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Opinion

Nationalism or patriotism?

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September 15, 2005—Someone e-mailed me the lyrics of a song from the musical, "South Pacific," and I was awash with memories of coming to this country.

We, high-school-aged refuges in New York City, were not a joyful lot of youngsters. Now in our teens in 1955, we had been born into a war. Those of us from Italy, like me, had spent our first five years of life under war and occupation. At the age of three, we were caught between the fire of the resistance and the fire of the occupiers. We watched our families take sides. Our houses emptied of uncles, aunts, and parents—some hiding, some taking up rifles and fighting in the hills. Our grandmothers taught us how to crochet, to distract us from our fears. I don't know what the boys did: we had no kindergartens or schools, and there were no boys in my family. I had only one playmate, my cousin, but we didn't play much. We eavesdropped on the adults; they didn't tell us anything about the war; we had to find out as best we could.

Then they were gone—to fight or to hide. Only old people and children remained to live in our houses.

News came that some had died—some killed in action; some bleeding to death in rebel camps from lack of doctors. Before they died, they had sent letters from the partisan camps in the mountains. Their bodies were crawling with lice, they wrote, but they were fine. We sent clean blankets. If we were found out we'd be hanged.

In the cities, we confused rain with bombs—865,000 allied bombing actions over Italy in WW II. In the country we were trotted out in village squares to witness hangings and be collectively punished.

Villages burned. Torture chambers went up in quiet neighborhoods, just up from the bakery. Trains left for death camps.

But the people fought on, until the "foreigners" left.

Throughout it all, we children hadn't had dreams—except that the war might stop. We didn't want to be train engineers because trains were blown up. We didn't want to be firefighters because fire-bombed buildings fell on top of them. We didn't want to be teachers because there were no schools. We didn't want to be priests because they were tied to chairs and shot for helping people to escape. There were no newspapers sold in our village, so we didn't want to be journalists. We didn't see any doctors, who had either fled or gone to the hills.

And sure as hell we didn't want to be soldiers, watching them kill and be killed.

We went to too many funerals when we could find the bodies, so we didn't want to be morticians, but who ever did, who was young and loved life with the despair of the dying? In this we were normal.

After the war, we became a drop in the swelling, flooding rivers of refugees, swarming through the shelters of smoke-filled, bombed-out Europe. We slept on straw. We missed our dogs and our grandmothers. We had no toys; no one told us fairy tales. We were hungry and sick. And we were quiet children—wrapped in silence as in blankets of dead leaves.

Making our way to the States, we found it a quiet place. It suited us. We had not much to say to a people that had not known war at home. They seemed so sure of so many things—flags and patriotism; right and wrong; my country this and that.

We owned no flags.

We had left ours in the rubble, among the ruins of a totemistic love of country that had driven us, like bloodthirsty sociopaths, to kill each other. We had lost the war. That, we now saw, had been our luck. We could concentrate on what mattered in life.

We began to dream of a common good—of a world that would know no war. Our teachers in America taught us well. Some of them cared; some of them wanted American children to learn from us.

In our speech clinic class, where we struggled to pronounce "th," Miss Brignoli planned a program for assembly. It was to be called, "Getting to Know You," from the musical, "The King and I."

We were deeply suspicious but pleased at the same time: no one in America had ever asked us to speak before—but wasn't it a little childish to plan such fun?

We were to sing songs from our countries. I looked at the boy from Okinawa. What song would he sing to forget Hiroshima? And Otto Mueller, from Germany, what would he sing—what song of his could drown the memory of the holocaust of Dresden?

I didn't know. We, the defeated, didn't trust to talk to one another. Perhaps we were ashamed—perhaps, we thought, in surviving, we had achieved all we were intended to achieve and deserved no more. Survivors often feel like that, I hear.

But in the States, where we had come to live, there another fear followed us: the atom bomb. We spent sleepless nights, planning our survival. We told no one—about our fears or our plans.

We chose to be conscious cowards. We could not imagine a heroic destiny for anyone who took up arms—except to defend oneself, perhaps. Our psyche had been deheroized in the long lobotomy of the war's unsurgical precision to kill 40 million.

The age of heroes was dead for us. The death camps alone silenced such blasphemous talk as "war," "victory," "national honor," and the rest of the claptrap our parents had listened to from the lying mouths of murderous, tin-pot dictators, with tiny brains and big egos.

We would listen no more to the sirens' call for war.

If we had to, we planned to live in the shadows of any public life that sang hosannahs to militarism, aiming to crouch unseen in mere corners of the majestic rooms in the center of which large, prosperous men began to talk of heroism again—of sacrifice, and domino theories.

We trembled a little; such talk on these well-armed shores did not bode well.

They talked so cheaply, it seemed to us, of "noble causes" and of crusades against "communism."

We thought a noble cause had been that served to us by those who had fed us, housed us, given us a cloak to stop us shivering along our cold and lonely road to final survival.

They thought of a "noble cause" as stopping governments from "going communist." We didn't understand—what was it to them what government people chose? Why was it communism that bothered them so much? Fascism hadn’t bothered them. Churchill had called Mussolini a great “gentleman” as late as 1938. They let Spain go fascist.

Imponderables.

There was segregation in the states. We didn't understand much about that. No one explained.

MacCarthyism was ending, after it had sown fear and silenced all passion for justice
that wasn’t an item on the official list.

So we went on stage at assembly time, and we sang—amazed that anyone would take notice of us. Three among us, Italians, sang a song about an old alpine shoe—symbol of the majesty of our mountains. Backstage, we cried after we sang, embracing one another—so fierce was our love of our land; so vehemently we missed it.

Patriotism is as natural as the love for one's parents—it is the mountains and the sea; it is the people and the smell of rain; it is the language and the music; it is to love justice and to practice fairness. It is to correct oneself when one goes wrong. It is to live in a place that one can respect without having to prove it with parades of goose steps, rifles raised, pointing at angry flags, waving over hideously cheering crowds.

Nationalism is flag-draped coffins; it is anger and dominance; it is my country, right or wrong; it is war and more war. It is death to a nation; it is the cry of orphans and widows. It is either you are with me or you are against me. It is hunger and homelessness. It is the killer of love. It is the mother of exclusions. It is the chilling wind of fear. It makes cowards of us all.

Then, all on stage for the finale, the world's fragments of human driftwood, flotsam and jetsam of the last war's angry torment and storm, we orphaned of childhood, we homeless by bombs, we the unquiet yet quiet heirs of unreason's crime against humanity, which had been the planning of our parents' aggressive wars, sang out this, in our accented mish-mash of English pronunciations—we sang out this—from "South Pacific":

You've got to be taught to hate and fear
You've got to be taught from year to year
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a different shade
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught before it's too late
Before you are six or seven or eight
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught
You've got to be carefully taught

I don't remember the applause, whether it was enthusiastic or merely polite. I don't remember if we felt proud. I don't remember anything, except that Miss Brignoli had got us to do this amazing feat—to make us a witness of our enduring loss as a warning to the victors. For sorrowfully we sang, because we came from a world where love of country had been turned into a license to kill; where the fatal distinction between love of country, right or wrong, and love of country, correct the wrong, had not been made; where nationalism was substituted for patriotism.

And now we stood, like little circus animals, performing our number for the victors, who might have regarded us the way we are wont to regard little pug dogs, hatted and skirted, dancing in circles on their hind legs—ever so cute and ever so pointless.

Perhaps. We shall see. Miss Brignoli had faith in reason.

The distinction between nationalism and patriotism was suggested by a reader from Australia, Bobbie, to whom I express my gratitude.

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