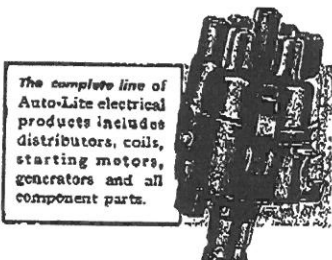




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CLOSE-UP

Comic vs. Commies

ITALY'S GUARESCHI USES HUMOR FOR HIS WEAPON

by WINTHROP SARCEANT

THE most adroit and effective anti-Communist propagandist in Europe is a barrel-chested, piratical-looking Italian who bears a disconcertingly popeyed resemblance to Josef Stalin. He is Italy's leading humorist as well as a devout and passionate monarchist. His name is Giovannino Guareschi (pronounced Gwaresky). As editor, principal writer and cartoonist of Milan's humorous weekly, *Candido*, Guareschi has for seven years been subjecting Italy's Communists to such a withering barrage of ridicule that the captions on his cartoons have become conventional catch phrases in nearly every cafe in the country.

Guareschi's all-out assault is now being stepped up, partly through his own prodigious efforts and partly as the result of the cumulative effect of his past contributions. Recently Guareschi moved into a rural villa near his native city to prepare dialogue for a new anti-Communist movie. Working three days a week on this project, he still was able to turn out five stories and six cartoons—all bitingly anti-Communist—for the latest issue of *Candido*. Meanwhile, a movie based on his first best-selling book, *The Little World of Don Camillo*, is a hit all over Europe and will soon be released in the U.S. A sequel, *Don Camillo and his Flock* (Pellegrini & Cudahy, \$3), already is a best-seller.

Guareschi's new movie will elaborate the adventures of Don Camillo, the ham-handed Italian priest he created for (and who is still the star of) *Candido*. Don Camillo holds conversations with Jesus Christ and fights Communism with guile and force in his little parish in the Po Valley. His skill in outwitting Communists and his habit, always deprecated by Jesus, of relying on his fists, have been recorded in translations from the English to the Hindustani.

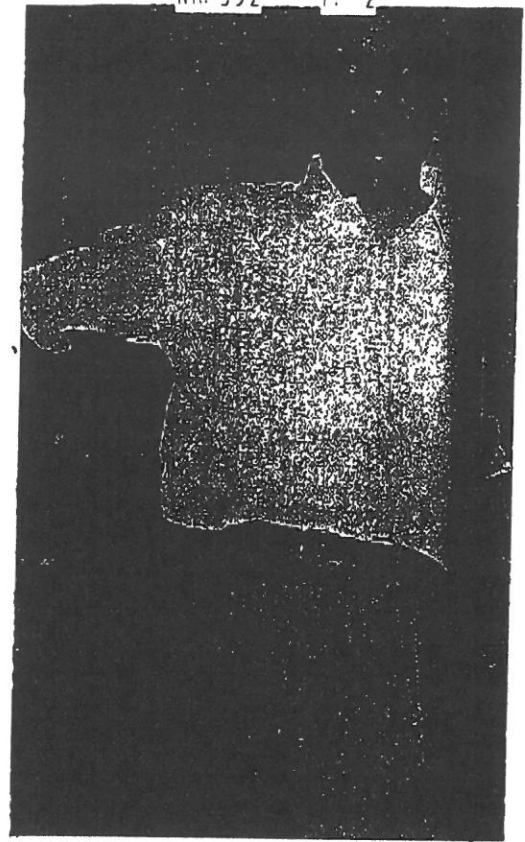
Don Camillo's popularity is partly due to the charm and humor with which Guareschi has written about him. But he is more than an amusing provincial priest shrewdly battling for the souls of his peasant flock. He is the personification of a force that is heavily to be reckoned on as an ally

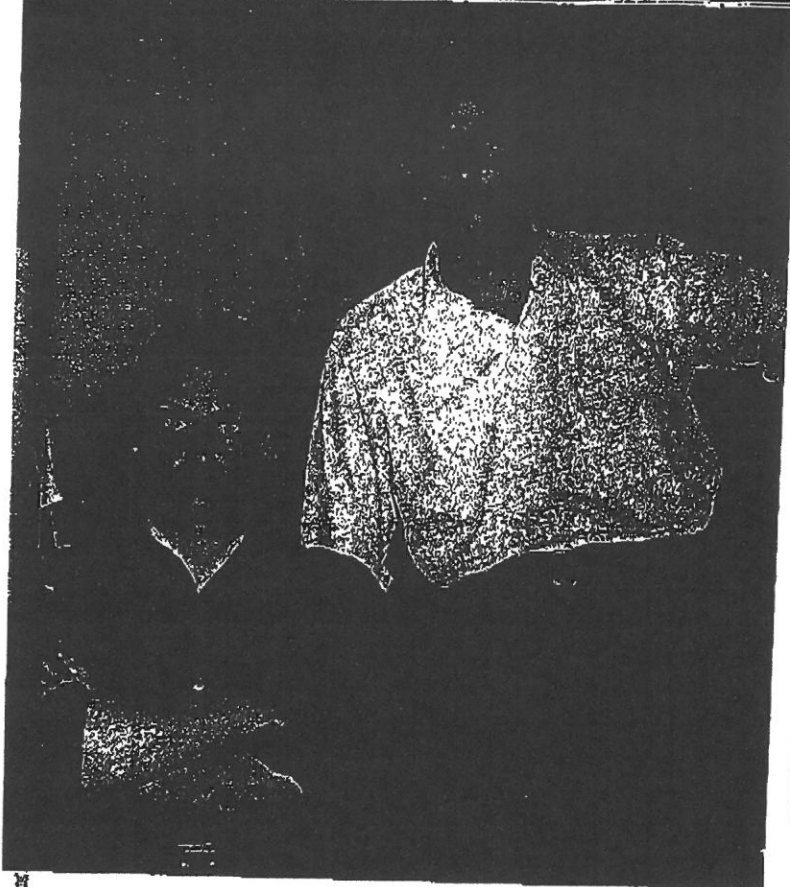
against the Soviet in southern and western Catholic Europe. His conflicts with the authorities of his native village symbolize, on an intimate human scale, one of the most dramatic struggles of the contemporary world: that between Marxism and its most implacable enemy, the Catholic Church.

Nowhere is this struggle quite as close to home as it is in Italy, where the most profound and deep-rooted Catholicism rubs elbows with the second most powerful Communist movement in Europe. Nowhere in Italy is the struggle as relentless as it is in the comparatively prosperous agricultural and industrial north. Here, in Don Camillo's native province, in the triangle lying roughly between Milan, Bologna and Venice, a large part of the population has, for nearly a hundred years, voted extreme left-wing tickets.

Yet such is the operatic nature of the Italian temperament that the sharp edges of ideological issues are continually blurred by intrigue, compromise, drama, confusion and emotion. In Italy one may be a Communist and a Catholic at the same time. In Italy leading industrialists often give large sums of money to the Communist party in the hope of bribing it to refrain from calling strikes and slowdowns. While Minister of the Interior Mario Scelba's Italian police are still busy tracking down huge Communist arsenals of Tommy guns and grenades collected after the last war, Italian Communists are daily entering Catholic confessionals in the hope of gaining absolution for anti-Catholic political murders.

Nino Guareschi himself was recently approached by a delegation of Communists who hoped he might help them organize a monarchist wing of the Communist party. Though he declined this confusing honor, he points with enthusiasm to the fact that these monarcho-Communists were not intellectuals but rank and file workers. *The Little World of Don Camillo*, as a movie, broke all box-office records in the small Italian towns that are the very center of Communism's traditional strong-





EDITOR Guareschi (center) poses with his assistants Minardi (left) and Manzoni, only other *Candido* staffers who are allowed to wear mustaches.

hold in the Po Valley triangle. Meanwhile Italy's priests, newly invigorated by the belligerent example of Don Camillo himself, have taken in increasing numbers to flexing their muscles and jauntily showing themselves on motorcycles.

The problems of party members

WHEN Nino Guareschi gets on the subject of Communism, his eyes bulge, he flails his chest and he lapses into the dialect of his native Parma, which he uses for all subjects that generate great emotional heat. He is fond of comparing the present comparatively quiescent state of Italian Communism to a live bomb of which the fuse has been temporarily extinguished. All it needs is another match to set it off. The solid core of Italy's Communist party is, Guareschi feels, beyond the reach of his propaganda. "The only thing to do with them," he says enthusiastically, "is to stand them against a wall and machine-gun them."

But the mass following of the Italian Communist movement is something else. It consists of sentimental, religious, impulsive and often bewildered Italians like his character Peppone, the Communist mayor of the *Don Camillo* stories. Guareschi's technique is to detach the Italian Communist-in-the-street from his party leaders by stressing the conflicts of conscience and common sense that plague him when he tries to follow party discipline. For several years Guareschi ran weekly cartoons involving a character known as "the Party Member Who Is also a Father," in which he depicted a harassed parent furtively being kind to his family while hiding from the eagle eyes of the party apparatus. Later he evolved another series of cartoons captioned "Obedience, Blind, Immediate and Absolute," involving a group of stupefied, bureaucracy-harried, earnest-minded Communists, all making elaborate mistakes due to misinterpretations of their party orders. Guareschi draws his Communists with three nostrils ("When I found myself

having to describe the terrific anger of them, I realized that two nostrils were not sufficient to release the pressure of the steam from inside their lungs"). The expression "three nostrils" (*tre narici*) promptly became a byword in political arguments all over Italy, and the crowning insult that ended most of them was "Bah, shut up! You with the three nostrils!"

Guareschi even took to drawing his Communist women with three breasts. "Look what Russia has done for women!" he would explain with mock admiration. These cartoons, each turned out in about 10 minutes, have plastered the pages of *Candido* every week without letup. "It's lucky I can't draw," he observes. "If I could, it would take much more time and effort."

For years Guareschi has been printing in *Candido* a little column of anecdote and humor about his family. The family consists of two gangling, energetic youngsters, Albertino, 12, and Carlotta, 9, who already show some talent for cartooning, and his good-looking, dark-haired wife, Margherita. They criticize Guareschi's Bohemian habits of dress (he almost never wears a necktie and considers a coat a "uniform"), his potentially homicidal driving and the bull-like energy with which he devotes himself to politics. "My wife," he observes, not without satisfaction, "is not interested in the least in what I write. She never reads my magazine. She thinks it is too full of political facts. She has a very limited culture. Still, she has a very developed sense of criticism. Sometimes I force her to listen to something I have written. Her criticism is always right. I had to drag her by force to see the movie *Don Camillo*. She didn't think much of it. But," he adds, expanding pleasantly, "she is an excellent cook. Her *tortellini con ricotta* and her *cappelletti* are magnificent."

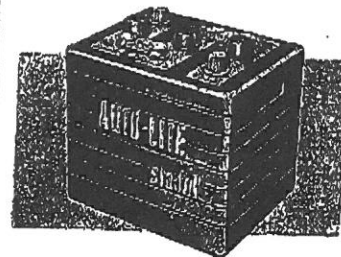
Like all natives of Parma, Guareschi loves food and the good, slightly effervescent Lambrusco wine that is made from the grapes of the Emilian Plain. And, like most humorists, he claims to have an

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GUARESCHI CONTINUED

ulcer which he describes graphically with agonized gestures and tears in his eyes. At the end of such a harrowing description, however, he often consumes huge plates of boiled beans and tuna fish drowned in olive oil.

Nino Guareschi was born 44 years ago in the little outlying town of Fontanelle di Parma, not far from the birthplace of Giuseppe Verdi. Fontanelle was at that time "an island of socialism in a sea of Communism." At the time when he first saw the light in a small bedchamber in the building that housed the Socialist party headquarters, a huge party rally was taking place in the street outside. It was the first day of May, a Socialist as well as a Communist holiday.

Overcome with the drama of Nino's birth on so auspicious an occasion, the Socialist leader rushed into the bedchamber and held the newborn infant in the window for the crowd to see. "The champion of the workers is born," he cried, amid frenzied applause from the workers below.

Guareschi's father was a local landowner and dealer in mechanical gadgets, and his mother was a schoolteacher. During the Italian financial crisis of 1926-27 his parents lost all their money, being forced even to sell the beds on which the family slept. Nino was yanked out of school where he had been rather good at classic studies, got a job as doorman at a sugar refinery in Parma, and then drifted into journalism. He rose rapidly. On Parma's newspaper, the *Corriere Emiliano*, he started out as proofreader at a salary of 290 lire (about \$15) a month. Later, he recalls, "I became local news editor and proofreader; then I was made sports editor and proofreader; finally I became editor-in-chief and proofreader." On the side he drew advertising posters and ran a humorous magazine published every three months for which he did his first cartoons. He also taught the mandolin.

In 1936 he decided to try his luck in a bigger city and went to Milan, where he got a job on a humorous weekly. After a month he was back in Parma trying to persuade a girl he knew there to come with him to Milan and marry him. The girl was reluctant to go, so he went to see her off at the station. There Guareschi gave her an ultimatum. Either she would come with him on the train to Milan immediately, or he would never come back to Parma again. She went along, with only a handkerchief for baggage. She didn't even say goodby to her family. On their arrival Guareschi gave her 50 lire and said, "This evening I want to eat at home." The girl tramped the streets, found a furnished room, bought an appropriate assortment of groceries and cooked him a dinner. Shortly afterward she became Mrs. Guareschi.

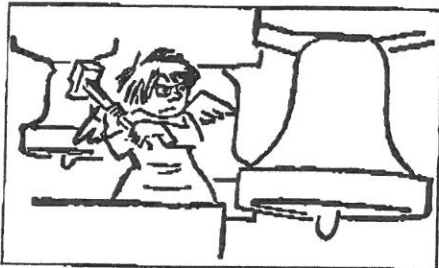
Guareschi had always had a certain distaste for Mussolini's government, though he remembered no rule but Fascism. One night in 1942 his distaste erupted in a monumental drunk in which Guareschi went staggering about the streets of Milan roaring insults at the government. He was jailed for a week. Then, to avoid trial, he joined the Italian army as a lieutenant in an artillery regiment. A year later Italy signed an armistice with the Allies, and Guareschi, in German hands, was sent off to a concentration camp in Poland. When he returned home after the war, his weight had dropped from 196 to a bare 99 pounds. A vast diet of his favorite foods and plenty of good wine restored Guareschi to health, and he was soon back in journalism. In 1945 he founded *Candido*, the magazine that was to make him famous.

It was during *Candido's* early years that Guareschi thought up the character of Don Camillo. He had become very homesick for



THREE-NOSTRILLED RED is Guareschi cartoon trademark. Here one of his "comrades" breathes a "black and humid spirit" over strife-torn Manrus.

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TWO DON CAMILLOS, one Guareschi's sketch from his book and the other Fernandel's movie version, are shown in the same scene—Don Camillo tolling his church bells in order to heckle a nearby Communist meeting.

What's the date?



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GUARESCHI CONTINUED

was actually a very nice fellow. "I think," he concluded in a noble crescendo, "that I am doing something that is exceptional, something that is prodigious, something that no other writer has ever done: I have succeeded in making a Communist sympathetic." There were mollified murmurs from the crowd. But the following day the local newspaper (Communist dominated) recorded in banner headlines that Guareschi had been defeated by overwhelming public sentiment.

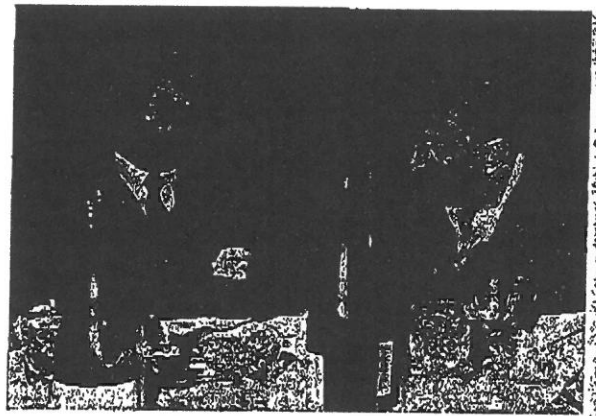
He carried the fight to nearby Reggio, a larger town, where the Communists had their headquarters. Here an enormous mass meeting took place. "I think that it was the first time in history that 20,000 people got together to discuss a book," he observes. At this meeting too, Guareschi managed by guile and charm to swing the audience to his side. The result was a near lynching for one of his Communist listeners who was severely beaten by a few unpersuaded comrades for loudly expressing the opinion that Guareschi was right.

By the time Guareschi was through, the entire population of Brescello was clamoring enthusiastically for jobs as extras in the film, and one Communist cell leader had applied to Communist headquarters for permission to appear as a minor character. To the surprise of everyone but Guareschi, permission was granted. With a good proportion of Brescello's Communists in the crowd scenes, *The Little World of Don Camillo* was shot and everybody was thrilled to be in the movies.

After it was all over and the movie was being shown to wildly cheering audiences in Brescello's diminutive movie theater, Brescello was richer by a huge income from the company's room and board and by a new football field which the company had constructed for use in some of the scenes. The only disgruntled echoes came from the priest of Brescello's church, who felt he did not get paid enough for the use of its facade as a backdrop, and from Guareschi himself. It seems to him that the picture was made in such an atmosphere of charm and good humor that its anti-Communist punch got lost by the wayside. Its principal Communist character, Peppone, came out altogether too nice a fellow to please Guareschi. "Mr. Duvivier," complains Guareschi, "was scared to death of the Communists. He did not want to expose himself too much. The film lacks the quality of the book. The worst of it is, the Communists like it."

Despite this frustration Nino Guareschi is riding the crest of his career as a successful author with expansive good humor. Between huge meals of *tortellini con ricotta* with Lambrusco wine and the care of a remarkably quiescent ulcer he continues to gnaw away happily at the solidarity of Italy's Communists. Frequently he visits his home town of Fontanelle di Parma, where even the Communists consider him a great public celebrity. "I go there mainly to eat for pleasure," he explains. "In Milan eating is merely a duty."

A few months ago Guareschi took his family to Paris for the gala opening of the film. It was the only time, except for his incarceration in a Polish concentration camp, that he had ever been away from Italy, and he returned as quickly as possible. "Now that I have traveled," he says proudly, "I know that I could be really happy only in Fontanelle."



PRAISE FROM THE PREMIER, Alcide de Gasperi, pleased Guareschi, although Italy's leading statesman was critical of the movie version of *Don Camillo*, which he felt was too soft on Reds. Guareschi agreed and is writing dialog for new movie personally to make sure his views are not watered down.