

## of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

### NEWSLETTER



#### Bono and Patti Smith pay their respects (separately)



Photo: Jesse Ditmar

The grave of John Keats received an unexpected tribute in front of 60,000 rock music fans in the Stadio Olimpico in mid-July. Bono, lead vocalist of the band U2 playing their 2017 Joshua Tree tour, called Keats one of his heroes and quoted lines from the *Ode to a Grecian urn*. Bono had arrived in Rome the previous evening and visited the poet's grave. Sophy Downes recalls Bono also visiting the Keats-Shelley House in 2005 when she worked there.



One of our long-term volunteers, Frank Carbone, was on patrol when he recognised Patti Smith (above) standing at the grave of Gregory Corso (see 'Poets in the Cemetery' on page 4). She, like Bono, has visited Rome often to give concerts while also remembering friends such as Corso.



#### SUMMER EVENTS AT THE CEMETERY

In support of the Cemetery, Rebecca Palagi gave readings in Italian freely inspired by Shelley's *Adonais*, and Michael Fitzpatrick, Shelagh Stuchbery and cast performed an entertaining one-hour version of Shakespeare's *Tempest* for a large audience in the chapel. The actor Julian Sands, who starred in the film of *A Room with a View*, is also known for his one-man show celebrating the playwright Harold Pinter. In June he gave a series of readings from Keats, Shelley and Pinter at the Keats-Shelley House, and then asked to read at Keats's grave. On a quiet Sunday morning a small audience had the treat of listening to him. The Garden Room hosted a small exhibition for five weeks, *Fatua*, new work inspired by the Cemetery by Aldo Bandinelli.



Photo: N. Stanley-Price



Photo: N. Stanley-Price

The anniversary of Keats's death, 2017

## WHO THEY WERE

### Alexander Kirk, former American ambassador in Italy



Alexander Kirk on the move

American Family Flakes, sold especially well in the Midwest where it suited the hard water prevalent there.

As a boy Alexander Kirk was tutored at home and also spent months travelling in Europe with his mother and sister. After a year at the University of Chicago he transferred to Yale University, graduating in 1909, and then spent two years at France's Institut d'études politiques. His father had wished him to become a lawyer; after graduating from Harvard Law School in 1914, he was admitted to the Illinois bar and joined the board of the family company.

Kirk's brother-in-law Albert Ruddock had meanwhile joined the American Diplomatic Service, and in 1915 Kirk himself passed the entrance examination. Posted to wartime Berlin, he was soon transferred to the neutral Netherlands. In 1919 he was a member of the American delegation to the Versailles peace talks and was then posted in quick succession to Tokyo, Peking and Mexico City. In 1925 Kirk became the

Alexander Comstock Kirk (1888-1979) joined the American diplomatic service in 1915 and served at many posts, including three times in Rome. He ended his career as U.S. Ambassador to Italy in 1945-46.

Kirk was born in Chicago on November 26, 1888, into a wealthy family. His paternal grandfather had founded in Utica, New York, in 1839 what became America's largest soap manufacturer, James S. Kirk & Company. Its best-known product,

assistant to Under Secretary of State Joseph C. Grew in Washington, D.C.

He went to the Rome embassy in 1928 as first secretary and the following year became the counsellor, deputy to the ambassador. He spent a decade in Rome and then went to Moscow in 1938 as deputy to Ambassador Joseph Davies. Davies resigned soon after Kirk's arrival, and Kirk was the chargé d'affaires for nine months. In April 1939 he returned to the Berlin embassy. The ambassador had departed, President Franklin Roosevelt had not sent a new ambassador to the aggressive Nazi regime, and Kirk served as chargé d'affaires throughout his 18 months in Berlin. In November 1940, a year before Mussolini's declaration of war against the United States, Kirk was posted to Rome as deputy to Ambassador William Phillips but three months later was named American envoy to Egypt.

In January 1945 Kirk became the first American ambassador to post-Fascist Italy, serving simultaneously as the political adviser to the Supreme Allied Commander for the Mediterranean Theater, Sir Harold Alexander. It was a difficult period in which the victorious allies were faced with numerous problems including Italy's ravaged economy, the country's political future, and the status of its former colonies and the Alto Adige and Venezia Giulia. Kirk retired in March 1946, returned to America and died in Tucson, Arizona, on March 23, 1979. He had never married, and he is buried in Rome with his mother, Clara Comstock Kirk, who long served as his hostess and who had died in 1936.

Kirk was known for luxurious living. In Washington he owned a mansion with elaborate gardens, outside ballroom, and a marble-floored billiard room. Even as a mid-grade officer in Rome he entertained lavishly at his mother's home, the Villa Spada on the Janiculum, now the Irish Embassy. He was often described as overly refined and haughty, but the American diplomatist George Kennan, who had served under Kirk at Berlin in 1939, wrote that "behind this facade of urbane and even exaggerated sophistication there lay a great intuitive shrewdness and a devastating critical sense of humor."

*Contributed by Peter Bridges, minister of the American embassy at Rome in 1981-1984 and ambassador to Somalia, 1984-86.*

### The Kirk tomb – an unrecorded work (1936) by Ettore Rossi

Cemeteries often conceal works by well-known sculptors and architects. The tomb (Zone 2.20.21) commissioned by Kirk following his mother's death is by Ettore Rossi (1894-1968), a leading exponent of the modern movement in Italy and one of the five architects who



The Kirk tomb from behind

designed the EUR district of Rome. Among his buildings in the city are the Rowing Club on the Lungotevere (1928-30) and the Hotel Bristol (1934) in Piazza Barberini. When Kirk contacted him in 1936, he was busy with the Palazzo del Dopolavoro Monopoli di Stato (1936-38) in Trastevere, now the Cinema Sacher.

Rossi's proposal met Kirk's request for a tomb-chapel built at ground-level but its volume was inappropriately large. Marcello Piermattei insisted on locating it in the furthest corner of the Zona Seconda. The Cemetery's Committee of Art Experts had earlier proposed that the controversial family tomb of Hendrik Andersen (Zone 1.7.10), surmounted by its nude male sculpture, should be transferred there. But Andersen had refused.



The Kirk tomb facade

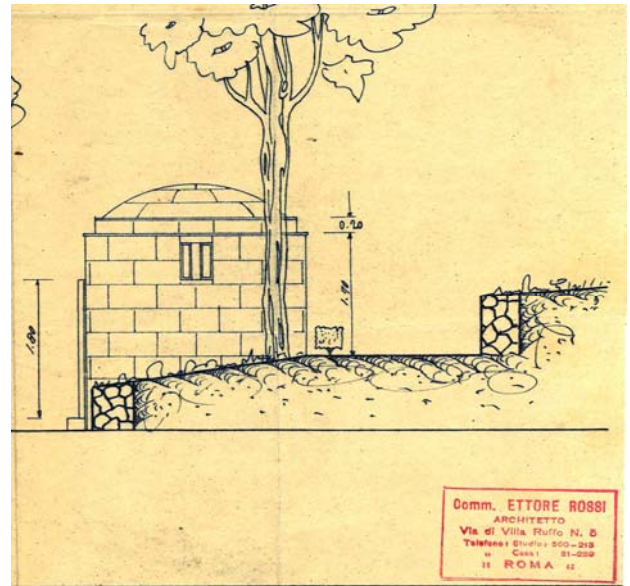
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The Committee's members were the Directors of the German, American and British Academies in Rome, respectively Hans Gericke, Chester Aldrich and Antonio Sciortino. (It was the British Academy of Art in Via Margutta, under the Maltese sculptor Sciortino [see *Newsletter* 18], and not the British School at Rome which had a place on the committee). They agreed that the proposed tomb was too voluminous but it could be located far back against the Aurelian wall, if the travertine stone were grey (not white); if the cupola were lower; and if climbing plants covered the walls.

The project went ahead with Kirk, at considerable cost, acquiring permanent concessions for four humble graves nearby so as to maintain the area's look. Ettore Rossi's building stands today as a discreet memorial to the distinguished diplomat and his beloved mother.

*Nicholas Stanley-Price, with thanks to Amanda Thursfield for allowing reproduction of the Rossi sketch*



Preparatory sketch for the Kirk tomb (1936) by Ettore Rossi (Cemetery archives; previously unpublished)

## WHO THEY WERE

### Hans Barth, provocative journalist in Rome



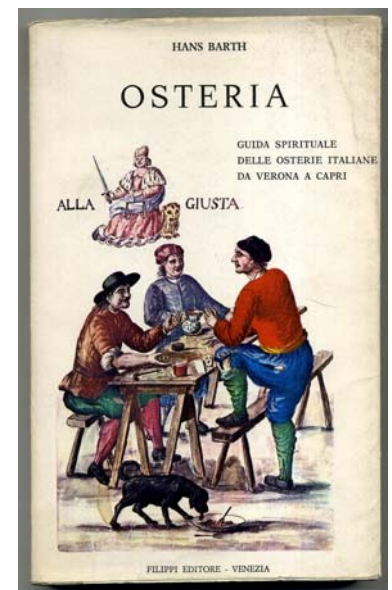
Hans Barth (1862–1928) was the author of witty guides to Italian inns (*Est! Est! Est! Italienischer Schenkenführer* (1900) and *Osteria* (1908, recently reprinted in Germany). Born in Stuttgart in 1862, Barth grew up in Smyrna (today's Izmir) where his father headed the English College. He studied Romance philology at Zurich, Geneva and Berlin before being appointed, at only 24, Rome correspondent of the *Berliner Tageblatt*. For some time he wrote also for a Munich newspaper and the art review *Kunst für Alle*.

He was known as a lover of good wine and a great friend of Rome, but his long career as a journalist was marked by several scandals. The first was in 1892 when he interviewed Senator Rinaldo Taverna, named as Italian ambassador to Berlin ("Despite his 52 years, the Count exudes a youthful energy.") The *Popolo Romano* reproduced Barth's article in the *Tageblatt*. In it Taverna praised the German army, stressed his sympathy for Germany and forecast a German victory in the event of a new war between France and Germany. There ensued a wave of indignation and a lively parliamentary enquiry in Rome. Barth tried to defuse the issue in a note to Parliament, but in the end the President of the Council, Starabba Rudini, revoked the ambassadorial appointment.

In 1898 Barth published in Leipzig a pro-Turkish pamphlet, *Türke wehre dich* (Defend yourself, Turk), which denied the persecution of the Armenians. Because of the great offence caused to the Garibaldini volunteers who had fought in 1897 alongside the Greeks against Turkey, Ricciotti Garibaldi (son of Giuseppe) wanted to punish the book's author, but nothing came of it. Instead, Turkey conferred on Barth the honorary title of 'Ottoman'.

Barth "whose brilliant character and temperament no-one could doubt" (*Patria*, 13.9.1902) was undeniably controversial. The daily

*Avanti* (2.4.1900) attacked him fiercely for his inability to report impartially the parliamentary session of 30 March and the obstructionism of the Left: "Out of respect for his education under imperial authoritarianism, he gets angry with the Extreme Left which is composed, in his view, of deputies who like that 'fat lawyer' Ferri and that 'peculiar' D'Annunzio do not represent the will of the people but only themselves." In fact the original article, although critical and ironic, did not use these expressions. Barth wrote of the grating voice of Ferri and referred to D'Annunzio as "small" but also "the great superman" who calls the people "the great beast".



In later years too, Barth was often criticised for a hostile attitude towards Italy and for mendacious interviews and articles: "Calumnies against Italy" (*Capitan Fracassa*, 1901), "The Berliner Tageblatt and the campaign against Italy" (*Corriere Sera* 1902), "The case of Dr. Hans Barth" (*Patria*, 1902), "An improbable interview attributed to the Hon. Luzzati" (*Giornale d'Italia* 1907), and "The slanders of the Berliner Tageblatt" (*Mattino* 1914).

He was warned by the government and became himself a topic for the press, actually challenging a colleague from Verona to a duel for alleged defamation. In the German community too (he was a member of the Association of German Artists) not all went smoothly: in 1911 he came to blows with his colleague Christoph Pflaum of the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* over the decree that would have expelled Barth for his articles about the war in Tripolitania. Several papers actually announced "German journalist expelled from Italy". The local press reported the dispute: "German reporters quarrel in the press room" and "Squabble among foreign journalists".

During the war Barth, until then living at Via Sicilia 43, had to leave

the country and moved to Lugano where he composed his epigrams *Römische Asche* while continuing to work for his paper. In 1919 he returned to Italy with his wife Ida Lamparter and spent his last years without provoking further scandal. For some time with a weak heart, he died of a heart attack on 28.2.1928, leaving his wife and one daughter. "I wish to be buried at Cestio" he often said to friends (Zone 1.13.13). The polemics had been long forgotten: according to the *Tageblatt*, not only

the German Ambassador and representatives of the Italian authorities attended but also many members of the public. The Italian press called him "The most Roman of German journalists" and Ludwig Pollak in his memoirs "The most amiable of the German journalists in Rome".

Contributed by Dorothee Hock, Casa di Goethe, Rome

## POETS IN THE CEMETERY



### Spirit in water: a reflection on the tombstone of Gregory Corso



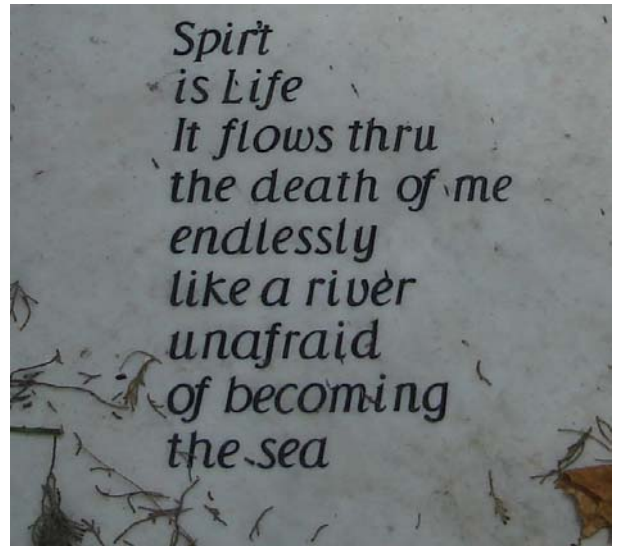
My hands did numb to beauty /  
As they reached into Death and  
tightened! – Gregorio Nunzio  
Corso (1930-2001), from *I held  
a Shelley manuscript*

Gregory Corso's proximity to Shelley allows the lover of poetry to see tradition and theme at work from gravestone to gravestone. Each epitaph deals in water, Shelley's famous "sea-change" marking transformation from one bodily form "into something rich and strange." For Corso, water is an image of the spirit, flowing continuously through a lifetime and beyond (see the photo).

A beautiful sentiment befitting a great poet. But wait, our eye catches the first word: *Spirit*? On close inspection today, there is a carved apostrophe that has lost its colouring, so the word should read: *Spir't*. Still, it is a strange spelling, and we wonder, was it a mistake?

Corso's *amici del vento* think not (friends of the wind—those who across time and space keep good company among kindred spirits). There's Shelley, who rests just a row above, reminding us that when we fade, we are transformed. I asked Corso's friend in Rome, Dario Bellini, if it was an error. He suggested, rather, an agile boundary between the poet and the past – Corso felt connected to those who provided the foundation of his sensibility, even under the extreme circumstances of imprisonment as a young man for petty crimes, when he started reading the classics. The boundary between life and death, or a spirit with archaic reference, is measured by the slightest absence. The Oxford English Dictionary attributes to M. Fotherby in 1622: "Euery Poet is inspired, with a kind of heavenly spirt."

Playing with the alternative spelling, "spirt" can also mean a slender spout, or alternatively, a plant sprout. Perhaps for Corso, the idea of spirit was captured both in watering and growth. He was no stranger to a full life. According to Bellini, a usual day for Gregorio in Rome began at San Calisto in Trastevere around 10:00 with a *Herald Tribune* and a Ceres (strong ale). From there he might take a meal at Da Augusto in Piazza de' Renzi, with frequently an evening in the Campo de' Fiori for a game of *monetine* at Giorgio Reggio's *vineria*. Tough but never insolent, Corso was a mainstay, once seen with Francis Ford Coppola, which led to a bit-part in *Godfather III*. Apparently, Corso was paid in new dentures.



The epitaph on Corso's gravestone

It was Rome in the "old days" – sometime in the 60's – that indelibly inscribed Corso's imagination on the city. He talked often of wanting to be laid to rest at the Non-Catholic Cemetery. There is even a touching scene in Bellini's short film of Corso in Rome, talking through the wall to Keats's grave. Only two problems: Corso was Catholic and died in Minnesota.

The Cemetery was initially opposed, and it took significant effort and the right people to arrange for the transfer of Corso's ashes to Rome. An American lawyer, Robert Yarra, was instrumental; he was a close friend and represented some big shots in the U.S. (such as Patti Smith, also a friend, who threw a benefit concert). So was Hannelore DeLellis who is credited with raising the necessary funds toward Corso's last cause (Zone V.15.11).

You can find online Bellini's delightful two-part film, and can also watch Corso discuss Jack Kerouac. He describes three stages for the artist: talent, genius, and "the ballgame divine." Shelley hit that last mark; and so Corso wanted to be close to his measure of divinity, forevermore part of a proud tradition of becoming through the poetic spirit.

By Arendt Speser, Department of English, University of Washington, USA

#### HOW TO BECOME A FRIEND

This Newsletter is made possible by the contributions of the Friends of the Cemetery.

The Friends also help fund the care of the trees in the cemetery and the restoration of tombs. Please can you help us by becoming a Friend? You can find a membership form at:

[www.cemeteryrome.it](http://www.cemeteryrome.it)

#### THE NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY IN ROME

via Caio Cestio, 6, 00153, Roma

Director: Amanda Thursfield

#### OPENING HOURS

Monday to Saturday 9:00am - 5:00pm  
(last entrance 4.30pm)  
Sunday & Public Holidays: 9.00am -1.00pm  
(last entrance 12.30pm)

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#### NEWSLETTER

of the Friends of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

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ROME, 2017

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Disponibile anche in versione italiana

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