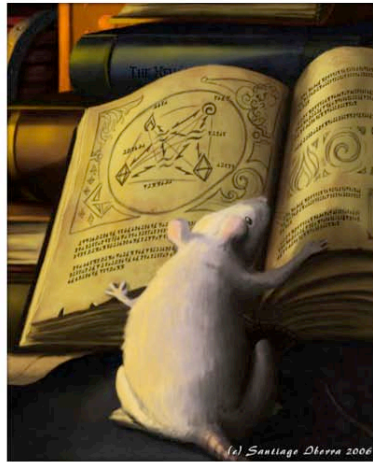


The **Wow** Factor: Confessions

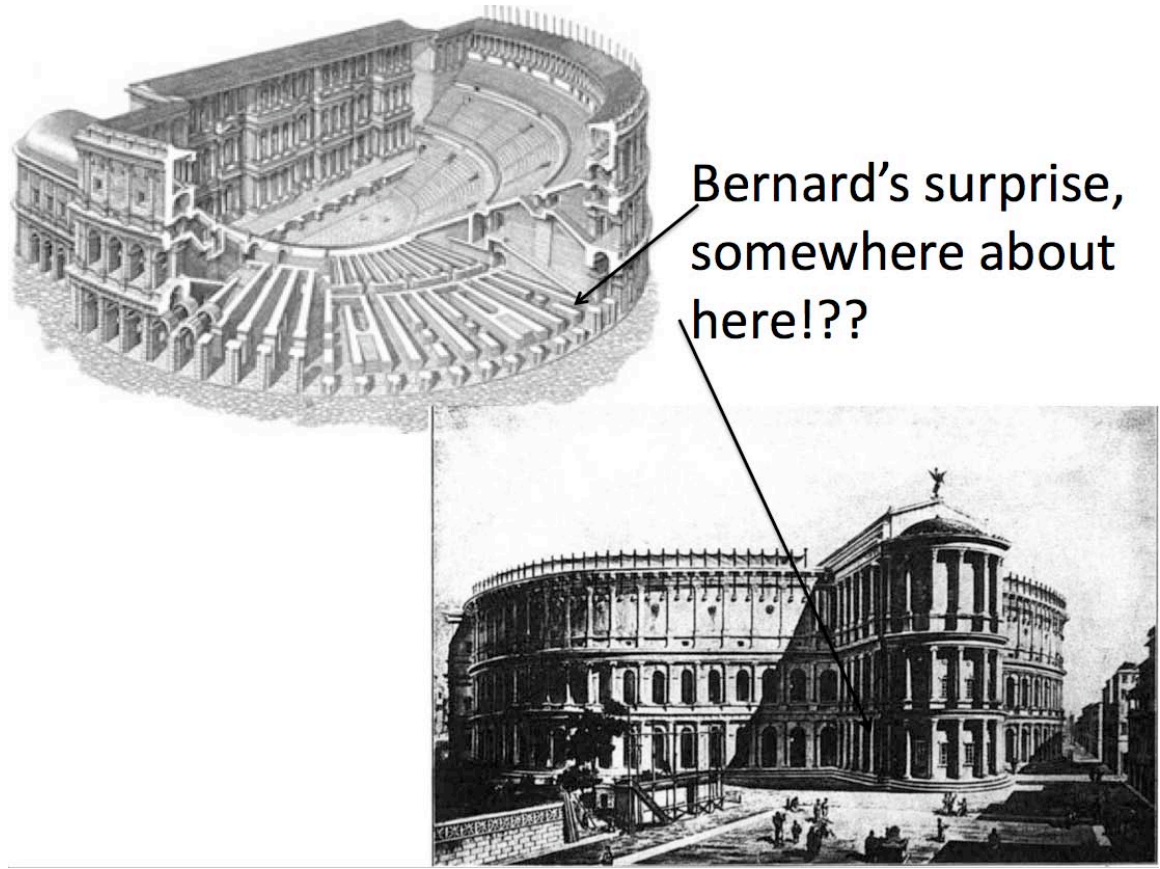
of an Archive Rat



Hello everybody. It is truly a pleasure to be here among you as we honor those students who have excelled in their academic endeavors at Loyola University. I too feel honored, indeed doubly honored, to be the recipient of the Nachbahr prize for outstanding scholarship this year: first because I am familiar with the work of the previous winners and I am gratified to be associated with such an illustrious and productive group; second because Bernard Nachbahr, in whose memory the award was created, was a friend of mine. I got to know him especially well as we worked together setting up the college's first study abroad program in Leuven Belgium, with him on the far side of the Atlantic and me on this one. I recruited, prepared and debriefed the students going abroad, while Bernard gave them the time of their lives personally, culturally, and intellectually. Occasionally, I would go to Belgium to see Bernard in action, but I have to say that it was one rousing dinner in Rome with him



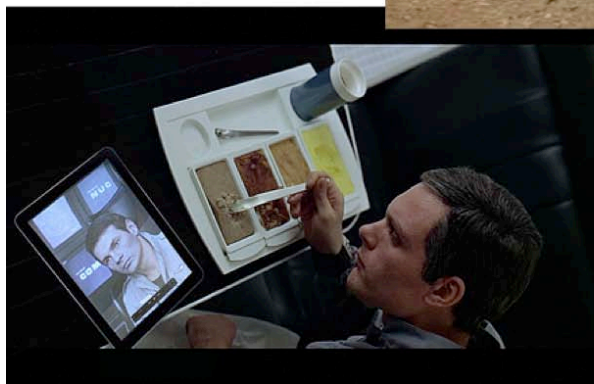
and a group of students that remains particularly vivid in my memory. Following an exquisite meal at a restaurant near Campo dei Fiori, Bernard gave a signal to the proprietor, who promptly unlocked a small shabby door down to a series of underground barrel-vaulted chambers of obvious antiquity. We all descended the rather rickety stairs, and with an irrepressible and characteristic twinkle in his eye, Bernard informed the students that they were now standing in the basement of the Theater of Pompey, the building in which Julius Ceasar had been murdered on the Ides of March in 44 BC. It was a “Wow Moment”, as everyone stared around agape at the classic roman brickwork, illuminated by a string of dusty naked light bulbs, and absorbed the musty ethos of history around them.



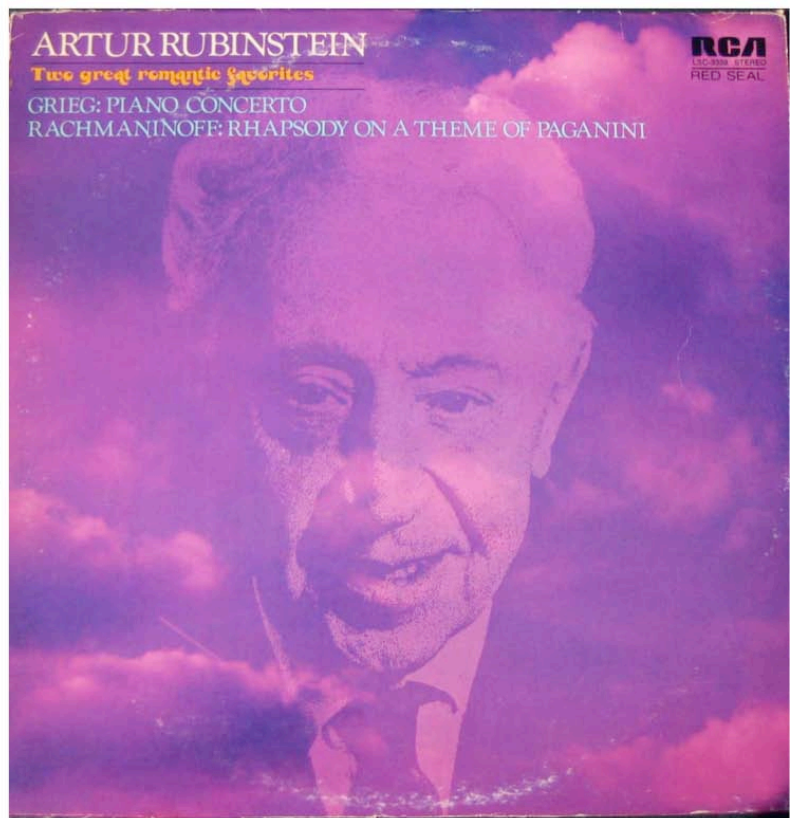
Appropriately then, it is from Bernard's concept of creating "Wow Moments" for our students, not just in Rome, but in alleys, streets, museums, and churches across the rest of Europe, that I take my inspiration for this talk about the life of the mind.



Like any good historian, I naturally sought out and read my predecessors' comments on this august occasion, and I was impressed and a bit daunted by the way that each of them made the "life of the mind" so relevant: relevant to the lives of newly arrived African immigrants, relevant to excellent undergraduate teaching, relevant to men who would spend the rest of their lives behind prison walls, relevant to a cogent and practical foreign policy, and relevant to a philosophy of faith in action: strong truths, well studied, and well lived. While I certainly subscribe to my colleagues' admirable comments and commitments, today I prefer, perhaps somewhat selfishly, to dwell on the personal relevancy of the life of the mind and in particular to discuss the way that "Wow Moments" can punctuate, elucidate, edify and energize our individual sojourns through the universe. Or to once again quote Bob Marley "If life is a journey, you might as well enjoy the trip."



Intellectual “wow moments” come in all shapes and sizes; sometimes they arrive in a flash and sometimes they result from long reasoned reflection. They range from finally grasping (after the fifth viewing) that images of food provide a key to unlocking Stanley Kubrik’s *2001 A Space Odyssey*, to sitting transfixed, seemingly forever, when your mezzo-soprano wife-to-be responds to your request to learn more about classical music by putting on Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a theme by Paganini*. And saying “now this is Romantic with a capital R.”



“Wow moments” can also be carefully arranged, like leading students through an architectural maze on the Ile de la Cité in Paris, then up a set of dark stone spiral steps, only to emerge into the dazzling mid-day display of the Sainte Chapelle’s stained-glass opulence, built by Saint Louis in the 13th century to house his newly

acquired crown of thorns. On the other hand, the big “wow” can hit you like a ton of bricks – like when you realize that slogging through eight hours of Dutch a day for four weeks, means you accidentally discover in the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam that you can actually read, with tears in your eyes, her publically encased diary in its original language.



But what has this to do with a celebration of scholarship, which is what the Nachbahr Award is all about? I would contend that the life of the mind for an academic is a constant searching for “wow moments”, but moments that are as much about creativity as they are discovery. For me, the connection started innocuously enough in the fourth grade when I discovered the *We Were There* series of books for young people. As you can, see each book placed an adolescent boy or girl, although usually both, into some historical event. They were always observer/participants, close enough to experience and report, but never to alter the

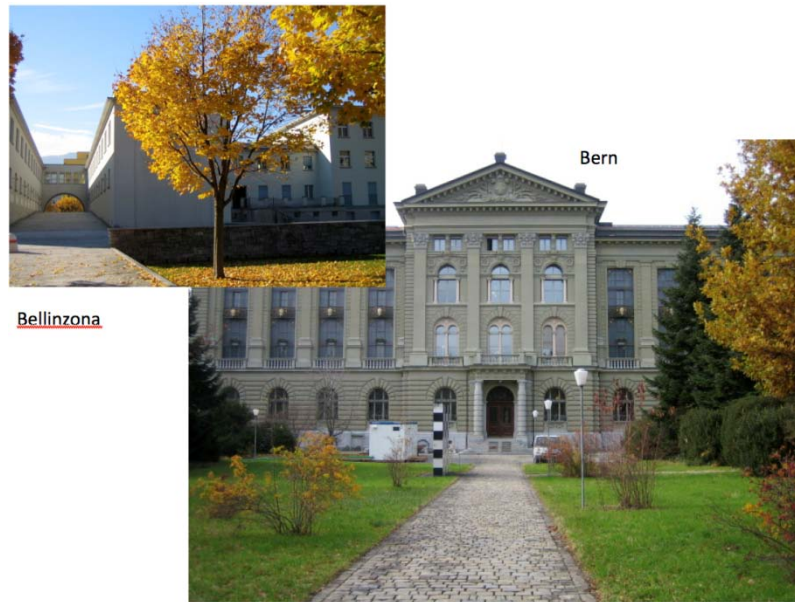
course of history. Each story had a historical consultant, but each offered a truly compelling drama that dragged you into the ethos and the action.



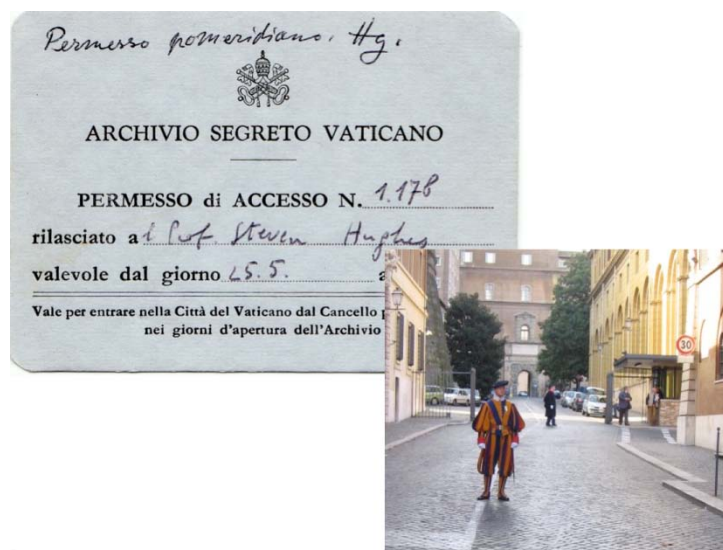
Gender roles were traditional, but agency abounded on both sides as kids your own age faced challenges and opportunities by the drove. Each book for me, as they slowly came to light in a pre-internet era of library randomness, turned into a “wow moment” of historical adventure and insight. In short, I was hooked on the past; and while some might call it luck, and some might call it providence, I called it very cool. Hence, at the end of the fifth grade my mother asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, and I responded that I wanted to be a history teacher –and so here I am living with the decision of a ten year old.



Let us fast forward to my job as a professional historian, because my high school career is best not mentioned, and we don't really have time to talk about how first-year classes in History and Italian at the University of Colorado completely changed my life - to say nothing of being introduced to the right woman at a bar known as the Sink, which is still around. By the way, so is the woman. What then, you might ask, are the "wow moments" for those of us, who, as one historian put it, "read dead people's mail for a living". It's a good question because for the most part historical research is a solitary, even lonely, pursuit. We tend to spend our time in archives around the world. Some are monumental and imposing, like the Swiss Federal Archive in Bern. Others are modern and airy like the Cantonal Archive of Ticino in southern Switzerland.



And a few, like the State Archive of Rome, are ensconced in daring architecture of such breathtaking beauty, that just going to work becomes something of a “Wow Moment.” There are also those archives where you have to obtain special permission to use the collection, wear a coat and tie in the reading room, and, everyday, you have to negotiate your way through rather flamboyant, but very serious, security.



On the other hand, there are some archives which tend to be substantially less formal.



But whatever its location, demeanor, or protocols, the same basic thing happens in an archive. Scholars sift through books and papers trying to make sense of what my colleague Tom Pegram, a previous Nachbahr scholar, has described as “the scattered, intractable evidence that the ocean of the past has cast onto our thin shoreline of documentation.” Sometimes, that evidence is easy to find and easy to read. Sometimes, it is more difficult. Sometimes, it’s just sort of insane; and you give it your best shot. And finally sometimes, you are just really glad that somebody had



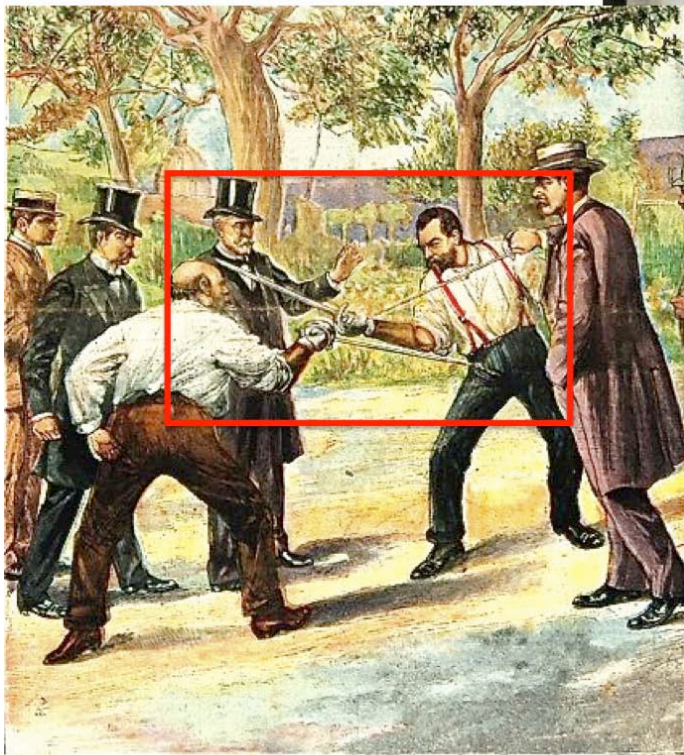
looking for; and I would always respond *un documento d'oro* or “a solid gold document.” This can be an intriguing letter that leads one’s research in new and unexpected directions, or it can be a document that fits like the last piece of a puzzle to reveal a picture of the past. For example, I had been working for months in Bologna to discern the structure and nature of the papal police, or *sbirri*, at the end of the eighteenth century. I ran into bits and pieces, partial descriptions and fuzzy anecdotes, but one day I was looking at documents from the period of Napoleonic occupation in the early nineteenth century. And there before me



emerged a list, put together by the French prefect, detailing the names, education, economic status, provenance, and work record of Bologna's *sbirri*, now called police guards, after the French took over in 1796. WOW, it was a solid gold document, but it wouldn't be to anybody else. It had to fit in with all the other documents that I felt to be important, many of which, as you can see, I had microfilmed by the long suffering, but ever patient, photographer of Bologna's archive.



Another graphic illustration of a scholarly “Wow Moment” comes from my more recent research on dueling and masculinity in modern Italy.



I had gradually come to realize that Benito Mussolini had very cleverly managed to substitute the popular knife for the aristocratic sword as an iconic weapon of honor during the early years of the fascist regime.



This shift was obvious in the fact that his own honor guard adopted the dagger as part of their uniform and employed it for ceremonial occasions, as you can see here, on the right, at his daughter's wedding.

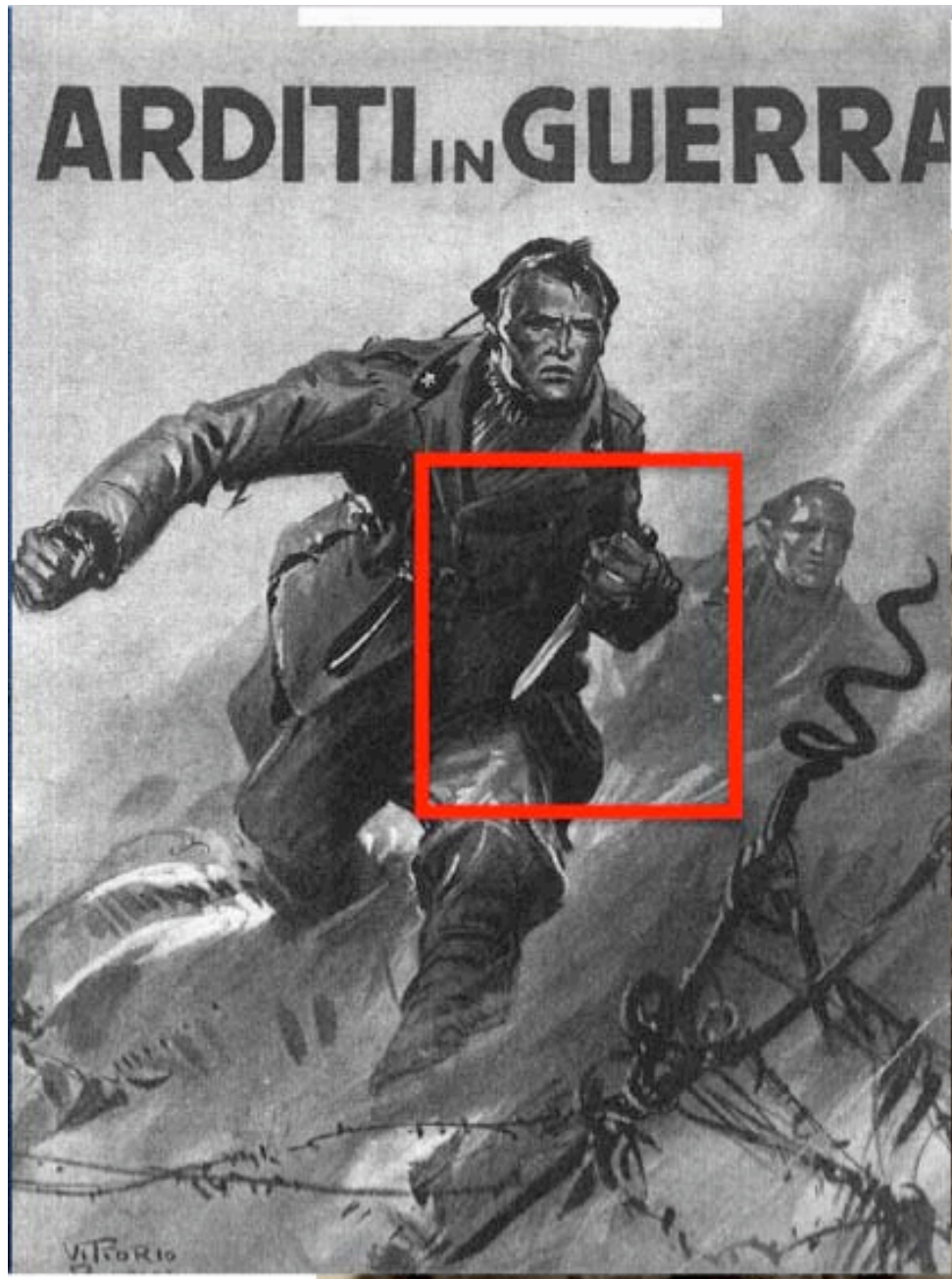


Wedding of Mussolini's Daughter
in 1936

The question remained, however, how did this transformation occur. How had Mussolini taken a weapon previously attached to rural bandits, political assassins, and the rough street justice of the lower classes, and turn it into a symbol of state power and prestige?



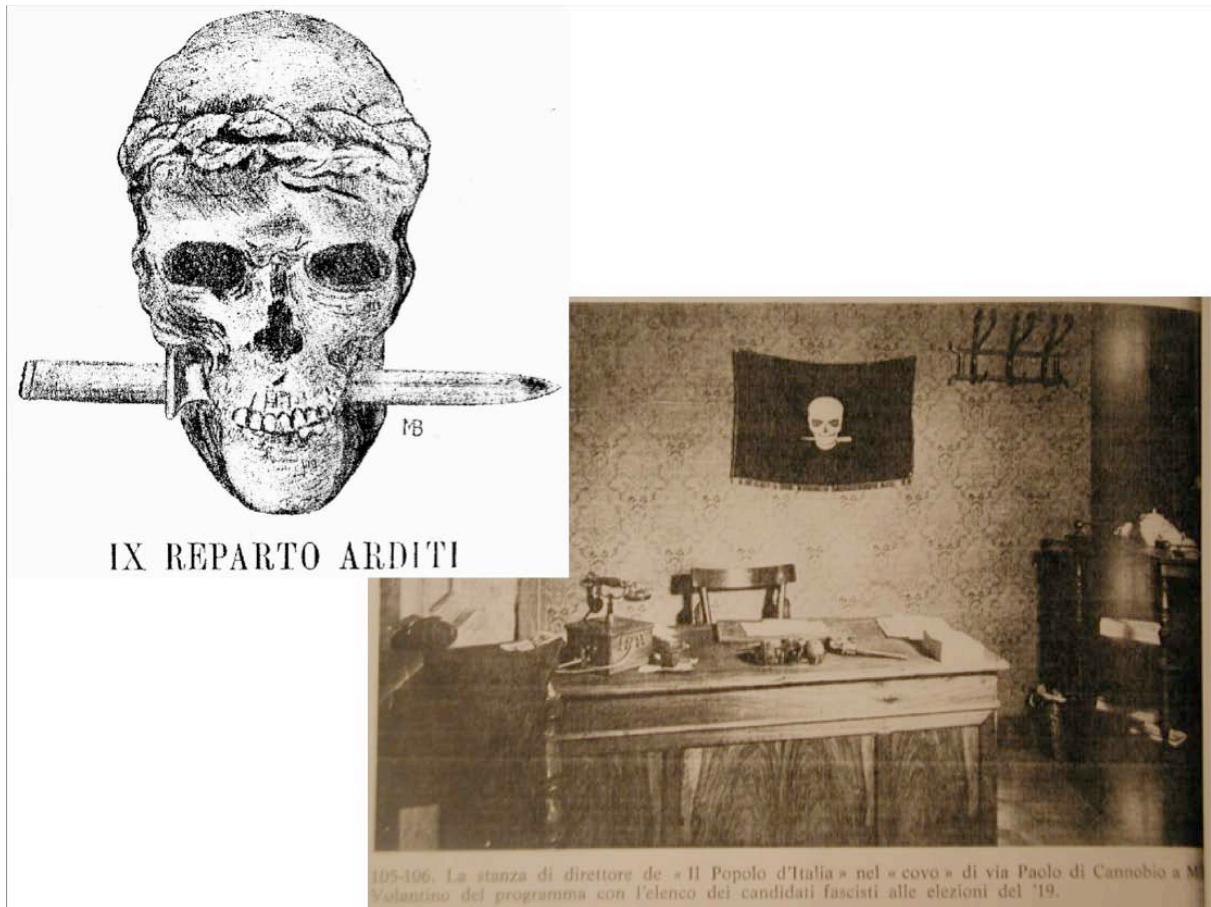
As with so many other aspects of Fascism, it all went back to the First World War, and in particular to the shock troops known as the *Arditi*, who prided themselves on being so brave as to go into battle armed only with grenades and daggers.



As the war ended, the Arditi became a political force in Italy and were heavily involved in Gabriel D'Annunzio's 1919 illegal adventure to flout the Versailles peace treaty and violently wrest the Italophone city of Fiume away from the newly created state of Yugoslavia --and dare I say, they carried their daggers with them.



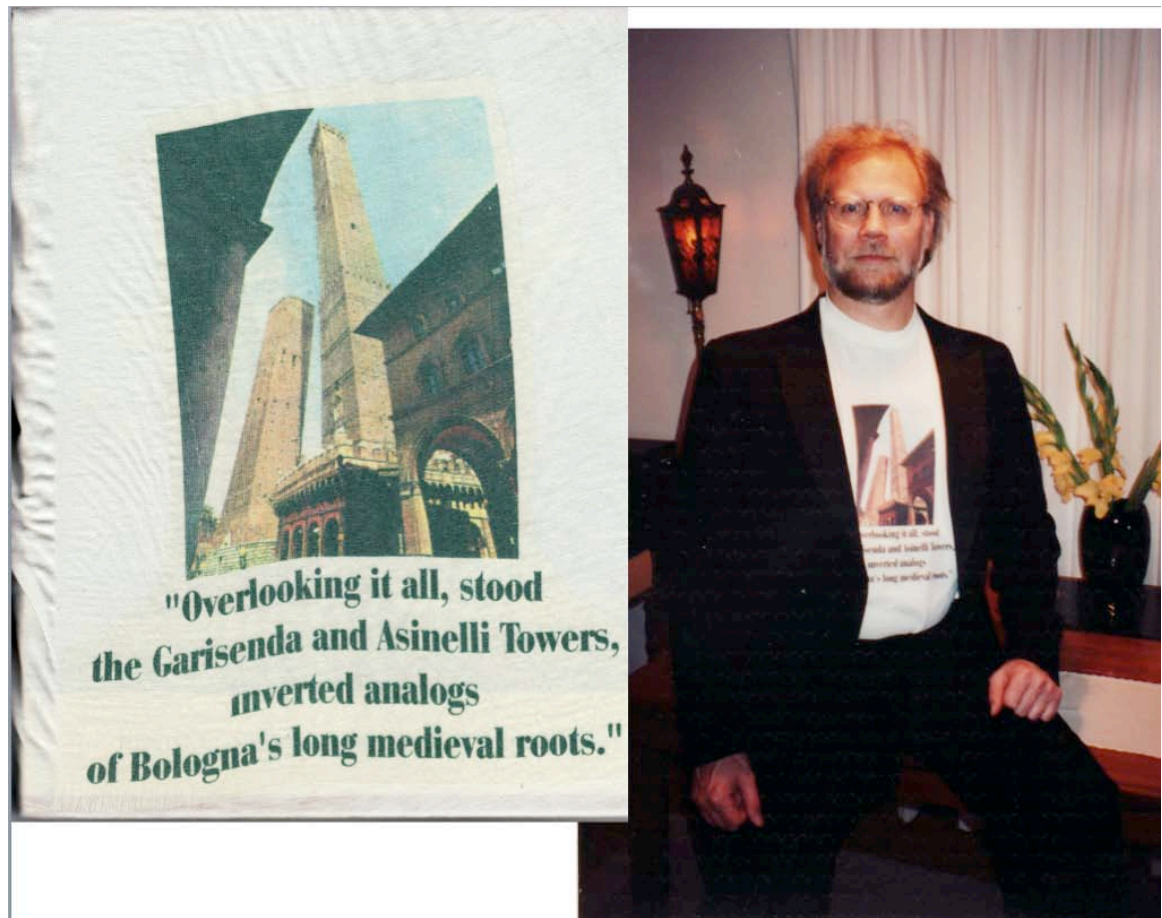
That there was a connection between the Arditi, the dagger, and the future Duce, seemed clear as my research progressed, but it took a “wow moment” to seal the deal. As I was gathering images for my course on Italian fascism, I ran across a photograph of Mussolini’s newspaper office in Milan in 1919, complete with grenades and a pistol on his writing desk; and sure enough, there on the wall was an Arditi battle banner, with skull and dagger happily surveying the scene. It all fit into a general pattern of symbolic syncretism that allowed Mussolini to co-opt and mix a



new “aristocracy of the trenches” into a potent brew of totalitarian politics based on patriotism, populism, and militarism. Elevating the Arditi dagger to a new prominent position of national dignity, obvious in the newsreels of the day, he tapped deeply into the honor traditions of Italy’s knife-carrying lower classes, traditions that the liberal regime had often ignored or disparaged. Yet the fascist dagger was in fact uniform; it was controlled, disciplined, and it became part of the mass display designed to subordinate individual honor to that of collective duty. Popular, potent, and obvious, it symbolized a bellicose tie between Mussolini (who, one remembers, was dismissed from elementary school for stabbing a fellow student with a penknife) and the Italian *popolo*.



You have no doubt noticed that for the purposes of presentation I have chosen examples that readily lend themselves to visual apprehension. There are of course other kinds as well, such as when one finally hits the right words to express the right ideas after struggling with the usual demons of disorganization, distraction, and, worst of all, difficulty. I laughed out loud when, trying to introduce the city of Bologna to my readers, I came up with the line “Overlooking it all, stood the Garisenda and Asinelli towers, inverted analogs of Bologna’s long medieval roots”: a piece of prose so purple (and yet somehow so appropriate) that my wife Sue Cornish and friend Chuck Cheape conspired to have it secretly made into a t-shirt for me.



Outlandish prose aside, I hope my paltry examples have made the larger point that sustained study offers the opportunity for more and better “wow moments” of the kind that enrich our lives. Those of us who teach in the Renaissance, humanist, Ignatian tradition of the liberal arts, take it as axiomatic that Wow Moments of the mind, like fine wine or better beer, need preparation, contrast, and context to sharpen the experience and lift the moment beyond the banal. If the Beatles were right that “the love you take is equal to the love you make” then hard work, sometimes lonely work, is the price of admission to the intellectual funhouse of lifelong learning.

Pondering political secrets of Napoleon's Tomb



Yes, the life of the mind should be of service to society and to others. Indeed, we should remember that for every historical document that you can find on the internet, some Archive Rat had to get their hands dirty digging it up. Nevertheless, the life of the mind can be, and should be, of service to ourselves and our souls; it is the liberating aspect of the liberal arts. And thus I conclude by reiterating how truly delighted I am to accept this award in memory of Bernard Nachbahr, our friend, who spent his life preparing people to enjoy the trip and once in a while really get to say “wow.”

LOYOLA
INTERNATIONAL
Nachbahr Huis

