SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

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Part 1: Via Circo, now

Most places in the States have a Main Street. Branching off it, or parallel to it, you will find streets and avenues whose name is a number, First Street being the one closets to the Main and up numerically from there. I find the practice of assigning letters and numbers to street names sterile and unimaginative. Nevertheless, considering the difficulty of pronunciation and spelling of English names, it is a practical way to avoid any mail delivery or similar problems.

In Europe, streets have names of historical figures and events. Due to the brevity of American experience, I can imagine that it is not easy for city planners to draw prominent names from a history that is barely 200 or so years long.

Assigning names to streets in a country that has a busy past like, say, Italy’s past must be effortless. In Milan, Italy, one could learn a lot about history from street names and by being curious enough to pay attention to descriptions posted in the lower left corner of the elegant limestone street signs. You learn that Via Ausonius is after a 4th century poet and that his contemporary Papinian was a jurist. Then, there is Via Circo. Its street signs have no description.

I often walked on Via Circo in my teen years. Had I at that time wondered where the name of Via Circo came from, I would likely have connected it to a local three-ring circus. Uneducated as I was, I would not have guessed that the name celebrates the great chariot racing arena that Emperor Maximian built next to his palace in the third century C.E. Via Circo sits on top of the site where Maximian’s arena once stood, not too far from the arena’s curved end.

Via Circo is located near the center of town in an upscale neighborhood populated by elegant office spaces and expensive condominiums. Buildings do not have ground floor shops, as it is typical of fashionable areas. Shoppers and the associated noise are left elsewhere. Pedestrians are rare even during the otherwise busy afternoon hours. On Sundays, neighborhood streets are quiet and mostly deserted.

Circus in Latin or circo in Italian is the name ancient Roman gave to the chariot race arenas because horses raced in a circle. Coincidentally, Via Circo is also curved, forming a semi-circle of around 120 degrees. From an imaginary aerial view, the street starts where the left spectators’ stands begin to bend, then curves towards the middle of the arena and finally extends beyond the opposite side stands. City walls run along the left or west of the spectator’s stands so Via Circo starts where the city once ended. The emperor’s palace and many Roman private homes were located on the east side of the arena. Today these homes are buried below the modern buildings of Via Circo’s neighborhood.

Recent excavations have uncovered beautiful mosaics from these ancient homes. The mosaics and other artifacts are now in Milan’s archaeological museum. Below is a link to a 360-degree panoramic view of the museum’s hall dedicated to “Living in Mediolanum”. Mediolanum is the original Latin name given to Milan. The Comune Di Milano on its website kindly provides this and other links.

<http://www.360visio.com/wp-content/uploads/panoramas/CL2013/MI/Archeo/MosaicoScacchi/output/index.html>

Part 2: My personal Via Circo

“Get out, get the fuck out of there.” my mother shouts while knocking on the bathroom door. “I know you are reading, get out.”

This sucks.

 “Out.” She repeats. “Take a walk.” Relentless.

There is no escape. She will not stop until I leave the apartment. Unless…wait, it is not sunny. Maybe it will rain. I open the bathroom window and look up. The sky is white but cloudless. White from humidity, oppressive humidity common this time of the year.

“On my way.” I yell back. I put Chekov down and unlock the door.

My grandmother sits at foot of her bed, looking, not saying a word. She has seen and heard it all before.

“Put on a nice shirt.”

That’s a joke. All my shirts are business white, all hand-me-downs from overweight relatives who are thirty, forty, who knows how much older than me. She probably means one that does not make me look like a puff-fish when I wear it.

I obey, I take my tee shirt off and put the first shirt I see hanging in the closet. After tucking it snugly around my waist, I sit on the edge of my bed to lace my shoes up. Today I have only one pair of socks on me, my feet must have grown.

My mother turns a chair from the dining table and sits down facing me, a couple of feet away.

“You may meet someone.” Her voice has changed, its harshness gone. The tone is soft, calm and loving. “You are seventeen.”

Almost eighteen.

“You shouldn’t spend your Sunday’s reading”

Books. Lermontov, Turgenev and today….

“You must be with others your age, your peers.”

Who are my peers? My head lowered, looking at my shoes, I am gripped by panic. I am not afraid of disobeying my mother or of leaving the house. I dread the thought of meeting one of these so-called peers of mine. I ran into a schoolmate a few months back. He recognized me, stopped and started chatting about what we did in class the year earlier. I could barely remember him. I left without saying a word while he was in mid-sentence.

 “Have friends, having friends your age is good for you.”

How?

“You may even meet a girl.”

“A good girl.” She adds quickly.

A good girl is one who does not ask for anything, a good girl does not ask to go to the movies or to sit at one of the ubiquitous coffee bars to have a soda drink or anything, anything else, nothing that may cost any money, that’s a good girl according to my mother.

I asked her once what I should do when I meet a girl. “Walk hand in hand through town” she replied.

 “Go out, go downtown, that’s where young people are, go, go there.”

I clam up. Not because I am irritated. I am not. I do not want to say anything disrespectful, this is no time for flippant remarks.

My poor mother. Trying to do her best. Following her maternal instinct. What does she think that I do when I am out of the house? Does she see me in a pack of teenagers? Maybe. Doesn’t she know that I am familiar with every street clock in town and that I do my rounds from one street clock to the next ‘til it’s 7pm, time to head back? Later, when I am back home no questions will be asked, her illusions remaining intact.

I raise my head; my grandmother hasn’t moved, still watching silently, still not interfering.

“Out.” My mother’s last faint but commanding hiss.

“Fine. Ciao” and out I go.

Through the front door, three steps down to the landing, not a penny in my pocket, buzz to unlock the metal gate - do not slam the gate, do not slam the gate - right at the gate and up the street on the way to the center of town, past Via Ariberto, left on Via Vincenzi, my steps reverberating into the Sunday quiet, across Via De Amicis to the first street clock, straight up Via Correnti, past the Carrobbio, must avoid downtown, veer left onto Via Medici and into its neighborhood of deserted streets, no chance of meeting anyone, past Via Circo………….