

Giuseppe Gneme (1872 – 1958): The “Dean” of Telecommunications

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At a tribute for the retirement of 85-year-old Giuseppe Gneme in 1957, the Chairman of the ITU Administrative Council stated:

We are experiencing [...] an event in the life of our Union, one that is both remarkable and unusual: the retirement from active service of our dean, the Honourable Grand Officer Giuseppe Gneme, who is leaving us after fifty years of the most fruitful and impressive activity for the Union, and sixty-five years in the service of his country, Italy¹.

In our view, the secret of this extraordinary longevity resided in the Second World War, for it was during the founding congress of the European Postal and Telecommunication Union in 1942 that Giuseppe Gneme came out of retirement to serve as an Italian delegate.

Giuseppe Gneme was born on 26 May 1872. After studying physics and mathematics at the University of Rome, he entered the senior staff of the General Directorate of Telegraphs of Italy, and was assigned to the central telegraph office in Rome on 1 February 1892 after passing a competitive examination. In 1896, he joined the central administration of the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs (the future Ministry of Communications), where he became familiar with more general issues in telegraph operations (domestic and international), pricing², and regulation.

His first contacts with the Central Office of the International Telegraph Union in Berne date back to the beginning of the new century, during preparations for the conferences on wireless telegraphy that were organised in Berlin in 1903 and 1906 to counter the monopoly of his compatriot Marconi. In 1908 he took part in a telegraph conference in Lisbon, where

1 *Journal des Télécommunications* 9 (1957), p. 197.

2 In 1916 he wrote *Le tariffe telegrafiche interne: tariffa dei telegrammi ordinari e della stampa - dei telegrammi lettera - per l'uso di indirizzi abbreviati e convenuti*, Recanati, Tip. R. Simboli, 1916.

he signed the International Telegraph Regulations for the first time as the head of Italy's delegation.

From that point on, Gnome continued to be part of the transnational community of experts in telegraphy and telephony, meeting at the international conferences of the ITU and other assemblies of its advisory committees³. Before the war, he served as laboratory director at the Military Radiotelegraphic Institute, which placed him in the crucial field of radio communications⁴.

After the First World War, he was Italy's delegate to the telegraph meetings in Paris (1920) and Prague (1921) regarding the restoration of communications and services. His rise within the ministry continued. At the international telegraph conference in Paris in 1925, he chaired the Italian delegation as Director and Head of Division. Convinced of the need to separate their regulatory provisions for telephone service from other telegraph regulations, he contributed to a reform effort via international legislation, which led to a reorganisation of the Union at the next conference, held in Madrid in 1932. These two separate regulations allowed the United States to join the organisation. In Madrid there was also talk of wireless telegraphy, a subject to which Gnome was no stranger. As chairman of the Italian delegation and chairman of the tariff commission at the 1927 Washington International Conference, he was in favour of merging the St Petersburg International Telegraph Convention (1875) and the International Radiotelegraph Convention. Gnome introduced a proposal that the Spanish Government should organise both the telegraph and radio conferences, which had hitherto been held separately and concurrently. The proposal was adopted, and the name of the organisation was changed from the Telegraphic Union to the brand new International Telecommunications Union, which encompassed the three regulations of telegraphy, telephony and radiocommunications.

Gnome was a prominent figure in this world of telecommunications — undergoing international reorganisation at the time — and was present at almost every meeting. Following the decision to set up an International Committee on Agreed Language (Commit international du langage con-

3 CCIT, CCIF, CCIR. Created in the 1920s.

4 Gnome would later publish a synthesis on marine applications, *Uno sguardo al servizio delle radiocomunicazioni con le navi*, [EDITION] Roma: Ist. Poligr. dello Stato (1936).

venu) at the 1925 conference⁵, he chaired its first meeting in Cortina d'Ampezzo in 1926⁶. Agreed language is a system that simplifies the letters and symbols of certain (mostly non-European⁷) languages in order to facilitate transmission between countries. In 1928, Gneme published a Regulation on the Agreed Language in International Telegrams⁸. His activity did not slow, as he served as the chairman of the Italian delegation and chairman of commissions at the European broadcasting conferences held in Lucerne (1933) and Montreux⁹, which regulated the frequency spectrum, as well as at the telegraph-telephone and radiocommunication conferences in Cairo (1938)¹⁰. He also intervened in telegraph and telephone matters at the meetings of the International Chamber of Commerce (Paris in 1931, Berlin in 1937, Copenhagen in 1939) and the International Legal Committee (Rome in 1928 and Liège in 1935). His experience was praised by his peers, who recognized him as Dean at the Plenary Assembly of the International Telegraph Consultative Committee in Lisbon (1934). He retained this honorary office for twenty-three years!

It is unclear exactly when Giuseppe Gneme retired from the Italian PTT Administration, but it was in the early 1940s, before he was called back to office — “retired head of the (telegraphic) service recalled to duty” — as a February 1943 decree put it¹¹. This probably happened in the context of

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- 5 Amendments to the proposal of the Tariff Commission concerning the constitution of a study committee, in: *Procès-verbal de la quatrième séance plénière de la Conférence de télégraphique internationale*, Paris 1925, p. 417.
 - 6 At the time Gneme held the title of Grand Officer of the Order of the Crown of Italy.
 - 7 “The agreed language is used by most of the Countries in their relations with the non-European regime”, in: *Procès-verbal*, Paris 1925, p. 418.
 - 8 Gneme, Giuseppe: *Regolamentazione del linguaggio convenuto nei telegrammi internazionali*, Roma 1928.
 - 9 Introduced as General Inspector of Telegraph and Radiotelegraphic Traffic at the Italian Ministry of Communications, Gneme headed the Italian delegation to the European Broadcasting Conference in Montreux in 1939. *Liste des participants à la Conférence européenne de radiodiffusion*, Montreux 1939, ITU website.
 - 10 Gneme, Giuseppe: *Uno sguardo al telegrafo: Conferenza tenuta alle sedi di Roma e di Milano dell'Associazione Elettrotecnica italiana*, 1934.
 - 11 *Capo servizio in pensione richiamato in servizio*, “Decreto Ministeriale 24 febbraio 1943-XXI. Istituzione e nomina dei componenti il Comitato esecutivo per la Conferenza europea postale e delle telecomunicazioni di Roma”, in: *Gazzetta ufficiale del Regno d'Italia* 56 (1943.)

the founding congress of the European Postal and Telecommunications Union (EPTU), held in October 1942 (Vienna).

Gneme, who was 70 years old at the time, actively participated in the congress, although there is no sign of his participation in the preparatory meetings of 1941 and January 1942.¹² Why was he brought out of retirement? We can assume that his expertise was considered crucial for the proper implementation of the organisation; it is no coincidence that he was both a member of the commission preparing the Convention, as well as president of the commission on telegraph tariffs. Gneme brought his pre-war experience in cooperation to the new organisation. His expertise was once again sought out during the meeting of the second EPTU Standing Committee (Service) in Vienna.¹³

However, it should be noted that he was no longer appointed head of the Italian delegation during the Congress meetings of 1942 and 1943. Giuseppe Pession (born in 1881), who had served as Director General of Posts and Telegraphs since 1925 and was a specialist in radiotelegraphy, signed the agreement on October 1942. Could Gneme's relegation be explained by the context in which the EPTU was operating? It is important to emphasize the German administration's perspective on Gneme:

About Gneme, it is well known that he is the man who led the international negotiations in the previous years. He staff does not hold him in high regard. He stands out from the others, and is neither loved nor appreciated by Pession¹⁴.

This stands in such sharp contrast to Gneme's pre-war distinctions! Gneme's great experience clearly gave him a kind of independence, which was frowned upon by the Reich's PTT administration.

At the end of the Second World War, the esteem in which Gneme was held (and no doubt his relative "effacement" during the conflict) allowed

12 The previous year he published a report on the use of the frequency spectrum, under the title *Dieci anni di utilizzazione dello spettro delle frequenze*, Roma 1941.

13 The second meeting of the telecommunications committee: September 1 – 7, 1943. The Duce was no longer governing at that time. The Badoglio Government that was in power was still officially on the side of the Germans. This changed with the Badoglio armistice of 8 September 1943. However, the Germans arrived in Rome a few days later, and established the Repubblica Sociale Italiana on 23 September 1943, putting Mussolini back in power.

14 Working meeting of the Reichspostministerium from March 18 to 28, 1943, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R 4701/11248

him to return to the forefront of the Italian scene. He was chosen to lead the Italian delegation in the decisive conferences held in Atlantic City in 1947, which reorganised the ITU and placed it within the new United Nations Organisation. Giuseppe Pession also died in 1947 and was purged in December 1944 because of his fascism.¹⁵ Gneme, a key expert for both Italy and the international community, became a founding member of the ITU Administrative¹⁶, and even served as Chairman for the Council's tenth session in 1953.

His consecration was complete. In his own country, he was showered with honours before, during, and after the war. He had been a Grand Officer of the Order of the Crown of Italy since 1926 and was also made Grand Officer of the religious order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus in December 1941, before being elevated in 1952 to the status of Commander in the new Order of Merit of the Italian Republic instituted by the new regime, which merged the two previous orders. At the same time, he was involved in telegraph and telephone matters for the meetings of the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris in 1946, and then took part in the Maritime Radiocommunication Conference in Copenhagen on 7 September 1948. Gneme did not retire until 1957, at the age of 85; he died in Rome less than a year later, on 17 April 1958.

Gneme's incredible professional longevity is impressive: he served under successive political regimes (monarchy, fascism, Italian social republic), as well as two world wars. He is unquestionably a witness and key player of the great changes that occurred in the field of telecommunications during the twentieth century. He was particularly involved in international regulation and was a part of Europe's long history of technical cooperation. This spirit of cooperation was emphasized by Gneme himself in his speech at the opening of the ITU Administrative Council:

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- 15 [30 December 1944] "Notizie da radio Bari [...] rilevo il sequestro dei beni mobili ed immobili di due gerarchi fascisti: l'ex academico Pession, direttore delle poste e telegrafiche e Lazzari ex direttore delle Belle Arti", in: Marchis, Riccardo (ed.): *Carlo Chevallard. Diario 1942-1945. Cronache del tempo di guerra*, 2005, p. 429.
- 16 Consisting of 18 member states, it is responsible for assisting the Members and Associate Members of the Union in applying the provisions of the Conventions, Regulations, Agreements and decisions of the Conferences and meetings of the Union. It also ensures effective coordination of its activities and good administration.

Over the last fifty years, I have had the privilege of witnessing, in our field of international telecommunications, the development of a magnificent spirit of cooperation, which has allowed us to overcome difficulties that were considered insurmountable, and to provide sufficient solutions to the problems that arose.¹⁷

In 1957, the Administrative Council had his bust placed in the ITU entrance hall—his figure has been keeping a watchful eye on the international community of experts ever since¹⁸.

References

“Notizie da radio Bari [...] rilevo il sequestro dei beni mobili ed immobili di due gerarchi fascisti: l'ex academico Pession, direttore delle poste e telegrafiche e Lazzari ex direttore delle Belle Arti”, in: Marchis, Riccardo (ed.): *Carlo Chevallard. Diario 1942-1945. Cronache del tempo di guerra*, 2005.

Capo servizio in pensione richiamato in servizio, “Decreto Ministeriale 24 febbraio 1943-XXI. Istituzione e nomina dei componenti il Comitato esecutivo per la Conferenza europea postale e delle telecomunicazioni di Roma”, in: *Gazzetta ufficiale del Regno d'Italia* (5) 1943.

Journal des Télécommunications 9 (1957).

17 *Journal des Télécommunications* 9 (1957), p. 198

18 “The President reminded the Council that two other proposals had been made. One, that the portrait of Mr. Gnome be included in the series of portraits of great men in telecommunications published by the General Secretariat; the other, that the Secretary-General be authorized to arrange for a bust of Mr. Gnome to be placed in the entrance hall of the future ITU building. Both proposals were adopted unanimously”. *Ibid.*, p. 200.