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## ESCAPE FROM THE SEA\*

“E come quei che con lena affannata,  
 Uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,  
 Si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,  
 Così l'animo mio, ch' ancor fuggiva,  
 Si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo  
 che non lasciò giamai persona viva.”

(Inferno i.22-7)

Forty years have elapsed since those terrible days at the beginning of June 1940 when it seemed that the whole of Europe must collapse under the onslaught of the German armies. We at the BBC, in the Italian Section, followed events with great anxiety, particularly because Mussolini was on the point of taking the dire step of bringing Italy into the war. During May, the British Government, in a moment of panic, had interned all Germans (the majority of them refugees from Nazism) living in Great Britain. When Italy declared war, all Italian residents were automatically interned as well. Since I was, at that time, employed by the BBC in the Italian Section, I never expected to be interned myself. However, on 13 June 1940, two Special Branch agents came to arrest me at seven in the morning — kindly allowing me to telephone the BBC who promised to get me released at once — and I was sent to an internment camp at Lingfield, a racecourse adapted for this purpose, where I slept in a horse-box with at least 10 or 12 other internees on a mattress stuffed with straw. Here we suffered, quite literally, from hunger. After about 10 days, we were transferred to a camp at Bury, in Lancashire, which was even worse equipped. It was an old textile factory, disused for some time, which had no sanitation. On mattresses which were only half-filled with straw, I and at least 200 other internees slept on the oil-covered floor of a vast room. The food here was still worse. I would say that this was the only time in my life when I actually suffered from hunger.

The order for my release, which the BBC had obtained at the very outset, had not been effective for the simple reason that, in the

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\*A slightly edited transcription of an impromptu interview given by Uberto Limentani to an Italian journalist in May 1980. The translation is by D.J.H.M.

confusion of those events, they had been unable to find me among the 30,000 or 40,000 Italians who had been interned. Quite honestly, one of the most painful aspects about being interned was the uncertainty about what would happen to us. We had no idea what would be done to us, that is, where we would be sent or for how long this situation would last. In the event, most of the Italians were sent to the Isle of Man. As for me, on 30 June I was separated from the other internees and dispatched, together with a few dozen young men — bachelors aged about 25 or more — to Liverpool, where I was deposited in front of a great grey-painted transatlantic liner called the “Arandora Star”. I remembered having seen the same liner, then painted all in white, at anchor in I Giardini in Venice eight years before, when she had been on a cruise around the world. At that time, I said to myself “How splendid it would be to go on a cruise in that ship!” Now, faced with just that opportunity, the prospect seemed a lot less appealing. The ship was armed with two small cannon, veritable pop-guns, one in the bows and the other in the stern of the ship. There was barbed wire all over the place. I was not put in the hold but into a cabin two or three levels below deck. Outside this cabin in which I had to sleep on the floor together with three other internees, there was an English sentry, armed with a rifle and fixed bayonet, who told me that we were being transported to Canada. During the night, the ship weighed anchor. Late in the afternoon on the following day, we were allowed up on deck for half an hour for a breath of fresh air. I then saw that we were between Scotland and Ireland, at the point where both coastlines are visible. Looking round the ship, I noted that the lifeboats were in very poor condition: they had obvious holes in them. They had been neglected and did not inspire confidence. During that night, that is between 1st and 2nd July, the ship must have rounded the northernmost headland of the Irish coast and headed out into the Atlantic. At 6.30 on the following morning, I was dozing when there was a sudden and inexplicable crash. At once I felt that some disaster had occurred because there was a fearful clattering noise, as if everything which *could* overbalance had come hurtling down. Through the crack under the door, I could see that the electric light had suddenly gone out and therefore guessed that the generators were out of action. I asked myself what could have happened and it occurred to me that the ship might have collided with an iceberg. In fact, we had been torpedoed by a German U-Boat. I learnt later that we

were the victims of a famous U-Boat Commander, Captain Prien, on his way back from patrolling the Atlantic.\* Seeing our ship sailing without an escort, he had been unable to resist the temptation of firing a torpedo which struck us full on; and he had then continued on his course.

There were about 1800 souls on board — Italian, Austrian and German internees, and, naturally, some hundreds of soldiers escorting us. My three cabin mates vanished at once. However, I remained for a few seconds, groping in the dark because I recalled having seen some lifebelts hanging on the walls. I found one, put it on and then somehow or other found my way up on deck. I could see that there was some panic but I don't think that I lost my head because in the event there was simply no time to worry. I was always able to act with a certain coolness, that is to say reflecting before taking each decision. The first thing I did was to climb up to the highest point that I could find, in order to determine whether the ship really was sinking. This showed me that it was tilting over more and more steeply to one side. I saw a sailor lowering a lifeboat into the sea and told myself that my best course would be to try to get aboard that lifeboat. But when I got down to the place, I realised that it was like jumping from the fourth storey and I couldn't bring myself to do it. Only one person succeeded in jumping, fracturing his skull (though he survived). So I gave up that scheme and made my way along the side-deck to see if there was any other way of getting into the sea. Eventually, I found a piece of rope which I thought might suit my purpose; but not satisfied even with this I went on searching and at last found a rope ladder.

At this juncture, I decided to wait quietly for a while, thinking it opportune to put off getting into the sea until the last moment, because

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\*Translator's Note

The *Arandora Star* was sent to the bottom by U-Boat Commander Gunther Prien whose reputation had been made by sinking the *Royal Oak* at Scapa Flow on 14th October, 1939. Prien was returning on 2 July 1940 from a patrol in the Atlantic in his Class VII B U-Boat, 750 tons with a surface speed of 17 knots. He had already claimed 8 ships and had one torpedo left when he came across the *Arandora Star*. That torpedo was fired at 6.58 a.m. and struck the *Arandora Star* on the starboard side, flooding the engine room. It is estimated that two thirds of the 700 Italian and one third of the 500 German passengers on board perished in this action. Those who survived it were rescued by a Canadian destroyer, the *St Laurent*, under Captain H. G. de Wolf, which reached the scene of the tragedy at 1.30 p.m.

D.J.H.M.

in the North Atlantic it can be extremely cold on a morning of cloud and rain even though it was July. After a bit, I began to climb down the rope-ladder but on reaching the lower deck I thought that it might be better to stop and make sure that the ship really was sinking. Almost immediately I became aware that the end was imminent: and so I went down into the sea. My immediate concern was to get far enough away to avoid being sucked under with the ship.

The few boats which had been launched were for the most part filled with German sailors who had been interned after capture in South Africa and who knew how to lower lifeboats. In all, there were only five or six boats because, as I was told afterwards, those positioned on the side opposite to the direction in which the ship was tilting could not be lowered. In any event, no lifeboats were visible. There was already some wreckage in the sea and I swam towards some object thinking that it might keep me afloat. There was another Italian hanging on to this bit of wood and I said "Help me to push this further away from the ship so that we can save ourselves". I asked him his name: the poor chap was called Avignone and I later found his name in the list of those who drowned. Many of those who managed to get down into the sea froze to death after a few hours in those icy waters.

In the meantime, the ship was sinking fast. Almost fascinated by the sight, I turned continually to look and yet I was anxious to get as far away as possible for fear of being dragged under: and in fact many of those who were too close — some good swimmers among them — were sucked under and not seen again. This great liner of about 12,000-15,000 tons listed more and more to one side, thereby throwing hundreds of people into the sea, mainly elderly people who had not attempted to save themselves. At that moment, the sea water clearly got into the boilers because there was an explosion. Almost at once, as the stern sank, the bows lifted briefly above the waves and, with a frightening noise, the liner slid obliquely into the sea, making the water boil over all around. There was wreckage everywhere, and corpses. More than once, I became entangled in some floating debris which had either wire or metal spikes sticking from it. There were also patches of diesel oil which had caught fire and I therefore found myself in the midst of flames, though these quite naturally burnt out very quickly. I reckon that I remained in the sea for about 2 hours.

At first, I tried to clamber onto a sort of seat from the ship, which might have served me as a raft, but I was frustrated in this because it

overturned each time I got on it. After some time — possibly an hour and a half — I caught sight of a lifeboat a good way off, perhaps a mile or so. I was only able to catch glimpses of this lifeboat when I was lifted up by successive waves, but I determined to make towards it by clinging to some wreckage and propelling it with the help, once again, of another victim of the shipwreck — I think he was an Irishman, probably one of the soldiers who had been in charge of us. So, for a while, we helped each other until finally he left me and swam directly towards the lifeboat without any support. I was never able to discover whether he made it. As for me, I told myself that that piece of wood was my only support and that it would be folly to leave it. Even now, I did not doubt for one moment that they would come and rescue us and it was perhaps this conviction that kept my spirits high, in a manner of speaking. The curious regularity of the waves brought to mind some verses of Manzoni's "Cinque Maggio" and I repeated them to myself

"Come sul capo al naufrago  
L'onda s'avvolge e pesa".

I thought how true it was that the waves broke over and submerged the castaway's head and I reflected on the significance of the lines which followed

"L'onda su cui del misero,  
Alta pur dianzi e tesa,  
Scorrea la vista a scernere  
Prode remote invan".

*Translation*

"The wave from whose crest  
the doomed man gazed anxiously but vainly  
for a glimpse of a distant shore."

And then, I asked myself, how did it go on? Ah well, I should have to re-read the text of 'Cinque Maggio' when I got back home.

I struggled on with my piece of wreckage for a while and realised that I was growing feebler. Clearly, I could not carry on in that laborious fashion. I should have to let go and swim for the lifeboat. I remember thinking that this was a brave decision, that piece of wood being my only secure hold on life. Now I made one last and prolonged

effort, since I was still some way off, and managed to get nearer to the lifeboat. By now, I was almost completely exhausted and I made my one mistake of the entire adventure by shouting 'Aiuto' ('Help') in Italian. I found out later that aboard that overloaded and waterlogged lifeboat, which was carrying some 110-120 survivors, there was a British Army Captain who had declared that there was no more room and that from now only British soldiers should be rescued and taken aboard. However this view was rejected, so I was told later, by the second-in-command of the torpedoed liner (the Captain went down with his ship), a certain Mr Tulip, at the helm of the lifeboat, who said "No, we're at sea and we must rescue all survivors". He it was who ordered that they should take me aboard. As a matter of fact, I managed, with help from those already in the lifeboat, to hoist myself up and realised then that my lungs were on the point of collapse and that my body had been tried to the limit. Squeezed in between the mass of survivors in the lifeboat, and shaking with cold, I asked for something to cover myself with. In reply I was punched on the head and found myself sitting at the bottom of the boat with three or four people on my back. By a stroke of luck, reaching out my hands, I found a sailor's jacket and somehow managed to get it on. My position was extremely uncomfortable not only because of the crush of people above me but also because the level of sea water was slowly rising in the bottom of the boat. We should certainly have sunk in a few hours, as some of the German detainee survivors considerably observed. After two hours, making a great effort, I managed to move into a more comfortable position and by raising myself I was able to breathe freely like the rest.

The lifeboat commander tried to stay in a spot not too far from the other four or five boats. These we could see, but there was no sign of rescue. I reckon that it was some six hours or so after the torpedoing that we saw a four-engined Sunderland seaplane which was carrying out a sea search without yet having found any survivors. Then, after a minute or two, it saw us, fired a Verrey light, and vanished. We knew now that help would arrive but we still had to wait for two hours before, to our great relief, a motor-torpedo boat bore over the horizon towards us — a Canadian boat called the "St Laurent". There were 700 survivors of the 1800 passengers on the *Arandora Star* and first we had to solve the problem of getting aboard the rescue ship, which was anything but easy. The warship took up a position in the centre of the

large area over which the survivors were scattered and each lifeboat had to make its way towards it. When it came to transferring from the lifeboat to the rescue ship, the problem was that the swell in the Atlantic caused the deck of the motor-torpedo-boat to be at one moment about 10 metres higher than the lifeboat and the next instant the opposite. And so, in order to get aboard the warship, we had to seize the exact moment when both vessels were on the same level. In my turn, I managed somehow to accomplish this and I remember having to move along the deck as quickly as possible — I was of course barefooted — because at that point the deck was scorching hot, probably because it was just above the Engine Room. Seven hundred is a great crowd on a small boat like a motor-torpedo-boat, and although the sailors did what they could we passed a very unpleasant night, packed as we were into the between decks where we had been forced to descend. I found myself sitting on a seat with dozens of other survivors in one of the sailors' sleeping quarters. I spent the night sitting like that, very hungry. I recall getting a cup of hot chocolate laced, if I am not mistaken, with rum. Otherwise, I was safe and sound. Before being torpedoed, I had a cold which must have disappeared during my involuntary swim because I don't remember having it afterwards. It was certainly a disagreeable night, aggravated by the somewhat irrational fear which spread among us that we might be torpedoed again. The next morning, on 3 July, we arrived off the Scottish coast and disembarked at Greenock. Two or three of the shipwrecked survivors had died during the crossing and others had to be taken to hospital. Just before disembarkation, we were, in fact, asked whether we needed medical treatment. At first I refused, thinking that I was in my normal healthy condition, but after running by chance into one or two of my cabin mates on the '*Arandora Star*' I was advised to go with them to hospital. I then noticed that my bare feet were rather swollen on account of the freezing conditions of the preceding twenty-four hours. And so I took their advice and went along with them, which was very lucky for me because those who did not go to hospital were embarked for Australia the very next day and their ship was torpedoed somewhere en route. It did not sink but it must have been a terrifying experience.

So there we were, on the deserted wharf of the port of Greenock, a wretched band of shipwrecked civilians with nobody to take care of us. I had on the sailor's jacket I'd found in the lifeboat, but I was barefoot.



After a while, a sort of Red Cross hostel opened but they could give us no more than a biscuit each. Little by little, the powers that be must have noticed our existence because around midday some trucks arrived to take us along the Firth of Clyde to a hospital whose location was not known to us at the time but which we subsequently discovered to be the Mearnskirk Emergency Hospital in the vicinity of Glasgow. Covered as I was from head to foot in naphtha, I needed above all a bath. Instead, I had to wash myself as best I could with a sponge. Then we were put to bed and could relax at last after the exhausting events of the previous day and night. We stayed in that hospital for 7 or 8 days, well fed and cared for. We were the first patients of a hospital constructed for the very purpose of caring for victims of the war. The nurses were especially attentive and, apart from the fact that we had to stay in bed and that there was always a sentry at the door of the dormitory, I believe that we had no complaints about our treatment. We had lost all our personal belongings, and after a week we were given some clothes which were frankly rather comical, being either too big or too small for us, and some equally useless shoes, as well as certain essentials like razors. On about 11 or 12 July, we climbed aboard a bus which took us to a new internment camp. We travelled right across Scotland although we did not know then that the harsh building in which we were imprisoned, with its massive walls and surrounding barbed wire, was the Donaldson School Hospital on the outskirts of Edinburgh.

After a few days I was permitted to write to the BBC and only then did my colleagues in London learn that my name had been mistakenly included in the list of those who had drowned. The BBC had obtained at the outset an order for my release and this was immediately put into effect so that on 31 July I was released — that is, I was escorted by a soldier in a tram as far as Princes Street Station and there put on the train for London. I reached London on the evening of 31 July and on the following morning I resumed my work at the BBC. Here, I continued to broadcast for the next five years until the end of September 1945, that is for the duration of the war.

U.L.