



E-ISSN: 2706-9117
 P-ISSN: 2706-9109
www.historyjournal.net
 IJH 2023; 6(2): 327-331
 Received: 15-10-2024
 Accepted: 22-11-2024

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Two socialists and their daughters (1890-1945)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2024.v6.i2e.333>

Abstract

Giovanni Zibordi and Camillo Prampolini were the most representative deputies of 'reformist' socialism in a city that symbolized the socialist movement and the Italian Socialist Party. Both were fathers of an only daughter: Pierina Prampolini (raised by her aunt) and Freja Zibordi (raised by her illiterate mother). Both were linked to a partner (Giovanni married while Camillo never married) and had a rather peculiar relationship with their daughters: after an inner journey (also linked to political militancy), Giovanni managed to accept and protect his daughter's homosexuality, who remained his fundamental political interlocutor, as well as his 'infiltrator' in his former constituency, when he had to flee his 'adopted city' due to a fascist attack; Prampolini also had an anomalous relationship with his daughter, whom he protected in place of her mother (who died prematurely), spoiling her and supporting her in the pursuit of the career she had undertaken but, at the same time, distancing her from the 'danger' posed by her political militancy, especially during the fascist regime but also in general. Although they held different positions in the public debate on the 'women's question' - Prampolini more radical, Zibordi more 'attentive' and cautious, especially on issues related to sexuality and the political role of women, even to the point of appearing paternalistic - they developed an extremely interesting relationship with their daughters that may perhaps even appear to be opposed to their considerations expressed in the public debate. This attitude is typical of many socialists (revolutionary and otherwise) at a time when women could not vote but could have a particular influence in the cultural and political debate until the advent of Fascism. Suffice it to say that the real leader of the Italian Socialist Party was Anna Kuliscioff, the life companion of leader Filippo Turati but not elected or eligible for Parliament. It is not without interest in post-1945 Italian history that, after the regime's fall, Freja was one of the founders of the then Democratic and Pro-Atlantic Socialist Party, a minority in Italy but consistent with her father's political line.

Keywords: Lesbianism, fascism, Italian socialism

Introduction

Alain Corbin's work on the history of the senses and the perceptual dimension of the past, together with the contributions of Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby on the emotional dimension of the private and the familiar, have significantly advanced historians' understanding of the affective sphere and the role of emotions as social processes.

Studying this private dimension implies the formulation of a functional morality applicable to political contexts. The issues of love, sexuality, marriage and family are discussed in political parties and institutions. However, the construction of political cultures gives rise to advice, prohibitions, disciplinary measures and rules of conduct. In the sphere of individual morality, there are points of contact and clash with the contemporary present and the multiple communities in which the protagonists live. Finally, it should be emphasised that in Italy, in the sphere of individual morality, secular culture and Catholic culture (in all its implications), there is almost always confrontation and clash. This clash occurs with regard to Italians and the social and political life of Italian women.

An attempt is therefore made to articulate these themes in a case study by analysing them mainly through epistolary writing, which can help to understand various processes, including those relating to family, group and political relations.

The epistolary correspondence between daughters and fathers and between the two friends-fathers analysed below is currently preserved in a public archive (the Panizzi Library in Reggio Emilia) and by some private individuals, relatives of the two women.

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Methodology/approach

The methods used in this analysis are those typical of historical analysis focusing on the period between the last years of the 19th and the first years of the 20th century: the reading of articles written by the two socialists protagonists of the article in national magazines and newspapers, the reading of their parliamentary speeches, the analysis of the few documents in the State Archives (which concern the reports of the prefects - representatives of the government on the national territory - and the correspondence with the leaders of the Socialist Party) and, above all, the personal archives kept in the library/archive of Reggio Emilia, which include the correspondence between the two parliamentarians, between each of them and their daughters, but also with family members and friends.

The article analyses the public ideas on the 'female question' and the private behaviour of fathers who choose to implement them in private with their only daughters.

The protagonists of this case study are Giovanni Zibordi (1870-1943) and Camillo Prampolini (1859-1930), both militants and exponents of the Italian Socialist Party, and both linked to the history of a part of the Po Valley territory (in central-northern Italy) to which Reggio nell'Emilia belongs. In general, Reggio Emilia is a significant province for the development of Italian socialism. These two politicians are linked to the history of the creation and implementation of a particular type of socialism (often heterodox compared to the currents of the national PSI) that developed in this predominantly rural area. The Reggio Emilia socialists (but not only) had built what is defined as an 'intransigent reformist' socialism and, in Prampolini's case, also Christian. The 'intransigent reformism' also counted Giacomo Matteotti, perhaps the most famous Italian politician killed by the fascists, among its ranks. For these politicians, it was clear that the task of reformism was to bring about the gradual and progressive enlargement of political and social citizenship, the only way towards a socialism that could not, therefore, be revolutionary, but a socialism that found its reason to exist only if it arose from below, from the conscious participation of each person, from their education, from their training. For these reasons, the ideas on the women's question are not only important but crucial: the consciousness that should have pre-existed women's right to vote should have transited from the formation of two equally strong and pre-existing consciousnesses: that of education for personal dignity and that of education for politics. The first issue also 'included' sex education, schooling and all those fragments of self-consciousness that would have constituted the birth and formation of a solid 'class' consciousness (a class consciousness that was not perceived Manicheanly by this strand of Italian socialism).

The four protagonists of this (hi) story

The protagonists of the case study are Giovanni Zibordi (Padua, 20 September 1870 - Bergamo, 30 July 1943) and Camillo Prampolini (Reggio Emilia, 27 April 1859, 30 July 1930), both militants and exponents of the Italian Socialist Party. Giovanni's daughter, of whom we have important documentation, is Freja Vittoria Simonetta Zibordi, born on 22 June 1900 in Poggio Rusco, in the province of Mantua, where her father, Giovanni Zibordi, and mother, Cesira Negrelli (Carbonarola, 24 May 1874 - Bergamo, 13 October 1945) had been living for some years.

Her parents had married on 11 September 1899, when both were already involved in the political struggle: Giovanni was a young socialist, the son of wealthy local landowners; Cesira (sister of seven other siblings) was probably a worker involved in the peasant struggles. Freja's life developed in a 'militant' family, in which her father (a Literature and History graduate from Bologna University) certainly left more public and private traces of his life than her mother, who remained illiterate.

Freja's relationship with her father and mother is a constant. She has a non-symmetrical relationship with them, especially in the eyes of an outside observer, who reads family life through the correspondence between her and her father, the only parent able to maintain a correspondence relationship. Around Freja, and above all her father, moves Reggio Emilia's reformist socialism and then anti-fascism, until she and other militants meet over the years and decide to join the formation of the PSLI, born in the early months of the Republic.

The correspondence between father and daughter was only interrupted by Giovanni's death in July 1943, a few days after the Grand Council's decision to 'defy' Mussolini.

The interweaving of relationships that occurs in this initial proximity of ideas and geography shapes Giovanni not only towards a close friendship with Camillo's family, but also towards an attitude (as a young man compared to his mentor) that is much less ideological and more empathetic towards people, be they readers, acquaintances, friends or relatives. Giovanni Zibordi's commitment as a father added to his already existing commitment as a politician. After the birth of his daughter, the then provincial leader of the PSI in Mantua intensified his interest in the 'women's question' and the centrality of education (not just schooling) for girls. Aside from the (true) vaticini of one of his sisters, Marina, who kept complaining ('You are not destined to have many children', i.e. to disappoint her family of origin), Zibordi is indeed a 'totally political man' who immerses himself in the reality of the time and tries to influence it.

This is certainly not an attitude foreign to the tradition of early Italian socialism, which was rarely Marxist. Freja's father expressed his first noteworthy stance on this issue even before arriving in Reggio Emilia when, on 18 December 1902, as a newly elected provincial councillor in Mantua, he presented a report on the reorganisation of the municipal schools in the capital and the consequent creation of a complementary school for girls: the report set out the precise didactic and moral criteria according to which the complementary school to be built was to be directed, for 'the loving and enlightened care of young girls when they need guidance; the completion of the knowledge acquired in the first three classes; [. ... a practical institute for the training of girls in the arts and sciences. ... a practical institute to prepare them for work'. For Zibordi, education was always (and not only in the case of women) a cornerstone of the 'reformism' that he never abandoned.

The provincial socialist congress in Mantua in 1904 marked a turning point in the history of the family and of Giovanni himself: sent by the party to direct the newspaper 'Nuova Terra', his positions as an 'intransigent reformist' soon came into conflict with both the right-wing groups of the party and with the future 'maximalists', while from Reggio, Camillo Prampolini invited him to direct 'La Giustizia', the newspaper that was read and edited as the 'bulletin of this laboratory' of national politics. In those years, Reggio

became the 'capital of socialism', especially in 1905. Zibordi's debut in the new Reggio 'world' was not without the appearance on the scene of some female figures in the movement, such as Argentina Altobelli, the first woman to become a trade union leader in the peninsula, who was very intrigued by Zibordi's ideas. Freja grew up in this environment and got used - playfully - to being close to her mother. Giovanni was thus one of the privileged friends of the 'apostle of socialism' Prampolini, a former deputy forced to abandon political activity for a long time due to illness and then the death of his companion on 29 October 1891. Giulia Giovanna Segala had been suffering from consumption for some time. The last farewell to Camillo's companion (who was never 'legally' married to him) was a secular ceremony organised under the auspices of the Socialist League and was one of the testimonies to Prampolini's private life and the teaching he left to Zibordi of steadfastness in matching public and political teaching with daily practice. The rhetoric of Prampolini's evangelism, which presents socialism as the authentic heir to the message of Christ, contrasts the social morality of the Gospel and early Christianity with the formalism and exteriority of Catholic ritual practices. The challenge to the Catholic Church thus also manifested itself in the private lives of socialist leaders, especially in that area. Segala left Prampolini a daughter, Pierina (born in 1890), whose education was entrusted to her father's sister, Lia Carola, and, despite the distance, to Prampolini himself. Zibordi, therefore, had before him a political-ideal model - the suffragette, represented by her friends, the Sacchi sisters with whom she had worked in Mantua - and an 'everyday' and moral model - the reality of the friend and mentor, who showed self-sacrifice every day, but also a very paternalistic relationship, characterised above all by the physical distance from his only daughter.

In those years the debate began between Filippo Turati, Anna Kuliscioff (the real leader of the PSI) and other socialist intellectuals on sex education; these issues also imposed themselves on the socialist public through the positions of Cesare Lombroso and Napoleone Colajanni, who using the category of 'Malonian altruism' tried to demonstrate that in bourgeois societies emancipation would be harmful to both women and the community. Indeed, the PSI did not fully embrace Benoit Malon's positions, believing that 'women, as women, are the bearers of a liberating and humanising message'.

Zibordi, on the other hand, took positions not far removed from Malon, often openly polemising with Kuliscioff and Turati: in an open letter, he accused Turati (in favour of 'individual anarchism' in the sexual and sentimental field) of supporting a position that could be 'misrepresented' by men insufficiently trained in sexual, moral and sentimental education to avoid forcing women 'to make love by labelling as revolutionary behaviour an act of conquest and hegemony of sex for bourgeois egoistic ends'. In a way, at this stage, Zibordi seemed more interested in the 'education of young men' and the welfare of young women, including issues such as the birth of children 'out of wedlock' (an 'accident' - according to widespread rumours - in which he was also involved); Zibordi remained interested in 'hygienic culture', another aspect that would always fascinate him in socialist education, to the detriment of his focus on claiming women's right to vote.

It was only with the passing years that Giovanni became a

good listener to his wife, from whom he always asked for advice, and an 'accomplice' to his daughter, to the point that in 1935 he wrote a series of articles (prompted above all by the family's economic problems) aimed at women as mothers, housewives, workers and readers, with an empathy that was almost completely absent in early 20th century production. Interestingly, Zibordi moved from positions that were much less close to the daily struggle of women; he was constantly and forever fascinated by Kuliscioff, to whose death he dedicated a beautiful article, not by chance entitled *La 'Donna' (Anna Kuliscioff)*, in which he emphasised the qualities that made her a 'lady' even in private life, rather than emphasising her undoubted political intelligence.

In these early years of fatherhood, Zibordi was a keen observer of Camillo Prampolini's relationship with his daughter, which was always characterised by a 'good-natured' paternalism and marked by the guilt of his friend and mentor; while Freja went to school and became her father's correspondent at an early age (also on behalf of her mother), Prampolini suffered from the physical, sentimental and character problems of his daughter Pierina, who lived with her aunt Lia. The father, on the other hand, was busy as a member of parliament, board member (and then president) of the Cassa di Risparmio di Reggio Emilia (1904-1908), and therefore a public figure often away from home. In public, the Reggio Emilia socialists were often concerned with 'women' (in theory), so much so that almost every day an article appeared in 'La Giustizia' (the newspaper par excellence of Reggio Emilia socialism) to encourage members to commit themselves in every way to the political and social 'redemption' of the female masses. Zibordi himself wrote articles, pamphlets and essays to this end, but this activity never seemed to be aimed at claiming equal political rights and equality, but rather an attempt to concretise the help that women could bring to the struggles for the realisation of socialism.

The relationship with her father and mother was a constant in Freja's life. A non-symmetrical bond, especially in the eyes of an outside observer, who can only read family life through the correspondence between her and her father, the only parent capable of maintaining a correspondence relationship, to the point that even the relationship between Cesira and Giovanni is often 'filtered' through the daughter. Zibordi's philosophy led him to often and openly polemize with Kuliscioff and Turati: in an open letter, he accused Turati (in favour of 'individual anarchism' in the sexual and sentimental sphere) of having a position that could be 'misrepresented' by men insufficiently trained in 'correct' sexual, moral and sentimental education, allowing them to force women 'to make love, labelling as revolutionary behaviour an act of conquest and hegemony of sex for bourgeois egoistic purposes'. In a way, Zibordi seems at this stage more interested in the education of young men and the welfare of young women (including issues such as the birth of children out of wedlock, an 'incident' - according to popular rumours - in which he was involved) and 'hygienic culture', another aspect that would always fascinate him; all his attention to these issues developed at the expense of his focus on demanding the vote for women.

Zibordi was not against women's suffrage in principle, but he always kept his distance from this demand. For him, the political priorities were the development of a 'socialist' consciousness and community mobilisation.

Freja became her father's observer in Reggio Emilia (often distant and then removed by Fascism) and his favourite 'political correspondent': Zibordi often 'leaned' on Freja and her judgements, accepting them and, in fact, relating to her in an almost equal way.

Comrade Camillo Prampolini seemed more in tune with the line that the national party leaders were defending. However, he often recalled that, instead of discussing the sexual and hygienic lives of women and young people, the party should have denounced the failure to grant women the right to vote, which in the end proved very damaging to the socialist cause ('And then, in our lists, in the whole army... women are always missing').

As a father, Prampolini is paternalistic and protective of his daughter Pierina. This paternalism is perhaps due to the fact that he belongs to an older generation than Zibordi.

At the same time, however, he is very attentive to his daughter's professional growth, helping her in every way (both financially and logistically) to prepare for her dream of becoming a singer (a goal that should come true).

Prampolini continued to fight for women's right to vote.

The unpredictable

While fascism raged against Prampolini and Zibordi (who had to flee the city never to return, even after an attempted murder), Freja began a 'dangerous' personal journey for herself and also for her parents.

After dropping out of school and many periods of depression, she accepted her homosexuality and told her family, more with actions than words.

After a failed attempt at a relationship with a man, he opts for various romantic relationships with other women.

These trials lead to an important confrontation with his father.

Zibordi accepts Freja's life with a touching letter: 'If this is how you feel, I do not want to change you'. Not only that, but this acceptance leads to concern for Freja's every love affair (regardless of who her partner is) and an unexpectedly strong political awareness.

At the same time, Pierina suffers from physical problems and her father does not hesitate to follow in her footsteps, also with regard to his daughter's maturity, who seems to be constantly at the mercy of others, so much so that the concerned father writes: 'Pierina has still developed too much the spirit of imitation - a quality particularly appropriate for children and adolescents - and is, therefore, more "happy" to be like others than to be herself'.

Freja, on the other hand, feels she does not have to submit herself (let alone her family) to the laws and prejudices of the fascists now in power. This is why her parents (especially Giovanni) support their daughter, who has become independent. The father and mother accept that their only daughter lives her life on the Swiss border, where the restrictions of the law ('invisibility and social punishment' of lesbians) are less severe because it is easier to hide from the eyes of the community.

While Freja lived as a 'gypsy' until 1943 (the year of her father's death and the end of fascism), her parents did their best to support her economically and morally. Pierina Prampolini, on the other hand, 'fled' Italy several times under the pretext of Tourneès and preferred not to get involved in politics (which she never did): she stayed away from Fascist Italy, especially after the death of her father in 1930.

Until his death, Prampolini's love for his daughter shines through in all his correspondence. However, he rarely touched on 'political' topics (even for him, Pierina always remained a 'woman too young', especially in terms of personality): 'Besides, you must have realised that, despite the party, you are very close to being my lover. Be careful not to abuse it!!!'.

Her father overwhelms her with teachings and moral dogmas ('even to cure health you need willpower!'), while trying to win her affection (from afar): 'Forgive me. It is the love I have for you that drives me to torture you with my preaching, even in writing. I want you to be morally and physically sound, strong, virtuous, beautiful, the best of all women [...] to be loved is a nuisance'.

This tone is in total contrast to the bond between John and his daughter: so much so that in a letter of 22 May 1928 he writes

Dear Freja, let us see if we can explain ourselves better in writing than verbally.

First of all, there is nothing dearer to me (and let your mother say so too) than to know you as an ardent and reliable friend with good intentions, reciprocated by lively and grateful friendships. Seeing you live your moral life in this sphere and, in this sense, seeing you find an unhappy end to your existence for many reasons corresponds to all my wishes and ideals. Therefore, there is no shadow of prevention in general against your 'friendly' inclination and activity, or more specifically against the friends you choose, but rather the opposite. I reserve the liberty to judge certain cases or attitudes to which I am convinced I have given a salutary lesson for which you will be grateful in your hearts; on the other hand, I would not dream of restricting your freedom to continue relations with them [...]. I might wish [...] a greater sense of equality on your part; sometimes I feel you are too selfish. But if that is how you feel, I don't want to change you.

The danger that all women were in during the fascist regime was very real. The danger that women could free themselves from male power had to be exorcised. The so-called 'gynocracy' (understood as women's control over their own bodies and sentimental tendencies) undermined the secular patriarchal role and raised the spectre of male homosexuality. A man was not to be 'dominated' by a woman and if he was, he was not a real man. During the fascist period there were many slogans to reassert gender roles, and one of the most famous was: 'Motherhood is to women what war is to men'. Those who did not have children faced social disapproval, the bachelor tax and a whole series of certified diseases such as ageing skin, facial hair, uterine fibroids and nervous disorders. The conditioning towards a new and pure 'homo fascistus' was suffocating. There was a definite collusion between state, church and academia to protect the institution of the family and not allow women to emancipate themselves. It is no coincidence that the years 1924, 1927 and 1928 saw the highest number of female suicides in contemporary Italy. During Fascist totalitarianism, Freja often stayed in Pieve di Cadore, passing through Tegliò (in the province of Sondrio, almost a continuation of Italian and German Switzerland) and in any case keeping away from large population centres. The feeling that, with the rise of the fascist dictatorship, homosexuals had less and less room to manoeuvre is painfully acute and precise, even though, at the end of an intense debate, the new penal code did not go so far as to

criminalise homosexuality, for the reason that was already clear in Zibordi's household: invisibilisation (especially of lesbianism) is a policy that, rather than criminalisation, has erased the lives of thousands of people through silence and, even more so, has often forced them into marriage.

Zibordi's political resistance to fascism (which persecuted him forever) also became a wise but total private resistance: his daughter had the right to make choices contrary to the retrograde and obscurantist morality of the regime and the Catholic Church, shared by the majority of Italians. On the contrary, Prampolini resisted fascism by placing a barrier between his daughter and every political turn that took place in Italy: his priority was always to protect his daughter from the fascist restrictions that would be imposed on her because of her political militancy.

Giovanni Zibordi always remained at Camillo Prampolini's side, even though the two 'comrades' lived in different parts of Italy. When his friend died alone and poor, Zibordi made a strong posthumous gesture of friendship: not only did he collect money for his surviving sister, but he severely reprimanded his daughter Pierina, who had hosted some of those socialists who had switched to the National Fascist Party during the funeral. The friend would not allow his daughter to besmirch his 'honour' in this way.

After the fall of Fascism, Freja continued to be involved in politics, even when Italy became a republic thanks to the referendum that gave Italian women the right to vote for the first time (2 June 1946); in 1947 she was among the founders of the Socialist Party of Italian Workers (later the Italian Democratic Socialist Party), for which she stood as a candidate in the elections of 18 April 1948. In her emotional life, she remained faithful for 40 years to the poet and journalist Valentina Magnoni, her last companion, who gave her a house in Bergamo in the 1960s. Until her death, Freja worked tirelessly for charities in Milan and Bergamo.

There is no evidence of a friendship or relationship with Pierina Prampolini.

Conclusions

Giovanni Zibordi and Camillo Prampolini started from almost opposite positions, as they were also within the Italian Socialist Party (in the late 19th and early 20th century) on the 'women's question' and on whether women should be granted the right to vote. The change in their view of the role of Italian women became the opposite of their initial political positions when they were confronted with the development of their two daughters' lives.

This double personal and political path recalls the metaphor of many Italian antifascists: that of fleeing abroad (as in the case of Pierina Prampolini) and that of staying and fighting (albeit mainly through daily resistance and individual choices) against the fascist regime in Italy (as in the case of the other three protagonists of the case study proposed here).

Acknowledgment

This research was made possible thanks to the availability of the Panizzi Library/Archive in Reggio Emilia (Fondo Zibordi) and the letters and photographs given to me by Dr. Alberto Poli, a relative of Valentina Mangoni.

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