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# MEETING MANDELA IN MILAN



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by C. Flisi

Madiba was there as always, waiting for me. Walking from the Cadorna train station in the chaotic center of Milan, I crossed the busy, building-lined piazza as cars, buses, taxis, and trams snaked around. Escaping the claxons and confusion, I took the shortcut onto quieter, pedestrian-only Via Puccini heading toward the Duomo. A yellow ochre theater was to my left and a few cafès to my right, and dog-walkers sometimes in the middle. Then I crossed the street (San Giovanni sul Muro) and followed what became a narrow alleyway flanked by the greyish stone walls of offices. This was now called Vicolo San Giovanni sul Muro (the alley of San Giovanni sul Muro). It eventually changed names a couple more times and curved into a major pedestrian way, but before it did, I had my rendezvous with Madiba.

The first time I saw him in the late autumn of 2015, I was startled. Suddenly there he was, Nelson Mandela, life-sized, modest, accessible, approachable, so realistic in spite of his bronze patina that my first impression was that he was impatiently awaiting my arrival as I turned into the alleyway.

But no, no impatience in his stance. His shoulders were a little hunched over, one hand was always calmly folded across the other, his eyes were sad but serene. When I walked there at odd moments, no one else was around since this is not a high-traffic corner of the city. And I would have a little *frisson* of pleasure that Mandela and I were meeting privately. An undisturbed conversation between me and a Nobel Peace Prize winner — the vanquisher of apartheid, the epitome of human decency, a symbol of hope and humility for mankind — a few steps from a busy train station and a major shopping street.

I loved these secret rendezvous. I always sought out this back way toward the Duomo and the center of town for the chance to have a personal tête-à-tête. Why was he waiting for me in that secret, seldom-trafficked corner of the city? I learned a few months later that his location was far from random: he was standing in front of the South African consulate in Milan, a perfectly natural place for him to be. The consulate is so low-key and unheralded that I didn't know it was there till someone told me, and I didn't see the plaque almost hidden behind the statue until someone else pointed it out.

Mandela officially arrived on October 13, 2015, a donation to the city of Milan by the government of South Africa. He was “welcomed” by the then-vice mayor of Milan, Francesca Balzini, by the then-South African minister for international relations and cooperation Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, and by South African entrepreneur Refilwe Monageng, CEO of Native Explorations, a mining company that contributed to the project.

This statue was only the fifth official sculpture of Nelson Mandela outside of South Africa at the time, and it was the first commissioned after his death in 2013. Pietro Scampini was the sculptor. He is a nationally-known artist born in Cardano al Campo, a provincial town 25 miles north of Milan, but he was not chosen for his native-son credentials. What counted was his familiarity with South African art, as he spent time there and organized a show of Ndebele art (the Ndebele are Bantu-speaking tribe in the northernmost part of the country). So he had the cross-cultural credentials the consulate was looking for. Equally important, he appears to have understood very well the essence of the man he was sculpting, including the concept of *ubuntu*. Ubuntu is a South African word that implies “togetherness” as it relates to the human condition. Although it has varying nuances in different African cultures, the underlying premise is “I am because we are.”

In her dedication remarks in 2015, Minister Nkoana-Mashabane explained that her country donated the statue to the city of Milan to express South Africa’s gratitude to Milan and its people. She added, “The statue expresses the diplomacy of ubuntu, a legacy left by Mandela that is practiced daily by our government in its international relations.”

Some Milanese have criticized the statue because the dimensions are so human and the figure is right there on the alleyway — no pedestal, no spectacle, no larger-than-life characteristics. But that is what ubuntu is all about, and exactly why I adore this representation of Mandela in its quiet little corner of Italy’s busiest city.

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