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Guglielmo Marconi: Some New Documents Covering the Years 1894-1896

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1. Introduction

There has been a discussion in the pages of this *Magazine* concerning the possibility that Guglielmo Marconi performed some experiments in Salvan, Switzerland, in the summer of 1895 [1-7]. In September 2008, the International Union of Telecommunications (IUT) in Geneva, an agency of the United Nations (UN), bestowed on Salvan the title of “Telecommunication Heritage Site.” There was a ceremony where both the President of the Swiss Federation, Pascal Couchepin, and the IUT General Secretary, Hamadou Touré, were present. It is important to highlight that when this occurred, there was a choir of protests that came from Italy, in all the media (see, for example, Figure 1 and [8]). In the end, the Italian Ambassador in Berna, Switzerland, did not show up in Salvan for the ceremony. A deep investigation to clarify this issue was then started directly by the Italian government and the Italian Guglielmo Marconi Foundation, located in Villa Griffone, Sasso Marconi, Bologna, which was recently bestowed an IEEE Milestone by the IEEE President [9, 10].

This paper presents several documents, some of which were gathered during the above-mentioned research. These documents were kept in the Historical Archives of the Waldesian Church (Torre Pellice, Turin, Italy); in the Lincei Academy Archives (Rome, Italy); in the Archives of the City of Sasso



Figure 1. An article from the main Italian newspaper, *Il Corriere della Sera*, (Sunday, September 14, 2008), entitled “Italia-Svizzera, duello su Marconi [Italy-Switzerland, a Duel on Marconi].”

Marconi (Bologna, Italy); and in the State Archives in the City of Bologna. These documents might be of interest to the readers of this *Magazine* who have followed the debate in [1-7]. Indeed, some of the documents presented here were published for the first time in [11] (Figure 2). This was a very recent publication, dedicated to the 100 years since Guglielmo Marconi's Noble Prize, published by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.

2. The Swiss Hypothesis

Prof. Yves Fournier (President of the Marconi Foundation, Martigny, Switzerland; <http://www.fondation-marconi.ch/>) affirmed that [12, pp. 9-10]

While he was staying in Andorno near to Santuario di Oropa, in the Italian Alps, Guglielmo Marconi become extremely enthusiastic about an article which appeared in connection with the death of Heinrich Hertz, the German physicist who had discovered the existence of electromagnetic waves. Stimulated by the article, Marconi undertook to transmit a message without using any wires to link the transmitter to the receiver. It was probably the following summer, that is in 1895, that Marconi went to Salvan....

As soon as he arrived, Marconi looked for accommodation for himself and his brother Alfonso. At first, he rented a chalet belonging to a certain Mr. Ducret. A week later, his brother left; Guglielmo then moved to a bed-sit at the bottom of the square in Salvan....

Statements reported in [12] (Figure 3) are mostly based on three interviews with Maurice Gay-Balmaz [1885-1975], dating back to 1965, 1968, and 1971. He claimed to have been an assistant to Marconi, at the age of about ten [12, pp. 11-12]:

At the age of about ten, probably at the beginning of the summer 1895, Maurice was allowed to carry the strange apparatus....

“In the morning” Mr. Gay-Balmaz told us later, “we were leaving for the Rocher du soir rock.” Marconi, perched on this promontory, was trying to send out waves with the help of a battery, a Rumkorff coil, a Righi discharger and an aerial. Maurice Gay-Balmaz was at the floor of this rock, four or five meters away. His material was nothing less curious: a rod about two and a half meters long from which ran a metallic wire which was probably attached to a Branley wave detector, a battery and a bell.

No written proof exists for these statements. A letter from Marconi to Gay-Balmaz was cited as lost [12, p. 14]. There were only the memories of a 10-year-old boy, collected when he was over 80.

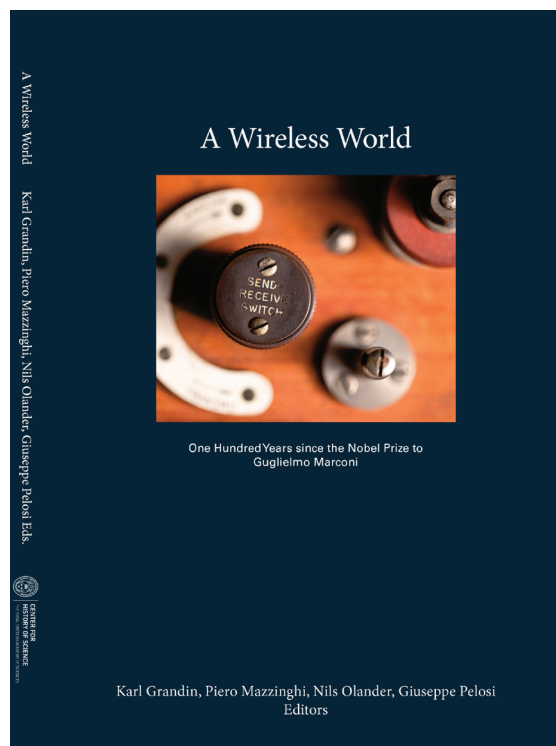


Figure 2. The cover of the book *A Wireless World*, by K. Grandin, P. Mazzinghi, N. Olander, and G. Pelosi, in the “Contribution to the History of Sciences” series of the Swedish Academy of Sciences, celebrating 100 years since G. Marconi's Nobel Prize [11].

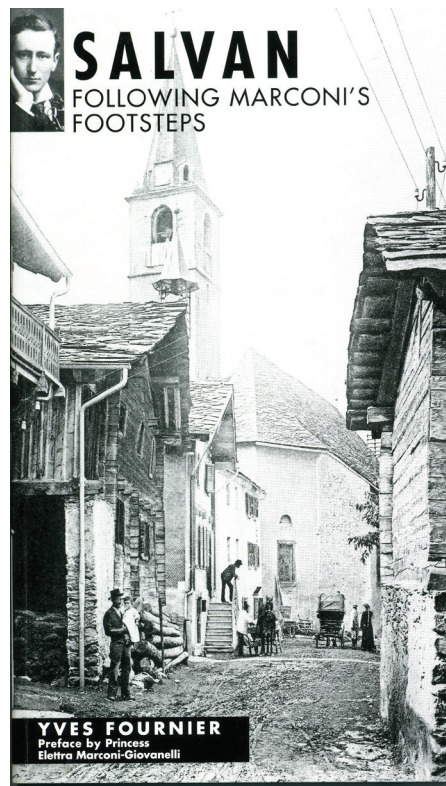


Figure 3. The cover of a book by Y. Fournier claiming that Marconi stayed in Salvan, Switzerland, with a preface by Elettra Marconi-Giovanelli, Guglielmo Marconi's daughter [12].

3. Date Changes

Indeed, we can highlight two date changes in this tale: an old one, on the Italian side, and a new one, on the Swiss side.

The Italian date change happened in 1937, the same year Marconi died (July 20, 1937), at Oropa Catholic Sanctuary where a plaque exists, stating that Marconi was there in the summer of 1894 (Figure 4). In [5], it was said that the Oropa plaque was most probably wrong with regard to its date, since it reported the words that Marconi wrote in a letter written in 1918, and in which the date was 1895 (Figure 5 and [5]). It is also worth noting that since, as already mentioned, the Oropa plaque was inaugurated on October 31, 1937 [13], after Guglielmo Marconi's death, the error could have easily remained unspotted.

Such an error anyway could hardly be accidental (Figure 5), so it might be worth thinking, if it were indeed intentional, why was it introduced? Was it to defend the paternity of the invention against international claims? After all, Guglielmo Marconi was a glory of Italy (Figure 6) in a period when nationalism was at its peak, and radio paternity was challenged by both Nikola Tesla and Alexander Popov who declared to have made radio experiments in 1895 (Figure 7).

The second date change was on the Swiss side, and it was far more recent. The current plaque (Figure 8) was inaugurated by the IUT on September, 2008. It was indeed a date change, and not a simple error, because an older plaque was present in Salvan, where Marconi's visit to the place was credited to have been in 1896 (Figure 8), a date that agrees with Marconi's visit in Andorno in 1895.

4. The Travels of Guglielmo and Alfonso Marconi in 1894-1895

The presence of Alfonso Marconi, brother of Guglielmo, in Salvan, as stated in [12], is also unsupported by any written evidence. To the contrary, the expenses of Alfonso were duly recorded. Figure 9 shows one page of such records for the summer of 1895 (Marconi Archives, Lincei Academy, Roma, Italy), and the full extract of the traveling expenses from June to August, 1895.



Figure 4a. The Oropa Catholic Sanctuary.



Figure 4b. The memorial marble tablet at the Oropa Catholic Sanctuary.

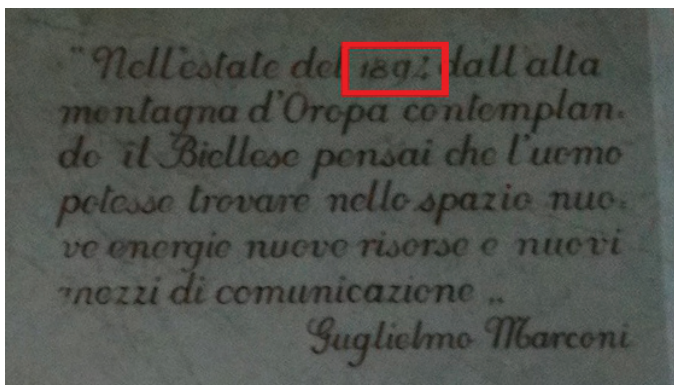


Figure 5a. A detail of the marble tablet placed in the Oropa Sanctuary near the Royal Door. The wrong year (1894 instead of 1895) can be read in the first line of the top epigraph.

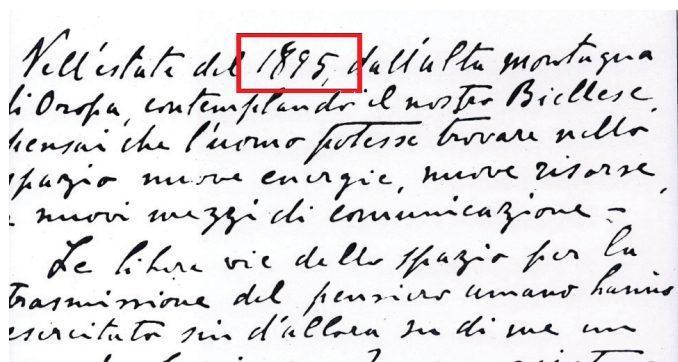


Figure 5b. A letter written by Marconi for the first issue of the Italian journal *Le vie del mare e dell'aria* (1918), with the correct date. The text is otherwise identical, except for the possessive “nostro [our]” for the countryside, which appears in the letter and not in the tablet. The translation of both is “In the summer of 1894 (1895), from the high mountains of Oropa, looking down to [our] Biella countryside, I thought that man could find in the space new energies, new resources and new means of communication” [Italian National Library, Florence].



Figure 6. Guglielmo Marconi's solemn funeral, in the presence of Italy's statesmen, among which was Benito Mussolini.

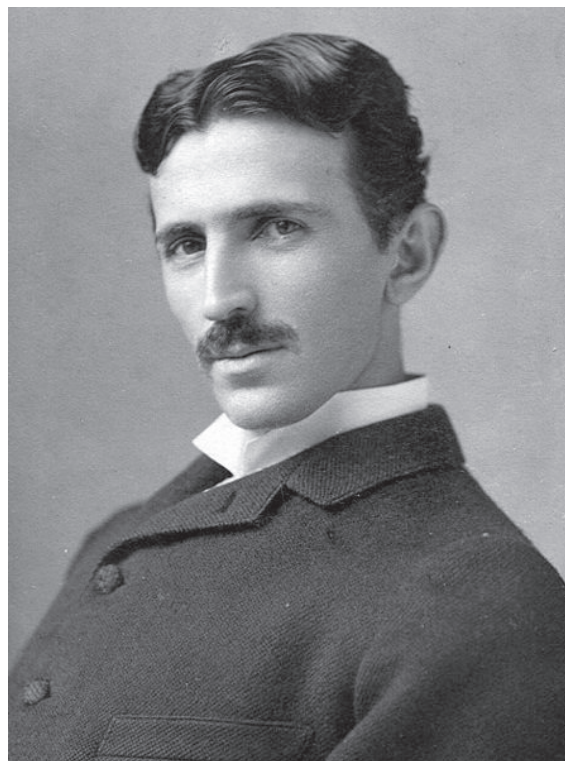
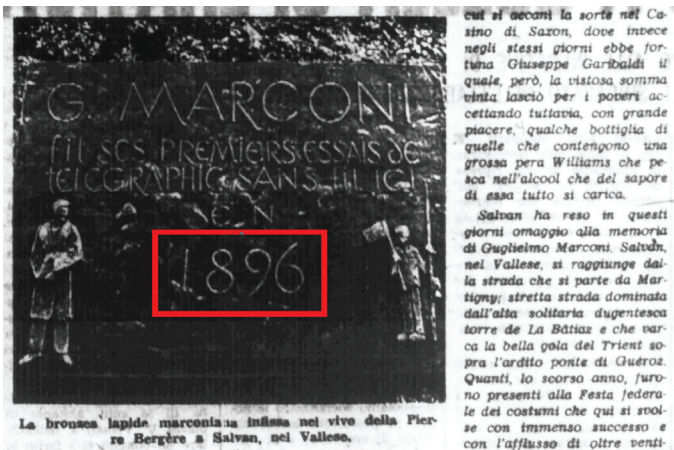


Figure 7a. Nikola Tesla [Smiljan, Austrian Empire, 1856 – New York, USA, 1943].



Figure 7b. Alexander Popov [Krasnoturyinsk, Russian Empire, 1859 – San Petersburg, Russian Empire, 1906].

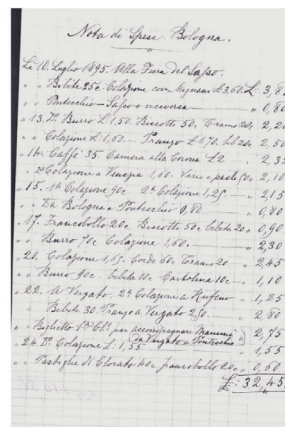


ent si accomi la sorte nel Casino di Sazon, dove invece negli stessi giorni ebbe fortuna Giuseppe Garibaldi il quale, però, la vistosa somma vinta lasciò per i poveri accettando tuttavia, con grande piacere, qualche bottiglia di quelle che contengono una grossa pera Williams che pesa nell'alcool che del sapore di essa tutto si carica.

Salvan ha reso in questi giorni omaggio alla memoria di Guglielmo Marconi. Salvan, nel Vallese, si raggiunge dalla strada che si parte da Martigny; stretta strada dominata dall'alta solitaria dugentesca torre de La Bâtiaz e che varca la bella gola del Trient sopra l'ardito ponte di Guéroz. Quanti, lo scorso anno, furono presenti alla Festa federale dei costumi che qui si svolse con immenso successo e con l'afflusso di oltre venti



Figure 8. (top) The old plaque in Salvan, with the 1896 date, from an Italian newspaper article [14] (preserved at the Mantova City Library). (bottom) It has now been replaced by a new plaque, with the 1895 date.



3 june:	Pontecchio-Sasso, two way	£ 0,80
4 june:	Pontecchio-Bologna two way	£ 1,60
11 june:	Pontecchio-Bologna two way	£ 1,60
14 june:	Castel del Rio	£ 0,60
14 june:	Firenzuola	£ 2,10
14 june:	Imola (snack)	£ 0,75
15 june:	Bologna-Pontecchio	£ 0,80
25 june:	Bologna-Pontecchio	£ 0,90
29 june:	Pontecchio-Bologna two way	£ 1,80
4 july:	Pontecchio-Bologna two way	£ 1,70
10 july:	Pontecchio-Sasso two way	£ 0,80
14 july:	lunch in Venice	£ 2,10
15 july:	Bologna-Pontecchio	£ 0,80
22 july:	Vergato (lunch in Roffeno)	£ 1,25
22 july:	1 st class ticket to accompany mum Vergato-Pontecchio	£ 2,75
5 aug.:	Bologna-Pontecchio	£ 0,80
7 aug.:	Pontecchio-Porretta	£ 3,55
7 aug.:	Porretta-Pracchia	£ 1,25
7 aug.:	Pracchia-Villa margherita	£ 3,20
16 aug.:	9 day hotel in Villa Margherita	£ 64,00
16 aug.:	Limestre-S. Marcello	£ 2,00
16 aug.:	S. Marcello-Castiglione	£ 1,70
16 aug.:	Castiglione-Abetone	£ 4,20
21 aug.:	Boscolungo-Mandriole	£ 1,20
23 aug.:	hotel Ferrari	£ 45,00
24 aug.:	Abetone-Castiglione	£ 3,20
24 aug.:	Castiglione-Pracchia	£ 3,70
24 aug.:	Pracchia-Sasso	£ 4,45
24 aug.:	Sasso-Pontecchio	£ 0,50
31 aug.:	Bologna-Pontecchio	£ 1,35

Figure 9. (left) A single page from the expense list by Alfonso Marconi in 1895, and (right) a summary of his travel expenses in the summer of 1895 (from the Lincei Academy Archives). Please note that he traveled a lot, but only in the Bologna region, northern Tuscany, and Venice.

SWITZERLAND



Figure 10. (top) Switzerland and northern Italy: the circle defines the area of Salvan and Oropa; (bottom) an enlarged view of the circled area.

Carissima Daisy.

~~Se perdonarmi se non ti ho scritto~~
~~ancora ma ho sempre avuto molto~~
~~da fare ed ora è~~

Se perdonarmi se non ti ho scritto
prima ma questo è stato perché sono
~~sto~~ sempre molto occupato con
miei esperimenti
e ho dato molto a scrivere ma
non è stato perché sono stato sempre
~~molto~~ occupato con miei esperimenti
elettroici ma tu se potrai
facilmente me ne avrai forse in do-
nato il perché sapendo come sono
sempre molto occupato con miei
esperimenti. Qui al Griffone fa
molto caldo come credo e temo
che sarà così, o peggio anche a
Firenze. Domani ~~farò~~ ^{potrò} accompagnare
Gino ad Andorno dove ^{egli si reca per} ~~forse~~ ^{per} ~~se~~ ^{la} ~~mi~~
sosterremo una settimana ^{bravely, parte delle estate} e Andorno
è un paesetto alpino vicino
a Biella nel Piemonte. Dicono
che ci fa piuttosto freddo essendo
vicino alle alte montagne

Figure 11. The first pages of a draft letter written by Marconi to his cousin. The translation is "[Page 1] My dear Daisy, <<erased>> you will forgive me <<erased>> if I waited so long before writing you <<erased>> I'm always <<erased>> you will have guessed why, knowing how I'm always very busy with my experiments. Here at Griffone it's hot <<erased>> and I'm afraid it will remain so, or even get worse, in Florence too. Tomorrow <<erased>> I'll accompany Gino at Andorno, where he is going to <<erased>> spend a large part of the summer. Perhaps I will stay there a week. Andorno is an Alpine village close to Biella in Piemonte. They say it's quite cool, being close to the mountains. [Page 2] Going back home I'll stop in Milan, maybe, I need to purchase <<erased>> electric machineries. My mother <<erased>> will go to Porretta next Monday <<erased>> and she'll stay there about 15 days. When do you think you will leave for Leghorn? <<erased>> of the almost <<erased>> I'm happy to hear that my dear aunt feels better. I'm sure that staying in Leghorn will benefit her. <<erased>> I hope you won't be disturbed by earthquakes any more <<erased>> the first earthquake <<erased>> Say hello from me to all <<erased>> don't forget your affectionate cousin Guglielmo Marconi." (Lincci Academy Archives).

Del tornare a casa mi fermerò forse
due giorni a Milano avendo bisogno
di fare acquisti d'oggi di ~~o~~ affari
di refettorio.

La Mamma ~~ancora~~ va a Portofino
Lunedì ~~pass~~ p. v. dove si tratterà
per ~~un~~ ^{quindici} giorni circa ~~partire~~
quando ~~o~~ credi che ^{potrete} partire per
Livorno?

~~Ma non puoi immaginare come siano~~
~~tutti contenti della cura della quasi~~
~~guarigione della cura. A T. non gran~~
~~biadere di sapere come che la cura~~
~~sia sta meglio. Sono certa che~~
~~il soggiorno che farà a Livorno~~
~~giuberà a ridonare ^{completamente} la salute.~~

~~E i terremoti, vi hanno proprio~~
~~lasciati tranquilli? Spero che~~
~~non sarete ^{stati} male stati in terre~~
~~moti. E ricordo ^{del primo terremoto} della sera ~~che~~ nella~~
~~quale morimmo insieme.~~

~~Saluta tutti per me e credimi~~
~~sempre il tuo~~

~~non ti dimenticherò del tuo aff.~~
Caro
Guglielmo Marconi

Anyway, this does not mean that Guglielmo Marconi could not also have been in Oropa in 1894. However, there is no evidence of this in Marconi documents. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that he was in Andorno, close to Biella and Oropa, in 1895 (Figure 10). For example, Figure 11 shows the draft of an undated letter from Guglielmo Marconi to his cousin, Daisy. In the letter, Marconi announces his trip to Andorno, but also cites earthquakes in Tuscany. From the records of the *Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia* [Italian National Institute of Geophysics and Vulcanology], a powerful earthquake happened on May 18, 1895 [11].

5. Marconi, the Waldesian Evangelic

As a matter of fact, even if he was baptized according to Roman Catholic rites, it is worth noting that Guglielmo Marconi was raised as a Waldesian Evangelic. He remained so for a long time – which is something not widely known – as the parish record reproduced in Figure 12 proves, and a later letter confirms (Figure 13). This was due to an explicit request of his mother, Annie Jameson (Figure 14), who was of Irish origins, and Protestant. Annie was the daughter of Andrew Jameson and the granddaughter of John Jameson, founder (in 1780) of the biggest Irish whiskey distillery still on the market. Hence, if Marconi were at the Oropa sanctuary, his visit should have been merely tourism, and not a pilgrimage. Indeed, it is interesting to note that in Piedicavallo (Figure 10), very close to Oropa, there is a Waldesian temple that was terminated in that same 1895. The Biella region, and the whole of Piedmont, is the place where Waldesians are more numerous in Italy.

Guglielmo Marconi started to get closer to the Catholics thanks to Maria Cristina Bezzi-Scali (1900-1994), who was to become his second wife. The only child of this second marriage was Princess Elettra Marconi-Giovannelli (born in 1930) (Figure 15). In a letter dated 1926, Marconi wrote [16]:

Dear Cristina, you were the Angel of my conversion, of my redemption, an Angel like the one who appeared to Saint Paul on the way to Damascus.

Marconi completed his conversion thanks to Cardinal Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Giovanni Pacelli (1876-1958). The Cardinal became Pope Pius XII on March 2, 1939. He operated to have Marconi's first marriage nullified by the *Sacra Rota* Catholic Court (April 27, 1927). This allowed Marconia and Cristina to marry, according to the Catholic rite, on June 15, 1927, with Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) as Marconi's best man. Clearly, no plaque could have been placed in the Oropa Catholic sanctuary before this conversion. There thus should not have been plaques previous to the current plaque, which, as said before, was indeed much later.

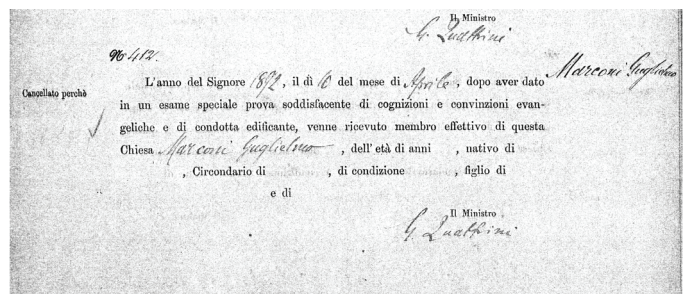


Figure 12. An extract from the registry of the Waldesian Evangelic Church in Leghorn, testifying to Guglielmo Marconi's association on April 10, 1892 (Waldesian Church Historical Archives).

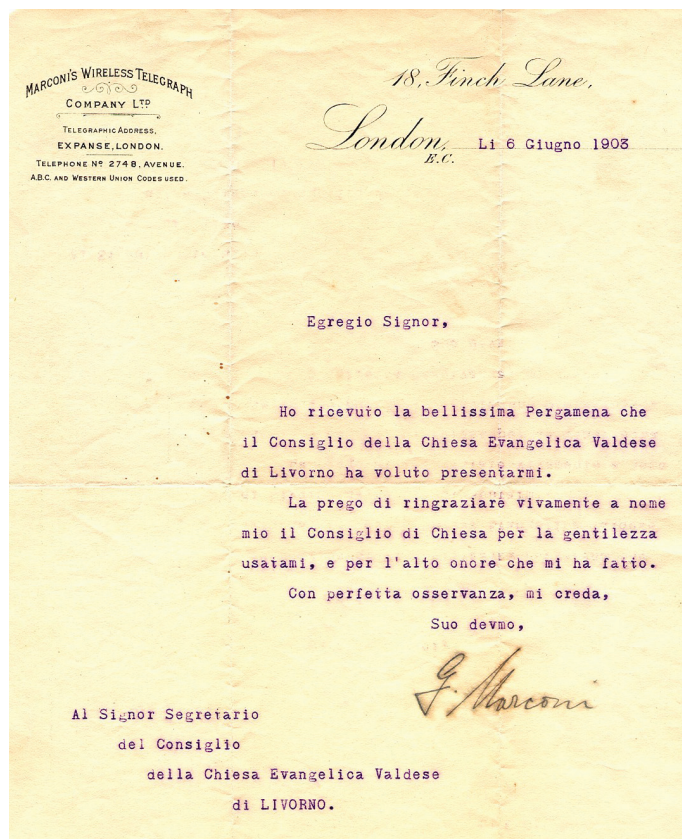


Figure 13. A letter dated June 6, 1903, in which Guglielmo Marconi acknowledges receipt and thanks the secretary of the Waldesian Church of Leghorn for a parchment he was sent. The translation is: “Dear Sir, I received the beautiful parchment that the board of the Evangelical Waldesian Church of Leghorn wanted to send me. I beg you to extend my thanks to the Church Board for their kindness, and the high honor. With perfect compliance, believe me, devotedly, Guglielmo Marconi” (Waldesian Church Historical Archives).



Figure 14. Annie Jameson with young Guglielmo.

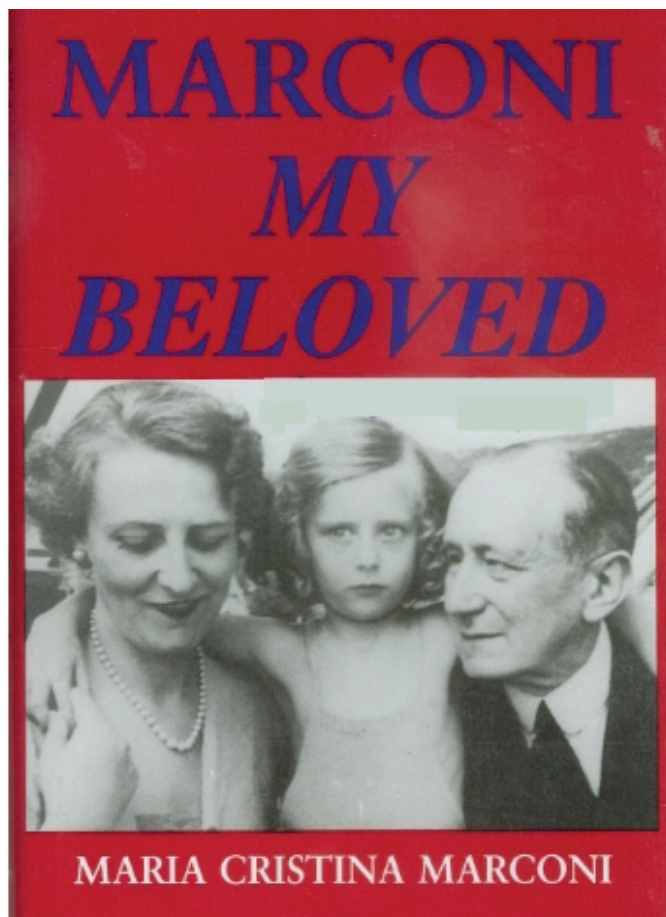


Figure 15. A book by Marconi's second wife. Elettra Marconi is in the center, between her parents.

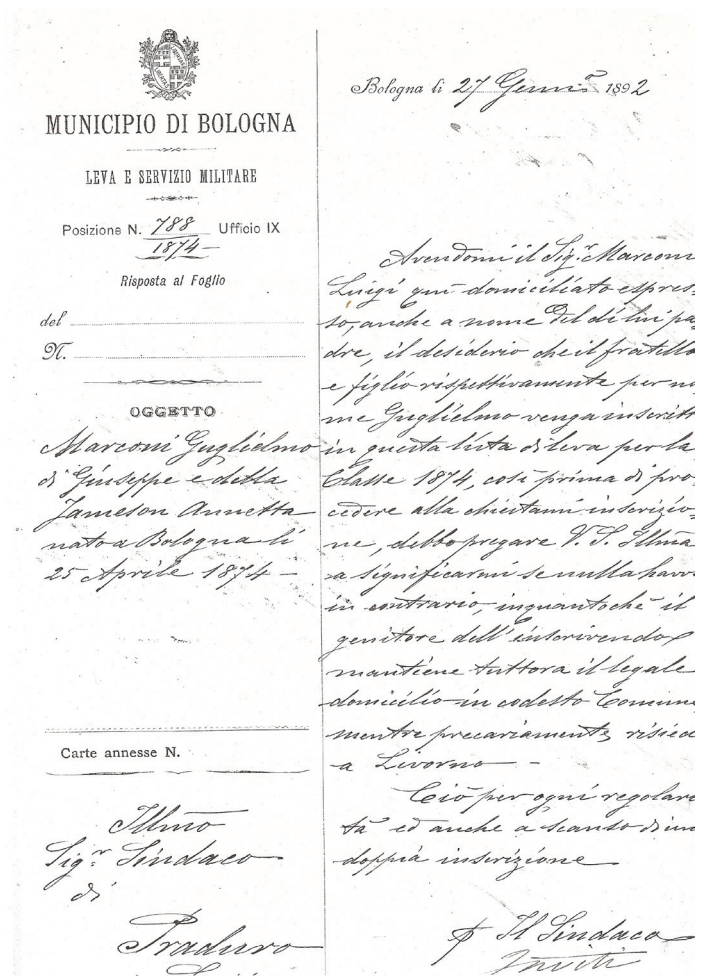


Figure 16. A letter from the office of the Major of Bologna to the Major of Praduro e Sasso, dated January 27, 1892, asking the latter if he agrees, given that the Marconi family was located in Praduro e Sasso, that Guglielmo Marconi were to be enlisted in the military roles two years earlier (Archives of the City of Sasso Marconi).

1892

Marconi Guglielmo

1872

N° 57-A del Catai.

DATI E CONTRASSEGNI PERSONALI		ARRUOLAMENTO, SERVIZI, PROMOZIONI E VARIAZIONI MATRICOLARI		DATA		CORPO CHE FU ARRUITO O TRASFERITO	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Figlio di <i>Giuseppe</i> n. <i>7</i> <i>1872</i> Municipio di <i>Bologna</i> Distretto militare di <i>Bologna</i> Sistema metri <i>1,72</i> categoria <i>1872</i> Capelli <i>bruni</i> Occhi <i>cazzati</i> Dentatura <i>buoni</i> Segni particolari Aree e proporzioni <i>regolari</i> Istruzione letteraria dei <i>classici</i> <i>accademici</i> N. <i>875</i> <i>Ente</i> <i>1872</i> Comune Mandamento di <i>Bologna</i> Circoscrizione di <i>Bologna</i> Distretto militare di <i>Bologna</i>		Soldato volontario di cui servizio nel <i>1872</i> distretto di <i>Bologna</i> categoria <i>1872</i> e lasciato in <i>disposizione</i> <i>autunno</i> a <i>Bologna</i> per il servizio Consulato <i>di</i> <i>violenza</i> <i>in</i> <i>seguito</i> <i>di</i> <i>trasferimento</i> nella <i>18</i> <i>Armeda</i> <i>(leg. 1872)</i> <i>del</i> <i>1</i> <i>giugno</i> <i>1892</i>		<i>29</i> <i>1892</i>		<i>1872</i>	
VERIFICATO <i>21</i> <i>giugno</i> <i>1892</i> <i>Gianni</i>							
CAMBIO DI DOMICILIO		NUOVO DOMICILIO		DATA		REGIONE IN CUI SI RECA	
RILASCIO del nulla osta per conseguire il passaporto per l'estero.		DATA		REGIONE IN CUI SI RECA			
		<i>24</i> <i>gennaio</i> <i>1896</i>		<i>Genova</i>			

RETIFICAZIONI.

RILASCIO del nulla osta per conseguire il passaporto per l'estero.

DATA REGIONE IN CUI SI RECA

24 *gennaio* *1896* *Genova*

Figure 17. The roll of Guglielmo Marconi's military service of the Bologna Military District (State Archives, Bologna). At the middle of the top is an annotation on his request to be a volunteer and to delay the service: "Volunteer for one year in Bologna District, enrolled 1st category, class 1872 and left free, allowed to delay the service, 29 October 1892." At the center is this magnified for easier reading of the date. At the bottom left (magnified on the right for easier reading), there is the single annotation, "Granting the permission to get a passport for going abroad; date: 24 January 1896, destination: London."

N. *10P* di Protocollo.

Bologna, addì *11* *giugno* *1896*

Ufficio *Comune*

Sezione *Municipale*

Risposta al foglio del *18* *giugno* N. *13*

COMANDO DEL DISTRETTO MILITARE DI BOLOGNA

(N° 6)

ELENCO delle Carte che si trasmettono al *Major Sindaco*
del *Comune* *Praduro e Sasso*

Numero delle carte	DESCRIZIONE DELLE CARTE Motivo per cui si trasmettono	ANNOTAZIONI
1	<i>Atto d'assenso per l'estero a favore del m. <i>Marconi</i> <i>Guglielmo</i>; che mi pregio ritardare alla S. <i>Praduro e Sasso</i> con frequenza di farlo ricompilare su carta da bollo da Cent. 50, avvertendo che questo Comando dovrà rivolgersi al Ministero della Guerra per ottenere il rilascio del nulla osta essendo il richiedente volontario di un anno di ritardo.</i>	

Colonello Comandante il Distretto

Figure 18. The first known request by Guglielmo Marconi to exit Italy. The document, dated 1896 and signed by a Colonel, commander of the Bologna army district, was sent to the Major of *Praduro e Sasso* (now Sasso Marconi). It reads, "Act assenting that private Marconi can go abroad; We wish to ask you to have the act rewritten on Cent. 50 stamped paper, warning you that this command must ask the War Ministry to obtain the authorization since the petitioner is a volunteer who asked for a one year delay" (Archives of the City of Sasso Marconi).

6. Guglielmo Marconi and the Italian Army

In any case, in 1895 (and in 1894, too), Guglielmo Marconi, born in 1874, was expected to join the army for the compulsory military service every young Italian was expected to do. It was expressly forbidden for young men of age higher than 20, not having already served in the army, to exit Italy [17, Art. 4 and 6]. If caught, he could have been considered a draft evader, if not a deserter, which implied at minimum of one to two years in jail (plus the military service, if able) [17, Art. 167]. Indeed, Guglielmo enrolled as a volunteer in 1892, asking at the same time to defer the service (Figures 16 and 17). He hence was enlisted in the 1872 class (not 1874), and was under military service law since 1892.

It is remarkable that in Guglielmo Marconi's roll of military service in the Bologna Military District (which is a separate, complementary, one with respect to the registry sheet published in [18]), one can read a single annotation for going abroad, dated January 24, 1896 (Figure 17). It is important to note that such an annotation was compulsory, so even if a previous request for going abroad had been lost, the annotation should have been present anyway.

Indeed, when Guglielmo Marconi decided to travel to England in 1896, he had to obtain permission from the army district. This permission was officially transmitted to the Major of the City of *Praduro e Sasso* (now Sasso Marconi), and is still preserved in the City archives (Figure 18). Indeed the letter also states that the request was not properly done, and asks that it be re-presented anew on stamped paper. This formal error is indirect proof that neither Marconi nor the City of *Praduro e Sasso* had ever before issued such a request.

7. Acknowledgments

Stefano Selleri (University of Florence) is acknowledged for useful discussions during the preparation of this paper, as is Gabriella Bellesio, who performed the research in the Archives of the Waldesian Church of Torre Pellice (Turin, Italy).

8. References and Notes

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Introducing the Authors



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