

World War 2 ended in August of 1945 with the Japanese surrender and the following month a ceremony occurred in Washington to award the congressional medal of honor to winners of the award, those living and to the families of others to receive the medal posthumously. It was President Truman to conduct the ceremony and one of the honorees, Robert Graebner of Wheeling West Virginia had this to say about the experience. He said:

Standing there waiting for the President to work his way down the line to myself--I have never been so terrified in my life. I was shaking like a leaf. Then it was my turn and the President places the medal around my neck and he says to me: "I would rather have this medal than be President of the United States".

I mention this story this because I have just finished reading a book, *Naples '44* by Norman Lewis, in which none of these soldierly qualities of courage, heroism and steadfastness of purpose make an appearance

In July of 1943 with the war going badly for Germany and even worse for Italy Mussolini was arrested by the king and in September the Italians threw in the towel—to surrender to the allies—the Americans and British. Meanwhile the campaign in Sicily had been fought and the Germans routed to retreat to the mainland. The allies followed, beginning at the toe of the boot and gradually working their way north.

Enter Norman Lewis. Lewis was English, a writer and linguist. He spoke a half dozen languages including

German, French, Italian and Arabic. Language specialists tended to wind up in intelligence and Lewis was sent first to north Africa and then to Italy to participate in the landings at Salerno. The book, that takes the form of a diary, begins at this point.

Naples in 1944 could be described as a city in a state of cardiac arrest. If an architect were to plan a city in such a way to render it most vulnerable to aerial bombing the city to result from this design would be Naples—a hive of narrow zigzagging streets and precariously sited hovels to magnify the destructive effect and quickly reduce an entire neighborhood to rubble.

Lewis:

Its a walk through a city literally tumbling about our ears. There is a stench of shattered drains or worse—and a return to the middle ages and all their deformities and diseases and desperate trickeries—the hunchbacks scuttling underfoot and a great collection of idiots and cretins nodding their big heads and here and there a small legless bundle balanced behind a saucer into which a few lire had been thrown.

The tone of the book is set—the tone of a sensitive and compassionate man—the humanitarian type—plunked down amongst a nation of people reduced to the level of animals.

Meanwhile the authorities had installed themselves in the city and established an office—the AMG—the American Military Government. It was Lewis and his colleagues in British intelligences who were attached to the AMG as a sort of glorified

snooping adjunct and DA's office. The duties were not clearly defined—both a plus and minus to the job—but the idea was to do what could be done to control activities on the black market—not much as Lewis says because “We soon discovered that most Italians lead political lives of complete apathy although prone to sexual adventures”.

These were the themes of Neapolitan life at this time: food, sex, the black market. Naturally they were interconnected and to speak of one was for the other two to quickly enter the picture.

Letter from a father

Lewis visits a family to investigate some incident of thievery--or the rumor of such—and the following day receives a letter:

Sir: I noticed when your honor was good enough to call that from the way you spoke to my daughter she made a good impression on you. This girl has no mother and hasn't eaten for days. I have no job and can't feed my family. If you could manage to give her a good meal once a day I'd be quite happy for her to stay and perhaps we could come to some mutually satisfactory understanding in due course.

The jailed industrialist

An industrialist was sentenced to a year for black market activities. The wife goes to the Beacon, the best of the Neapolitan brothels and asks to see the most intelligent girl. She dresses the girl in her best clothes, complete with jewelry and pays her 4000 lire to impersonate her, the wife of the industrialist, and arrange

for an interview with the colonel over at the AMG who prosecuted the case.

Lewis:

“The visit was a success and 2 days later the industrialist was re-introduced to civilian life. The general view of Italians to this story is: “Too bad they didnt send one with the syphilis””.

Ride to a soldier

Returning from an assignment Lewis picks up an American soldier hitching a ride. They drive a few blocks and the soldier says: “I feel like a woman. How about that place over there?” He shows Lewis his pack with some cans of food. Lewis drops him off outside an apartment building and waits as the soldier rings the bell. The door opens and there are a few words of conversation with the person inside and the soldier gives the OK sign to Lewis and disappears inside the building.

Vito Genovese

The American Mafia in the thirties was under the control of Lucky Luciano. There was this Don and that Don and the other Don but when push came to shove it was Lucky Luciano calling the shots. Lucky’s second in command was Vito Genovese. The FBI had been hounding Luciano for years and finally managed to deport him back to his native Sicily where, hailed as a hero, he didnt miss a beat resuming his nefarious activities and a few years later it was Vito who found himself in the soup, under a

murder indictment, and he fled the country also, to turn up in Naples where, following the example of his former boss he enjoyed the confidence and benign patronage of Mussolini.

Then 1943 arrived, the Duce was arrested and Vito became tight with the Americans—the AMG—and quickly assumed control of the *sindacos* of most of the towns within the vicinity of Naples.

Now what you had was: the AMG calling the shots policy-wise but it was the camorra—operating under the eagle eye of Vito Genovese--that controlled the black market and it was the black market that served to regulate life as it was actually lived among the people of the city.

The significance of all this was obvious: that anything involving the black market had first to receive the AMG stamp of approval.

For example: News leaked out of a particularly stealable load of military equipment and other goods arriving by cargo ship. The camorra sprung into action. The officials involved were paid off and when the ship docked the air raid sirens sounded to clear the streets, the mobile smoke screen units were flung into action and the “shock troops” of the *camorra* were on the scene in a flash and the operation went off without a hitch--to unload the entire contents of the ship down to the last box of spam, cigarettes, coffee and bayonets onto the backs of the waiting army trucks and they were gone.

sex continued

Lewis is approached by a woman in the street who implores him to visit her house where she has something to show him.

He decides to help out.

She lives not in a house but, like 80% of the Neapolitans, a *basso*, a slang expression, to describe a single room—windowless, airless, waterless.

What she has to show him is her daughter, age 13 and thin as a stick. Lewis says:

Some soldiers are reluctant to have sex with the average Neapolitan prostitute due to a fear of venereal disease but are willing to pay for some other service—fellatio being the most common—but also for a young girl such as this to strip and display her sex.

The woman suggests a price of 20 lire—or 2/3 the cost of one egg on the black market. Lewis declines.

Prince A

A visit from Prince A—the absentee landlord of a vast estate in the south. The Prince is typical of the Neapolitan upper class—meaning he was educated to embrace the idea that the business of trade or to perform some useful commercial service is unseemly but to enter a profession in which he is certain never to find employment is acceptable. The result is an enforced aristocratic idleness that leaves the Prince and other members of his class even worse off than the average Neapolitan who merely goes hungry while the prince and his fellow aristocrats are dying of starvation. That is why the prince has appeared at Lewis' door, along with his sister, age 24, to ask Lewis if he can arrange for the sister to enter an army brothel. Lewis regrets to explain that,

unlike the Germans, the British have failed to establish these services.

Food.

There was no food. Lewis estimates that 1/3 of the food imported into Italy by the allies was diverted to the black market. Food was the obsession of every Neapolitan from the moment they opened their eyes in the morning until they fell asleep at night with the same nagging emptiness gnawing at their innards.

These are some of the things you will find yourself eating when there is nothing else to be found:

The roadside plant—mostly dandelions

Small birds—sparrows and warblers

Seafood such as: winkles and sea snails, and in the poultry dept: chicken heads and guts, the throat and feet.

Also Cats

Lewis:

The density of the population in the *vicaria* district is the greatest in Europe—3000 people per acre. They live on the indescribable offal from the slaughterhouse, on the heads and tails of fish and in a moment even more desperate than usual—the body of a cat. There is a rumor of the steady decline of the cat population of the city and I note the carcass of a rabbit is

never on display in a butcher shop without the head that guarantees its identity. Otherwise a swap with the body of a cat has been known to occur

cost of living

The average monthly wage for an Italian civil servant at this time was 1200 lire. A loaf of bread on the black market, made with tainted flour is 160 lire/kilo. Olive oil is 450 lire per litre, eggs are 30 lire each and salt doesn't exist and cannot be bought at any price.

The Uncle From Rome

Of all the Neapolitan scoundrels out there wandering the streets—the hustlers and pimps and hookers and thieves and scheming politicians and informants and high and low ranking members of the *camorra*, etc, it was Lattarullo who becomes his contact—the uncle from Rome

Lattarullo wasnt an uncle and he wasnt from Rome but everyone in Naples had their role to play and this was his. Like the Prince as described above Lattarullo was proof of the determination of every middle class Neapolitan family to have one uselessly qualified son. The family could barely put 4 slices of bread on the table for the

evening meal but the son can now be addressed with respect—
as *avvocato* or *dottore* or *professore*

This according to Lewis was the classic description of the inner workings of Neapolitan society at the time—a time of anarchy and disorder and raging starvation—but not to lose sight of, above all, the value of values—to keep up appearances.

Its on display most prominently at a funeral. A man who lived in poverty his entire life is certain to be buried in a magnificent coffin and given a dignified farewell and this is where the uncle from Rome comes in--some professional type commissioned for a few hundred lire to appear at the funeral and pose as a friend of the deceased. Lewis says:

“Why in this little farce must the uncle be from Rome? Why not Bari or Taranto? But Rome it has to be”.

The uncle appears on the scene in a fine suit, a perfect fit and lets it be known he has just arrived on the Rome express, he never uses the 3rd person singular personal pronoun *lui* as all the lower class Neapolitan types do but says *egli*—as in the textbooks. Lattarullo was perfect to play this part. He had the patrician appearance, and the Roman accent and manner had been rehearsed to perfection.

If anyone at the wake happened to notice Lattarullo as a fellow Neapolitan often seen wandering half starved in the streets like everyone else they were careful to keep this information to themselves.

The funeral over Lattarullo would return to his room—the *basso*--and eat lunch. A slice of bread dipped into a precious hoard of olive oil and briefly rubbed, not too forcefully, with a tomato.

Lola and the Captain

Lattarullo introduces Lewis to a friend—Lola—who has a British lover—captain Frazer. Neither speaks the language of the other and Lola has come to ask a favor—for Lewis to pass along crucial information she wishes to share with the captain. The neighbors are beginning to gossip about the captain, not that he is her lover which is common knowledge but that he visits only at night and never during the day. This is a violation of the Neapolitan custom in which the lover always pays a “conjugal visit”, as Lola puts it, at mid-afternoon.

Lewis promises to pass on the message.

He meets with the captain. Lewis says:

The captain was a striking man with a beautiful greatcoat made especially for him—the most handsome coat I had ever seen and, to complete the picture, a hat that was pushed up in front with some kind of stiffener that made him look like an officer in some crack German SS formation.”

They speak of Lola and it seems the captain has a few questions of his own, relating to the husband, or ex-husband, the deceased husband who Lola has described via certain gestures that, as Lewis puts it “can only shudderingly be imagined” as a sexual superman that even half starved and in the early stages of the tuberculosis from which he died was able to have intercourse 6 times a night.

Lewis by this time now regards everything that falls into his lap as an assignment to be executed with suitable energy and recommends a local drink—marsala wine with the yolks of 2

eggs—and for a little insurance—to wear a medal of San Rocco—the patron saint of intercourse.

visit to a cemetery

A colleague of Lewis is invited by a female contact to visit Naples cemetery. He decides she merely wanted company to visit the family tomb. But then at the cemetery she drags him behind a monument and—despite the freezing weather, lies down upon the ground and pulls up her skirt. Now the officer looks around and sees other couples copulating here and there among the gravesites. It seems the cemetery is the local lovers lane. He says to Lewis:

“There were more people lying on top the ground than beneath it”.

The syphilis campaign

I didnt say the *anti*-syphilis campaign. The idea was to spread it—not stamp it out. Lewis says: “This is why intelligence officers are intelligence Officers”. It was a fact the incidence of syphilis among prostitutes was much lower in Rome and the northern part of the country because the Germans, who were in control of these areas, operated brothels for the army and the women were carefully scrutinized for any signs of venereal disease. But in the south, the allied occupied south, this was a problem of epic scope.

Enter Intelligence with a brilliant plan—to round up a few dozen of the Neapolitan whores who were the most seriously infected with the disease—without showing visible signs of such, chancre-wise, and then ship them off to Rome to be turned loose upon the Germans.

But the plan was thwarted for a simple reason: the whores all had pimps, they were attached to the pimps and vice versa—naturally—and some of the pimps had contacts in high places—naturally—and the idea gradually ran out of steam and nothing came of it. Too bad

The stolen fiat

There was an anti-corruption agency—the *pubblica sicurezza*—that had itself become so riddled with corruption a new agency was formed to succeed it—the *squadra nucleo*—and one of the first cases to land on the investigation list involved a leading citizen—a surgeon—who had acquired a Fiat sports car that he did not know, though he should have known, was stolen. Normally in this type situation a call would have been paid by the surgeon on the *pubblica sicurezza*— and a bribe handed over of 50,000 lire. But now it was the *squadra nucleo* on the job to correct that situation and the bribe had quadrupled—to 200,000 lire

stealing

The loot preferred over all stolen goods is the telephone cable with the copper wire innards. The cable is dug up, a section chopped out, the insulation removed and from there its over to a stall in the *via Forcella*--the open air flea market to be sold on the black market. Not a Neapolitan family exists with at least one member engaged in the stealing copper wire.

Otherwise there was nothing too large or small to steal—from telegraph poles to vials of penicillin—nor was anything

considered off limits—no matter how sacred or of value to the cultural heritage.

Such as: An orchestra that took a 5 minute break during a concert and returned to find all their instruments gone.

Or: A priceless collection of Roman cameos stolen from a museum and replaced by cheap imitations and then the thieves to find out the originals they had stolen were themselves imitations

Also: Statues that disappeared from a public square and tombstones from cemeteries

3 missing fingers

A mother appears in Lewis's office with a youth of 12 years and holds up a hand with three missing fingers. She has the fingers in her purse and has been told, mistakenly, that the British surgeons have developed an operation to sew fingers back onto the hand from which they have become separated.

How did they become separated? In this way: the city swarms with dozens of these juvenile gangs and one preferred trick is to hop into the back of an army truck stalled in traffic and begin tossing out to their chums anything stealable that may be stashed in the back of the truck. Its a problem and the army has decided to solve the problem by hiding under a tarp a citizen with a hatchet. He waits for a small hand to attach itself to the tailgate of the truck and down comes the hatchet.

Lewis says: "God knows how many children have lost their fingers in this way".

angelo

In an effort to quench or at least make a dent in the epidemic of crime prison sentences have been accelerating—on a daily basis. So it behooves prisoners to come to trial quickly. A delay could add several years to the sentence. The problem is that the prison system itself is in chaos and once behind bars any thing can happen. Frequently a case will come up for trial, the man cannot be found and the trial postponed. by the time the postponement occurs the sentence for the crime has doubled or worse

Lewis was obliged to arrest angelo Priore, 70 yeas old, with a dying wife living alone in a *basso* with no food and 32 cats. The trial had been twice postponed because Antonio had disappeared somewhere into the bowels of the system and in the interim the sentence had been goosed—boosted from a fine to a fine plus 3 years.

An exchange in court

The judge is American and speaks no Italian. The defendant, a halfwit, accused of the usual, stealing telephone cable for resale on the black market. But there are no witnesses, the evidence has disappeared and the MP making the arrest has failed to show in court and the half wit is jabbering away some nonsense that has the court in an uproar.

The judge: did he just say something about the Americans? What did he say?

Interpreter: just a stupid remark your honor, nothing to do with the case.

Judge: please leave it to me to decide what has to do with The case. I insist on knowing what he said.

Interpreter: he said "When the Germans were here we ate once a day. Now the Americans have come we eat once a week.

Judge: ask him if it means nothing to him that we have freed him and his kind from Fascism. How can he talk about us and the Germans in the same breath?

The interpreter interprets and the defendant rolls his eyes and begins jabbering and also to emphasize his words, grabs his private parts. The court erupts in laughter.

The judge: Im losing patience with him. What does he say now?

Interpreter: with respect your honor he says, Americans or Germans its all the same to him. We've been fucked by them both.

The Judge: Hes off his head. Get him out of my sight. Case dismissed

The prisoner: best wishes your lordship. May all your children be males

Three Neopolitan Protestations of Honesty—all prefaced with "your honor":

"Your honor he is as innocent as the soul of a child murdered by Herod".

“I swear to your honor on the mourning worn for my sister who died a virgin”.

“God knows your honor I’d sooner lie to my own father”.

The blind children

Lewis takes Lattarullo to lunch. Its a cold day and the restaurant is without heat and the customers bundled up in overcoats made from stolen army blankets. The waiter arrives at Lewis’s table bearing a fish on a platter—the “show fish”. Lewis says: “As usual there was a trick involved” The trick was to sever the head of the fish from the body and to cut the body into small portions that were unidentifiable and the question arises—are the body of the fish and the head of the fish the same fish? And the answer, according to Lattarullo is: no. The body is from a different fish--perhaps the dog fish—one to be avoided. They settle for macaroni.

Now while they eat there is a commotion. Five little girls, perhaps 9-12 years of age appear in the door. They are dressed in black, a uniform of some kind, buttoned under their chin with black boots and stockings and hair cut short—institutional style. They are orphans—also blind and they are weeping. They were passing by with their guardian and there was the smell of food and they gravitated to it and now they were inside bumping their way around the room.

Lewis waits—for someone to offer a bit of food from their plate but of course no one does. The customers continue to concentrate on their food, shoveling it into their mouths as though these children do not exist.

Lewis says:

This incident had a profound effect. Until now I clung to the optimistic belief that human beings eventually come to terms with pain and sorrow. But now I knew I was wrong. These little girls, any one of whom could have been my daughter came weeping into the restaurant and weeping still when they were led away and I knew that, condemned to everlasting darkness, hunger and loss, they would weep on incessantly. They would never recover from their pain and I would never recover from the memory of it.

The moors

Lewis:

What is it that turns an ordinary decent Moroccan peasant boy into the most terrible of sexual psychopaths as soon as he becomes a soldier?

He investigates a complaint of rape—a young girl driven insane by an assault from a group of Moroccans—French Colonial Troops. Cases such as this involving these troops—the Moors as they are called by the locals—are on the rise and back at the office

Lewis is met by a group of *sindacos* from the neighboring towns and an ultimatum given: either clear out the Moroccans or we will take action and do it our way.

Lewis says:

These men looked like the toughest movie gangsters and I was convinced they would carry out their threat.

And they did. Some weeks later Lewis investigates another call—the murder of five Moroccans in the village of Canello. The Moors were invited to meet some women and once inside the house were given poisoned food. While still conscious they were castrated and beheaded. The beheadings were assigned to youths of 12 or 13 to prove their worth but they lacked the strength and skill and the men were obliged to finish the job.

Extraordinary Naples

Naples is extraordinary in every way. Last week a Nobleman in our street was lifted by his servants from his deathbed, dressed in his evening clothes, then carried to be propped up at the head of the staircase over the courtyard of his palazzo. Here with a bouquet of roses thrust into his arms he stood for a moment to take leave of his friends and neighbors gathered in the courtyard below, before being carried back to receive the last rites. Where else but in Naples could a sense of occasion be carried to such lengths.

A Friend of Vito

The stealing of penicillin was out of control—to the point that the neighborhood pharmacies are in short supply and even the military hospitals are feeling the pinch.

Lewis is assigned to investigate the problem and the trail leads to Vittorio Fortuna, pharmacist and friend and associate of Vito Genovese. But there is Lewis, on the steps of Fortunas house with

his papers in order, an arrest warrant, and the following conversation occurs:

Fortuna: This will do you no good. Who are you? You are no one. I was dining with a certain Colonel last night. If you are tired of life in Naples I can arrange a transfer.

But the arrest is made, Fortuna is locked up and Lewis prepares for the next step, prosecution. At this point a note arrives in the office, addressed to Lewis, inviting him for a chat with Colonel Poletti—the G in AMG.

Over at AMG Lewis meets not with the Governor but the governor's deputy, a civilian—"a small, dried out, light-starved functionary"

The GD (sighing deeply): Senor Fortuna has had a sudden attack of appendicitis and been transferred to the Hospital at Cercola.

Lewis: that is a civilian hospital. Why wasn't he sent to the prison hospital?

DG: the prison does not have the proper facilities.

Lewis is stuck. He knows he can take a doctor to the hospital to examine Fortuna where they are sure to find an incision in his stomach, the running of a temperature and a dire prognosis featuring a slow recovery followed by a long convalescence.

Now the ball would be in my court. I could insist on returning him to the prison hospital,

where the facilities were indeed primitive, and now it begins to look like victimization to anyone who did not know the facts of the case and Fortuna would be sure to file an appeal to AMG, who would be sure to refer the matter upward to the next level at no. 3 District.

Lewis, knowing this was a scenario that could have been predicted, returns to the office to report these latest developments and his boss, sighing deeply, says “I simply don’t see how you can spare the time”. And that was that.

And also: All the fish from the Naples Aquarium—the renowned Naples Aquarium with many exotic species—have been eaten

What about the Swabian prince who spoke of his celebrated ancestors and a contempt for the peasantry so sublime that a tax was imposed for sleeping with their wives—21 nights a month

And there was don Rico the capitalist who had “the sad eyes and drooping features of the bloodhound and these enormously long fingernails on the little fingers of each hand to prove—in the old fashioned style of the south—that he does no work”

And finally Marcello the midget gynecologist—who required a stepladder to perform his examinations and specialized in the restoration of lost virginity for those who could afford it, and whose boast was, as Lewis says—“that the replacement hymen is much sturdier than the original and takes even the most vigorous husband 3 nights to demolish it”

Well I could go on but you get the idea. Its a book of 175 pages and on every page or nearly a story so incredible and incredibly hilarious, hair-raising, tragic, squalid and absurd as to make your head spin.

It all combines to leave you with one—and only one—conclusion: thank God this wasnt me.

Farewell to Naples

Its oct 1944 and Lewis says “The thunderbolt has fallen”-- orders to pack up and prepare for his next assignment—to embark for Port Said where he is to pick up 3000 Russian prisoners who deserted to the Germans and repatriate them to their native land. From Southern Italy to the Russian front and just in time for winter.

Normally I like to end a piece with words of my own--some penetrating observation that boils down everything that preceded it and to leave the reader in a state of 100% satisfaction. Thats the idea. But with this book nothing I write could compare with anything Norman Lewis has written on every page and I will leave it to him and the words with which he ends the book, taking leave of the city and the people of the city he has conceived such an affection for:

I am left with only hours to spare and no time to say goodbye to friends scattered through so many towns—no time for a glass of *marsala* with any of the scheming *sindacos* or a coffee substitute with the girls in the Gran café I was unable to help marry a soldier or a last meal at zia teresas and to shake the gnarled paw of the old aunt, or even a half hour to spare for a dash up to the

Vomero for a last panoramic view of the great grey and red city spread below. But I will see Lattarullo and I know that when it is time to go he will take my hand and say: 'Ill be at the station tomorrow to see you off' and I know he will be there as promised, dressed in all the dignity of his *zio di Roma* suit for such an occasion.