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**Manmadhan Ullatil, Roberto Mazzotta**

**ORLANDO MAZZOTTA**  
**THE PHANTOM IN QUARONI'S OPERA**

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ORLANDO MAZZOTTA

THE PHANTOM IN QUARONI'S OPERA

Edited by Stefano Baldi

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## INTRODUCTION

If I ended up becoming a diplomat, I owe it to the circumstances into which I was born. Born to nomadic parents, the nomadic life that marked the years from my childhood through to adolescence sealed my original genetic imprint. In brief: I was born in Kabul in 1943, where my father, Orlando, had been posted as a radio operator in the service of what was then the Italian Legation in the Afghan capital. According to the little I remember of the stories my parents told me when I was a child, Afghanistan was a beautiful, though rugged country, peaceful, hospitable, and its people friendly to foreigners, its green valleys providing excellent fruits and vegetables, its wuthering heights glittering with copious snow coats in winter.

My mother, Olga, joined him there after marrying him by proxy. Of what my father did in that period (1938 - 1944), apart from taking care of communications between the Legation and Rome, I always knew very little. I never questioned him about it, nor did I ask my mother. I was too young to ask such questions. Later, when I reached the age of adolescence, my mother died, and my father was transferred to South America. I moved to Rome. Just when I could have obtained some information.

That remained the case until about three years ago, when my son, more curious than I, did a bit of browsing on the web in search of information and came across an article published by an Indian blogger, now living in the United States, who in his spare time from his work as an electrical engineer, is an independent researcher with a passion for history, particularly that of Malabar and Kerala. This booklet reports what Manmadhan Ullatil wrote on the subject. I owe a very special debt of gratitude to my son, who first unearthed Ullatil's story, and to Stefano Baldi, who made it possible to publish it.

The fact that the great Pietro Quaroni, Minister Plenipotentiary of Italy in Kabul, and his noble wife were my godfather and godmother, that even from afar he was my point of reference (at the age of four I declared to a

pharmacist who asked me that, when I grew up, I wanted to be an ambassador), and that when the time came to choose a degree I opted for political science, *all this* meant that I could hardly end up anywhere other than in the ranks of the Farnesina, the Italian Foreign Ministry.

Thank you, Dad, thank you, Mum, and thank you, Ambassador Quaroni. And my daughter has followed in my footsteps as well.

Roberto Mazzotta

Rome, April 2026

## ORLANDO MAZZOTTA THE PHANTOM IN QUARONI'S OPERA\*

In March 1941, Subhas Chandra Bose slipped out of Kabul, holding the passport of an Italian named Orlando Mazzotta, headed for Moscow, leaving behind the real Italian in Kabul. I had previously covered the tale of Bose's flight out of British India, and his travels through Russia, Italy, and eventually to Berlin in Germany. At the end of that article, I mentioned that one Mr. Orlando Mazzotta worked in Vienna in 1963, and wondered if it could be Bose. Well, it was not, it was the real Orlando Mazzotta. This is his story.

As it turned out, the son of the real Orlando Mazzotta, himself an Italian diplomat, fortuitously reached out to me, with additional details about his father.

So here we go to the Kabul of the early 1940s, where the Axis supporters plotted against the British, while the British CID leaned on their extensive spy network to figure out what was going on. The ex-Emir Amanullah was in exile in Italy, and Zahir Shah was in charge. At this fringe of the British Empire, members, and employees of the nations of the Axis - Italians, Germans, and initially Russians, teaming with many other dissidents passing off under multiple guises, plotted to bring down the British colonial enterprise. One of those persons was Orlando Mazzotta.



*Figure 1 - Orlando Mazzotta (1941)*

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\* This text has been previously published online:  
<https://maddy06.blogspot.com/2022/10/orlando-mazzotta.html>

The Italian Legation was an important edifice in Kabul in those days. It was headed by Pietro Quaroni - 38 years old, who had joined the Italian diplomatic service in 1920, starting in Constantinople, as a diplomat well-versed in Russian, French, German, and English. Moving to Argentina and then to Moscow, Pietro met and married Larissa, daughter of Prince Alexander Cegodaeff from the Volga region, in 1927, only to get expelled from Russia, for it. A Posting in Albania followed, then it was back to Rome for a stint in Mussolini's Foreign Service. Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and Minister of Foreign Affairs, had him transferred to Kabul (ostensibly after a critical article was submitted by Quaroni) in 1936. Italy had by then established a good relationship with Afghanistan. With the start of WW II, Quaroni was busy establishing his Legation as a central point in information gathering on British India for the Axis powers, creating a spy network, and fostering relations with potential dissidents, assisted by his wife Larissa and the legation's First secretary Enrico Anzilotti.



*Figure 2 – 1939, Pietro Quaroni, Ambassador of Italy in Kabul  
(Source: "Immaginario diplomatico" by Stefano Baldi)*

While Larissa, the lady with a booming voice and confident airs, concentrated on covert message deliveries (as she did in the case of Subhas Bose) and socializing with the big-wigs in Kabul, Anzilotti, the frontman, established contacts with collaborators. Mario Ungaro was the commercial attaché, Adolfo Crescini was the Legation chancellor, and Orlando Mazzotta took care of the radio operations and cipher work. Ernesto Cagnacci was the diplomatic courier, in fact a priest himself. A few other Italians working in the government services and as artisans, completed the Italian population in Kabul. Well connected to them were Italian civilians - Giovanni Azzurri an engineer and his wife Valentina. It must be

noted here that during the war days, all of them were involved in undercover activities, and were frequently spied upon by the British. The legation also housed a Padre named Egidio Caspani, and local staff to support operations, the most important among them being their interpreter Muhammad Aslam.

The Italian legation was in close contact with the German as well as the Russian legations. Quaroni had clear ideas on supporting the Axis war machine, he had planned to penetrate and arm the NWFP tribes, who would then launch frequent skirmishes at the British across the border. This unrest would ensure that the British had to divert a large number of their forces up North, thus depleting the force which would otherwise be sent abroad to fight in Europe. Secondly, it would enable Indian legions trained in Germany to travel to Afghanistan and launch attacks on the British Indian forces. Finally, Quaroni planned to provide covert support to Radio Himalaya, a radio station run by Mohammad Iqbal Shedai in Italy, to transmit anti-British propaganda beamed to Asia. Crescini, Anzilotti, and Mazzotta were the lynchpins of this team, during the period 1938-1943. Early on, Quaroni had identified the Faqir of Ipi as the person who could marshal resources and mobilize a revolution. With that in mind, Quaroni decided to strengthen his relations with the Faqir. Afghanistan itself was pro-German, and with about 150 German agents and deep German penetration into the Afghan ministerial circles, the Axis-leaning Afghan power was being cultivated. Though Rome was not in full support of Quaroni's ideas, they were still in favor of the Legation's pro-Axis actions.

As we saw, Orlando Mazzotta handled the radio and communications in the Legation. From the testimony of Aslam, the interpreter who was arrested by the British in Quetta around June 1941, we can make out that radio sets were delivered by the Italians and Germans to the Afghan officials as well as some dissidents, and Mazzotta was responsible for testing them. The receiver for the legation itself was placed in its dedicated room, but the transmitter was moved around to ensure it was not detected. Important

messages were delivered at night (Cagnacci was the backup to Mazzotta). In fact, for a long period, the transmitter was hidden in the house of Padre Caspani! In addition to routine communication with Rome and others, Mazzotta used to record Italian news bulletins, do a copy of them in French and Aslam would then do translations in Pashto (Urdu script) and Farsi. Copies were secretly distributed to the far corners of Afghanistan, regularly.

Mazzotta first figured in the British secret service radars in the Mrs. Heilmann case, just after he arrived in Kabul. In Jan 1938, Dr. Josef Heilmann and Elisabeth Heilmann, both German nationals arrived in British India, Josef being employed as the company doctor for Banke Mille in Kabul. Dr. Heilmann spoke Italian and was noticed by the British and kept on their watch lists, as the couple travelled often to Peshawar. In 1939, Elisabeth went to Bombay, and moved in with Frau Matke, the wife of a German agent. Elisabeth then met with Chancellor Crescini who arrived to see her in Bombay. In Oct 1939, Orlando Mazzotta applied to meet Elisabeth in Bombay with the claim that he intended to marry her. The Italian Legation



*Figure 3 - The Italian Legation in Kabul*

in Kabul also stated in the application, that they would withdraw the request if the Indian government had the slightest objection. The British refused permission (as they had planned to arrest and deport Elisabeth). Orlando Mazzotta then sent a telegram to Elisabeth asking her to

visit Sig. Silvio Marabelli at the Italian Consulate, in Bombay. One

could surmise that Elisabeth was a German agent or Nazi sympathizer on the run, and wanted to escape from British India. Whether there was a relationship between Mazzotta and Elisabeth, or if it was just a ploy to assist her in her escape, is not clear.

The British had, as mentioned previously, decided to expel Elisabeth Heilmann together with some others, suspected to be Nazi agents. Paperwork was in progress, but in 1940 they discovered that Elisabeth had already left India. Elisabeth was grouped among German consulate employees, considered to be “leading Nazi concerns”. Dr. Josef Heilmann was later picked up and interned at Ahmednagar together with other Germans and Italians. He admitted that he was a Nazi party member, but he claimed that he joined the party only for the sake of health insurance. In these records, we can also see a mention that Mrs. (Olga) Mazzotta arrived in Kabul in 1941 (probably erroneous, 1940 seems appropriate).

Let's pick up Orlando's story from Roberto's notes. In Roberto's words

Orlando Mazzotta was born in 1911 near Lecce (Italy), then a small city of Apulia region on the heel of the peninsula, looking onto the coast of Albania, the youngest of seven brothers and sisters. He left Lecce very soon as his parents died and was "adopted" by one of his elder sisters, who moved to Marseilles (France). At age 15 he embarked as a ship boy on a merchant ship, ending up as a conscript seaman in the Italian Navy, where he was trained as a radio operator. As such, he embarked on several warships, including submarines, sailing the seas from Gibraltar to Djibouti, where he found himself, at the time when Mussolini's Italy declared war against Ethiopia (1935 -36). In 1938 he was eventually sent to Kabul to serve as a radio operator at our Legation in the capital city of Afghanistan.



*Figure 4 - Subhas Bose in the guise of Mazzotta*

He married by proxy (circa 1939-40) an Italian school teacher Olga Giurleo, whom he had probably met in Tunis (Olga was a primary school teacher in the Italian school there), and the marriage was later solemnized in the Catholic chapel, which was part of the Italian Legation in Kabul, in the summer of 1940. As Italy entered into WWII in June 1940, my father's tasks became more challenging, including coded communications with the main headquarters in Rome, and trips across the Indian frontiers to escort the incoming and outgoing diplomatic pouches. He had plenty of opportunities to travel across the country and since his face and complexion could easily be mistaken for those of a native, he was soon en-

trusted with actions aiming at disturbing and countering the presence of British forces in the region.

Now we get to the story of how Bose got to use this Mazzotta's identity. Many had assumed that the guise under which Bose travelled and lived a life outside India until he reached Japan, that of Orlando Mazzotta, was a fictional one. Some writers mentioned that the real Orlando was an Italian Count, while others thought he was a Sicilian. Quaroni, the Minister Plenipotentiary at the Legation, had pried Orlando's smiling photo out of Orlando's passport and replaced it with one of Bose, looking a little alien and sober, with a French beard and all.

Subhas Chandra Bose, slipped past the British in 1941, destined for Soviet Russia or Germany. After escaping confinement in Calcutta, he arrived at Peshawar on 19th Jan 1941 and met Bhagat Ram Talwar - a.k.a. Rahmat Khan - codename Silver. Before long, Bose was dressed and trained to pass off as a deaf and dumb Pathan pilgrim, headed for Adda Sharif, under the guise of Ziauddin, with Khan, his nephew guiding him. After a weary and long trek, they arrived at Kabul on the 27th. An initial attempt at contacting the Russian consulate for help failed (Moscow had told the Ambassador to give Bose a wide berth), and Bose decided to try the Germans next. The Germans liaised with them through a Siemens radio engineer named Thomas, who dragged his feet while awaiting word from Berlin. A nervous month passed by and a trader named Uttam Chand provided Bose with a place to live. The Afghan police got wind of the stranger and Uttam had to silence the constable, with regular bribes. Tired of waiting, fearing arrest at any moment, and exasperated, Bose decided to trek it to the Soviet border, after meeting Thomas for the last time. The German had an answer this time - he asked the duo to go to the Italian Legation and meet Pietro Quaroni. Quaroni met Silver on the 22nd of Feb 1941 followed by Subhas Chandra Bose. They discussed plans and strategies over the next three weeks, as they waited for the Russians to grant Bose a visa to travel to Moscow.

### Quaroni explains his actions in a telegram to his superiors in Rome

26th March 1941 - In order not to prolong the extremely delicate situation, I gave Bose an Italian passport under the name of Orlando Mazzotta - radiotelegraph operator of this legation on which I changed the photo after getting a visa for the Afghanistan exit. Please excuse me for doing it without authorization but the Soviet consulate refused to do anything other than affix the visa on the document provided by us and the Minister of Germany did not want to act without precise instructions from his government. On the other hand, given local circumstances, the risk was much greater than it may seem. If necessary, I ask that the passport be collected in Berlin to make sure.

Since Bose was leaving as an employee of this Legation, I paid for his car to the border and provided the minimum necessary funds for the trip; please telegraph how I must account for the aforementioned sum which amounts to 1,500 Afghans. I recommended that Bose go directly to the Embassies of Italy and Germany in Moscow and wait for instructions that will be given to him to continue his journey and leave Russia as soon as possible. He thanks you for our help and your message.

Some months later he met a surprised Mussolini, who had not been fully appraised of the developments.

Quaroni's son Alessandro added in a 2009 speech details on the preparation and issuing of the false passport: after many suggestions exchanged, it was finally decided, after a "Europeanization" of his looks (the Germans had been prompt to suggest that he could much appear more Italian than German) it was decided on a casual meeting by chance of my mother, Crescini and Bose, all having a stroll on the road to Darul Funun, outside Kabul, as the best opportunity to take a snapshot of a passer-by.... The substitution of the photograph, exactly to coincide with the Italian official seal, was not an easy matter for people not having this specific experience: my father remembers having been very proud of receiving compliments from his Soviet colleague on the "quality" of the work done!

Anyway, Bose was out of the Kabul scene, and Quaroni had set into action something which was to have huge repercussions in the future of British India, his support for Bose's escape. Bose was by now settling down in

Berlin, a trifle disappointed though with the lukewarm reception from the Germans, but well into the process of establishing the Azad Hind Radio, making visits to Italy, meeting Mussolini, etc., subjects which we have discussed and covered earlier. During all those years which passed by as well in his relations with Emilie Schenkel his secretary, Bose went by the alias - Orlando Mazzotta.

Those are well known to Bose aficionados, but what they did not know was that the real Mazzotta, Crescini, and Anzilotti were neck deep with intrigues in Kabul, working hand in hand with Quaroni and masterminding Italian relations with the furtive warlord, the Faqir of Ipi.

Roberto, born in 1943, had only a general understanding of his father's activities but it certainly helped me get a rough idea of Orlando's days in Kabul between 1939-43. Roberto feels that his appearance and complexion was the reason why Quaroni used his passport to get Bose out of Kabul. He continues

These must have been the reasons on which Ambassador Pietro Quaroni (in those days the head of a Legation, a lesser diplomatic mission, had the title of Minister Plenipotentiary) based his decision to grant Chandra Bose an Italian passport bearing my father's name. Of course, under instructions from headquarters in Rome, where Mussolini received Bose personally to agree with him on ways and - above all - means to fight against British rule.

He seldom told me about these actions - he was a very private person. I still remember distinctively that one of his missions was to a remote area of Waziristan, where the respected fakir of Ipi - Haji Mirzali Khan Wazir - waged his war as a freedom fighter, against British attempts at putting Afghanistan under their rule. Presumably, my father brought him financial as well as propaganda means.

In June 1941, British Indian intelligence picked up and arrested an interpreter Muhammad Aslam in the Italian Legation - Aslam's testimony though rubbished by Quaroni later (he wondered how the British could have "swallowed the most palpable rubbish" and then made themselves "ridiculous in Afghan eyes by using it as evidence), is exact, very specific in detail and damning. Curiously, however, it does not mention the visit of

Bose, or the relations Rahmat Khan (Silver) had with the Legation in the early part of 1941, something Aslam would have known, since Bose lived in the Legation at times, during February 1941. I cannot however conclude that Aslam's testimony was burnished by the British CID, to build up a case against the Axis legations of Italy and Germany, is true in most parts.

Aslam claimed in his statement that several members of the Italian Legation had visited the Faqir between 1939 and 1941 and supplied him with money and weapons, including machine guns and a wireless transmitting and receiving set. He also supplied the British with the names of Afghan officials and army officers collaborating with the Italians and with the Faqir, which were then used to bring more pressure to bear upon the Kabul Government.

Aslam mentions that the first radio set was sent to the Faqir of Ipi in 1940 and that Azzurri helped maintain and run it. Azzurri later vanished, and British sources state that he went to Iran. Aslam records in his extensive report that a senior diplomatic official from the Italian foreign office named Ciralo arrived via Russia with a wireless transmit/receive set, money, weapons, and propaganda literature and that Aslam accompanied him as an interpreter, to the Faqir's caves. The equipment was delivered to the Faqir in person and the Faqir when specifically queried answered Aslam that Giovanni Azzurri was not around then. With Azzurri gone, the only person who could have provided training to the Faqir in 1941 on the wireless set, should have been Orlando Mazzotta.



Figure 5 - Faqir of Ipi

Quaroni later admitted that he had personally presented the Faqir with a light machine gun and ammunition to match, and also stated that Anzilotti had been to the caves in June 1941, to meet the warlord. This, of course, contradicts the testimony provided by Aslam, but is in line with what most other historians, including Milan Hauner, have narrated. A subsequent attempt by the Germans to establish contact with the Faqir failed. Specific details of the Ital-

ian moves are not available, but they continued to believe that the Faqir of Ipi would be of assistance in the long run. It did not work out, and we know now that the Faqir proved to be an insatiable money trap throughout the war, delivering hardly any goods in return.

Bose, as you will recall, lived in Berlin with his Italian passport (Reg. No. 64932) under the name of Orlando Mazzotta - a name he continued to keep for nearly a year. All letters sent by him and minutes of meetings in Germany and Italy mentioned Bose only by his alias Mazzotta. So much so, those anti-British activities which happened in Afghanistan were connected to the 'Mazzotta Organization' - An example is the Hur insurrection in 1942 and 1943 when they attacked railway lines. The general belief was that the railway sabotage had been directly instigated by the 'Mazzotta Organization', and the Faqir of Ipi. It was also mentioned those days or popularly believed that a German and an Italian cryptographer had managed to break the military ciphers used by the British, thus enabling sabotage by the Axis forces. It is believed that the Italian man was Orlando Mazzotta, but no further details are as yet available.

The relations between the German and Italian legations were also becoming thorny and the Germans eventually took control of the coordination of the Axis relations with Afghanistan and India. On 13th October 1943, Italy joined the Allied Powers and declared war on its former Axis partner Germany. Cooperating with the British now, Quaroni was interrogated by the British, at which juncture he provided details of all the activities of the Italian legation, but hardly mentioned the role of Orlando Mazzotta. Quaroni and Mazzotta continued to work at the Legation, and Roberto Mazzotta was born to Olga Giurleo and Orlando Mazzotta, in the winter of 1943.

As the war wound to a close, Orlando Mazzotta continued to remain elusively behind the scenes, and the names we see mentioned are those of Quaroni, Crescini, Anzilotti, and Larissa. With the British and other observers relating Bose to a fictional Mazzotta, the real one remained hidden

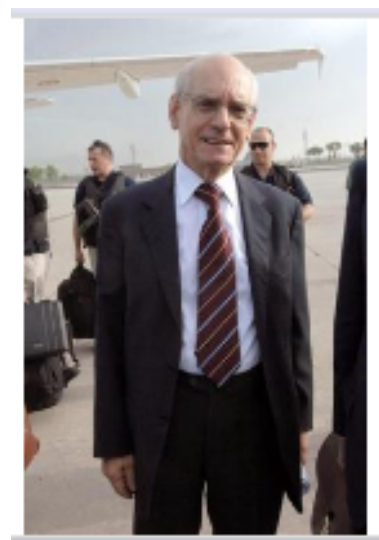
behind the mist, the veritable phantom of the Quaroni opera. Details of Mazzotta's times in Afghanistan are still largely unclear and we can therefore make only some broad assumptions.

By April 1944 Pietro Quaroni was appointed the Italian Ambassador to Moscow. He later served in Paris, London, and Bonn and passed away in 1971. Enrico Anzilotti took over as Minister Plenipotentiary in Israel and then Administrator of the Trust Territory of Somaliland under Italian Administration.

Orlando Mazzotta and his family too moved in September to the Moscow embassy to join Pietro Quaroni, on camel back first to Tashkent and then by a ramshackle Russian train. Orlando after Moscow served in Argentina and Morocco and much later at the Italian Consulate in Vienna, as an administrative clerk in the early sixties. His varied life took him to many other places; he served as a chancery clerk in Caracas, Prague, and Budapest, retired in 1976 after a long service, and passed away in 1993.

Alessandro Quaroni, one of Pietro Quaroni's sons, joined the diplomatic service and held distinguished positions, the world over. He retired after his final posting as the Italian Ambassador to India.

Roberto Mazzotta, Orlando Mazzotta's son, the person who has been in touch with me, too served as a distinguished diplomat in various countries, his last posting was as the Ambassador of Italy to Pakistan (2004 - 2008).



*Figure 6- Amb. Roberto Mazzotta, Orlando Mazzotta's son*



## PHOTOS



*Figure 7- Orlando Mazzotta sailor in the Italian Navy  
(Palermo 1936)*



*Figure 8 - Orlando Mazzotta in the 1960s*



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I quaderni della collana “Memorie e studi diplomatici”, diretta da Stefano Baldi, raccolgono specifiche testimonianze o studi di carattere diplomatico volti a far conoscere personaggi ed episodi di storia diplomatica

At the height of the Second World War, in Kabul on the fringe of the British Empire, a nearly invisible Italian radiotelegraph operator moved between codes, legations and conspiracies. His name was Orlando Mazzotta. When Subhas Chandra Bose fled British India under Mazzotta's identity, the real man disappeared into rumor and archive - a “phantom” in Ambassador Pietro Quaroni's Afghan opera.

This book brings him back to the stage. Combining the personal recollections of his son, Ambassador Roberto Mazzotta, with the meticulous reconstruction by independent researcher Manmadhan Ullatil, *Orlando Mazzotta: The Phantom in Quaroni's Opera* follows the Italian Legation in Kabul as it becomes a small but crucial node in the global conflict. It tells of clandestine radio sets, secret missions to the Faqir of Ipi, tense relations with German allies and British adversaries, and the unexpected intertwining of Italian diplomacy with Indian anti-colonial struggle.

More than a curious footnote to Bose's odyssey, this slim volume is a diplomatic micro-history that shows how the life of a “minor” official can illuminate the wider drama of fascism, empire and resistance.

**Roberto Mazzotta**, career diplomat

**Manmadhan Ullatil**, electrical engineer

**Cover: The Italian Legation in Kabul in 1940**

Source: Caspani - Cagnacci