The Ruspoli Legacy in Italy

Tales from a Family Pageant
in Rome, Viterbo and Cerveteri

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Rome

Palazzo Rospoli, built by Italian architect Bartolomeo Ammanati in 1584, is the Rome residence of Stazio and Maria Pia Rospoli (below), the prince and princes of Cerveteri. Originally built for another of Italy’s noble families, it was purchased by Francesco Maria Rospoli in 1700. Family photographs and portraits, on the Baroque table beyond, extend over several generations. Left: The grotto-arched entrance hall exhibits Renaissance busts of Roman emperors and a pair of painted coat benches.
Visitors to the Palazzo Rospoli, whose austere bulk looms above Rome’s Via del Corso, enter through marble portals over which is inscribed: “Franciscus Maria, Princeps Rospolius.” The name immortalized there belongs to one of the most illustrious of the city’s noble families—owners of two other imposing houses north of Rome at Vitorio and Cerveteri.

In Rome, flanked by family photographs and antique paintings, many of which portray public and private episodes in the lives of his ancestors, Storza Rospoli, the prince of Cerveteri (Lillo to family and friends), attempts to bring some order into the complex genealogy of his family.

“To understand it,” he says, “you have to realize that from 1600, when they met, there have been two families, the Massinotti and the Rospolis. The Rospolis’ only daughter, Vittoria, married Francesco Massinotti, but with the condition that he take the name Rospoli.” (The first Rospoli was buried in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence in the fourteenth century, where the family had already established its authority; in 1391, in addition to a number of priories, the title of gonfalonier was conferred on the family.)

This marital power play resulted in a line of distinguished progeny, most notable of whom was the very Francesco Maria Rospoli whose name is engraved above the entrance to the palazzo in Rome. Born in 1685, he died in 1737 “enormously rich,” having bought the Palazzo Rospoli in 1703 from the Caetani, who obtained it from the Rucellai, for whom it was built in 1586 by the Tuscan architect Bartolomeo Ammannati.

The fortunes of four families were united under Francesco Maria’s name. He had married Isabella Coi, last heiress of the Cois and niece of Pope Innocent XIII. There were nine popes in Isabella’s family, notably Innocent III. Passionately devoted to the Vatican, Francesco Maria recruited a seventeen-thousand-man regiment that was deployed along the threatened papal frontier at Ferrara. In gratitude, the pope awarded Francesco Maria the title of prince, with all its honors and privileges, including primacy of rank over the princes of the Holy Roman Empire.

Rome was at the apogee of the Baroque period, and the princely family in its new palazzo conducted itself with suitable éclat. “It’s not easy to describe the splendor of those Roman palazzi,” says the prince. “The head of each house was sovereign of a little kingdom whose endless liveried servants, coaches and kennels outdid one another in luxury.”

In preparation for a visit by the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II in February 1769, Alessandro Rospoli restored and refurbished the palace. In 1768 Alessandro had been made a Knight of the Golden Fleece by Joseph’s predecessor, Franz I. Throughout the ups and downs of history, and particularly in the darkest moments when the papacy and Napoleon were in opposition, the family remained loyal to the Vatican.

“Queen Hortense of Holland and her son, the future Napoleon III, lived in the palace apartments belonging to my great-uncle Giovanni Rospoli,” says the prince. “Giovanni didn’t care for the French because of the actions they levied against Rome, but he had an affection for Prince Napoleon Charles Grégoire Bonaparte, who’d married Cristina Rospoli, the last Roman Bonaparte.” The prince and his wife supported the emperor until his downfall.

Beneath Palazzo Rospoli’s walls the Roman carnival reached its frenzied peak. The ceiling painting in the living room was commissioned for Napoleon III when he came to live in the palace with his mother, Queen Hortense,” says Storza Rospoli. “It’s in the Renaissance style, but with its strong colors, it’s more reminiscent of the Empire period.” The baroque mirror above the marble-and-brass fireplace echoes the overdoor panel with a portrait of Francesco Maria Rospoli. In the corner, an unusual mirror has been paired with a marble-and-gilt table. The chandelier is Venetian glass.
zied peak, and the silvered surfaces of its vast mirrors still seem to reflect the majestic figure of Alessandro Ruspoli, the last grand master of the Vatican's Holy Apostolic Hospice. Admired by Gabriele D'Annunzio, he loved splendor, tradition, women and hunting. Truly regal, he has left behind him the memory of his incomparable style. A family portrait shows him in a ceremonial costume of black velvet, his fine face framed by a ruff and shadowed by a plume.

“My family belongs to the black nobility, which people often talk about without really knowing well,” says the prince. “It’s distinguished from all other European aristocracies in that its titles and privileges were conferred by the pope.”

At the time of the risorgimento, in the 1860s, the Vatican lost both temporal power and territory. The Roman aristocracy was split in two: the blacks, who remained loyal to the pope, and those who were faithful to the king. The black families were opposed to Garibaldi; they shut themselves up in their houses and refused to have anything to do with the new rulers of Rome, the House of Savoy. They returned to public life much later, remaining reactionary and patriotic. Bartolommeo Ruspoli, grand master of the Order of Malta, resigned when the English took over.

Sforza Ruspoli reflects for a moment before resuming buoyantly: “We also have a saint in the family, Gaetanina Marocetti, the daughter of Marco Antonio Marocetti and Ottavia Orsini. She was one of the shining lights of the church in the late sixteenth century. When she died, she had to be dressed three times over because the grieving inhabitants of Viterbo tore off all her clothes to keep as relics.” Saint Gaetanina was canonized on August 15, 1607. Her body lies in Viterbo, north of Rome, where there is a church dedicated to her memory.

“We cherish Vignanello, our palazzo near Viterbo, because it is inseparable from our history,” says the prince. “Viterbo was elevated to earldom by Pope Clement VII, and the succession of title was conferred on the Marocetti by Pope Paul III. Today Vignanello belongs to my older brother, Alessandro Ruspoli. Every summer our family comes together in this house endowed with an almost magical past.”

The gardens of Vignanello are arguably the first of the great Italian gardens that served as a model for all Europe in the centuries that followed. Laid out with the precision of a musical score and the mystery of a labyrinth, they border the ramps, stretching beneath the windows of the austere castle—a marvel of feudal directness and power. Still legible in its gray stone is a coat of arms emblazoned by the Marocetti: it includes the fleur-de-lis conferred on the family by Charlemagne.

The master of Vignanello, Alessandro Ruspoli, is a man of great charm. His casual elegance, freewheeling style and original approach to life have made him the darling of the gossip columnists and won him the affection of those who know him best. He has transformed his life into a kind of poem that reveals the hereditary complexity of a nature made up of equal parts poet and adventurer. He lives on the second floor of the Palazzo Ruspoli in Rome, as well as at Vignanello. Sforza Ruspoli is master of a third family palazzo at Cerveteri, not far from Rome. Cerveteri, with its thousands of acres of woods and farmland, is the cradle of one of the most enigmatic of the world’s civilizations, the Etruscans. The town dates back

continued on page 116

In the formal dining room, one wall is dominated by a painting representing the 17,600-man regiment employed by Francisco Maria Ruspoli to defend the papal territories at Ostiana. To reward his lifelong loyalty, Pope Clement XI gave Ruspoli the title of prince in 1799. “It is for this reason that they call us the black,” explains the prince. “There are only nine families comprising the aristocracy made and protected by the pope.”
"Cerveteri is only a short distance from Rome," says Silvia Ruspoli, "and there we can study Etruscan culture, hunt wild boar and visit with friends. The palazzo’s loggia overlooks the piazza and the Etruscan museum. An immense stone table and rattan furnishings allow for alfresco dining and entertaining.

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to the eighth century B.C. Its palazzo survived the vicissitudes of history to be sold by the Orsinis to the Ruspolis, who inherited the wonders extracted from Etruscan tombs by the government and the princes of Cerveteri.

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Sforza Ruspoli gave the town spacious quarters for exhibiting Etruscan finds in Cerveteri’s fortress, transformed into a museum that bears the name of his mother, Claudia Ruspoli. And on lands that were the hub of the Etruscan world, the prince of Cerveteri and his brother raise apricots, table grapes and nectarines.

Sforza Ruspoli is a keen businessman. He travels often to oversee his South American interests, which include developing tourism on the island of Margarita in Venezuela. Perhaps the business acumen of this idealistic aristocrat is inherited from his grandfather, Francesco Matarazzo.

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“My grandfather symbolized the Italian emigration to South America,” says Sforza Ruspoli. “He left his village near Salerno at the age of twenty-eight and ended up in the countryside near São Paulo without a penny to his name. At the time of his death in 1937, he employed forty-five thousand workers in two hundred and sixty enterprises.”

The patriarch left thirteen children and fifty-three other descendants. In 1935 the king of Italy declared him a count. His imagination and loyalty allowed him to found an empire that is still expanding.

Sforza Ruspoli pauses in his musings as his wife, the princess Maria Pia, enters the room. She sinks into a velvet armchair and begins to speak of her own life: “Lillio and I share a liking for music, reading and travel. We’ve recently had a daughter, but we still get around a lot, and we have friends all over the world. One of our great pleasures is to spend the month of September at Capri in a villa overlooking the Bay of Naples.”

“Even though I’m very much involved in the world,” says the prince, “I retreat now and then into a monastery, for silence is essential to the spirituality that in my view is the reality of life. If I can be sure when I die that I have endowed my daughters with affection, culture and a seri-

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