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Interview with Mario Casalini

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Interview with Mario Casalini

Founder and President, Casalini Libri <gen@casalini.it>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

As we go to press, we must mourn the death of this great man. — KS

Recently, my husband and I visited Italy. We went with trepidation. We had never been there. We didn't know Italian. And all the stereotypes converged to make us timid. How wrong we were!

We arrived in Florence at dusk and fifteen minutes later we were in the breathlessly beautiful surroundings of the small village of Fiesole, just fifteen minutes by bus from the middle of noisy downtown Florence.

Fiesole sits high on a hilltop above Florence. Overlooking a lush green valley, it is untouched by modern cares. A summer dusk sifted down. Bats glided through the sky. Blue wood smoke rose from far-away farm houses. A dog barked in the quiet distance. *A Room With A View* came alive and the normal world that we live in in Charleston vanished into the perfect atmosphere and clean air of Fiesole.

To visit **Casalini Libri** is to take a trip back in time, not just through seven centuries of Italian history — but for an American academician it is a trip into a secret chamber of memory you haven't visited since graduate school. All your youthful fantasies return. You'll live in Europe, become trilingual, steep yourself in art and old books. You'll visit the House of Salina in Lampedusa's *Leopard*. The Finzi Continis in their garden.

Mario Casalini is the current embodiment of all these fantasies. He is elegant and learned, cultured, scrupulously polite. He has a wife and three adult children, **Barbara**, **Ursula** and **Michele**. Each of them speaks three languages. Ursula is a pianist, while Barbara and his son, Michele, have followed him into the business and are now both working directors. For the past five years they have been responsible for the smooth day-to-day running of the business.

Mario Casalini, as President of the company, oversees and counsels them. Like his good friend **Knut Dorn** of Harrassowitz, he is a collective walking encyclopedia of the history of publishing in his country. The Casalini live in a family estate built by a South American tin king (you haven't thought of that since reading Balzac in 300-level French). A huge friendly old hound escorts visitors through the grounds. There are terraces and olive trees as well as four historic buildings, the main building which houses the forty people who work inside to make sure that our world knows about the Italian books that have entered and are entering the vast global marketplace.

Mr. Casalini's office is like the man — open, unassuming, eclectic, charming. Across the room, a mantle is full of cat pictures and figurines; there is a portrait of his father with the faint wisp of cigarette smoke rising from his negligently outflung hand. It is a comfortable place, a place where one can sit and reflect and be at peace with the world.

ATG: Tell us why and how you started **Casalini Libri**?

MC: It's a strange story! It was in the 1950s. I was visiting the States as one of the youngest members of a group of Italian publishers. A number of American librarians had told us of their difficulties in obtaining new Italian books and had asked us for help. They said that information on new titles got through very slowly, if at all, and when it did it was usually too late because Italian titles go out of print so quickly. Distributors were not reliable and although the big Italian publishers (including **La Nuova Italia**, the publishing house where I myself was then a junior director) did what they could to supply and promote their own works, they were not geared to general overseas distribution and certainly did not understand the needs of libraries. So there was a gap in supply which needed to be filled, but the problem was how. On my return, my wife and I talked it over and finally decided to try to organize a very small family firm which would work from my home and would be specifically tailored for the supply of Italian publications to foreign libraries.

ATG: I notice that Italian books do not contain *Cataloging In Publication* information on the verso of the title page. Is **Casalini Libri** compiling all the CIP data itself?

MC: Yes, because Italian publishers do not,

as yet, print these details in their publications. Naturally the **Italian National Bibliography** compiles this information, but, unfortunately, with too much delay to be of use to us. If we waited for their data, many of the materials would already be out of print. So we had to do the work ourselves. First of all, we had to organize our own network throughout Italy to be sure of obtaining the most comprehensive coverage of new publications as possible. Secondly, of course, we had to have our own trained bibliographers to do the cataloging.

Because **Casalini Libri** is a commercial firm, we must naturally pay for all the titles we acquire for cataloging and this fact makes life easier because publishers are much more inclined to sell their materials than to supply them to the **National Library**, as they should, for nothing. We are naturally in constant contact with the **National Bibliography** in Florence and, in fact, we are sometimes able to give them details of books that we have received which they don't know about at all.

ATG: I notice that there are at least two national libraries in Italy. Isn't this rather expensive? Is there a depository system for books and journals like in the U.S.?

MC: The two real Italian National Libraries are in Florence and Rome. The **National Library of Florence** is the more important —

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and this dates back to the time when Florence was the capital of Italy. The National Library of Florence also houses the **Italian National Bibliography**. The other so-called national libraries would really be better described as "regional", or branch, libraries.

Yes, Italy does have a depository system. By law, every printed book or journal must be sent to a government agency — five copies if it's a new publication, three copies if it's a reprint. One copy must go to the **National Library of Florence** and one to the **National Library of Rome**. The real problem is that this law does not include any real sanctions and, as a result, it is frequently ignored.

ATG: *You sell books and journals to libraries in the United States? Do you have clients in other countries?*

MC: Yes, although naturally we still supply principally to libraries in the United States, we now also sell both books and journals to many countries throughout the world.

ATG: *How many Italian journals are published? How do you handle subscriptions?*

MC: That is a good question. We have about 9,000 journals in our database. Obviously some of these have ceased publication but there are probably about 7,000 titles which are currently active. Journals are about 12% of our business. We have developed our own internal system for handling the journals, which are supplied to our library customers directly from our offices. We stopped asking publishers to send issues direct to libraries nearly 20 years ago because we found this method was not reliable. Issues failed to reach the libraries and often library claims reached us too late to obtain copies. This led to gaps in collections which were almost impossible to fill. We now collect everything here and, depending on quantity, ship issues to the libraries every two weeks or once a month by air freight. The automated service allows us to record the arrival of every issue, pick up and claim missing issues immediately and generally offer a much quicker and more accurate service.

ATG: *Are many scientific journals published in Italy or do your scientists tend to publish in foreign journals?*

MC: Although a number of important medical journals are published here, Italy doesn't have many expensive scientific journals. The majority of these are published in the United States, Britain and Holland. Italian scientists do tend to

publish abroad. They largely choose the English language so that their work is better known and more widely distributed.

ATG: *What type of electronic publishing is going on in Italy? How about CD-ROMs?*

MC: This sector is obviously not as advanced as it is in the States but it is certainly developing fast and we ourselves are closely involved in promoting and supplying materials in these forms.

ATG: *How many publishers are there in Italy?*

MC: This is a difficult question to answer. Publishing in Italy differs from publishing in most other countries. The **Italian Publisher's Association** has around 400 members, but there are many small prestigious publishers who are not members. There are also many others: learned societies, small regional and local publishers, universities, banks, museums, exhibition and conference organizers, even individual academics, all involved in publishing on subjects spanning the entire cataloging classification range but many of these are not registered as publishers at all.

ATG: *You don't seem to have university presses over here. Publication is done by various departments of the university. Doesn't this make it difficult to locate materials?*

MC: You are quite right, the concept of the university press is not Italian. There isn't really an equivalent. And the various university departments you mention should mainly be added to my list of "occasional" publishers who, when they do publish, may do so through any academic publisher they happen to choose. The difficulty in locating titles is very obvious and brings us back to the beginning of our talk. To enable **Casalini Libri** to offer a coverage which was as near as possible to comprehensive, it was absolutely imperative for us to build up a reliable network of contacts throughout the country. Even so, we still have to use email, faxes and spend a lot of time on the telephone to track down specific publications.

ATG: *How many books are published in Italy that are the kinds of books that you supply to libraries?*

MC: An average of 44,000 titles are published annual in Italy. Of this total, 27,000 are new titles, 3,000 are new editions and 14,000 are reprints. Over 25% of the total are translations. Many of the others are vanity press, non-commercial or promotional material. We obviously supply any title a library may order (ranging from a book on making pasta to a highly academic specialist work). However our own market is primarily academic and, of course, our own annual biblio-

graphical coverage reflects this. It amounts to approximately 15,000 records in all subject fields and includes, for example, non-commercial art publications, first issues of new periodicals and audio-visual material including CD-ROMs.

ATG: *What's the book trade like in Italy? How is it organized?*

MC: I would love to be able to give you a succinct reply to this but unfortunately the very nature of the book trade in Italy defies any brief analysis. Suffice it to say that it reflects the complex cultural history of the country itself, which has only been a unified nation since the second half of the last century. Before that it was a patchwork of many small, contrasting independent states. Instruction was only for the elite and even today the average Italian is not a great reader. Nevertheless, Italy has one of the oldest and most glorious literary traditions in the world. Publishers constituted an entrepreneurial class which worked hard to promote the instruments of knowledge and stimulate interest in culture but only a very few (**UTET**, **Olschki** and **Hoeppli**) were able to build modern commercial structures before the first war. The majority developed after that war, only to be plunged into considerable political instability almost immediately afterwards. Today, the Italian book trade is made up of publishers large and small, distributors and bookstores as well as the mass of other small producers. However, the market has changed greatly since the early 1980s and in recent years we have seen a tendency among the larger, more commercial publishing houses to regroup and merge. There is also greater and greater competition between the bigger bookshops and the large organized distribution networks. The aim is to reduce costs and to maximize sales channels. Both these factors, although positive in themselves, tend to limit the field, making life more difficult for the small prestigious publishers, whose titles are more academic and slower to sell, and the more elite little bookshops have difficulty in competing with the big chains. However, as book exporters to academic libraries, we are fortunately, not affected by the negative aspects of this situation. In a sense, our very existence helps maintain both the smaller academic publishers and presses.

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When it came to the fifth question: "Is your institution interested in developing an electronic capability to supplement or replace existing commercial products? If so, is your library involved in the process?" — Only **UC Irvine** was active here. **Julia Gelfand** stated: 1) "We are looking at electronic commercial

fulltext products and possibly making them available; and 2) We are not doing this at this time because we need to refine what we've got."

For the final question of the survey we asked: "Are there any other comments you would like to add about electronic permissions and may we quote you or mention your institution as a participant in this survey?"

We received 100% permission to quote our respondents.

In summary, only a few institutions have put their toes in the electronic content management waters but the interest is definitely there. Online permissions may be a great idea but it will take time to implement. Let's look at this topic again in a year or so and gauge the changes in rights management applications. And, thanks to **Renee Mansheim**, **Julia Gelfand**, and **Pamela Goude** for their participation in this fairly complex survey.