OPENING SPEECH

Once upon a time there was ... «A king !» my readers will say immediately. No, you are mistaken. Once upon a time there was ... «A piece of wood !» Not even that ! Once upon a time, in a thick hedge in Boboli Gardens (at Florence) there was a grate, covering the entry of the drainage system, with a bar bent enough to allow me, a filiform twelve-year-old gymnasial student, to make my first underground experiences and to found the "Banda del Buco"[1] in the far-off 1936's.

Those were hard times and it was not easy make ends meet. Then, even short trips were not easy for most people: even a bike was almost as unaffordable as a Ferrari is today. Thus, it was only five years later, on the 16th of September 1941, I finally made my dream of exploring a real cave come true, precisely the *Spelonca delle Pille* on the Calvana Mountains, between Prato and Florence. It was number 1 of my life and, as it happens, also number 1 in the Tuscan speleological cadastre ... And it was there that I had my *coup de foudre* for European cave salamanders. It was the very beginning of an overwhelming infatuation with those that are likely to be considered, according to their overall characteristics, the most interesting vertebrates in Europe.

Since I am by nature a faithful person, my passion soon turned into love producing its first fruits: perhaps rather naïve works, which, however, were the beginning of more complex studies on this subject which eventually were to produce interesting results in the fields of genetics, evolutionism, systematics, taxonomy, parasitology, ecology, ethology, and population dynamics.

I like to think that this conference probably wouldn't take place if a bar of a grate in Boboli Gardens hadn't been damaged: «*Das*

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[1] "Banda del Buco", literally "Band of the Hole", refers to a gang of thieves notorious for making holes in the walls or digging galleries.

Schicksal mischt die Karten, und wir spielen», «Fate shuffles cards and we play», as Schopenhauer wrote.

But, above all, I am really pleased that our Genoese friends had the wonderful idea of joining the celebration for the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the glorious *Gruppo Speleologico Ligure "Arturo Issel"* with this conference on cave salamanders, little beasts sharing with us the same special feeling for caves. Although I have already gone quite a way along the sunset boulevard -but always supported by many young, passionate and valid naturalists-, I owe to these friends the greening again of two of the biggest passions of my life: biospeleology and herpetology.

Therefore, also on behalf of all the participants, with all my heart I thank the devisers and organizers of the meeting, as well as all the others who collaborated for such a brilliant accomplishment.

Dear Genoese friends and colleagues: thank you, thank you very much once again!

Benedetto Lanza