

# The Scuola Magistrale and the Concept of An Officer and a Gentleman

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The military caste system in Europe created a vast chasm between noncommissioned and commissioned officers. This had a profound effect on the manner of instruction and the way military fencing masters were perceived. In France military fencing masters from the nineteenth to the twentieth century were noncommissioned officers, and the same was true initially of Italian military fencing masters until the Decree of 31 December 1923, after which date graduates of the Scuola Magistrale Militare di Scherma at Rome were elevated to the rank of second lieutenant. And with this change the role of the military fencing master shifted from that of a drill sergeant barking out orders and working by the numbers, to that of a lieutenant or captain who taught the art of fencing. Indeed, an officer was by definition *signorile*, a word not easily translated into English, but encompassing in its meaning a courtly mode of behavior, high moral standards, and strict adherence to the code of honor.

Maestro Aldo Nadi, *The Living Sword: A Fencer's Autobiography* (Bangor, Maine, 1995) p. 46 remarked: "The officers [of the Italian cavalry] were perfect gentleman and represented an elite of their own class." And on p. 92 he wrote: ". . . the Professional Champion of Italy was an obscure noncommissioned officer named Candido Sassone." But after Nadi's defeat 20-11 on 30 January 1922 in Paris by Lucien Gaudin, and hungry for money, yet in no proper state of mind to compete so soon with a strong adversary, he unwisely accepted a match on 19 March 1922 in Rome with the "obscure noncommissioned officer" Candido Sassone, and to his chagrin suffered still another loss, this time 20-13. Though in subsequent exhibitions Aldo triumphed over both Gaudin and Sassone, neither one was ever willing to risk a return match, so that the possible outcome of such an encounter remained uncertain.

Now in his nineties, Maestro Niccolò Perno, one of the last surviving graduates (1933) of the Scuola Magistrale, recently wrote me that noncommissioned officers under twenty-eight years of age, with two months of preliminary fencing exercises, and at least two years of military service, could apply for admission to the Scuola Magistrale. If after three years of study, including courses in physical education, anatomy, and related subjects, they passed a rigorous final examination, they were awarded the diploma of Master of Fencing, and the rank of second lieutenant. Following a waiting period of two to three months they were assigned to a regiment or military school. And, as regards the maximum rank a fencing master might hope to attain in the course of his career, my Florentine fencing master, Maestro Ettore

Spezza, told me that military fencing masters could eventually attain the rank of major.

Although the influence of the Scuola Magistrale was significant in Europe, especially in Germany (Maestri Ettore Schiavoni in Berlin and Arturo Gazzera and Francesco Tagliabò in Frankfurt) and Hungary (Maestri Italo Santelli and Eduardo Alajmo in Budapest), little is known of its influence in the United States. Generally, in this country, the Italian school of fencing is associated with either Maestro Aldo Nadi and his publication, *On Fencing* (Bangor, Maine, 1994), or with Maestro Giorgio Santelli. And while English translations of Maestro Luigi Barbasetti's books, *The Art of the Foil* (New York, 1932) and *The Art of the Sabre and the Épée* (New York, 1936) were well known in this country during the 1930's, he himself never came here.

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Yet, a direct influence of the Scuola Magistrale on American fencing does, in fact, go back in time as far as the final years of the nineteenth century and the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. On that occasion, at the invitation of the President of the Italian Commission for the Exposition, Maestri Agesilao Greco and Carlo Pessina of the Scuola Magistrale at Rome, and Eugenio Pini of the Reale Accademia Navale at Livorno, embarked on the *City of Berlin* at Southampton on 8 October 1893 and sailed to New



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York, where they arrived on 14 October 1893, and were met by a large and enthusiastic crowd of Italian Americans. From New York the three celebrities traveled by train to Chicago, where they were received as guests by the Atlantic Club and the German Circle.

*The Chicago Record* reported that in the North Side *Turnhalle*, in a foil match for \$1,000, that in twenty-five minutes Greco defeated Prof. Heintz, Champion of Chicago, 10-1. Pini then easily vanquished, in an academic assault, presumably in foil, Captain Yates, a man in his 50's, who politely and scrupulously announced each of the hits he received.

We read that Prof. Heintz again stepped on the fencing strip, and in a sabre match for \$1,000, lasting twenty-five minutes, lost to Pessina 9-3. This was followed by a foil match for \$2,000 in which Pini defeated Prof. Gignac (very likely either *Maîtres Regis* or Louis Senac) of the New York Athletic Club, 11-3. The article also reports that Gignac was always courteous and acknowledged even the lightest touches.

In subsequent assaults staged in the Central Music Hall of Chicago the Italian masters vanquished all of their remaining adversaries in Chicago. Greco, Pessina, and Pini were then invited by General Miles to give a classical demonstration of the Italian method of swordplay at Fort Sheridan, two hours distant from Chicago. Present for the exhibition were Generals Schofield and Howard, Colonel Carlston, and Count Piola Caselli, who acted as interpreter. At the conclusion of each portion of the program the spectators broke into applause. Then as a final demonstration, Pessina directed Greco to perform a series of mounted exercises with sabre in hand, which prompted even greater applause. And as a consequence of this exhibition of swordplay on foot and on horseback the officers present decided to write directly to Masaniello Parise for two hundred copies of his treatise (fig. 1-3), and for the fencing materials employed by the Scuola Magistrale.

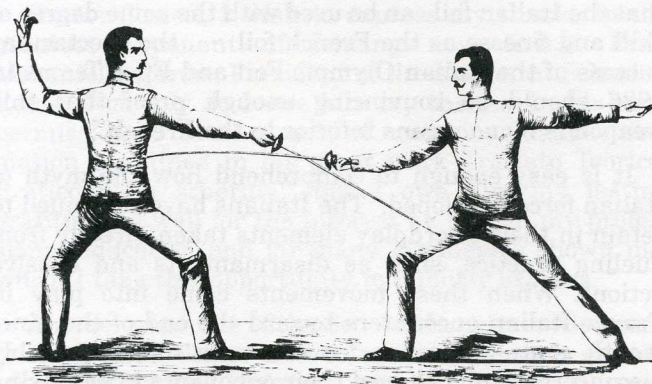


Figure 1

It is noteworthy that each of these three Italian masters who visited the United States in 1893 wrote a

book on fencing. *Pini's Trattato pratico e teorico sulla scherma di spada* (Livorno, 1903) was based on

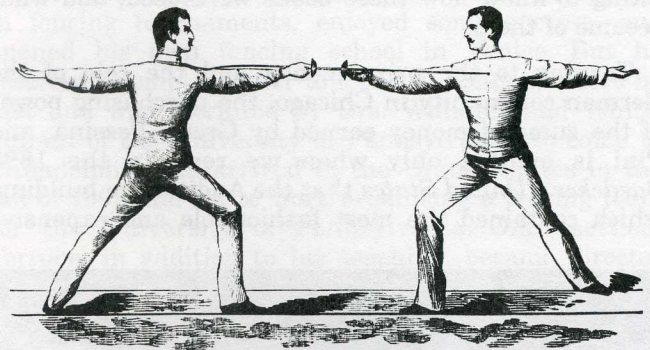


Figure 2

Northern Italian fencing theory; Pessina's *La sciabola* (Roma, 1910), written with Salvatore Pecoraro, was a publication of Radaellian sabre technique, that is to

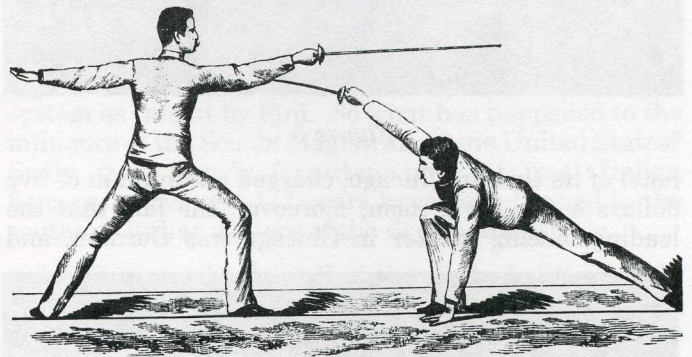


Figure 3

say, Northern Italian fencing theory; and Greco's *La spada e la sua disciplina d'arte* (Roma, 1912) was an elaboration of Parise's method of *épée* instruction (figs. 4-6). Not one of these volumes was ever translated into

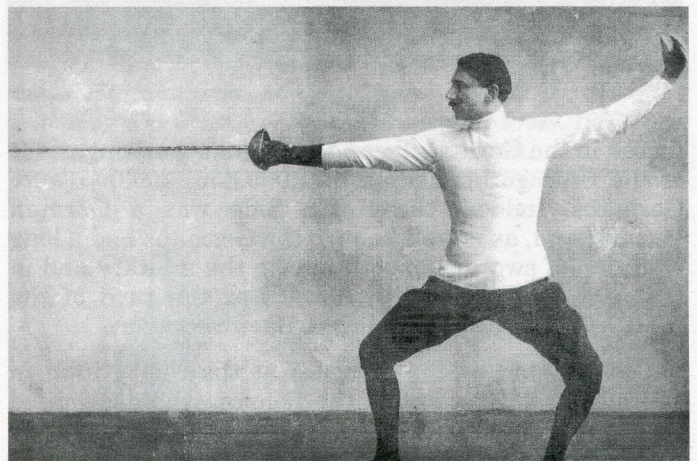


Figure 4

English, nor is there evidence that Parise's textbook, which was apparently ordered in multiple copies by the



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United States Army, was translated. It would be interesting to know how these books were used, and what became of them.

Turning to the prize money and the role of the German community in Chicago, the purchasing power of the sums of money earned by Greco, Pessina, and Pini is evident only when we read in the 1893 *Baedeker's United States* that the Auditorium building, which contained the most fashionable and expensive

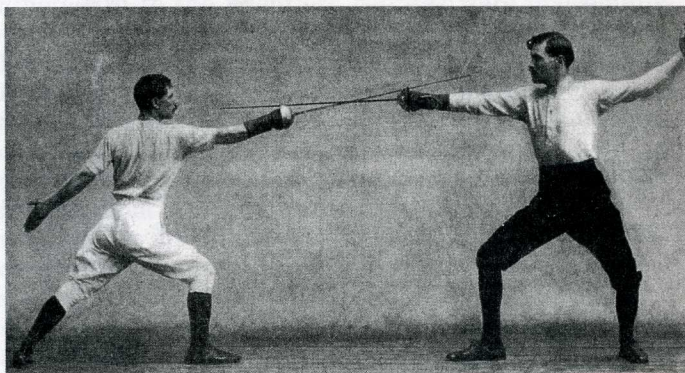


Figure 5

hotel of its time in Chicago, charged a minimum of five dollars a day for a room; moreover, the fact that the leading fencing master in Chicago was German, and

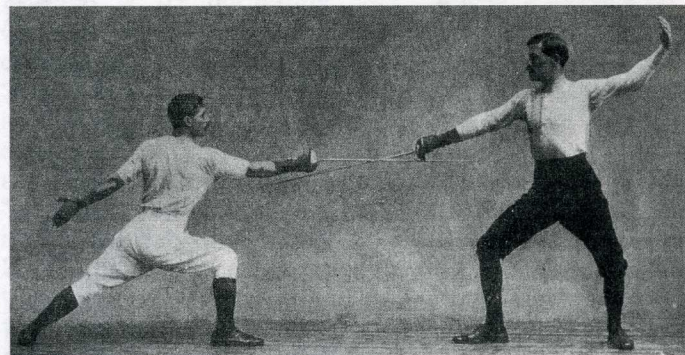


Figure 6

fenced in the German *Turnhalle*, is not surprising, since of the Chicago population of 1,099,850, 400,000 were Germans. Indeed, the North Side was a German enclave, and, as is well known, the Germans had a long tradition of swordplay, both among the military and in the universities. My own father, at the turn of the century, learned to fence in the Bavarian Army.

Curious, too, is the presence at the competition in Chicago of at least one of the Senacs, who designated themselves "Professional Champions of America." They were father and son, and had a fencing academy at 1947 Broadway near Sixty-fifth Street, New York City. Regis Senac had been a military fencing instructor in France, and immigrated to the United States in 1872.

In their book, *The Art of Fencing* (New York, 1915), the Senacs were less than generous to their Italian rivals. Ignoring the defeat of 1893 at Chicago, on p. 17 of their volume they stated: "A careful consideration of the respective merits of the two schools teaches us that the Italian school is, and always will be, inferior to the French, at least as long as the Italian fencer relies upon vigor and gymnastic ability instead of upon skill and agility, as does the Frenchman." This generalization of Italian force versus French finesse persisted for decades in American fencing literature, for example, Maître Clovis Deladrier, *Modern Fencing* (Annapolis, 1948), on p. xiii observed: "Where the French school uses finesse, the Italian school uses force." By the time the Belgian master published his book both Maestro Giorgio Santelli and Maestro Aldo Nadi had been in the United States for years, and their methods of swordplay demonstrated unequivocally that Italian fencing was as

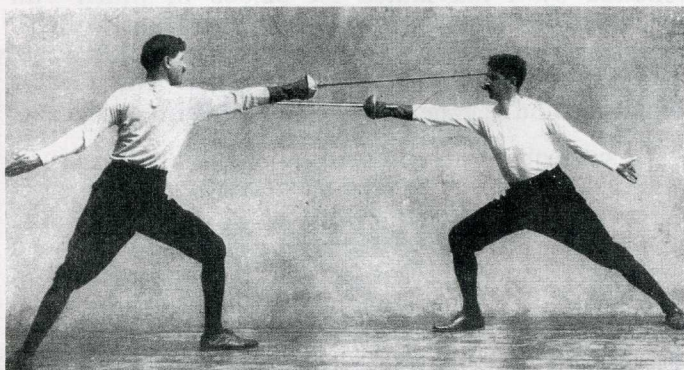


Figure 7

controlled and polished as that of the French school. I never met a fencing master in France or Italy in the years I lived abroad who had a more delicate touch than Maestro Nadi, and that includes the leading French military champions of the 1950's on the faculty of the French Military Masters School at Antibes. In this respect, Maître Joseph Vince, *Fencing* (New York, 1937), was more objective than some of his colleagues in this country when he wrote on p. 4: "It is the unanimous opinion of the leading fencers of the world that the Italian foil can be used with the same degree of skill and finesse as the French foil . . . the spectacular success of the Italian Olympic Foil and Epee Teams in 1936 should be convincing enough proof that this weapon is by no means inferior to the French."

It is easy enough to comprehend how the myth of Italian force developed. The Italians have continued to retain in their swordplay elements taken directly from dueling practice, such as disarmaments and evasive actions. When these movements came into play in Franco-Italian encounters toward the end of the nineteenth century, French fencers were understandably disconcerted and believed their opponents to be relying solely on brute force. Indeed, even as recently as 1990, when I gave a demonstration of the Scuola Magistrale system of instruction at the INS in Paris, at the point



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where I disarmed a fencing master candidate, one student asked how it was that up to that moment I emphasized sensitivity of touch and then contradicted myself by using such great force. The answer is that I did not employ "great force," I simply dominated the degrees of the blade, using a stronger portion of my steel against a weaker part of the opposing blade.

Evasive actions, of course, are still taught to Italian candidates for the fencing masters diploma. Along with the imbroccata and time thrust, the inquartata and passata sotto can be employed to counter even simple attacks with glides. However, these movements are sometimes misunderstood and shown incorrectly in American fencing texts, as for instance, in a relatively recent publication where the thrust by inquartata against an adversary of the opposite hand is depicted arriving in the inside high line, when, in fact, it should have been directed to the outside low line.

Mention should also be made here that there were Italian fencing masters trained in the Scuola Magistrale at Rome who settled in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, Maestro Generoso Pavese, who like Greco, Pessina, and Pini, came to the United States at the time of the Columbian Exposition. He was born on 30 January 1865 at Vallata near Naples, served in the Nineteenth Cavalry, was admitted to the Scuola Magistrale at Rome, completed the course work and examination and graduated with the diploma of fencing master. He returned to his regiment as fencing master, continued developing his skills, and between 1889 and 1892 participated in fencing competitions in Italy, France, Spain, and Austria.

In the United States Maestro Pavese taught in Baltimore, Maryland, where he wrote a textbook based on the system of the Scuola Magistrale, *Foil and Sabre Fencing* (Baltimore, 1905). He included a photograph of his teacher, Maestro Masaniello Parise, and in his introduction on p. 10 he commented:

"In conclusion, I wish to express my thanks to the greatest exponent of fencing now living, Prof. Masaniello Parise, President of the Magistral School of Rome. Not only do I owe him my thanks for his kind permission to avail myself of certain valuable information contained in his great work *Trattato Teorico-Pratico della scherma*," but I owe him my lasting gratitude as well for the interest he took in my professional education and for many kindnesses shown me, which I take this opportunity to publicly express."

Another graduate of the Scuola Magistrale who came to the United States at a comparatively early date to teach fencing was Maestro Leonardo Terrone. Terrone was born on 17 February 1872 in a farming community near Turin. He joined the Royal Navy, was later admitted to the Scuola Magistrale, became a pupil of

Parise, completed his fencing studies and returned to the Navy, but decided against continuing a military career, and resigned. Leonardo then began competing in fencing tournaments, enjoyed some success, and opened his own fencing school in Venice. But he received a tempting offer to teach in London, where he met and was recruited by Drs. Williams and White, alumni of the University of Pennsylvania, to come to Philadelphia. He arrived in the United States in the fall of 1902 and set to work organizing a fencing team for the University of Pennsylvania. Once settled, Terrone, in addition to his teaching, became director and editor of an Italian language weekly newspaper, *Il Vesuvio*. And eventually, with the help of his students, he was able to purchase a house for his own academy and home. In his later years Leonardo wrote a book, *Right and Left Hand Fencing* (New York, 1959), which was published posthumously.

Today, Pavese's book is virtually unknown, and Terrone's volume is given little attention. In contrast, Aldo Nadi's work, *On Fencing*, is widely read, and his system of instruction is regarded in English-speaking countries as the Italian method, when, in fact, it is a highly personal adaptation of the northern Italian system as taught by Pini. So what has happened to the influence of the Scuola Magistrale in the United States? Sadly, it is largely forgotten, and yet most Italian fencers for the past 117 years have been trained in the southern Italian system of the Scuola Magistrale.

In retrospect I submit that the method of the Scuola Magistrale, which is an elegant and complete pedagogical system, might have contributed substantially over the past century to American fencing success at the international level; moreover, it certainly would have instilled in our young fencers respect for the code of honor that once governed the behavior of an officer and a gentleman.

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