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Nunzio Pernicone

Robert Helms

2013

Nunzio Pernicone (June 20, 1940-May 30 2013), the leading scholar of Italian anarchism, has died of prostate cancer.

Born in Manhattan, the son of Sicilian immigrants Salvatore and Giuseppina Catania Pernicone, Nunzio absorbed anarchist ideas from his father, who was both actor and director in amateur theater groups that raised funds for *Il Martello* and other Italian radical papers, performing plays by Carlo Tresca during the 1920s and '30s.

After earning his BA and MA degrees from CUNY, Pernicone earned his PhD in 1971 at the University of Rochester, studying under the direction of A. William Salomone, the eminent historian of modern Italy. He soon became the colleague and close friend of Paul Avrich, who was then starting to establish the history of anarchism as a full-on academic field of study. All through his life, Nunzio knew many aging Italian veterans of the movement such as Valerio Isca.

Pernicone taught at several institutions and authored scores of articles on the Italian anarchist and labor movements, settling permanently at Drexel in 1987. There followed his books *Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892* (1993), and *Carlo Tresca: Portrait of a Rebel* (2005). What distinguishes those

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volumes (both of which were later re-issued) is that they represent decades of thorough research into the lives of Italian militants who are notoriously difficult to trace – even for those who have total fluency in their language.

Students of U.S. history should be especially grateful for Pernicone's biography of Carlo Tresca, which he expanded and corrected for its second release by AK Press in 2010. Some heroes of the ages remain too poorly understood or appreciated by the general public until one scholar steps forward to devote a lifetime of work to present the hero's legacy to future generations. If not for Horace Traubel, we'd have meager knowledge of Walt Whitman. Without William Archer, the English-speaking world would know very little of Henrik Ibsen. Nunzio Pernicone is exactly that important to the legacy of Tresca, whose rousing speeches and unwavering courage played a pivotal role in fighting the abuses of capitalism and fascism among Italo-Americans for half a century. This is a huge contribution.

I knew Nunzio since 1994, when he accepted my invitation to lecture at our small club in West Philadelphia. Being generous with his time and knowledge, he spoke to about twenty Wobblies and anarchists with his scratchy and somewhat deep voice. He wore a bright red shirt (his black shirt being in the wash) and gave an intimate account of the anarchist leaders of 19th Century Italy, both comic and tragic. His manner was that of a learned comrade teaching what he knew to his fellow workers. Over the years since then, he was always ready to share information from his research and ask questions about mine.

Not long before his death, Nunzio completed his last book, *Propaganda of the Deed: Italian Anarchist Violence in the 19th Century*. AK Press will publish it soon.

Nunzio Pernicone the historian, anarchist and atheist, a lover of cats and the opera, is survived by his wife Christine Zervos and their four cats.