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**“DOWN THERE BY THE SEA”  
D. H. LAWRENCE: TWO LETTERS TO RINA SECKER  
AND A POSTCARD TO MARTIN SECKER**

RICHARD OWEN

There are brief references in biographies of D. H. Lawrence to Rina Secker, the Italian wife of Martin Secker, Lawrence's publisher. It is acknowledged that it was Rina who suggested the seaside resort of Spotorno on the Italian Riviera as a suitable place for Lawrence and Frieda to stay in 1925–1926, and that Lawrence's story 'Sun' – written at Spotorno – was inspired by Rina sunbathing there with her toddler son Adrian.<sup>1</sup> Rina's unpublished archive, however, provides a much fuller picture, including two letters to her from Lawrence published in this journal for the first time. I was offered access to the papers by the Secker family following an article in which I had described places in Italy associated with English authors, including Lawrence.<sup>2</sup>

Rina's archive – untouched since her death in 1968 – consists largely of letters to and from her husband Martin during long periods when she was in Italy while he remained in England, as well as her diary jottings and other memorabilia, and notes and correspondence by her son Adrian, who became a senior journalist with the *Financial Times*. The archive makes clear that it was Rina who found the Lawrences the Villa Bernarda at Spotorno, with the aid of her father, Luigi Capellero, who was a hotelier at the resort. She thus brought together Frieda and Angelo Ravagli. She was also an observer of the Lawrences' life at the villa throughout the six months they spent there, describing in letters home to Martin, for example, the tensions between Frieda and Lawrence's sister Ada Clarke, which precipitated Lawrence's flight to Capri and Dorothy Brett. As Adrian Secker later wrote, "They were obviously very close, my mother and the Lawrences".<sup>3</sup>

Since little was known about Rina, I interviewed her relatives in England and Italy, as well as reconstructing her life by tracking down birth and marriage certificates, census records and other documents. Many of the clues to her life story, however, are in the archive itself. Rina, it emerged, was not originally from Spotorno at all, or even Italy. Although her parents, Luigi Capellero and Caterina Gazzera, were from Piedmont, she was born in Monte Carlo in 1896 and brought to London as a baby, thus becoming both Italian and English.<sup>4</sup> In London Luigi Capellero, who in Monte Carlo had made an unsuccessful start as a hotelier, worked first as a waiter in Soho but then built up restaurant businesses at Archway and Clapham Junction. After the First World War, the Capelleros returned to Italy, buying the Hotel Miramare at Spotorno at a time when the Italian Riviera was seen not only as fashionable but also as ideal for those seeking health cures.

It was at this point that Rina, who divided her time between London and Italy, met Martin Secker. According to both Adrian Secker and Compton Mackenzie (one of Secker's authors), the relationship began when Rina helped Secker with his imperfect Italian while he was travelling to Capri by train.<sup>5</sup> Martin Secker, nearly fifteen years older than Rina, had worked as a publisher's reader before setting up his own publishing business at the age of just 28.<sup>6</sup> He became engaged to Viola Meynell, another of his authors, but the engagement was broken off in 1919, possibly because of Martin's relationship with Rina, who began working for Secker as a translator.<sup>7</sup> They were married on 30 August 1921, and their only child, Adrian, was born three years later, on 11 March 1924.

Rina Secker visited Lawrence and Frieda in Hampstead at the end of 1923, when the Lawrences were in London before returning to New Mexico. "All the people who met you here said very flattering things about you", Frieda wrote to her afterwards.<sup>8</sup> When Lawrence and Frieda came back to England at the end of September 1925, Lawrence visited Martin and Rina at their house at Iver in Buckinghamshire (5L 312).<sup>9</sup> It was evidently on this

occasion that Rina planted the idea of Spotorno, where she was herself heading with her baby son. Lawrence, whose attraction to Italy had taken him earlier in his life to Gargnano, Fiascherino, Abruzzo, Capri, Sicily and Sardinia, wrote to Brett on 28 October 1925: "We may stay on the Italian Riviera for a while" (5L 326). On 4 November he told her that he had found England "very damp and dreary" (5L 332), adding: "Martin Secker's wife lives (her family) in Spotorno, she's just gone there, and we shall probably fix up for a while in that region: don't know yet" (5L 333).

By the time the Lawrences arrived in Spotorno in November 1925, Rina had moved into the annex adjoining the Hotel Miramare, the Villa Maria – today the quarters of the hotel owner. "I received a letter from Lawrence – from Baden – an amusing letter", she wrote to Martin: "They are arriving here on the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> and I have fixed rooms for them at the Albergo Ligure here in Spot. My father has told me of what sounds a very ideal apartment for them in a villa on the hill above Spotorno. We shall probably go to see it this afternoon".<sup>10</sup>

The "amusing letter" is the first of the two Lawrence letters published here for the first time (Letter 3534a). Writing to Rina from Baden-Baden c/o ("presso") her mother Caterina Capellero at "Villa Maria, Spotorno, Riviera di Ponente, Provincia di Genova" on 3 November 1925, he addressed her as "Mrs Secker", even though by then he knew her as Rina: possibly this was to impress her parents with his manners. "Perhaps you will be at home by the time this arrives: your father's home, that is", Lawrence wrote. He and Frieda were planning to leave Baden-Baden on 12 November and arrive at Spotorno via Lucerne on the 15<sup>th</sup>, a Sunday, "or perhaps better Monday, 17<sup>th</sup> [sic]".<sup>11</sup> He added: "It would be nice if you knew of a house for us: not very big, three bedrooms or thereabouts".

Baden-Baden had once been "fashionable and 'grand'", and still had "a sort of fin de siècle elegance", but was now "quite deserted. Nobody comes at all". His head was "thick with talking German to old ladies", or rather "listening to old ladies talk German. My God,

what is it that keeps these old ladies trotting and talking for a hundred years? So many people die: but these have the gift of eternal life. And why? Why, Oh why! There should be a law against widows". His mother-in-law, Lawrence added, was of course "a dear. But she's only seventy-five, so far". He turned his thoughts from his German in-laws to the happier prospect of Spotorno: "I hope you had a pleasant journey, and the boy fared well, and that you are rejoicing in the bosom of the family. And I hope we shall see you soon, and that we can have some jolly times, all of us, down there by the sea".

In the event, Lawrence and Frieda arrived at Spotorno on the Sunday rather than the Monday, and Rina met them at the station, taking them to the Hotel Ligure rather than the more imposing Miramare – though it appears they at some point lodged at the Villa Maria before moving into the Villa Bernarda.<sup>12</sup> Rina later had no doubt about her role in the events which followed "down there by the sea": towards the end of her life, when Martin Secker was preparing Lawrence's letters for publication, she wrote on the typescript – in red ink – "I found them the Villa Bernarda, belonging to Tenente Ravagli, who afterwards became Frieda's 3rd husband".<sup>13</sup>

As a result of tensions with Frieda at Spotorno, Lawrence abandoned the Villa Bernarda in March 1926 for Dorothy Brett in Capri and then Ravello. Martin Secker was on one of his occasional visits to Spotorno: the archive contains a postcard sent by Lawrence from Ravello to Secker at the Villa Maria, with a black and white photograph of Ravello's thirteenth-century cathedral altar on the front (Letter 3649a). Avoiding any mention of the recent dramas, Lawrence said he was sorry to hear that Martin had flu (which he spelled "flue"), and hoped it was a mild attack. "The weather isn't worthy the name", Lawrence wrote: "I leave for Rome on Monday, and wend my way slowly north so shall no doubt see you if you don't leave till about March 30". Lawrence duly went to Rome with two painter friends also staying at Ravello, Mabel Harrison and Millicent Beveridge, then to Assisi, Perugia, Florence and Ravenna,

reaching Spotorno on 3 April 1926, Easter Saturday, after an absence of a month and a half.

Rina did not see the Lawrences again after Spotorno. Frieda however continued to write to her, and commented on the descriptive power of Rina's letters. Lawrence evidently agreed; in the second unpublished letter to Rina, from the Villa Mirenda at Scandicci near Florence, in 1927, he offered her advice on how to get into print (Letter 4054a). He thought she might do well as a society or woman's columnist, Lawrence wrote to Rina, a "London Letter" or "the Feminine Topics kind of thing". She had apparently mentioned the idea of being a reporter to him, but a news correspondent had "to be an expert journalist of considerable experience", Lawrence wrote, whereas Rina was more suited to the role of social observer – the "sort of thing", he suggested, that was done by Iris Tree, daughter of the actor Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree.<sup>14</sup>

The only problem, Lawrence warned Rina, was that to be a society gossip writer meant that "you have to run round seeing people and seeing shows – garden parties etc – and you don't get a vast salary. But it might be worth it". She should "write a few snappy little 'interviews' or 'reports,' to show you can do them: then see if you can get onto some paper like *Vanity Fair*, or *Harpers Bazaar* or *Good Housekeeping*: they pay pretty well. If there's anything I can do, I'll do it. But what can I do?". Lawrence suggested she approach Frank Swinnerton, one of Secker's authors – "He is a journalist – I'm not" – and if he was "no good" she could ask for help from Nancy Pearn at Curtis Brown, his agents.<sup>15</sup> He added: "I do think it would be good for you to be doing some work of your own ... Make a start somehow, and you'll get somewhere".

Rina never did start a society or gossip column, nor did she write a memoir of her time with Lawrence and Frieda, even though several people urged her to do so. In 1938 she divorced Martin Secker and re-married. But in old age she returned to live near her first husband in Buckinghamshire, and the papers she left behind

there have enabled me to try and bring her – and her relationship with D. H. Lawrence – out of the shadows.

There is some evidence that she contributed to the character of Connie Chatterley. Rina was given to mood swings: she was, Lawrence wrote to Dorothy Brett in December 1925, “a living block of discontent” (5L 352). In his 1927 letter to Rina herself he was less blunt, suggesting she sounded “désœuvrée to a degree” – that is adrift or at a loose end – an assessment which could be said to apply equally well to Connie Chatterley’s state of mind as Lawrence’s novel opens. According to papers in the archive, Frieda once told Rina that she “was” Lady Chatterley, and suggested she should play the character in a proposed film version. It may also be argued that ‘Sun’, inspired by Rina, anticipates *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* – written at Scandicci shortly after the Spotorno episode – as an account of a dissatisfied woman drawn to a man not of her own class.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example David Ellis, *D. H. Lawrence: Dying Game 1922–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 283; and John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 335.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Owen, ‘Doors Open on Writers’ Inspiration’, *Times*, 20 March 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished letter from Adrian Secker to Adrienne Dion, granddaughter of Anna Marie Frysinger, née Capellero, Rina’s sister, dated 5 January 1990.

<sup>4</sup> The Capelleros were a family of bakers, while the Gazzeras had higher social status, later reinforced by the rise of General Pietro Gazzera, Rina’s uncle, who became Minister of War under Mussolini from 1928–1933. He was, the Turin paper *La Stampa* wrote in its obituary, “an upright and honest military man” and not himself a Fascist (*La Stampa*, 1 July 1953).

<sup>5</sup> Compton Mackenzie, *My Life and Times: Octave Five, 1915–1923* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 205.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Secker was a reader for John Eveleigh Nash from 1908–10. See the *DNB* entry on him, and his brief memoir *Publisher’s Progress: From My Unpublished Memoirs* in *The Cornhill Magazine*, No 1076 (Summer

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1973), held at Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Nottingham.

<sup>7</sup> In 1921, Secker published an English version by Rina Capellero of *Tre Croci* [*Three Crosses*] by the modernist Italian writer Federigo Tozzi.

<sup>8</sup> Unpublished letter from Frieda Lawrence to Rina Secker, from 110 Heath St., Hampstead, London NW3, 20 December 1923, in the Bridgefoot Archive.

<sup>9</sup> See also Ellis, *D. H. Lawrence: Dying Game 1922–1930*, 269.

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished letter from Rina Secker to Martin Secker from Spotorno, 7 November 1925, in the Bridgefoot Archive.

<sup>11</sup> “DHL and FL actually arrived on Sunday 15 November” as noted by the editors of this letter earlier in this current number of *JDHLS*, 3.2 (2013), 7 n.3.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence evidently thought he and Frieda would be staying at the Capelleros’ own Hotel Miramare: see for example his letter to Dorothy Brett, 11 November 1925 (*5L* 335). However, he certainly headed his letters as from the Villa Maria after his arrival in Spotorno: possibly he and Frieda moved there after an initial stay at the more modest Hotel Ligure. Rina is quite clear however that the Lawrences stayed at the Ligure when they first arrived at Spotorno.

<sup>13</sup> Rina’s note in red ink about the Villa Bernarda is on a typescript of Lawrence’s 1925 letter to Martin Secker from Baden-Baden just before his journey to Spotorno; the typescript prepared by Martin Secker is held at Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Nottingham.

<sup>14</sup> Iris Tree was painted nude by Modigliani and sculpted by Jacob Epstein. She later played herself in a cameo role in Federico Fellini’s 1960 film *La Dolce Vita*, and died in 1968, the same year as Rina.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Swinnerton (1884–1982), prolific author and literary critic. He was a witness at Martin and Rina’s wedding in 1921.