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## LISA SERGIO, “ROME’S GOLDEN VOICE”

Lisa Sergio was the *golden voice* of the Rome-broadcast Fascist radio shows; she fled to the United States of America in 1937. Although her mother was a US citizen, Sergio was considered an enemy of the state from the moment the US entered the war. Despite all of that Lisa Sergio was naturalized in 1944 and continued to build a successful radio career, starting at NBC and then later working for New York based WQXR; this was the time when female voices were considered unsuitable for serious programs. In early 1950’s she was blacklisted as a communist and lost her job at radio; she moved on to become a lecturer and author in Washington where she died in 1989.

Her successful career as a *radio announcer* can be explained with her unique talent and her ability and talent to portrait herself in public as an ideal American woman living in turbulent times.

She grew up in a bilingual Italian-American family and came to age at the time when the Fascism was on the rise to power. At the time Italy had a parliamentary system with the King as head of the state and in control of all executive powers.

When first Fascist riots broke out in Florence, Sergio was 15 years old and just entered university.

She was born in Florence in 1905 and in 1922 – with some support from her grandfather - she became assistant editor at “*Posta Italiana*” the only English weekly published in Italy at the time. She later moved on to become the editor. She published works of Huxley, Pound and D.H.Lawrence before she left the magazine in 1927. Sergio described the magazine as apolitical and purposed for cover-ring a wide range of cultural topics to all English-speaking people in Italy<sup>60</sup>.

The same year when Sergio joined “*Posta Italiana*” Mussolini launched his March on Rome and forced the Italian King Vittorio Emmanuel II to appoint him the Prime Minister at the head of the Second Government. Although it took Mussolini seven years to completely consolidate all the political power in his hands Fascists started to influence everyday life of ordinary Italians from the beginning of their rule. The government introduced worker pro-

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60 Sergio, “The dreams was veiled in Blue”, <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

tection legislation, improved health and education and launched public construction projects. Fascist Government turned to women and enabled their larger participation in public affairs. The fascists, ironically, used this to impose control over their political activities and prevent their individual or collective emancipation.<sup>61</sup>

The State glorified motherhood and yet removed women from political offices. For example, although other societies which increased motherhood rights followed with an increase in political powers, Italy took the completely opposite direction. One of the students, Victoria de Garcia wrote: "*Availability of social services was limited by the arbitrary political power resulting in an ideological opposition to developing the rights of women.*"

Lisa wrote that Fascism made work modern for women. Besides living with her grandfather, later with her mother, the job she had gave her independence. Actually, since more women started listening to the Italian media, journalism became a fastest growing profession in Italy between the wars. In 1921, 7% of writers were women, and in 1931 the number reached 12%.<sup>62</sup>

Lisa Sergio travelled a lot and during her time on the road she met her father's friend and a person whose role would be crucial in securing her survival after she fled Italy – Marconi himself. Her letters give conflicting accounts of the date the two of them met – on one occasion she wrote that it was at an reception given by the Italian Embassy in London in either 1923 or 1929;<sup>63</sup> the other account places their meeting in Rome in 1932.<sup>64</sup> According to Sergio Marconi asked her to prepare his notes for a lecture he was about to deliver in London.<sup>65</sup>

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61 Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. , <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

62 Ibidem

63 Lisa Sergio, "Chapter IV Breaking the Rules", Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1; Lisa Sergio, "Guglielmo Marconi: The Silent Man Who Made the Ether Speak," Box 7 Folder 40, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1; Sergio, "Gente translation," 3., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

64 Sergio, "Guglielmo Marconi: The Silent Man Who Made the Ether Speak", 2., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

65 Sergio, "Guglielmo Marconi: The Silent Man Who Made the Ether Speak", 2., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

Soon after she moved to Rome, Sergio began contributing to the Association of the Mediterranean Studies' magazine combining her interest in archeology and journalism.<sup>66</sup> She claimed to have written the first Pompeii tourist guide; the guide was in use until mid 50's.<sup>67</sup> She participated in excavations in Ostia, Herculaneum and Pompeii where she worked under Eugene Sellers Strong. She wrote that she worked on Sundays serving tea and cookies at Strong's house which is how she met a number of prominent Americans, including Ezra Pound.<sup>68</sup>

Available documents show that she was a member of the Royal Archeological Institute, Archeological Library and Arts History Library; she also had free access to galleries and the Royal Museum where she studied the most famous pieces of excavated arts.

Italian dictator Mussolini kicked off his short wave radio propaganda effort in 1932. Mussolini called on Marconi to be his advisor in the process and to recommend someone with good English. Sergio claimed Marconi recommended her; something she heard from Mussolini during preparations for an archaeological exhibition of antique silverware. They exchanged a few words on the exhibition and her second language.<sup>69</sup> Few days after the encounter she received a call from the Department for print media at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; she was requested to meet Gaetano Polverelli.<sup>70</sup>

Polverelli showed her plans for broadcasts in foreign languages and implied that Marconi recommended her for the job. He inquired about her political views and whether she was a staunch Fascist. *"Am I a staunch Fascist? Everybody is a staunch Fascist supporter because I think Fascism did a great service to Italy"* wrote Sergio.<sup>71</sup>

66 Lisa Sergio to Gayle K. Yamada 17 September 1986, Box 9 Folder 34, Sergio papers, <http://openlibrary.org/a/OL256636A>

67 Sergio, "Curriculum Vitae", <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

68 Sergio, "Chapter V Death and the Pain of It", <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

69 Lisa Sergio, "One Woman's Opinion, April 22 1946," Radio script, Box 12 Folder 7, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 22 April 1946. , <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

70 President of Mussolini's Press office from 1931 to 1933

71 Sergio, "One Woman's Opinion, October 30, 1944," <http://openlibrary.org/a/OL256636A>

In her interview to Christian Science Monitor given in 1941 Sergio expressed her hopes that Mussolini will create a better, economically and socially prosperous Italy: *“Together with thousands of other young Italians I found myself in the midst of it all. Fascism is in essence a youth movement, and youth in general is rarely aware of history and its teaching.”*<sup>72</sup>

Sergio said she initially said no to the job. She said she knew nothing about radio and politics and had no intention of changing her profession; Polverelli insisted on Sergio taking the position, claiming that the new role would only take an hour or two of her time per day, and that she would be able to keep her original job. When she eventually acquiesced, it became obvious that due to its complexity she would have to leave the field of archaeology. *“I had an internal struggle – on one hand I wanted the new job on the other there was a voice inside me insisting I declined. I was very flattered and yet scared by the job.”*<sup>73</sup>

Sergio consulted with Marconi and one of her fellow archaeologists and both insisted she should take on the new job. Later in her life she considered consulting her uncle; Don Gullio Rodino di Miglione was a staunch anti-Fascist who lived in Naples. In 1945, following the Allied victory in WWII he became a minister in the provisional Italian Government. She was not close to her father's side of the family. *“If he lived in Rome or had I at least known my relatives I would have consulted them too and my life would take a different course”* wrote Sergio.<sup>74</sup> The Fascist movement, in 1932, was popular both home and abroad with Italians; she also claimed that Fascists did more good to her than bad.<sup>75</sup>

Mussolini was a rising star and Sergio was closely following social changes in the country.<sup>76</sup> When Polverelli asked her for the second meeting and sent

72 Lisa Sergio, “One Woman’s, June 4 1945”, Radio transcript, Box 12 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 4 June 1945., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

73 “Column of the Air Reviewed.”

74 “Lisa Sergio Reviewed”, Billboard, 19 July 1941. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

75 Sanger, Rebel in Radio. 86, 87.

76 Margaret A. Walsh, ““Brave Women and Fair Men”: Women Advocates of U.S. Intervention in World War II, 1939-1941” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 1996), 235.

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a police motorcycle to pick her up, she said she found it extremely difficult to decline the invitation. “*The persuasion was irresistible, the wooing, Duce, Marconi, police escort, two men who waited for me at the radio stations to discuss technical questions. To sum it all up – a Fascist invitation was in fact the Fascist order. You cannot say that Italy was late with radio broadcasts. The first Italian radio station was launched in 1924 but Mussolini was not interested in the process until late in the 20’s*” said Sergio.<sup>77</sup>

In 1932 Lisa Sergio *reluctantly* became one of the most famous radio presenters of all time. She became a radio presenter in service of Italy broadcasting in foreign languages under the patronage of Press and Propaganda Department; the Department soon grew into a full Ministry (named Ministry of National Culture in 1937) .

English and the US press reported on her work which helped her become famous and strengthen her connections with American social circles<sup>78</sup>. She was issued an official press identification to confirm her status as a professional journalist as well as the appropriate travel documents entitling her to 70 percent discounts on all routes. She was in charge of translating the news to French and English; she also broadcast the 15 minutes-long news at seven o’clock.

Mussolini wanted to explain the ideologies of his party to those living abroad, specifically to introduce his fo-reign policies to British and American listeners. Sergio was also in charge for recruiting announcers for broadcasts in foreign languages. In 1935 she came up with a plan to teach Italian language to listeners with books available for free to all those who requested them. Her broadcasts brought a lot of concern throughout Europe and England, and the press started following the *English reporter* from Rome.

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77 Lisa Sergio, “Lisa Sergio’s Column of the Air WQXR November 27th 1940,” 27 November 1940. Box 11 Folder 78, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

78 <http://openlibrary.org/a/OL256636A>

Her pronunciation was perfect and it was a pleasure to listen to her, reported the Nottingham News.<sup>79</sup> Similar comments were printed in London-based the Daily Telegraph; the newspaper praised her flaw near-flawless accent and wrote that pronunciation of only a handful of names revealed that she had not been born British.

When Italians started their Ethiopian propaganda campaign the feedback from the US and England to Sergio's broadcast was immense, as she wrote in her unpublished biography. Commenting on her nickname – the Golden Voice – she wrote: *"The news attracted more attention than anyone expected. News was grounded in facts and I tried to make them easy to listen and interesting."*

There were but a handful of female voices on European radio waves, if any, and it was soon clear why this voice from Rome was daubed *golden*.<sup>80</sup> Her broadcasts were generally a Q&A session on Fascism; questions were sent by letter to the Italian government, and then a selection were forwarded to the presenter. Sergio remembered later how she spent most of her time answering these letters.<sup>81</sup> People were most interested in the possibility to replicate the success of the Fascist regime in other countries, if the corporate state was the answer to labor problems and unemployment or if the single party system was the answer to the problem of weak democracy. Other questions included – if the mix of state controlled culture and education was the answer to crime and juvenile delinquency. Someone also asked if state controlled health system was efficient in fight against tuberculosis.<sup>82</sup>

The New Yorker published an article analyzing the effect of her broadcasts: *"Apart from the extreme left newspapers, the French media and Parisians are ge-*

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79 Variety, 23 July 1941. Clipping preserved in Sergio scrapbook. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

80 Sanger, Rebel in Radio. 20, 21.

81 Sergio, "Brains Have No Sex," 2, 9. When this article appeared in the New York Times in 1943, Sergio was one of three women giving "comments" in the morning, and the only woman doing so in the evening. "The Week's Radio Programs," The New York Times, 25 April 1943,

82 Waller, Judith, "Radio: The Fifth Estate", <http://ia331318.us.archive.org/2/items/radiofifthestate00wallrich/radiofifthestate00wallrich.pdf>

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*nerally pro-Italian, cautious about the League of Nations and against everything pro-British.*<sup>83</sup>

English newspapers saw the broadcasts as tools of indoctrination: “Having in mind that the broadcasts are intended to English speaking world they present a stealth aggression on the British policies” wrote the Daily Telegraph.<sup>84</sup>

London-based the Spectator was in agony when writing that the listeners might be tricked by a news anchor whose perfect diction “*could out speak Oxford with its faked flawlessness*”.

Italy followed by introducing broadcasts in other languages, as Sergio managed to hire additional linguists for the team, mostly women. BBC started broadcasting in foreign languages as late as in 1938 and by that time Italy was already broadcasting in Arabic which forced the British House of Commons to act in an effort to match the outreach of the Italian propaganda machine.<sup>85</sup>

In her autobiography Sergio wrote about other less important aspects of her life in Rome. She hosted Mahatma Gandhi during his visit to Rome in 1932.

She also noted that her Italian lessons broadcast at the end of the program attracted so much attention that London-based publishing houses wanted to print a text book based on her broadcasts. The State allowed her to write the book and it was published in 1935. However, when she left the country in 1937, the State republished the book and sold it at the Italian stand during the 1940 World Fair.

*“Since they did not remove or change the author’s name they gave me publicity instead of my royalties”* wrote Sergio.

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83 Sergio, “One Woman’s Opinion, October 30, 1944”, 6. , <http://openlibrary.org/a/OL256636A>

84 Evelyn Wellson Wendt, “A History of WQXR and WQXR FM: The Radio Stations of the New York Times” (Ed.D., Columbia University, 1962), 113, 115.

85 Donald G. Godfrey and Frederic A. Leigh, eds., “Historical Dictionary of American Radio” (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 381, 382.

In addition she won the Italian Ministry of Press and Propaganda prize for the best article on Italy, printed in daily or weekly newspapers abroad. The article entitled "*Ancient Rome surfaces under Mussolini's rule*" promoted Italian tourism and was printed in Washington Post in 1935. Sergio claimed that she even attended the first meeting between Mussolini and Hitler in Venice in June 1934.

Her work as an anchor attracted so much attention that a number of Italian radio shows were re-broadcast by the US based radio stations. "*For a European anchor America is a radio paradise. and to hear a voice of a person who reads to audiences across the ocean from the field is something we all crave for, but very few manage to fulfill*" wrote Lisa Sergio.

### **Activities as a translator**

Sergio became the official English translator of all speeches given by Mussolini. The American audience would first listen to the original live recording of Mussolini, followed by a short musical intermission so as to allow translation of the speech.<sup>86</sup> Sergio translated Mussolini's speeches at least twice, the proof of which is in two scarves containing printed speeches.<sup>87</sup>

In May 1936 she translated the famous speech by Mussolini in which he announced the Italian conquest of Ethiopia and the accession of the King of Italy to the throne of Ethiopia.<sup>88</sup> In this speech Mussolini also announced his pact with Hitler, and Sergio claimed that it was her who used the word Axis to describe the pact and that she even forged the word.

Sergio later wrote that while she translated the speech she knew that there is a growing foreign interest in recent talks between Hitler and Mussolini and their pact. In her translation she needed to paraphrase excerpts of the speech but decided to give a word-to-word translation of one particular part

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86 "Business, Professional Women Elect Sally Butler as President", The New York Times, 26 July 1947, 16., <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html>

87 Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 64., <https://ls2.cmich.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0610&L=AEJMC&P=17562>

88 Lisa Sergio, "July 31st 1940", 31 July 1940. Box 11 Folder 78, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

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of Duce's oration: *"This vertical line between Rome and Berlin is not just a cover but an axis that will attract all the European countries willing to cooperate towards peace"*.<sup>89</sup>

When she came to this part of the speech in her translation, Sergio recalls, she knew the Italian word "asse" (axis) presents the very essence of the speech.<sup>90</sup>

At the time Sergio was at the height of her radio career. However, the first signs of her disappointment in Fascist regime surfaced after she witnessed the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and actively took part in shaping the propaganda war. According to her autobiography it was then that she became aware of her role in the propaganda effort. She said that she soon realized that her broadcasts were used not just to report on foreign press articles in support of Italy but also to spread pure lies. Mussolini had a particular style of editing the news that was highly unpopular with the audience in the USA and England: Sergio wrote: *"Sometimes this was not an ill intended misinterpretation of an actual event, but more often they were deliberately shaped to suit his Machiavellian agenda."*

Sergio recalls, on one occasion, some particular information she received for broadcast. It was the British army report on water well poisoning in Afghanistan which affected the local shepherds. Her friends at the British Embassy told her that the British Army never released such a report so she decided to remove the information from the broadcast. *"The same minute my superiors realized I had not read the information I was summoned to explain my actions"* Sergio recalls. *"I said that my decision was motivated by the lack of broadcast time."* On another occasion Mussolini wrote an article on how British soldiers in Egypt were infected by plague and that the disease spread among civilian population. Sergio sensed that Duce's intention was to start rumors that would increase hostilities between Egyptians and the British.<sup>91</sup>

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89 Sergio, "Chapter IX Another World, Another Life", 1-2., <http://openlibrary.org/a/OL256636A>

90 Allies, "axis" powers

91 Jack Preble to Lisa Sergio 16 November 1949, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

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By 1936 Sergio faced a *dilemma* – to stay, spread lies in support of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and be disgraced or to listen to her conscience, change the language of her broadcasts and face dismissal.

### **Escape from Italy**

A chain of events that started on August 1, 1933 led Sergio to think about leaving Italy. The appointment of Count Ciano as the Head of the Press and Propaganda was the first.

Ciano was born on March 8, 1903 in Livorno and served as military attaché in South America and Asia as well as in the Italian representation to the Holy See. In 1930 he married Eda Mussolini, Duce's eldest and the most favorite daughter. The couple moved to China, but Ciano was soon recalled to Rome since Mussolini missed his daughter and transferred to the Bureau for press and propaganda.

Ciano became Assistant Minister in 1934 and was appointed Minister in 1935. His job was to make sure that *tightly controlled Italian media praise Mussolini and the regime, smear the hostile governments and avoid news that were unfavorable to Italian cause.*

Ciano Left the Ministry in October 1935 shortly before the beginning of the Ethiopian campaign to become a bomber pilot. On June 9, 1936, at age 33, he was appointed Italian Foreign Minister.

There are two accounts of Lisa Sergio's escape from Italy – her own which she shared in interviews she gave, and the one recorded in her 300 pages long FBI file. Ciano is a vital part in both versions. According to Sergio's story Ciano discovered her omissions on several occasions. Ciano questioned her on the day she left out the information on Afghan water wells. She said that he lost trust in her: "*I have a feeling that you take far too many liberties in your work.*" Ciano said "*From now on make sure you follow instructions to the letter. I am telling you this for your own personal benefit. We have enough on you to destroy you.*"<sup>92</sup>

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92 Jack Preble to Lisa Sergio 13 February 1950, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

On one particular occasion when they questioned her broadcasts, Sergio claimed that she was put under Police surveillance and insisted that she went over the surveillance recordings herself. In the recordings she referred to Ciano as the mad man, and called the army bulletins absurd<sup>93</sup>. Recordings were also made of her contacts with the British Embassy during which she questioned the authenticity of official news and commented on a number of Fascist officials. Police let her go without making further problems. One of the officers simply told her: “*Ms Sergio, do us a favor and please try to be more cautious in the future.*”<sup>94</sup>

Sergio claimed Mussolini himself found out about her editing escapades in February 1937 when she asked an US journalist to give him English lessons. The journalist – addressed by Sergio as Mary Ann - suggested that Mussolini practice language by listening to the radio. “*My English is worse than I thought. I think I cannot follow Ms. Sergio’s translations. I think her lines do not match the lines I have*” Mussolini said.<sup>95</sup> Mary Ann checked the two texts and found that some lines were omitted in the translation.

In April 1937 she was told that Mussolini planned to sack her and she was ordered to sign a letter of resignation. She allegedly refused by saying “*I would not resign as that is impossible*”.<sup>96</sup> When she refused to resign she faced Ciano who told her “*If I was Duce I would have had you shot a long time ago.*” She replied by saying: “*You are the one that will end up being shot, not me. Remember this.*”<sup>97</sup>

It is unclear why Ciano, by that time the Foreign Minister, confronted her. After the meeting she was escorted out of the building once and for all.

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93 Ibidem

94 “Brands American Red Traitors or ‘Off Trolley’”, Detroit Sunday Times, 29 October 1950, part 1, page 3. Box 14 Folder 8, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

95 Ibidem

96 “Preble to Sergio”, February 13, 1950, <http://openlibrary.org/a/OL256636A>

97 W.C. “Tom” Sawyer to Charles H Gilbert 10 April 1950, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

In July 1937 soon after she arrived in New York, the *New Yorker* magazine announced that she will be hired as an *announcer* at the NBC.<sup>98</sup> She was the first woman ever to record a commercial and be recorded in the NBC archives. Soon she started lecturing on the values of American democracy and on March 17, 1938, on her 33 birthday, she applied for the US citizenship.<sup>99</sup>

A year later she used her connections in the US to secure a job at WQXR as a news commentator.

Her activities in the USA attracted the attention of the Italian Ministry of Culture. A note in Italian language from the Head of the Propaganda Department to the Ministry, accused Sergio of engaging in an *anti-Italian and anti-Fascist campaign, speaks bad things including the story that she was forced to flee Italy for her political views*.<sup>100</sup>

Sergio was not happy to leave Italy which she repeated in a number of interviews: *"I was unhappy to leave. On the other hand I understood that as a necessity as I was left without a choice. I had to leave and that was that."* she said in a 1980-interview.<sup>101</sup> If she knew that the Italian regime would only last for another two years she would have risked the jail and stayed. In another interview she referred to her escape as one of the great misfortunes of her life.<sup>102</sup>

98 Stanley M. Isaacs to James Moore 10 March 1954, Box 1 Folder 42, Sergio papers; Olive K. King to J. Edgar Hoover 17 February 1966, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file; American Legion National Headquarters to Edith Davis 18 April, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

99 Bayard F Ennis, "Forum Speaker, Accused 'Pink,' Gives Ardent Plea for Democracy", *The Charleston (W.V.) Gazette*, 26 January 1951, 7. Box 15 Folder 8, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

100 "Interesting Highlights About Lisa Sergio, Today's Speaker", Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

101 David Cate, *The Great Fear*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978. 21<sup>6</sup>.

102 "Hornet's nest of questions for speaker", *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, 8 March 1954. Box 23 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

An interview given by an unidentified woman who worked with her at the Ministry of National Culture became one of the most revealing sources of information on Sergio. The woman claimed she was close to her and that she openly bragged about having multiple lovers and that she gave particularly detailed accounts of her love affairs when she was *under the influence of alcohol*.<sup>103</sup>

Sergio was at the time protected as Ciano was the head of the Ministry. However, during the second part of 1935 Ciano joined his bomber squadron during the Ethiopia campaign and later moved on to become Minister of Foreign Affairs. When Ciano left Dino Alfieri was appointed Minister of National culture. According to the informant he was not so understanding of Sergio's behavior which culminated in her dismissal from the service in 1937, at 6 o'clock one hour before her usual 7 o'clock broadcast.<sup>104</sup> The informant said that a friend of Sergio's (whose identity was never established with certainty with some speculations that it could have been John Whitaker) helped her earn her living interviewing famous Italians for various American and Italian magazines. Her first interview was with Marconi.<sup>105</sup>

The informer also claimed that this friend also contacted Ciano asking a permission for a joint project he was about to launch with Sergio; Ciano replied that it would be better if a man wrote the articles ending any further discussion on the matter.

At that point Marconi and De Revel persuaded Sergio to leave for the States. The informant also said that she left because she could not find a job.<sup>106</sup> Other sources confirmed this story.<sup>107</sup>

These sources confirm the fact that Sergio never worked for Italian secret police or any other Government branch other than Ministry of National

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103 Kathleen McLaughlin, "Poletti Upholds Fair Exhibit Ban", The New York Times, 29 August 1941, <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html>

104 "Lisa Sergio Naturalized", The New York Times, 7 September 1944, 8. ; John C Knox to Lisa Sergio 6 November 1944, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

105 "Sergio to Shipley", 23 April 1953., <http://openlibrary.org/a/OL256636A>

106 Ibidem

107 Ibidem

Culture. She was never engaged in espionage activities on behalf of the Fascists. Still, none of this information gave a clear proof of who Lisa Sergio really was.

According to the same sources she agreed to become an informant to the FBI and supply information on Italian officials;<sup>108</sup> she also cooperated in investigations of the fascist activities in New York area.

### **What is the true story?**

The two conflicting stories cast shadow over one of the basic challenge a historian can face – inconclusiveness of historical sources. The biggest mismatch between the two stories is the question of whether Sergio left Italy driven by her despise of the Fascist regime or her inability to find a job or even her adultery. The papers Sergio left behind mention no accusations of treason which lead us to believe that the reason was elsewhere. It was a common fact that Ciano also had numerous affairs. Mussolini started to receive anonymous letters on Ciano's adultery in 1935. Both Ciano and his wife Eda were known for their extra-marital activities which they did not try to hide. Ciano had a number of mistresses from aristocratic circles while Eda enjoyed the company of younger, athletic men. Even though Ciano did not work for the Ministry of National Culture for as long as Sergio did (she worked there 1932-1937 while he was there 1933-1936) they were frequently in contact. For example, Sergio claims she was in Venice when Mussolini met Hitler. Editing press releases from this meeting seems to have been Ciano's first task, as confirmed by Sergio's papers.

Even though it is impossible to prove she had a love affair with Ciano that remains an option. The FBI informant who claims she left Italy because she could not find a job can also be regarded as credible. A job for a single woman trying to support herself was a serious problem in a regime that tried to oust women from the workplaces. From 1928 on the Government worked to make it more difficult for working women. On September 5, 1938 the campaign reached its peak when the Government placed a 10% limit on

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108 Stanley M. Isaacs to Lisa Sergio 31 August 1953, Box 4 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

the number of women in workplaces.<sup>109</sup> So if she did not leave Italy for her political views when did she start considering the move? The US press at the time reported that she arrived for a vacation to learn first-hand about the American radio management.<sup>110</sup>

This might be true or it might be just a cover story for her real intentions either due to political differences, inability to find a job or possible treason. Her statements from the period make us doubt that she had problems with the Fascist regime. In her interviews she defended the Fascists policies like financial support for each new baby. Statements like these broadened support the Fascist regime enjoyed abroad. But as WWII came nearer she regretted ever making them. Her interviews provoked people across the country to write to the FBI to alert the Bureau of her activities.

Despite all that Sergio frequently stood for her homeland. In one of her first appearances on NBC she said she was honored to translate for Mussolini *“The fact that I as a woman was given a chance to broadcast from the key point in our modern history makes me thrilled.”*<sup>111</sup> She might have been an anti-fascist when she left Italy or she might have become one in the USA. A handwritten note found in her papers show that the change, no matter when it occurred, was genuine and honest. *“People are not all-knowing. They are born with the ability to learn. They learn how to walk and talk. They also have to learn how to be free”* she wrote.<sup>112</sup> After her encounter with David Samof at the NBC’s New York office she became a part of their team and one of their anchors. Dozens of newspapers reported on her arrival to the States as a long vacation and a chance to visit friends and family as well as a study visit. Some reported that

109 De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*. 166, 193.

110 “A Guest of NBC Famous European Announcer to Broadcast Here”, NBC, “Lisa Sergio to Announce Dell Concerts.”

111 The Helen Traubel Program Copy of Milton Cross’s scripted interview of Lisa Sergio, Box 19, Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 18.July 1937.

112 Lisa Sergio, List of colleges Sergio lectured at from 19661-1967. Box 10 Folder 5, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

she would be a guest at the NBC.<sup>113</sup> Newspapers reported on the fact that her aunt Alice Fitzgerald lives in New York and her uncle Charles Fitzgerald in Baltimore.<sup>114</sup> One of the newspapers described her as “*slim and attractive American who caused quite an international storm over the war in Ethiopia with her Rome broadcasts.*”<sup>115</sup> She was also described as the most interesting voice to date<sup>116</sup> and one of the best radio announcers in the States.<sup>117</sup>



*Lisa Sergio at the American “NBC” radio*

- 113 For example: “Behind the Mike”, Columbus Dispatch, 18 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Sergio papers; “Lisa Sergio of Italy is Added to NBC Staff as Guest Announcer”, Greenville Piedmont, 21 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Sergio papers; “Radio”, Macon News, 19 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Sergio papers; “Voice of 2RO Here as Guest, Will Announce”, New York Herald Tribune, 18 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>
- 114 “Round About in Social Whirl”, Baltimore American, 8 May 1938. Box 19 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>
- 115 “Gleanings,” Brooklyn Citizen, 20 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>
- 116 “Newcomer!” Chicago American, 21 October 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>
- 117 Igor Cassini, “Petit Point”, Washington Times, 11 March 1938. Box 19 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>

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Her Italian background was of interest to journalists behind specialty articles. One of them was so thrilled with the way Italian radio was operating: *“Italy may have Mussolini and black shirts, but the fans of Italian radio can laugh at their American peers as they never have to listen to commercials.”*<sup>118</sup>

Sergio was a magnet for press and the positive publicity she received enabled her to strengthen her position at the NBC. However, the people she met at the NBC and who became her safety net were key in securing her career as a lecturer and a news analyst; they also proved to be her vital allies in the fight to fend off accusations of being a communist supporter in years following the WWII.

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118 Lee Roy Manuel, “Turning the Dial”, Ft. Worth Press, 2 August 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C., <http://library.georgetown.edu/>