An Autobiographical Account

Some Things You Don't Know

Eugenio Carmi

1. My Birth in Genoa on 17 February 1920

In those days babies were born at home with the assistance of a midwife, and this was my case. However, at the moment of birth I didn't show any sign of life: no crying or screaming, just silence. The midwife put me aside, announcing that the baby was stillborn. My father, who was happy to have the child he had long desired and wasn't willing to give in easily, was also present: he grabbed me, immersed me in two basins, one of cold water, the other of hot water. They say that at that point I started to cry — with gusto, so it seems. My father was ecstatic. If he had had to work at that time, well, the world would have done without me and nobody would have noticed.

2. The Origins of My Family

My parents were Piedmontese: my mother came from Alessandria, my father from Vercelli. My father had a rebellious character and at the age of thirteen left his parents' home for Genoa, in order to look for work. He found a job as an office boy in an insurance company. Since he was intelligent and resourceful, he quickly worked his way up in the firm and got married, which is why I am Genoese.

3. My Childhood and Adolescence

Although I have repressed a great deal of my childhood, I can remember that already as a child I was a rebel, shy and unconventional. An incident I recall very clearly is the following. When I was six years old, my mother took me to gymnastics lessons at the Istituto Cesarano. Miss Cesarano, who was getting on in years, played the Fascist song "Fischia il sasso" (The Stone Whistles) on the piano and the children walked in a single file with a rhythmic step along a rectangular white line made of marble chippings set in the floor. As soon as the march started, I left the file, shouting 'I don't want to walk on the line!'.

Meanwhile, my brother Marcello and sister Lisetta were born: the latter was to become a pianist and photographer. My family was secular Jewish, and was very open-minded and non-observant. Since I was a child, my religion has always been the universe, and I'm happy to be Italian.

When I was about fourteen, I painted a vase of geraniums and, when I was seventeen, a landscape with trees. I would have liked to study art, but unfortunately Mussolini, in obedience to Hitler, prevented me from enrolling at secondary school with the racial law enacted in September 1938. I went to live in Switzerland, where my father had discovered there was an Italian secondary school in Zugerberg, near Zurich, that my brother, Marcello, and I were able to attend, and it was here that I obtained my school-leaving certificate.

Things were getting worse: the alliance between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany made a conflict increasingly likely; in fact, this started in the autumn of 1939 with the invasion of Poland by Germany and the subsequent outbreak of world war.

4. Switzerland

After finishing secondary school, I moved to Zurich, living in a rented room with my brother. I wanted to enrol in the architecture department of the polytechnic (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) there, but the Italian school leaving certificate wasn't sufficient for this purpose. I asked which department required fewest admission examinations and was told chemistry, so I enrolled in this. France had capitulated and the Germans were everywhere: the future looked very dark indeed, but I attended my chemistry course in Zurich, even finding the lab work enjoyable. My parents were still in Genoa and I heard nothing from them after the Germans occupied Italy, but one day they, too, arrived in Switzerland as refugees, together with many other Italians, who were housed in internment camps.

When the situation changed and the Germans began to retreat, with the Russians and Americans in hot pursuit, I felt as if I were starting life over again. It was now clear that Germany was losing the war. On 25 April 1945 the Germans capitulated in Italy, surrendering to the Resistance, and in May they were finally defeated.

5. My Return
I couldn't wait to return to Genoa. I was able to do this in September, and I found the other members of my family, who had already been repatriated.

I feel a close attachment to Switzerland, a nation that saved my life, while millions of people ended up in the Nazi gas chambers. Zurich had, in a sense, become my city — after Genoa with its sea, of course. After I had returned home, my sister, Lisetta, introduced me to a girl. I looked her in the eyes: they were very beautiful. I was immediately struck by her discreet beauty and I courted her assiduously. Her name was Kiky Vices Vinci: she came from a Catholic family, but, like me, was not at all religious, and she was very cultured. In 1950 we got married; her mother was a very kind-hearted woman, a Catholic in the best possible way, and I still miss her today. She wanted us to have a church wedding and we agreed because we respected her: a very quiet affair, the ceremony took place in a little country church.

6. My Children
In 1952 Francesca was born, in 1956 Antonia, in 1957 Stefano and, in 1964, Valentina. In contrast with the way Italian fathers usually feel about this matter, the fact that, in addition to a boy, I had three girls was a source of great joy for me. I learnt about women's needs from when they were little girls: I became aware of their strengths, their weaknesses and their difficulties with regard to males and, subsequently, this led me to fight for their rights.

Francesca, Antonia and Stefano all took part in the political demonstrations of the 1970s and 1980s, and we were often worried about their safety. Valentina was still young and very sensitive: she was an anxious participant in her brother's and sisters' political activities, while, as parents, we were attentive yet apprehensive onlookers.

7. My Wife, Kiky Vices Vinci
When I think of the woman I love, of course it's her. We lived together for over fifty years, until she died in 2007: she was my guide and a shining example to me. Very cultured, she loved films and books: I think she'd read them all! A successful artist — but without the excessive self-esteem typical of many creative people — she produced remarkable works. But her reserve and aversion to publicity were her most outstanding characteristics. Her great love for her family and art accompanied her throughout her life, and she has left us all with a rich spiritual legacy. Although I have come to terms with her absence, I can't help feeling she is still with me.

8. In Genoa, 1945–1970
My first pictures: in 1945–46 Kiky and I went out to paint views of the city — she was an excellent artist, much better than me. In 1947 I attended art classes in Turin run by Felice Casorati: a great gentleman, he was an outstanding painter and a superb teacher. On returning to Genoa, I started to work as a graphic artist.

After we got married in 1950, we went to live in Salita Fieschine, where Francesca was born. We saw the painter Emilio Scanavino and his family, who lived nearby, nearly every day. The year 1956 was important for us: thanks to a loan from my father, we managed to buy a flat by the sea in Boccadasse, an old fishing village located on the edge of Genoa. And it was in Boccadasse that I found a studio where I could go every day to paint. I remember with affection my first assistant, Bruna, with whom I am still in touch today.

Again, it was in 1956 that Gianlupo Osti, general manager of the Italsider (formerly Ilva and Cornigliano) steelworks, gave me the task of promoting the company's image. A friendship was born between us that has lasted until today. An enlightened and cultured manager, Osti believed that a company must create culture, and our collaboration was a period of my life that had a particular significance for me. A refined and outgoing journalist, Vita Carlo Fedeli, who is still a friend of mine today, was the head of the press office and editor of the company's journal *Rivista Italsider*, which we worked on together.

In 1963, seven of us, including Fedeli and my wife, Kiky, founded the Gruppo Cooperativo di Boccadasse and opened a gallery by the sea, the Galleria del Deposito, which was a great success: more information about this can be found in catalogues and on the Internet.

9. In Milan
In 1971 my work required us to move to Milan. I won't go into the details of this because ample information regarding my activities is to be found in various catalogues and on the Internet. In Milan we lived at that time in Corso di Porta Romana, while my studio was close by, in Corso di

Porta Vigentina. My children went to school: Antonia and Stefano attended art school, while the youngest, Valentina, went to primary school and then to the Liceo classico Berchet, a secondary school focusing on the humanities, where she had a remarkable teacher, Gabriella Portinaro, with whom she has kept in touch later in life.

Francesca also moved to Milan, where she and some friends of hers set up an important graphic design studio. An excellent graphic artist, she is a very creative person: she married Maurizio and they have two children.

Antonia, after an eventful tour of the United States and Mexico when she was only eighteen, became an actress, meeting her future husband, Lee Orloff, a New York sound technician, on the set of a television series. Now she paints with spirituality and poetic inspiration. They live in Los Angeles and have two sons.

Stefano, after graduating in architecture, spent seven years in New York, where he married an American woman, Lis, and then he returned to Milan. Now he has written a fascinating book. He has two children.

Valentina, who has had a number of boyfriends and is very cultured, has worked for various newspapers and magazines. For me, she's still 'my little girl'.

Here ends this autobiography of emotions, while you will find more conventional biographies relating to me in a range of catalogues and books, but I think hardly anyone reads them. The usual artist's biography is a just a rather boring list.

In my studio, Sara Villa, my assistant, keeps this perfectly up to date. Sara is a person whose character is both attractive and difficult. I regard her as a timeless girl who belongs to all ages: she stands out from the crowd by rejecting fashions, and she's unconventional, shy, quiet and reserved. She's also an oxymoron: on the one hand she's very good at using the tools of the modern age, but, on the other hand, she's also a sensitive artist who paints pictures conveying the refined abstraction of her inner spirit. I wish to thank her for having supervised, with her innate creativity, every detail of the preparation of this catalogue.

This is the true conclusion of my account.

(Translation by David Stanton)

In "*Eugenio Carmi. Pythagoras's Theorem*", Casa dei Carraresi, Treviso, 2012