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# Echoes of History at a Tuscan Estate

By DAVID LASKIN | MAY 9, 2014

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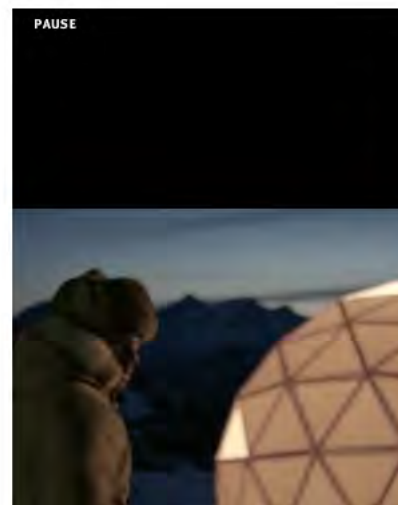


Iris Origo was a 22-year-old newlywed Anglo-American heiress — as rich, brilliant and innocent as a Henry James heroine — when she and her husband, an Italian nobleman, decided to buy La Foce. “Treeless and shrubless but for some tufts of broom,” Origo wrote in October 1923 of her first view of the rundown 3,500-acre estate southeast of Siena; it was “a lunar landscape, pale and inhuman.”

As we zipped south down the A1 autostrada in our rental car last spring, my wife, Kate, wanted to know exactly why we were bypassing Lucca, Pisa, Florence, Arezzo and Cortona and making a beeline for what Origo called this “lonely, uncompromising” corner of Tuscany. I waxed on about the rave reviews the estate-turned-rental-property had received from friends; about the garden, reputed to be one of the finest 20th-century gardens in Italy; about how Iris and Antonio Origo had transformed La Foce from a wasteland of degraded hardscrabble farms to an aesthete’s paradise with a rich, evocative history; about its proximity to Montepulciano and Montalcino and their superb wines.



Gardens at La Foce, an estate in Tuscany. Roberto Salomone for The New York Times



PAUSE



Benedetta Origo, an owner of La Foce. Roberto Salomone for The New York Times

But the real reason was Origo herself. Like Edith Wharton, whom she knew, Iris Origo (1902-1988) was not only a fabulously wealthy and well-connected expatriate but also a wonderful writer — not of fiction, like Wharton, but of biography, history and memoir. Her autobiography, “Images and Shadows,” is as delicious and tear-inducing as “Downton Abbey” (she and the Crawley family share a similar background, only it was Origo’s American father, William Bayard Cutting, who had the money, and her Anglo-Irish mother, Lady Sybil Cuffe, the title). “War in Val d’Orcia,” the diary Origo kept about life at La Foce during World War II, is a masterpiece of reportage about the simultaneous world war and civil war that ravaged Italy 70 years ago.

How often does the opportunity arise to live for three days on a property that you’ve inhabited in your imagination in stirring, beautifully written books?

We had no trouble finding the entrance to the estate on a wooded stretch of road a few miles from Chianciano Terme, an uninspiring spa town about 50 miles southeast of Siena. But after checking in at the fattoria (home and office of the estate manager), we were told that we’d need a maid to guide us to our room. We hopped back in the car and trailed the woman’s Fiat down an unpaved road, past the high stone garden wall, past huge horse chestnuts swaying at the edge of wheat fields, past a tiny fenced cemetery (the Origos’ family plot), olive groves and ancient battered cypresses. After a half-mile or so, the Fiat turned onto an even more rutted lane, proceeded steeply downhill about a hundred yards and stopped by a stone farmhouse that struck me as the perfect marriage of Tuscan peasant vernacular and crisp contemporary design.



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Belvedere house, one of the farmhouses available for rent.  
Roberto Salomone for The New York Times

A pheasant squawked. The sun glinted off a serpentine allée of cypresses on a far hill. In the distance rose the cone of Mount Amiata, a “great extinct volcano,” in Origo’s words, “which, like Fujiyama, dominated and dwarfed the whole landscape around it.” There was nothing lunar about this sublime vista. It was clear that the Origo family had nursed the valley back to productivity and released its monumental beauty.

We ascended the massive exterior stone steps to the second floor of the Palazzolo, one of 35 farmhouses that the Origos built in the 1920s and 1930s to house the families of their tenant farmers. After the blazing spring sun, the interior was cool and dim with a tang of wood smoke from the open hearth pervading a spacious common room with a white-tiled kitchen at one end. Our bedroom, which faced away from the view, was spartan but comfortable with big screened windows and a generous private bath. A delightful young couple from Singapore had the room across the hall; the other two bedrooms were empty.

There was no time to savor the silence from a picnic table out front or sip wine by the pool: We had signed up for the 6 o’clock garden tour, so we drove back to the fattoria courtyard, where the tour would begin.



Gardens at La Focè, Roberto Salomone for The New York Times

“Of course you’re seeing it in the best light possible,” Sibylla Holtz, a local painter who doubles as a garden guide, assured the small group standing

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amid the orange and lemon tubs of the Origos' poolside limonaia (winter citrus house — once de rigueur at fashionable villas). Rays of that light were tangled like purple foam in the wisteria blooming on a pergola that ran the length of an upper terrace — a rare splash of color in this classic Italian garden of carved stone, clipped shrub and etched shadow.

The British society architect Cecil Pinsent, a protégé of Bernard Berenson, whom Origo commissioned to design the grounds and farmhouses, made the most of the garden's dramatic setting. Pickets of cypress and walls of boxwood clipped into oblongs capped with half-globes lead the eye down a series of "rooms" into the untamed expanse of field and mountain.

As she shepherded us from terrace to parterre, urn to fountain, travertine steps to herbaceous border, Ms. Holtz sprinkled forth equal parts history, botany, garden design and family gossip. The Origos' two daughters, born during the war (and still living on the estate), grew up as tomboys roaming and riding the hills. When one of the girls once disturbed her mother at work, she was told to "please close the door again, but this time from the other side." Antonio, the illegitimate son of a marchese, was recognized by his father only at the time of his engagement to Iris. "During the war," Ms. Holtz said amid the lozenges of boxwood radiating out from a pool, "Antonio wore the black shirt of the Fascists by day and he helped the partisans at night."



Taking care of flowers at La Foce. Roberto Salomone for The New York Times

The word "war" sounded a jarring note. I knew from reading Origo's autobiography and diary how shattering the war years were at La Foce. The couple had acquired the property soon after Mussolini came to power, and despite "an instinctive dislike for a few external aspects" of Fascism, they benefited from it in many ways. It was only when Italy declared war on Britain in June 1940 that Origo "fully faced the problem of divided loyalties



which confronts every woman whose marriage has placed her in a country at war with her own.”

In “War in Val d’Orcia,” she describes the harrowing double game she and Antonio had to play during the period in 1943 and 1944 when the Germans occupied Tuscany and Allied forces were inching their way up from the south. Two dozen war orphans and refugee children took shelter on the estate while a steady stream of downed Allied pilots, Jewish refugees and escaped P.O.W.s hid in the surrounding woods. “Coming downstairs this morning,” Origo wrote on Dec. 28, 1943, “I am greeted by the now familiar information: There are some Germans in the fattoria courtyard — and an English prisoner in the garden.” The fighting was literally at their doorstep at the start of the summer of 1944. German soldiers requisitioned the villa, and on June 22, the family was forced to evacuate. Origo hastily collected her two daughters along with 30 war orphans and refugee children and marched them eight miles under a blazing sun to Montepulciano. “Some corpses lay, uncovered, by the roadside,” she wrote in the diary. “We had been warned to stick to the middle of the road, to avoid mines, and to keep spread out, so as not to attract the attention of Allied planes.”

Once the front moved north, the Origos and the unharmed children returned to La Foce to repair and replant — but in some ways the postwar years were even more devastating. As the sharecropping system that dated back to the Middle Ages broke down, tenant farmers left to find work in the cities. By 1970, when Origo wrote her autobiography, most of the stone farmhouses were abandoned and falling into ruin.



After the death of their parents, the Origos’ daughters sold off more than two-thirds of the estate (which had grown to 7,000 acres) and divided the rest between them. In 1996, they opened one of the farmhouses to paying guests — and over the years they have made a total of 18 structures of various sizes and configurations available for holiday rental. Even in its reduced state, La Foce is so vast and secluded that we woke each morning with the sense that we had come into an immense, if fleeting, fortune.

Our brief stay took on a lulling rhythm. At 7:30, Filippa Gentile, our charming Sicilian-born housekeeper, appeared to cook breakfast, tidy up the rooms, chat in Italian and offer sightseeing suggestions. On Ms. Gentile’s advice, we shopped for picnic supplies and hats at the lively open-air Friday market in nearby Sarteano, where she lives, and I drove up the precipitous



market in nearby Sarteano, where she lives, and I drove up the precipitous dirt road to Castiglioncello del Trinoro, a tiny jewel of a Tuscan village perched high above the valley. The 12th-century abbey of Saint'Antimo, a 45-minute drive from La Foce, is one of the most perfect Romanesque structures in Italy. Nearby, Montalcino has a host of tasting rooms showcasing its prestigious Tuscan reds.

Dan and Pat, our Singaporean housemates, were tireless explorers (and wine-tasters), but Kate and I whiled away our days walking the fields and woods, reading and watching the breezes flicker through the olive groves. Poking around the property on a drowsy afternoon, I stumbled across a plaque commemorating the war dead at Castelluccio, the Origos' medieval castle about a mile from the villa (now another rental property, as well as an exhibition space and the headquarters of a chamber music festival, Incontri in Terra di Siena, held each July). I tried to imagine hobnail boots sparking against the cobblestones, fighter planes dropping out of the sky to bomb the valley, partisans lurking in the hills. But in truth, it was difficult to summon past violence in this enchanted setting.

On our last afternoon, we returned from a tramp to find that two American couples had arrived to claim the Palazzolo's empty bedrooms. As we chatted in the lengthening shadows, I asked why they had come here. One of the men replied that he had seen the property featured on the TV show "The Victory Garden" some years ago and had wanted to see the garden ever since. He had never heard of Iris Origo or her books, but sounded mildly interested when I described them.

I felt a tad offended on behalf of my deceased but still vivid hostess. Of course, it's possible to have a wonderful holiday at La Foce without knowing a lick of its history. But somehow it seemed unmannerly to show up at the Origos' door with no idea what the family has created and endured here.

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David Laskin, a frequent contributor to the Travel Section, is the author, most recently, of "The Family: Three Journeys into the Heart of the 20th Century" (Viking).

#### **IF YOU GO**

La Foce (Strada della Vittoria, 61, Chianciano Terme, 39-0578-69101, [lafaoc.com](http://lafaoc.com)) rents out 18 houses and apartments scattered around the property. The Palazzolo B&B, where we stayed, has four double rooms that rent by the night (rates are 120 to 140 euros, or \$165 to \$190 at \$1.35 to the euro, per day per room, including breakfast). All the other houses and apartments rent by the week.

Two years ago, La Foce opened its own restaurant, Dopolavoro, in the estate's former workers' recreation center. Open daily, except Monday, for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the restaurant uses olive oil and vegetables grown on the estate in traditional Tuscan dishes ([dopolavorolafaoc.it](http://dopolavorolafaoc.it)).

La Foce's garden is open for guided tours every Wednesday afternoon and every weekend from mid-March to November.

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