

**From the Liguria del Saper Fare si Racconta: an unknown image of
Italsider in Cornigliano – Genoa**

by Salvatore Vento

As described in the previous issue of the magazine, the Ansaldo Foundation, with the support of the Compagnia di San Paolo, set up “La Liguria del saper fare si racconta”, an audiovisual archives consisting of the collection oral testimonies from single researchers as well as several organizations and agencies. In the Genoese area, we taped the interviews of 44 people, focusing especially on individuals born in the 1920s. By the end of this year, the research will be extended to the other three Ligurian provinces (La Spezia, Imperia and Savona). The oral histories of workers, technicians, managers and consultants (also artists and intellectuals) of the iron and steel sector are given particular emphasis.

Historically, iron and steel production in Liguria contributed significantly to Italian industrial development—in 1917 it produced 32% of all Italian steel. However, the construction of the full production cycle plant in Cornigliano, which operated between 1939 and 1943 under the responsibility of Agostino Rocca (Finsider general manager) represented a turning point in the modernization of the plant and its organization. During the war, the entire plant was dismantled by the Germans and brought to Germany (see the interview to Mr. Vernazza in Giuliano Montaldo’s film “Ritratto di una città” – Portrait of a town – 1964). Finsider’s reasons for that choice were essentially two: to respond to a rational division of the production among all Italian regions and to implement the technical and economic integration with the Siac plant (whose activity was largely based on special war production, an area vulnerable to strong fluctuation).

The production resumed in the 1950s when Oscar Sinigaglia, chairman of Finsider (1945-1953), thanks to help from the Marshall plan and the support of Alcide De Gasperi, had the chance to achieve the strategic aim he had pursued since the period when he was director of Ilva, up to 1935. On October, 9th 1951, the company Cornigliano S.p.A. was set up and the first blast furnace was lighted on the morning of March, 15th 1953 with a simple ceremony, as it happens for many important events, wrote journalists at that time. There were the management, technicians and workers, mostly iron-casters from Ilva in Portoferraio. The director of the plant, Engineer Bianchini, put a torch close to the gate where the first molten iron would start to flow, about 30 hours later.

The first casting from the Martin furnace n.1 took place on June 2nd, 1953. The initial workforce of the plant was made up of 12 employees (3 engineers, 4 technicians and 5 skilled workers) who had already trained for one year at Armco Steel Corporation (Middletown, Ohio) in the US.

So many fatal accidents occurred during the building of the plant (perhaps due to the desire to finish as quickly as possible), that people began to say the construction site was ‘cursed’. One of these accidents, a gas explosion in a pipe in December 1952, killed three workers, greatly

shocking the town; another one, in January 1954, was caused by the collapse of the roof of the cold rolling mill, which “caved in like a house of cards” as it was written on the newspapers of the time.

Following subsequent filling-in of sections of the seabed, the industrial citadel extended over an area of one and a half million of square meters of which 440,000 were covered, and included an internal railway 55 km long, a functionally autonomous loading and unloading wharf and its own fleet (Sidermar), able to carry 16 thousand tons of coal in its holds, at a speed of 14 miles per hour. The productive cycle began with the arrival of the iron ore at the wharf, as Mario Franzoni says describing the work in the maritime installations. Another interesting testimony is given by Maria Diva Repetto, one of the few women laborers in the workshop (the same one that employed Guido Rossa, the union representative killed by the [militant left wing organization] Red Brigades in 1979).

The directing board of “Cornigliano S.p.A.” held strongly innovative attitudes, both in industrial relations (then called ‘human relations office’) and cultural and social policies. The top management was formed by: Antonio Ernesto Rossi (Chairman), Redaelli Spreafico Enrico (General manager), Marchesi Mario (CEO), while Gian Lupo Osti (board of directors secretary, in 1957 director for general affairs and the personnel, in 1962 general manager of Italsider) during his stay in Genoa (1955-65), had a significant role in the promotion of innovation processes and in the reestablishment of a positive relationship with the town.

In June 1966, “Cornigliano S.p.A” merged with “Ilva Alti forni e acciaierie d’Italia” and took the name “Italsider alti forni e acciaierie riunite Ilva e Cornigliano”. In the meanwhile, steel production had notably increased (data in thousands of tons):

| YEARS | CECA | ITALY | CORNIGLIANO |
|-------|--------|-------|-------------|
| 1956 | 56.685 | 5.908 | 830 |
| 1960 | 72.827 | 8.229 | 1.366 |

The first innovation imported from the United States concerned the classification system of work based on Job Evaluation. 24 categories of hourly pay were defined according to 12 basic features relative to professional requirements, responsibilities, effort and working conditions. In order to promote workers’ involvement, the management introduced the “cassetta delle idee” (“idea box”), where all workers who put forward proposals to improve the productive process were rewarded (see Sergio Vercelli’s testimony). In a single year, from 1958 to 1959, suggestions proposed by the workers more than doubled from 188 to 427.

The same thing happened with the workers’ underwriting of company shares: in 1959 they reached 60% of the workers in Cornigliano. Moreover, collaborative attitudes were strengthened through the use of inquiries to solicit workers’ opinions in different sectors of activity.

On the other hand, social policies tried to answer a wide range of workforce needs:

- summer and winter camps for children (which included educational programs by major experts);
- building of houses and granting of subsidized loans. In 1960, 71 houses were built within the projects of Ina casa;
- varied social assistance organized according to workers’ needs.

In the field of cultural policies, there was a broad program of initiatives: organization of trips both in Italy and abroad, the setting up of what is known in Italy as “CRAL” (a social club for company workers), access to theater, cinema, library, gift-books as Christmas presents and the subsequent creation of the Italsider book series sold at low prices to employees.

Two house organs also contributed to developing a new cultural climate: the first was the publication of rivista Cornigliano (Cornigliano magazine) (1957-60). Following that, the rivista Italsider (Italsider magazine) was published until 1965 with the collaboration of many avant-garde artists and intellectuals such as the abstract painter Eugenio Carmi (see magazine covers) and the set designer Lele Luzzatti.

Among the most well-known cultural events:

- in 1962, the exhibition of Italian paintings in Moscow in the Finsider pavilion as part of an initiative on Italian industry;
- the same year, in Spoleto, on the occasion of the fifth Festival of the Two Worlds, Giovanni Carandente spearheaded the program “Sculpture nelle Città” (Sculptures in Towns). Italsider placed its plants at sculptors’ disposal so that they could create in collaboration with the workers.
- Between 1964-64, the work by Luigi Nono “La Fabbrica Illuminata” (a recording of the sounds of the steel production cycle), commissioned by RAI, wasn’t broadcasted because it was considered too politically committed and instead was shown at the Cornigliano CRAL.

Particularly relevant is the role of the painter Cecilia Ravera Oneto who, in the 1960s, used to paint in front of the factory gates.

In order to reconstruct the enthusiastic climate of that period, here is an abstract of an article by Luciano Rebuffo (a journalist from Genoa-Sestri Ponente) published in the Rivista Italsider, n.5/1961:

“Here, where the plant is [now], there was the sea and a beach, surrounded by the Raggio castle, in false gothic style, symbol of opulence typical of the rich people of the past. At that time, there were bathing establishments here, with multicolored cabanas and beach umbrellas, crowded during the summer by joyful brown bathers. Then, the long winter would come and the whole area was frighteningly deserted; there was no one in this no man’s land between Cornigliano and Sestri. In fact, it was called “the desert” where the crickets sang and, at the mountainside, one could see the convent and the abbey of Sant’ Andrea in the shadows. Here, Pope Innocenzo IV, coming from Rome, found peace and relief from the seasickness that had tired him out. Now, instead of the sea, there is one of the most densely crowded industrial areas in Italy, and therefore, one of the most valuable. Where there once was the sea, now there are blast furnaces and chimneys. Where once Innocenzo IV strolled in the countryside, now there is the transit of trucks to the airport; the songs of the crickets have been overpowered by the rumble of the airplanes and, next to the airport, the heavy cranes of the Ansaldo shipyard rise like big pelicans. And still, there is the fitting-out basin with the hull and its narrow bows, and the foundries, and Multedo piers where the big tankers berth and unload 50.000 tons of oil at a time”.

Films promoted by Italsider that can be seen in the film archives of Ansaldo Foundation include:

Il pianeta acciaio 1962 by Emilio Marsili (18’)

The film documents the different stages of the construction of the plant and it emphasizes the contribution of steel to the economic development of the country using strong and effective language and expressions like “...the God steel...”, “...the power of steel...”

Film relazione 1961(34’). Directed by Valentino Orsini

It was produced to show the balance sheet of 1961, referring in particular to:

- production, supplies, raw materials;
- personnel, trade-union agreements based on Job Evaluation;
- the social club in Cornigliano showing the film on Sacco and Vanzetti;
- the development plan;
- the production forecast for 1963 of the steel and iron center in Cornigliano.