the beginning of the Twentieth century. Furthermore, the second half of the 90s marked the beginning of a negative period for the Italian economy including the brewery sector. So there hasn't been much time to celebrate Peroni's 150th anniversary. On the other hand, the creation of the Archives and the Museum created a sense of cohesion within the company. The Peroni family pushed strongly for the museum project, which reflected the heritage of the firm, but also of the family.

G.P.: It's interesting that the idea of creating a museum came before the one of the archives. Usually it's the other way around.

D.B.: We found objects from the 60s put aside with a note "Museum" attached. In the company, we referred to "the museum" as a forgotten place inside the storehouse of the Roman plant. In fact, we found a lot of wonderful things there, including Peroni's oldest illuminated sign, dating back to the end of the 19th century: treasures that we had forgotten about. Fortunately, someone had started keeping these items about over 50 years ago.

Maybe this only happens in a family business, I'm not sure, but it certainly happened at Peroni, where the project of the Archives and the Museum had been hatching for a long time.

G.P.: Have you found something on the history of this first idea? I was struck by something you said before: both the entrepreneur and a second branch of the family were strongly in favor of the project.

D.B.: Yes, all parts of the Peroni family working inside the company, as well as other historic shareholders were convinced of the quality of the project.

G.P.: Historic shareholders?

D.B.: At the beginning of the 20th century, there was an important merger between Peroni and the Ice and Artificial Snow-Making Company of Rome. Other important families of entrepreneurs came from that company.

Between 2003 and 2005, the Peroni Company's ownership radically changed. Today, the South African multinational SABMiller owns the entire block of shares. However I want to point out for the sake of historical precision, that the Archives and the Museum project grew out of the previous ownership.

G.P.: So, the project was supervised directly by the Chairmanship.

D.B.: Yes, with all the pros and cons of the situation: on one hand, this ensured that all the projects proceeded quickly, however, there is the risk of binding the structures to a single internal sponsor and therefore, not ensuring them autonomous continuity with the

passing of time. From the start, enlightened entrepreneurs need to think about how their project will continue its legacy.

G.P.: So how did it follow through? How did the museum work from an organizational point of view? Was it delegated to a department within the company?

D.B.: Yes, it was. Since 2002 the Archives and the Museum have been part of the External Relations Office, which gave the structure greater autonomy and positioned it at the heart of company life. A project that is sponsored from the top might find a lot of open doors. but it tends to stay on the fringe of real life.

For a short time we examined the possibility of creating a nonprofit foundation, but it was too complicated at the organizational, bureaucratic and property levels. So we gave up that idea. Today there are cases that are perhaps more stable because the cultural investment is independent from company's fluctuations. However, the price to pay is often detachment from real company life. Both solutions have their limits. Surely the Peroni Archives and Museum have the advantage, especially after the change of ownership in recent years, of being perceived as the place to record and display what is useful for the company, and to represent Peroni in its current industrial and commercial situation. To this end, one of our first priorities is the recording of last year's advertising and promotional material.

It is the finicky archivist's duty to make the business aware of the importance of keeping the paper documents that go with the objects connected to a product: at the moment, a new lot of documents is being recorded and is about to receive the notification of historical interest: a business archive's main purpose is to increase with new streams of documents.

It is very difficult to mediate between archival theory on the correct management of an archives and the company's practical needs for space.

Surely, the soul of an enhancement project like the Peroni's is the entrepreneur's devotion, even if Dr. Natali spoke very little about himself in relation to the Museum. The initial framework for the museum exposition was very clever, and so was the outline for the reconstruction of the company's history in its celebration volume. It focussed less on the family, and more on the company, its products and people as an integral part of our Italy's social, economic and cultural history. In my opinion, this formulation works well with the new owners who, I must say, are sensitive to Peroni's traditions, even though they have set minimum maintenance of the two structures as a target. Actually, that's not so bad these days!

G. P.: Let's see if I've understood correctly: when the museum began to be coordinated by the External Relations Office, its marketing functions increased. The museum is usually a one-dimensional institution, whereas a serious cultural action aims to discover and communicate multiple dimensions. So, in your efforts, did you manage to create services for the company and therefore, actually participate in the business process by offering them organizational advantages and a streamlined flow of information? Is that a possible prospect?

D.B.: Yes. The archives now offers improvement of the practical aspects to the advantage of the company. Marketing, for example, often makes use of the archives'

services to research the history of different brands, of company communication and of the packaging.

So, if someone needs to work on the restyling of “Nastro Azzurro”’s history, the archives will provide the necessary information. Also, there is frequent staff turnover in the marketing department, and the organization tends to forget past information. For this reason, I have prepared several files on the history of brands for my colleagues. This is a very useful and practical service.

In addition, we have external relations with Universities. We receive thesis students who are mainly interested in the history of the advertising message. But the basic activity remains that of a service for the company.

G.P.: Tell me more about the Archives’ relations with its users.

D.B.: Six or seven out of ten monthly requests come from the company, the rest from external users. It is not a widely used archive, but it has got its regular users. As the Archives and the Museum are inside an industrial plant that operates round the clock, there are problems of accessibility and safety that impose limitations on external users. A couple of good examples of the Museum’s users who are connected to the company’s commercial life, would be the visit by 80 Roman *sommeliers* or the pizza makers who came to Rome for the *Pizza Time* exhibition.

It is true that the Museum and the Archives have a lot of unused potential, but since they are the property of the new ownership, it is SABMiller who decides their destiny. It’s not a question of trying to convince Top Management with theory or illustrious examples of other archives; if that year the company decides to allocate minimum maintenance and to exclude public access, that is what it will be done.

G.P.: Isn’t there an external authority, for example a scientific committee, to add their voices to a promotion of the archives to top management?

D.B.: No, there isn’t.

G.P.: So, the museum acts as a fully integrated part of the business structure. No advisors to influence the entrepreneur or make suggestions.

D.B.: No. Only during the setting-up of the museum – which project lasted two or three years – was there a more concerted effort. A staff was appointed: there were persons in charge of technical and administrative aspects; people in charge of marketing, a scientific administrator, the presidency as a guide and a general supervisor, external architects for the exhibit layouts, etc. The planning and realization of the museum and archives was certainly the moment of greatest collaboration. At present, it wouldn’t be possible; let’s say that the museum and archives is an only child..

G.P.: On the other hand, it’s too early to comment on the new multinational ownership. The multinationals often behave badly towards the acquired companies’ historical memory, as we have seen in the case of Barilla. Perhaps it’s better to wait and see.

D.B.: Absolutely. It’s too early to say what will happen. In this field there are many different situations. Sometimes the multinational itself promotes the historical

enhancement of its own brands (as we can see with Ferrarelle, Buitoni/Perugina and others). Pilsner Urquell beer of Pilsen, in the Czech Republic, is part of the group SABMiller and has quite an active museum and historical archives.

They are of course more accessible than the Peroni Museum in Tor Sapienza in Rome. However, it is a positive sign of continuity, of respect for the brand's historical value and of what the company has meant to the territory: it would be stupid to turn one's back on that. Of course, time will tell.

G.P.: From what you have told me, the presence of the Peroni family diminished along with the feeling for the company that was the family's emblem. At the same time, no internal management emerged that chose to look after the history of the company.

D.B.: That's right. There were no managers with *carte blanche*: the Peroni ownership decided everything. Today we are in a period of transition, that situation is over. I don't know if this is atypical.

G.P.: Not really. It happens in those cases where the family has been overly present, as if the world ended along with the family ownership.

Now, we need to understand what will happen: if Peroni will simply be one beer production center of a company with its heart somewhere else; or will there be an effort to keep the Peroni brewery's specific identity.

D.B.: Yes, it's the struggle of the future, but now we are entering a rather delicate area, and, as it isn't my specific field of expertise, I can't really give precise answers. In my opinion, the duty of a historical archives or a company museum is to defend the business' history and culture. For a brewery, this also means the culture that surrounds the product. The Peroni Archives and Museum aims to be a place of cultural transmission and training for the company, the scientific community and the customers. Visitors, especially foreigners, are amazed at the sight of the library with extensive reading material about the beer industry, as well as a section dedicated to business museums. Then there is the exhibit of historical Italian advertising; the collection of *Gazzette Ufficiali* or the collection of Peroni glasses, starting from the end of the 19th century. This sort of presentation is a company's best visiting card.

G.P.: If that type of sensitivity exists, the multinational could strengthen the network of companies it has acquired. You mentioned the Pilsen museum; the Peroni museum is another identity centre; yet another will be in South Africa... so, why can't they be connected through a *glocal* strategy: combining local identities with international flexibility... it could become a cultural project. Maybe it is possible to implement a strategy opposite to that of Nestlé-- a multinational that destroys local identities.

D.B.: But why didn't Nestlé do that with Perugina? Actually, in this field there are very different behaviours, but maybe this is an issue lying outside our field of interest.

G.P.: I remember the case of Poretto: it was taken over by Carlsberg that continued only two or three brands of the original firm...

D.B.: Well, if SABMiller became a cultural multinational with a *glocal* strategy, I would be happy. We'll wait and see: I don't know what will happen in this field.

G.P.: To sum up, the Peroni museum is the expression of the strong identity of a family so involved in its own business that it never created a managerial dimension. When the family had to step down to new owners, its original identity remained as a museum, no longer having a point of reference.

D.B.: I think the question is more complex. Of course, you are commenting on the defects of the Italian family capitalism, but this should be put into the context of the expansion of the multinationals, that occurred on a wide scale in the Italian food market during the 70s.

If we consider the Italian brewery section, only Forst of Merano, which also owns Menabrea beer, are Italian. The other well-known beers – Dreher, Moretti, Ichnusa – are all brands that have already taken over by multinationals.

The struggle to survive on the market has become difficult over the last few years. In this kind of market, defending the competitiveness of an Italian family business is extremely challenging: the competition might sell the same product from Nairobi to Hong Kong. The fact is that these are strategic problems that take precedence over the promotion of business culture. I can understand that the field of my activity may not be a priority!

However, the Peroni archives and museum are alive and well; they are open to the public, and are fully available for research, individual and group visits, studies and theses. Well, it would be better if the museum were in *Piazza di Spagna*, in the center of Rome, where the view is nicer, but we can't have everything in life!

G.P.: And the archives is constantly in search of its own role inside the company.

D.B.: Certainly. Being closely connected to the company and having no separate identity, the archives and museum are always subject to the company's fortunes. The important thing is that we exist, we keep going. Hanging onto the company's leg, if you like, through good times and bad, with the kind of solidarity that doesn't show up only at Christmas!