

29 November 2021

Intervento di Massimo Ungaro - Arandora Star Conference

Dear Ambassador Trombetta, Hon. Longhi, Mayor Francis, Director Pizzi, Mr Pini
Italians of the UK,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me thank the Arandora Memorial for the invite and for the organisation of this conference on the Arandora Star tragedy, the first of this kind. Thank you also to Katie Pizzi and the Italian Cultural Institute in London for hosting us here today.

On 2nd July 1940, a few weeks after Mussolini's Italy had declared war on France and Great Britain, a German U-boat torpedoed the Arandora Star, a cruise ship used by British authorities to deport mainly Italian and German civilians in prison camps to Canada, causing the death of hundreds of people. By far the greatest tragedy that had ever affected the Italian community in the UK (on board of the ship 476 people out of 865 were Italian citizens). Young and old, men and women, fascist sympathizers or antifascist activists, all found death in the cold water of the Atlantic.

The ship was painted grey and no sign could indicate that it was being used to transport civilians, like a Red Cross. 81 years after, it is still unclear how the selection of the people on board had been undertaken. Most importantly, it is a big tragedy on which institutions were very silent for too long. Everybody knows about the Titanic, no one about the Arandora Star although it happened 25 years later.

Following Mussolini's declaration of war against France and Great Britain on 10th June 1940 British authorities imposed strict restrictions on all Italian citizens living in the UK who, after decades of peaceful integration became suddenly seen as enemy aliens, a source of potential danger for the country they were inhabiting. This is why soon afterwards British authorities decided to deport all the civilians arrested. This is the context of the Arandora Star tragedy.

When asked by a parliamentary enquiry on the precise dynamics of the events, the Italian government replied in 2020 – for the first time as far as I know - that 'the decisions that made the sinking possible had derived from the chaotic weeks that followed Italy's declaration of war against the UK. The selection of the prisoners to be deported had not been based on clear criteria and seems to have particularly affected the younger section of the community. Besides, the onboarding operations took place in the greatest confusion, some prisoners exchanged their identification numbers, others hid while some decided to accompany their relatives onboard. The absence of

distinctive marks on the ship was probably due to the hurry and the lack of time. During the first few weeks of the conflict the priority for British authorities was to take away all those subjects that could pose a threat to the country. This is why the Arandora Star had not been prepared adequately for the transport of prisoners, for example by painting red crosses on flanks of the ship, an essential and international distinctive sign of civilian operations'.

After the war remembering the Arandora Star tragedy was not deemed a priority neither by Italy nor by the United Kingdom. 50 long years had to pass by before the victims received any kind of institutional acknowledgment. In 1990 the President of the Italian Republic Francesco Cossiga awarded to 21 survivors of the Arandora the title of 'Cavaliere al Merito della Repubblica Italiana'. Gradually, the Italian community in the UK honored the memory of the victims by erecting commemorative monuments at the St. Peter's Church in London, where every year a mass is celebrated for the victims, Liverpool Docks, Cardiff Cathedral and in several Italian towns in Lazio, Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, most importantly Bardi, Barga, Picinisco and Pontremoli.

In 2009 a committee presided by Ronnie Convery, today Italy's honorary consul in Glasgow, started raising funds among the Italian community in Scotland that allowed to build a monument besides the St. Andrew's Cathedral in Glasgow. The monument, composed of a garden with a fountain, mirrors, gravestones with the inscription 'We will never forget you' and the names of the victims and an olive tree, was designed by the Roman architect Giulia Chiarini and was inaugurated in 2011 in the presence of the Prime Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, the Italian general Consul Gabriele Papadia, the Archbishop of Glasgow Mons. Mario Conti, the British ambassador at the Holy See Nigel Baer and the last survivor of the Arandora, Cavaliere Rando Bertoia.

Today the garden is a reference point for the Italian community in Scotland and remains the most important monument commemorating the Arandora Star tragedy, a monument funded and built entirely by the community through donations and no public funds.

The precise dynamics of the Arandora Star massacre remain unclear, what is sure is that the suffering of the survivors and the victims' relatives was initially marred with silence and neglect by the institutions. This attitude gradually shifted with time, also thanks to the hard work of the local communities who decided not to forget what happened. This time the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella decided to award today's event with the 'Medaglia del Presidente della Repubblica', acknowledging the great sacrifice suffered by the Italian community in the UK. Hence today's conference is important not only because it will attempt to vindicate the victims' memory, to

understand what happened, to remember, but also because it signifies in my opinion a renewed national reconciliation. As Menenius Agrippa said to the plebeians in revolt concentrated on Capitol hill: 'sic senatus et populus quasi unum corpus discordia pereunt concordia valent', senate and the people, like one body, perish when in discord, prosper when in harmony.

What is certain is that the sinking of the Arandora star is a war crime committed by Nazi Germany and that it was a direct consequence of Mussolini's declaration of war. This is what happens when totalitarian regimes take hold led by criminals indoctrinated by fascist ideology. In the sinking of the ship hundreds of civilians died, fascists and anti-fascists alike, a death determined simply by the colour of their passport. Remembering these events and building a common shared memory is the best way to preserve the peace in the centuries to come. I think this is also one of the reasons why we are here today.

To serve the purpose of peace it is fundamental that liberal democracies remain closely allied to defend together democracy, the rule of law, civil liberties, the welfare state. That alliance can take many different shapes or forms, independently from the membership to the European Union, and that is the case of Italy and Great Britain. Moreover we speak from London, a city highly symbolic for Italy's republican and democratic tradition, being the city that welcomed not only Giuseppe Mazzini or Giuseppe Garibaldi, but also figures like Don Sturzo, Carlo Rosselli, Decio Anzani, a socialist tailor who lived in Soho and a antifascist activist, himself a casualty of the Arandora Star. Our societies, our economies, our cultures are so intertwined that it is difficult to always distinguish what is the Italian national interest from what is the british national interest. Nationalism, like in the '30s, remains a great illusion and our common history is a proof of this. In practical political terms, I think it will be important that this alliance produces tangible acts for the people, from the preservation of the civil rights enjoyed by british citizens living in Europe or by European, Italian citizens living in the UK, to the definition of a new bilateral agreement which is already being negotiated by our two countries.

In conclusion, as the member of parliament elected by the Italian citizens living in the UK and in Europe I can only thank the Arandora Memorial Trust, the Mazzini-Garibaldi club, to Dominic Pini for this precious work aiming at uncovering the truth behind these events and honoring the memory of these innocent victims. It will allow this great community to which we belong to reconcile itself with its own past and it will allow us to build ever deeper relations with this great country that hosts us.