

## **Luigi Romersa: Biography of a war correspondent**

Luigi Romersa, journalist and author, had a career throughout most of the twentieth century, even until the beginning of the new millennium. The ups and downs of his life and his work are the subject of the present study: in his reportage from the front lines war, he offers us a disenchanted and objective testimony on the course of the conflicts.

Surely fate was favourable in allowing him to be a direct witness of some of the crucial events that determined the course of history. Later in life he continued to write about a past that many wish they could erase. He did it with determination and without bias. Some episodes he appeared to his contemporaries reported the product of a "visionary." Only recently, thanks to the opening of the archives and dissemination of time, it was found that his work corresponded to reality and was not the product of journalistic speculation.

The first chapter is devoted to the first period of journalistic formation until 1939. Luigi Romersa was born in Boretto, province of Reggio Emilia, on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1917, into a family of peasants. He majored in Law at the University of Parma. In 1937 his journalism career began while Romersa was still a college student, in collaboration with the «Gazzetta di Parma». Integrated into the fascist regime, he followed the events of the war as a war correspondent for several newspapers including «Il Corriere della Sera» and «Il Messaggero». He was a war correspondent on the African front until the fall of Tripoli, when he returned with a mandate to deliver an important military relationship to Benito Mussolini in which he earned the respect due to the clarity of the information provided on the progress of the war in Africa, beyond the logic of political expediency and propaganda. In 1944, Mussolini decided to assign him a delicate task: to perform an investigation on the size of Hitler's secret weapons, on which they had to turn the tide of the conflict. On this occasion he met Werner von Braun, the father of the V-2 rockets. Romersa also visited the laboratories where scientists were developing the German fighter Messerschmitt ME 262 and, above all, he came into contact with the group of physicist Kurt Dieber, spearhead of nuclear research, assisting, he said, to test a nuclear bomb. It seemed that the Dieber's team enjoyed the support staff of Heinrich Himmler, unlike that of Heisenberg, due to

the latter's note friendship with Enrico Fermi, who passed to the service of Americans in 1939.

A second chapter sees him sent to the front line of the Second World War while also on a controversial secret mission in Germany, to check the progress of the destructive weapons of the Reich. During the Second World War (1939-1945) Romersa, with the rank of lieutenant, took part in it on the front lines of Italian North Africa, Italy and Germany as a correspondent for the first «Ente Stampa», then the «Messaggero» and, finally, for the «Corriere della Sera». As for the latter sent the head, he had the opportunity to personally meet a large number of players in the history of that period: Benito Mussolini, Teseo Tesei, Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Hitler. During the war in Africa, some of the movies'«Istituto Luce» testify Romersa with the return of Italian troops from the colonial defeat in May 1943, which he had followed as a military journalist. As a result of his particular in the conflict, a witness and a journalist, the same is urgently convened by Mussolini at the Palazzo Venezia. In these movies Romersa himself emphasizes the impressions that he had at the time, leaving a strong impression on Benito Mussolini who appreciated the objectivity of the facts.

On 21 April 1944 Hitler invited Mussolini to attend an important meeting with his staff in the castle of Klessheim, near Salzburg, in order to inform the Italian allies of developments in the conflict. This invitation also had the purpose of verifying the accuracy of the ally. The performance of the conflict was not reaching the targets set by coalition troops of the Axis Powers. The Allied Forces were advancing relentlessly on all fronts, including the Italian one. As in previous meetings, Mussolini was welcomed by Hitler with the highest of honours. The purpose of the Führer was to reassure the Italian ally and share military information, the most notable of which were those related to some secret weapons planned by Hitler and his closest associates, which could quickly and decisively turn the tide of the conflict.

On his return to Italy, Mussolini, anxious to find evidence of what had been presented with so much emphasis from the German allies about these revolutionary weapons, summons the General Command of the “Rocca delle Caminate”, the fascist reporter, Luigi Romersa. The aim was for him to be able to verify the power of the ally. Arriving in Berlin to fulfill the mission entrusted to him, Romersa, through the

mediation of a friend and correspondent from Germany, looks to Goebbels, who after checking credentials, grants authorization to proceed with the investigation of German territory. We set out for the secret rocket base Peenemunde on the Baltic Sea. The location was chosen by the head of the project: the Baron Wernher Magnus Maximilian von Braun.

The missile development is working in full swing: great scientists led by Von Braun studied and conceived new weapons. Inside the base, Romersa met prominent personalities of the Nazi world including the base commander, gen. Hugo Walter Dornberger. Romersa was fascinated by both the person and the genius of Von Braun, so much so that a friendship started that lasted a lifetime, which survived the war and continued in the "new" life of the scientist.

When Romersa left Peenemunde to continue his investigation, he visited many factories in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia and collected information on the "promise" of the German Navy: submarines of unimaginable power that would change the tide of war in the Atlantic. But the real weapon that Hitler boasted, was a weapon that could "vaporize an entire city in a few seconds." On this occasion Romersa saw on the island of Rügen experiments and the explosion of such a bomb. Nobody believed him for years and this was the cause of mockery from his colleagues. During the process Romersa humanly denied having seen the experiment, perhaps for fear of aggravating the situation, however, the Court of Brescia, condemned him.

The third and final chapter covers the long period following the conviction immediately after the Second World War. We follow Romersa's career as a special correspondent in the most dangerous places around the globe. At the end of the conflict purge instances had also affected the field of journalism. Without counting the first episodes of rough justice, the courts were on the scene of the initial death sentence by the «Corte di Assise», then the Supreme Court switched to a punishment of imprisonment of thirty years as was the case with Ermanno Amicucci, the last Director of the «Corriere della Sera». There are also numerous convictions like the one of Luigi Romersa, who received a fifteen years sentence in prison and his property confiscated for his claims about the Nazis secret weapons. On 22 June 1946 Romersa and other convicted journalists were released due to the so-called «Amnistia Togliatti». The dark memories did not abandon

them in the following years, but those would fade gradually, due to the new world status of the Cold War.

At the end of the war he continued to write for one of the most important publications «Tempo» in Milan, for whom he worked for three decades as an envoy abroad. During these years he met important people around the world. These were the years of most intense activity: we find him at the poles, in Congo, in Bahrain, but above all, we see him follow the events of international importance: from the Suez crisis to the Korean War, the revolution in Argentina to the Israeli war of six days. In 1956, he covered Port Said to the oil crisis, assisting Anglo-French attack, and a few years later, we find him in the wake of the Israeli troops of Moshe Dayan, during the Six-Day War.

In 1955 he won the Marzotto Prize for Journalism and in 1963 the prize Massai Saint Vincent on international affairs. Romersa gets a visa to the USA, and in December 1964, travels to Huntsville. Romersa claims his dismissal from the «Corriere della Sera» was for "for political reasons", to go on to write for the magazine «Tempo».

On his trip to the United States said he was flanked by a Lieutenant pilot "functions stern guardian angel", and he saw with pleasure Von Braun and his friends whom he met at Peenemünde. For Romersa this was the first trip in America, a nation known only through cinema and literature, and he was pleasantly surprised. His meeting with Von Braun was a conversation between two old friends, who spoke of the past just to understand what was going on and new inventions for the conquest of space. Von Braun tells of new life, as a child tells of new game. It is the moment in which the United States are in competition with the Soviet Union to put a man on the moon and the scientist with his co-workers are treated with respect and admiration: «[...] for the hosts, Wernher was a of alien species, an individual rained on the earth from another planet ...». He was a young rigorous scientist who believed in their work, the Americans, however, did not understand his genius immediately and he criticized the work; only later allowed him to work, giving him a carte blanche.

Romersa went several times to find his friend Von Braun, who was invited to participate in the highlights of the conquest of space, such as in 1958 at the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union, thanks to the work of German scientists in the service of USSR, Explorer

I was followed by the United States. As early as 1964 Von Braun described to our author what actually would happen in the July 21, 1969: the walk on the moon. Von Braun told his friend the fluctuating moments of joy at work, explaining how politics influenced his research. Romersa seems to attribute the disease and, subsequently, the death of his friend to disappointment and disillusionment of those days. Von Braun died in 1977 at age 65 in Virginia and Romersa saw him just before and almost did not recognize his friend, who was ravaged by cancer.

To commemorate his friend, Romersa said that «in the days of the triumph of the moon [...] the life of Wernher Von Braun, derivation for family, for his athleticism, for his amazing intelligence, it was a perfectly successful mixture between science and epic». While in previous years, in business of journalism, Romersa was able to unfold, and many of the most significant events of our century, such as the landing of man on the moon or the crisis of the Six Days War in the latter period is given a higher profile, thanks to his personality and the ability to put at the center of his narrative the people. A careful and faithful seven volume chronicle of his time, thanks to the publisher Murcia, was published between 2005 and 2008, with his usual vivid and descriptive power, in the form of narrative-reportage: *Le armi segrete di Hitler* (2005), *I segreti della guerra d’Africa* (2005), *All’ultimo quarto di luna – Le imprese dei mezzi d’assalto* (2005), *Uomini della seconda guerra mondiale* (2006), *I segreti della seconda guerra mondiale* (2006), *Il pianeta del silenzio* (2008), *Von Braun racconta* (2007). Here Romersa tells how far are the echoes of bitterness but not the memories of the events experienced in first person, with the simplicity and humility of a plain witness. Once again, at the center of his reflection, as well as the events that he narrates, there are always men, their hopes, their fears and their wonder. Romersa died in Rome March 19, 2007, lucid and aware that he was part of the story.

I finally completed this research with an appendix which contains photos and reproductions of period items which can better illuminate the characters, events and times in conflict with each other, and with an interview given to me by Mrs. Maria Romersa, widow of journalist.