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Gabriella Corona and Christof Mauch

German-Italian Encounters: A Dialogue on Environment, History, and Politics

A year after the Villa Vigoni workshop, environmental historians Gabriella Corona (National Research Council, Institute of Mediterranean Studies) and Christof Mauch (Rachel Carson Center) met to discuss national traditions, current issues, and future challenges in environmental history in Germany and Italy.

Gabriella Corona: What is a key topic or debate within current German environmental history?

Christof Mauch: We are in the middle of a pandemic. If there is a "debate" at present, then it is about what is happening in the world: the Covid-19 crisis and racism in the United States, Germany, and elsewhere. Both of these topics are closely linked with environmental questions. They bring to light key issues of environmental and social injustice. At the Rachel Carson Center (RCC), these two topics are being "debated" by scholars on a daily basis. When we were at Lake Como, the world looked so tranquil, the landscape so pleasant. Today, things look different, very different. The current situation has alerted us to the vulnerabilities and inequalities of our systems, which were not as visible before. Thus, in a way, we should be grateful. The crisis has politicized and activated our scholarly community. At the RCC, several projects about pandemic threats are planned. Gregg Mitman and a team of younger scholars are using the example of West Africa to look at the intersection between the colonial exploitation of natural resources, racism, and the emergence of new types of infectious diseases. His EU-funded RCC research group will also study how changes in the environment have caused new pathogens to thrive. Another project, an empirical project in medical anthropology, will investigate how vulnerability to Covid-19 is unevenly distributed among different social groups in Munich. These are topics that are on our mind today, and they are closely connected to political debates in our country and elsewhere. I know that environmental historians in Italy have studied the impact of the current pandemic in agricultural areas. They have found that areas of high intensity agriculture show up to five times

more infections than low energy rural areas in Italy. But perhaps your question was about a different type of debate?

Gabriella Corona: There have been some interesting studies carried out by the University of Florence, in particular. I believe, however, that their hypotheses should be carefully evaluated, just like the whole idea of a direct relationship between Covid-19 and pollution. In fact, it is necessary to understand to what extent the relationship between populations heavily impacted by the pandemic in areas of intensive agriculture is related to other variables. These areas are, in fact, located in flat and mostly densely populated territories. Maybe this explains the higher rates of infection? The relationship between pollution and Covid-19 still needs further investigation. One aspect that environmental historians might find interesting to research is the relationship between environmental upheavals and new pandemics. How intertwined are these? And how do you explain the relationship between them?

As the climate changes, the logging of forests, the creation of gigantic megalopolises, the industrialization of agriculture and farming, and the reduction of biodiversity seem to have altered the relationship between humans and animals, favoring pathogenic jumps, such as HIV, Ebola, avian and swine flu, Sars, and Mers.

Christof Mauch: Besides research on pandemics, and long before the current crisis, environmental historians in Italy focused on catastrophes—floods and landslides, earthquakes, and toxic events.

Gabriella Corona: Yes, exactly. Since the end of the last century, the theme of natural and unnatural catastrophes has been a central theme in Italian historiography. It seems to me that in Italy debates and reflections on the relationship between nature and society have intensified. These are normally analyzed through the category of resilience—that is, the way in which we relate to catastrophic and destructive events. Think of the literature on earthquakes, hydrogeological instability, landslides, and floods: Emanuela Guidoboni's studies at the Institute of Geophysical Environment History of Bologna, Walter Palmieri's work on landslides and floods, Giacomo Parrinello's research on earthquakes, and the work of Gabriella Gribaudi and her research group from the University of Naples Federico II on the earthquake of 1980, which affected some regions of Southern Italy. These themes are

born from the environmental and historical characteristics of Italy, a geologically fragile, highly seismic country where 77 percent of territory is made up of mountainous hilly areas. Since the 1950s, the Great Acceleration in Italy has forced the population to move from mountainous hilly areas to areas near to the coast, which constitute a mere 23 percent of the country's land surface. This shift has led to the depopulation of Italy's inland areas, accompanied by gigantic socio-environmental pressures and upheavals, with disastrous environmental and social consequences. Today, the question of inland areas is one of the most relevant issues in Italian public debates. As far as environmental historians are concerned, many associations have been created in order to deal with these issues, analyzing them through a historical context, recreating a sort of memory exercise with local communities, with the aim of supporting vulnerable inhabitants. Environmental history that becomes public history is a very common pattern in Italy. Such a transformation has been achieved among the communities affected by the earthquake of 2016 and 2017. Augusto Ciuffetti and Rossano Pazzagli are among the main protagonists of this militant historiography aimed at supporting communities in participatory and bottom-up reconstruction processes after catastrophic events in order to rediscover the value of places. These studies focus on the history of mountains in both their environmental and social dimensions. They intertwine the story of trees and soils with that of communities and the governance of these territories. Through a *longue durée* approach they take their cue from the Middle Ages reaching right through to the present day. There are also avenues of research that approach the history of the Alps from a long-term perspective in which the study of the mountains is intertwined with that of the commons. These studies are bearing interesting results, such as with Giacomo Bonan's research on the Cadore woods.

> **Christof Mauch:** But resilience is an interpretative category that is used in other contexts as well in Italy—beyond "nature," isn't it? Italian environmental history has had a stronger focus on social factors, on labor, on the health and well-being of the working classes, on industry…

Gabriella Corona: Yes, it has been applied to the study of industrial catastrophes and calls into question the relationship between health and environment, as well as labor and nature, which is an interesting new trend developing in Italy with the studies of scholars such as Stefania Barca, Bruno Giglioli, Elena Davigo, and Salvatore Romeo.

This theme takes into account the post-industrial revolution as a relevant aspect of the Great Acceleration. We have recently published an issue of the social sciences journal *Meridiana* covering similar topics. Here, issues related to the decontamination of toxic substances are intertwined with those related to poverty and social despair, to disease, and to the crisis of the labor system. Neoliberalism is also linked to the immense devastation caused by modernization. The environmental remediation of these areas is strongly linked to the question of scientific knowledge of toxic substances, to the definition of ecological thresholds, and to the history of bureaucracies engaged with recoveries and risk perception. This is the story of a great number of areas located in the hinterlands surrounding Milan and Naples, as well as many other northern Italian territories and territories along Italy's coastlines and islands.

But Germany has considerable research on toxic catastrophes as well, doesn't it? And on economic history?

> **Christof Mauch:** The short answer is, yes. A couple of excellent scholars have worked at the intersection of economic and environmental history. Roman Köster and Heike Weber have done groundbreaking research on the history of waste in Germany and Western Europe. Toxic catastrophes have also played a major role in recent research, including in Simone Müller's project on "Hazardous Travels," which looks at the global waste economy and specifically at international trade in toxic materials since around 1970. One of the researchers in Simone's team, Jonas Stuck, works on the millions of tons of toxic waste that West Germany exported to its East German neighbor, the GDR, during the Cold War. The travels of toxic waste shed light on inequalities and injustices around the globe. The interest in toxicity is a relatively recent one in German environmental history—Italy was far ahead—but urban pollution has been one of the key interests of German environmental historians for a long time.

Gabriella Corona: Would you say—and this is my impression—that urban environmental history has been quite prominent in Germany? More prominent than other areas of study and research? And if so, why?

> **Christof Mauch:** Well, urban environmental history has been quite strong, especially at the Technical University in Darmstadt with Dieter Schott and his

colleagues and at the Technical University of Berlin with Dorothee Brantz, who runs the Center for Metropolitan History. The volume *Greening the City: Urban Landscapes in the Twentieth Century*, which Dorothee wrote together with Sonja Dümpelmann, is still something of a bible on the topic. In comparison to the United States, where environmental history comes, arguably, out of a political debate and academic discourse on wilderness, one string of German environmental history has its roots in social and economic history. A few social-economic historians, most prominently Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, integrated environmental issues into their studies. Brüggemeier wrote about the Ruhr, the largest urban area in Germany outside of Berlin. He was inspired, I guess, by German Chancellor Willy Brandt, a social democrat, who pushed for "the sky over the Ruhr area to become blue again." Industrial pollution had already entered high-level political debates by the 1960s and Brüggemeier—and later others like Frank Uekötter—developed an interest in chimney smoke, if you will. In the 1950s, chimneys were a symbol both of the "*Wirtschaftswunder*" (the economic miracle) and of bigtime environmental polluters. Germany is quite urban—more so than Italy. Less than a quarter of Germans live in small towns of less than 5000 inhabitants. It may be too simple to assume that the high degree of urbanization accounts for scholarly interest in urban environmental history, but it could be a factor.

Having said that, for every environmental history article or book that Germans have written about cities, you will find one on forests. German environmental historians have written a lot about forestry and nature conservation. I am thinking of scholars from different generations: Martin Bemmann and Bernd Grewe, Richard Hölzl and Joachim Radkau, Sigrid Schwenk, and Johannes Zechner. *Der deutsche Wald* (the German forest) is ever-popular; research on German forests is an "evergreen."

But let me get back to the topic of resilience, which I find exciting. I find your analysis of resilience as a key concept in environmental studies particularly enlightening. Now, one area that you have not mentioned is climate. Climate resilience is a key concept in environmental studies, and to some extent in environmental history as well. In Germany, environmental historians—Uwe Lübken and Franz Mauelshagen, for instance—have been interested in topics such as

climate migration. German, Swiss, Czech, British, and French environmental historians have shown great interest in climate history and historical climatology. What about Italy?

Gabriella Corona: Contemporary research addressing the way Italy has historically faced crises and catastrophes using the concept of resilience has not yet addressed the risks posed by climate change. My hope is that this line of research will be addressed soon, as we have a large amount of available data, especially concerning the last twenty-five years, detailing the risks posed by climate change. In this respect, a particular characteristic of Italian environmental historiography is that it has not had much dialogue with the so-called hard sciences. Rather, it has tended to engage with the social sciences and, in particular, with sociology, economics, demography, urban planning, geography, and political science. The exception to this is engagements with geologists, seismic and hydraulic engineers, and agronomists, who have represented important partners for environmental historians. Yet there has been little dialogue with biologists, climatologists, epidemiologists, botanists, chemists, and physicists.

So are Germans more interested in climate change and Italians more in natural catastrophes?

Christof Mauch: Ha! Isn't that an interesting suggestion! At first sight, it seems paradoxical because Italy, the Mediterranean region altogether, is more likely to suffer from extreme weather conditions and global warming than is Central or Northern Europe. So why are Italians not interested in climate issues? As far as research on natural catastrophes is concerned, Germans seem to be obsessed with flooding—more than with any other catastrophe. This could be because we don't have a lot of earthquakes, avalanches, or landslides. It could also be because Germany has a number of big rivers—the Rhine, the Danube, the Oder, and the Elbe—as well as around 200 smaller rivers that flow for more than 50 kilometers, which is a considerable length. The omnipresence of rivers and rivulets all over Germany might account for a strong interest in the environmental history of floods and flooding. Scholars like Dieter Schott, Guido Poliwoda, Felix Mauch, and Christoph Bernhard have studied the Elbe and Rhine rivers. Others, such as Elenora Rohland and Uwe Lübken, have focused on flooding

and catastrophes outside of Germany. German historians have also—my guess would be more than Italian historians—taken an interest in fire catastrophes, early modern catastrophes, storm surges, and insurance issues. I am thinking of scholars like Manfred Jakubowski-Tiessen, Cornel Zwierlein, Elenora Rohland, and Franz Mauelshagen. Early modernists, in particular, have come out of a tradition of intellectual history. And there are some great scholars who have focused on nuclear catastrophes, most prominent among them is Melanie Arndt.

Gabriella Corona: At the beginning of our conversation, you talked about the pandemic when I asked you about current debates in environmental history. This was all very interesting. But let me come back to my actual question, that is: Are there any research controversies among German environmental historians regarding Germany's past?

Christof Mauch: Your question is eye-opening. Real controversies, heavy debates, I do not think exist anymore. Your question makes me wonder about the current culture of historical debate. One of the great environmental histories of Germany entitled *Schranken der Natur* (Gates of Nature) by Franz-Josef Brüggemeier "de-dramatizes" German environmental history, as one reviewer described it. It is neither a declensionist story about the destruction of nature nor does it foreground current political topics such as climate change. German historians used to be eager to debate, and the German media are generally happy to give historians a platform. One of the most famous historical debates, the *Historikerstreit* (Historians' quarrel) of the 1980s was about the crimes of Nazi Germany, including their comparability with the crimes of the Soviet Union. Regarding the environment, we also saw some heated debates among German historians a couple of decades ago about *Holznot*, the shortage of wood in the eighteenth century. Some historians took the records at face value, whereas others claimed that *Holznot* was politically constructed. They argued that the shortage-of-wood argument served the elites and was used to deprive peasants from gaining access to the forests. Another more recent debate was about conservation in Nazi Germany. Some historians argued that the Nazis worked hand in hand with German environmentalists, whereas others emphasized their ideological differences. Joachim Wolschke-Buhlmann and Frank Uekötter stood

on different sides of the aisle in this debate. I am currently involved in a project about Germany's first national park which has its 50th anniversary in 2020…

Gabriella Corona: This was rather late, wasn't it? In the United States, national parks were established in the nineteenth century. In Italy, the Gran Paradiso National Park goes back to 1922, and several other parks were established in the 1920s and 1930s.

Christof Mauch: Yes, Germany was a latecomer. I used to argue that the two world wars made Germany a latecomer. But of course Italy had a similar history and two world wars. Perhaps one of the differences between our two countries is that Italy had more pristine and remote spaces that nobody cared about.

Gabriella Corona: But you were hoping to make a point about Germany's first national park, the Nationalpark Bayerischer Wald.

Christof Mauch: Yes. One of our researchers found that most of the ideas and projects that the Nazis sold as radically new can be traced back to the Weimar period. Five out of the six National Park Projects (none of them was ever realized by the Nazis) were designed during the 1920s. In reality, the Nazis, as they planned for a transnational park with Czechoslovakia, used the guise of conservation to hide their plans for the expansion of the Reich into the east.

This brings me to another point. German environmental historians are not very national. Most of us are not working on Germany proper; I am mostly working on the United States. The same is true for Elena Rohland, Dorothee Brantz, and Uwe Lübken. Many of the doctoral students who finished their degrees in Munich have worked on the United States, Canada, Brazil, the Netherlands, Britain, Scandinavia, etc. Melanie Arndt who holds the Chair in Social, Economic and Environmental History in Germany is an Eastern Europeanist. The same goes for Julia Herzberg. Many of us are working on international environmental history, on global, comparative, and transatlantic issues. This is true for Jan-Henrik Meyer, Iris Borowy, Frank Uekötter, Joachim Radkau, and Sonja Dümpelmann. Books like *The Age of Ecology* and *Nature and Power* by Radkau are truly global in nature and their readership outside of Germany is probably

larger than within. Germans have produced non-German research, regional research—I am thinking of scholars like Martin Knoll and of scholars who have worked on Eastern Germany like Astrid Kirchhof, Sebastian Strube, and Tobias Huff—and transnational research. At the RCC, we just started a project with partners in Britain that looks at nature protection through a transnational perspective. One of the individual research projects—that of Pavla Šimková—deals with the intertwined history of Šumava in the Czech Republic and of the Bavarian Forest. Another one, which is being pursued by Katie Ritson, looks at the German-Dutch Wadden Sea. Some scholars have also done comparative work: Birgit Urmson worked on the environment of war cemeteries in Italy and Germany; Talitta Reitz is comparing Munich and Portland (Oregon) as cycling cities, while Dorothee Brantz has compared slaughterhouses in Berlin, Chicago, and Paris. It almost seems to me that Germans are staying away from specifically national topics.

But let me get back to Italy and to the "origins question," the question about the roots of environmental history in Italy. When I think of Italian environmental history, it seems to me, Gabriella, that research in your country often comes out of social history. This seems to be the case with the Naples School of Environmental History that you, Stefania Barca, and Marco Armiero come from. Italian environmental historians seem to be truly engaged and rather political. There is a strong focus on environmental movements and environmental conflicts, and several scholars are inspired by political ecology. Would you share this impression?

Gabriella Corona: Marco Armiero and Stefania Barca are developing a line of research that stems from political ecology intertwined with the practice of protest movements and environmentalism. It is a very important contribution. In addition, it was due to their commitment that a group of young Italian researchers was formed in Stockholm, including Roberta Biasillo, Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, Gilberto Mazzoli, and Daniele Valisena, which has the merit of having "de-provincialized" Italian historiography giving it an international character. There have been other groups in Italy whose historiographic work is characterized by a strong political and civil commitment. This includes scholars associated with the Micheletti Foundation in Milan, such as Pier Paolo Poggio, Marino Ruzzenenti, and Andrea Saba, who have researched conflicts related to the theme of pollution, and the research group

that stems from the journal *Altronovecento*, as well as researchers such as Luigi Piccioni. Even Piero Bevilacqua in his most recent research has written books, such as *La terra è finite* (The Earth is Finished) and *Miseria dello sviluppo* (Poverty of Development), that have a strong political ecology imprint.

However, this is only a part of Italian historiography. Italian environmental history is a very rich and complex field, not commonly recognized by Italy's academia. As a consequence, even studies with a less "militant" identity have been inspired by a profound need for civil commitment and a strong bond with public debates. We have always "spoken" to students, teachers, public officials, and politicians and been present in the media and in social networks. In this sense, we have always had a reformist agenda related to left-wing parties and environmental associations.

The birth of environmental history is commonly traced back to the late 1980s when Alberto Caracciolo organized a large exhibition in Rome in 1989 entitled *The Environment in the History of Italy.*

> **Christof Mauch:** But the roots of Italian environmental history go further back in time…

Gabriella Corona: Yes. In hindsight, it becomes clear that environmental history follows a trajectory set in place many years before in the 1960s by historical studies on the agricultural landscape, taking its cue from this discipline. It is a historiography that emerges from Marxism, influenced by the thought of Antonio Gramsci, a philosopher and one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party. These studies historicized the contribution of the working classes in terms of the labor and value they added to the creation of a vast array of diverse agricultural landscapes, such as the rice fields in northern Italy, the valuable agricultural fields in the north of Tuscany, the mulberry trees of Calabria, the olive trees of Puglia, the vegetable gardens of Campania, and the almond orchards and citrus gardens of Sicily. The most emblematic book related to landscape history is by Emilio Sereni, a proto-environmental historian, intellectual, and communist politician, entitled *History of the Italian Agricultural Landscape.*

During the 1980s, social historiography, very attentive to Italian territory, emerged

from this intellectual culture, strongly influenced by the *Annales* school and, in particular, by Marc Bloch (*Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rural française* and *Apologie pour l'histoire*) and geographer Vidal de la Bla. Much of this regional research (by Piero Bevilacqua, Giuseppe Barone, Augusto Placanica, and others) has contributed to the collective volumes published by Einaudi entitled *The Regions in the History of Italy*. Other strands that have contributed to the birth of research more attentive to the relationship between nature and society have stemmed from economic and energy history (e.g., Alberto Caracciolo, Paolo Malanima, and Ercole Sori), or from the historical ecology of Diego Moreno, an exponent of a historiographic current of great prestige in Italy called "micro-history." Catia Papa's research on environmental movements and Elisabetta Bini's research on nuclear energy have also been influential.

It is only since the 1990s that a more explicit environmental history research trend has emerged in Italy. A decisive contribution was made by Piero Bevilacqua and by the group that contributed to the magazine *I Frutti di Demetra*. This new movement addressed the realization that the categories we had used to analyze the relationship between nature and society were obsolete and inadequate for answering new questions arising from international environmental and climate-related questions. It was therefore necessary to find new interpretative categories and sources. Piero Bevilacqua's book *Between Nature and History* was illuminating for me. It represented a turning point in considering nature as a historical subject and as a cooperating partner in the production of wealth. Nature is now taken into consideration as a resource, as something perpetually alive, that constantly reproduces itself, with its own times and laws. It is not considered as historiographical inert matter. During those years, we began to understand that we had to criticize many of the intellectual categories we had reasoned with up until then, and most of all that of development, which was losing its universally positive meaning.

During these years, research on the Italian woods was carried out by Marco Armiero, Mauro Agnoletti, Walter Palmieri, Renato Sansa, and Pietro Tino. Just as important were Luigi Piccioni's research on the history of environmental protection, Stefania Barca's studies on water, and Federico Paolini's studies on the history of transport. As far as I am concerned, it was thanks to a trip to the United States that I began to enthusiastically discover how much the issue of the commons could help

us better understand and interpret the disastrous social and environmental implications related to the construction of capitalist markets, and how much this was a global interpretative key for environmental history.

Christof Mauch: During those years, when Italian environmental history internationalized, you went to the United States. And you and other Italians were also engaged in an international group of urban environmental historians.

Gabriella Corona: Yes. Simone Neri Serneri and I were engaged with an international group of urban environmental historians, which allowed us to develop new interpretative categories for studying urban realities from an environmental point of view, such as the city as an ecosystem and the concept of urban metabolism. There is no doubt that our urban environmental history has been greatly influenced by German historiography and classic texts by Peter Sieferle and Joachim Radkau, as well as by Franz Josef Brüggemeier's pollution studies and Dieter Schott's technological approach. Particularly memorable for me was a conference held in Clermont-Ferrand, the proceedings of which were published in a book called *The Modern Demon*. While I continued to deal with cities, developing the theme of urban planning as a relevant aspect of the history of environmentalism in Italy with the publication of the volume *I Ragazzi del Piano* (The Boys of Urban Planning), Simone Neri Serneri published *Incorporating Nature*. Together, we established a research group with Salvatore Adorno investigating the relationship between industrialization and the environment.

Christof Mauch: I have to say that I am impressed by the breadth of topics that Italian environmental historians have covered over the past decades. It is also interesting to see how you can draw out the lines of thought from early research to the present. We don't have the same traditions in Germany. The study of German environments does not have a home; it has never really had one. We do not have longstanding traditions or schools. For a decade or so, the University of Göttingen was the epicenter of environmental history in Germany. Two full professors, early modernist Manfred Jakubowski-Thiessen and biologist Bernd Herrmann, ran the Göttingen Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Environmental History. Herrmann's approach was unique; it was inspired by zoology and anthropology. Some of his students, among them Jana Sprenger and Patrick

Masius, conducted cutting-edge research on caterpillars in environmental history, on the common viper, and on wolves. But there is no environmental history left in Göttingen. The Göttingen center shut down for good. Moreover, very little of the research conducted in Göttingen found its way into international publications. It is a pity that much of the literature is not published in English. This is true for German environmental history, and even more so for Italian environmental history. For me and for many of my colleagues, it was both exciting and enlightening to see an English translation of your *Breve Storia dell'Ambiente in Italia*. White Horse Press published it under the title *A Short Environmental History of Italy: Variety and Vulnerability.* And I have to say that the Villa Vigoni encounter of Italian and German scholars last year was a true highlight. We were able to discuss our research in English and discovered a lot of potential for future exchange and collaboration.

Gabriella Corona: The meeting at Villa Vigoni was fantastic and above all an original experience. Italy and Germany have long been linked in the field of environmental history. If only for the fact that we—you, Mauro Agnoletti, and I—jointly publish one of the major journals in environmental history, *Global Environment: A Journal of Transdisciplinary History.* Our editorial focus, particularly open to young researchers from the Global South, has pushed us to publish lesser-known historiographies, granting contributors the opportunity to make themselves known internationally.

Perhaps what I found most extraordinary about this volume of essays was its conception at the Villa Vigoni residence, which brought the German and Italian authors of this volume into dialogue. The intertwining of autobiographies, histories of places, historical sources, and memory exercises was a new and original experience. It creates an environmental history based on practices of dialoguing with an ethnoanthropological approach. It is an invitation to look at the historian's role as a "mediator" between the source and what he or she reads and sees. The historian is a "translator," so to speak. The contributions in this volume intermingle with the story of what is being told and with that of the writer, who in most traditional approaches remains in the background. There is a passion for knowledge and a love for the places that are studied and the emotions they evoke in us. These texts convey a "thirst" for history and memory, without neglecting intellectual analysis, as expressed by the historiographic contributions that emerge from the texts. The result

is very effective and compelling.

Wilko Graf von Hardenberg's contribution deals with the memory and history of the region near Vercelli, a story of irrigation techniques but also of work and fatigue, malaria, and struggles against the fascist regime. The history of the Schwarzenbach dam is described through the eyes of Fabian Zimmer as a boy, who sees it in a completely different way to how he will as an adult with greater vision. The result is the account of a great transformation of nature based on the use of "white coal." Sophie Lange shows us the difficulties of a researcher who makes history out of themes, such as the pollution of the Elbe divided between two Germanies, each with a profoundly different way of interpreting and measuring the same phenomenon. The history of the Aral Sea and Syr Daria before the Soviet intervention appears in the refined and suggestive story that Flora J. Roberts makes of it. A strong cultural and scientific tension permeates Claudio de Majo's text, creating a dialogue through the study of the commons between the southern Italian and the Brazilian mountains. His text intertwines environmental history with evolutionary biology, with the rules of mountain communities dialoguing with sources from botanists and naturalists. There is Noemi Quagliati's story of France devastated by the war and its transformations in visual history, which conveys a great passion for photographic sources. Roberta Biasillo's text intertwines the exhilarating discovery of new sources with reflection on the theme of the role of soils, their natural characteristics, and human intervention during Fascist Italy's colonization of Libya. The story of a German city emerges from Ansgar Schanbacher's study of ancient maps and walks through the streets of a modern city. David-Christopher Assmann shows us that such a central theme for environmental history as waste can be transformed into a literary experience and be perceived through a wide range of feelings and emotions.

Now, Christof, you were a convener of the Villa Vigoni conference. If you had been asked to submit a piece, what would you have written? How does your personal story intertwine with environmental history? Which place would you have chosen and which story would you have told?

Christof Mauch: What a wonderful question. I find places like Menaggio, the

site of Villa Vigoni at Lake Como, absolutely intriguing. Picturesque and tranquil places. Villa Vigoni is a romantic oasis with ancient trees and beautiful vistas of the lake. But today's setting is hiding a history of exploitation of human labor and of nature. Silk worms and mulberry trees and the labor of multiple workers produced the wealth that created the villa and paid for the art. I live in a similar place at Lake Starnberg, south of Munich. This place in Upper Bavaria was once a poor village. The fishermen and peasants were exploited by the aristocracy through taxes and tithe. With the arrival of the railroad, the upper classes and artists settled at the lake, as well as wealthy Nazis. I might have written about Villa Vigoni or about the beauty of my current home and about the violence that beauty can hide. But most likely, in the spirit of our collaboration and dialogue, my text for this volume would have focused on the connections, both environmental and cultural, between Bavaria and Italy. A glance at a topographical map will suggest that Northern Italy and Southern Germany are fully separated by the Alpine mountain range. But our worlds are also connected. Bavarian and Italian hills are part of the same activity that created a rough climate and a barren landscape, and our lakes are of glacial origin, north as well as south of the Alps. Against many odds, migrants and their skills, animals and plants, food and customs, spices and textiles have found their way through mountain valleys and gorges across the Alps. Munich's architecture is inspired by Italian styles. Italian laborers helped build Bavarian railway lines. Understanding how weather and seasons, altitudes and forests, and rivers and gorges have connected and separated us would be a project worthy of Villa Vigoni and our collaboration that I hope will see many more chapters.