



Ancient as the hills

Emma Morano, the oldest recorded Italian and, for a year, the oldest person in the world, died on April 15th, aged 117

THOSE who live to be very old are never previously famous. Few in the world know them, and they know almost nothing of the world. Emma Morano had never been to Rome, let alone abroad. Her world was Pallanza-Verbania on the shores of Lake Maggiore in northern Italy, stretching to Varallo Sesia in the hills, where she had family. The fading photographs she would lay out, on a lace cloth, for reporters showed herself and her siblings enjoying lunch outside, posing in Pallanza's main square and on the lakeside promenade, all within a stroll of the tiny flat, down an alley by the church of San Leonardo, where she still lived. For her last 15 years, though she could walk, she did not leave it.

The very old tend not to have led glamorous lives. They work deep in the fabric of the everyday. Miss Morano's job, from the age of 13 to 55, was in Maioni's jute factory, sewing sacks for potatoes. After that, she worked for 20 years as a dinner lady at a local college. The young Emma wondered sometimes, since she had a lovely voice—a voice that would stop men in their tracks when she sang “Parlami d'amore, Mariu” from the window—about a musical career. But the thought wasn't serious, and she contented herself with listening to Claudio Villa's popular songs on the radio, a device first dreamed up in the year she was born.

Visitors often marvelled at the events she had lived through: not least the tumultuous history of Italy from monarchy, through fascism, to republic. But much of the time her head had been down, sewing sacks. She remembered Victor Emmanuel III, and the queen too. But the second decade of the 20th century was vivid mostly for slipping out of the house to go dancing, and for birch-stick beatings on her legs when her mother caught her. The first war was memorable only because her *fidanzato*, Augusto, was called up and did not return. When his letters stopped she assumed he was dead, and never learned, because no one told her, that he had left town for a steelworks in Milan.

Similarly, the rise of fascism was overshadowed by growing violence in her own house. She recalled the constant black-shirt parades. But far worse was the abuse from Giovanni, the man she had married in 1926 after he had threatened to kill her otherwise. She dreaded marrying him, but could not escape; he was “from the lake” too, living in the same courtyard, and both sets of parents pressed her. In 1937 she had a little son; he lived from January till August. The next year she kicked Giovanni out, and they separated. Divorce was not yet legal, and separation itself was rare. This made her a pioneer, she felt.

When researchers called, puzzling over her longevity, she told them that a single life definitely helped. She refused to let anyone dominate her, including the manager of the jute factory, who completely lost his head over her and proposed running away together—that, in the days when lowly female workers did not dare answer back to superiors. And her determination played a part, too. It showed in the large baby photograph she kept in the kitchen: bold dark eyes, a fierce little chin, her amulet askew on her neck. It was just as evident in middle age, when she prided herself on working hard to pay for things she wanted, like her hand-carved bedroom suite; and at 112, when she still manoeuvred heavy copper pans on the stove and put down newspaper to save her floors from muddy feet.

Food for longevity

The family genes were good, with several members living to advanced old age. But as a girl she was often ill. The doctor diagnosed anemia and advised a move to the lakeshore, from which she did not move again. He also told her to eat three eggs a day, two of them raw: a diet she kept to for almost a century, usually scooping them up with *biscotti* from a bowl. For lunch she had pasta with raw minced meat, for supper a glass of milk. At night she would raid the *biscotti* and the large tin of *gianduiotti*, local hazelnut chocolates, that sat on the sideboard. Last came her home-spiked grappa, infused in a wide-necked jar with seven sage leaves, herbs and a few grapes, and taken in spoonfuls every day.

This diet, doctors said, broke all the rules. Its only virtues were simplicity and long, long regularity. Those same virtues applied to her life as a whole. It had three pillars: family, self-sufficiency, and faith. Her flat was a shrine to them all. Glass-bead rosaries were draped over framed photographs of her parents, brothers and sisters, and the Holy Family presided above her bed. The Madonna and child watched over her bedside table, where she kept the anti-ageing cream she faithfully smoothed on each night. She liked to watch Mass on Channel Four, since it was shorter than the RAI one; she had not lost her impish streak. As for death, “quand la vegn, la vegn”, and her prized collection of chiming clocks ticked her way towards it.

On May 12th 2016 fame and glamour arrived together, as she became the world's oldest person. Officials rained certificates on her. The gas company thanked her for her loyalty, and the mayor for her services to tourism. On her 117th birthday a huge cake came, and a team from RAI; at the party in her flat she sang “Parlami d'amore, Mariu” again, though she was cross that her voice had gone. “My word,” she told a neighbour, “I'm as old as the hills!” The hills she had never been beyond. ■