

An early Easter story

by CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

While still living in the UK, Patricia, myself and John Higgs - her father- were invited by very dear friends in Rome to go to Italy for Easter of that year. Our ultimate destination was not Rome but, further on, to Porto Cesareo.

Porto Cesareo lays on the coast of the Golf of Taranto, the body of water cradled by the interior of Italy's 'boot,' from the inside of the heel to the back of the toe. Situated on by the cleanest of the Mediterranean seas, the town enjoyed a fine supply of various fish and of sea urchins in their deep red, very spiky shells, that, when opened, discovered a delicious little mollusc, eaten raw, slipping down our throats, full of their own flavour and that delectable hint of the sea.

I had first met the Palumbo family: Flavio and Karin, and their two sons, Fulvio and Fabio, in a Paris restaurant. This Easter was some years later.

Falvio was waiting for us at the train from the airport. After a night in Rome, we set out in their car for Porto Cesareo.

Bruno's and Maria's home was quite basic but they were extremely hospitable. Bruno was a fisherman, who went out every morning to bring in the catch, which he sold in the harbour.

Not a tall man, Bruno was a stocky build, thick through the shoulders and heavily muscled. He had a hearty laugh and was always ready with a bucket of fresh sea urchins and a handy knife to open them, which he insisted we eat, as a snack, in between meals, any time.

Maria, her sister and her daughter, married by then for a year, had a long, wide kitchen, in which they seemed to cook and wash dishes all the time.

We had arrived on the Friday; Easter lunch was Sunday but, that evening, we were greeted with supper, wine and laughter.

Flavio owned a multi unit apartment building there. He turned one of the apartments over to us and he and the family took up another.

We arrived back to our hosts' home on Sunday, slightly before the appointed hour of one o'clock. A very long table was covered by a series of cloths and many places were set with cutlery, napkins to one side. There was a frenzy of cooking the kitchen, so many busy gas rings, so many steaming pots.

As they placed the starters at each place, the ladies began calling in all directions for people to come to the table and so they did, rinsing their hands, talking in big voices, taking their places. From all sides, everyone encouraged us to sit! Come on ? be comfortable ? here, Patricia, sit next to Papa Flavio (in lieu of a grandfather). Your Mama next and John, there!

Up and down the length of the table were baskets with cut pieces of the sturdy bread made in Southern Italy and carafes of wine, cool, white and delicious. Both were passed around to accompany the courses as they came along, while the glasses were kept topped up.

The conversation flowed as generously as the wine and there was plenty of fun with translation as Karin and I were the only two speaking both English and Italian.

As he enjoyed the first three courses ? a small seafood anti pasta, a pasta dish dressed in a simple, perfect tomato sauce; then, a reasonable portion of fresh fish ? John had been athletic about finishing what Patricia could not, all the while calling for 'more

bread!?

Karin told him, 'There is lots more to come, save yourself for the other courses.'

When each plate was taken to be replaced by another, we were all told to 'keep your fork.' Chicken pieces were next, with a cover of mushrooms. There came a plate of meat, stewed to divine tenderness and flavour, followed by steamed vegetables, gently drizzled with the best olive oil. Then, salad to clear the palate and announce the cheese and fruit.

John had foresworn the bread and was only handling his own servings. Finally, he was told, 'keep your fork?' and he said, 'why?!'

We went for a walk after, to see the newly-weds' apartment. It was surprisingly luxurious. Clearly, the couple slept there but the kitchen was untouched, with the paperwork still inside the new stove. Wedding presents were on display on the dining room table and across the backs of the couches.

Irresistibly, we commented on this but they pointed out there was no sense cooking here when it was much nicer to eat with the family every day. The level of luxury was the obligation of the parents and guests as gifts for their wedding. Then...

'Time to go back to the house,' said the bride.

'Why, what are we doing there?'

'Oh, it's time for the evening meal,' she replied, matter of factly.

Patricia and I looked at John's face and laughed our heads off!!