

RINVOLUCRI, GIUSEPPE (1890 - 1962), engineer and architect

Name: Giuseppe Rinvolucri
Date of birth: 1890
Date of death: 1962
Spouse: Mina Josephine Moore-Rinvolucri (née Moore)
Spouse: Anna Gwenmore Sopwith
Spouse: Rinvolucri
Child: Bernardo Rinvolucri
Child: Mario Rinvolucri
Parent: Maria Anna Ferrero
Parent: Guglielmo Rinvolucri
Gender: Male
Occupation: engineer and architect
Area of activity: Art and Architecture
Author: Warren Kovach

Giuseppe Rinvolucri was born on 8 September 1890 in Savigliano, Piedmont, Italy, the son of Guglielmo Rinvolucri, an engineer, and his wife Maria Anna Ferrero. He was probably an only child, and his father died in a train crash when Giuseppe was very young. His mother also died before he reached adulthood. After attending schools in Mondovì, Piedmont, he studied engineering, specializing in mining engineering, at Turin Polytechnic University, graduating with a doctorate in 1914.

In 1915 he joined the Italian Army as a second lieutenant in the 2° Reggimento Genio Guastatori (2nd Engineer Regiment). He fought in Northern Italy against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, ending up at the decisive Battle of the Piave River in 1918. He remained in the regiment as a reserve officer, promoted to captain, until 1929. At the same time he was working as a civil engineer in Turin, building roads and bridges for local government.

He married during the First World War, but six months later his wife (name unknown) died of the Spanish flu. In the 1920s he met Anna Gwenmore Sopwith (1879-1931), an Englishwoman from Staffordshire who was on holiday in Italy. They were married in Turin in 1925. They returned to Staffordshire in 1928, and then moved to Conwy in north Wales in 1929. She died in 1931, and in his grief Rinvolucri turned to religion, returning to Piedmont to study for the priesthood for several months, but decided he wasn't suited to the life and remained a layperson..

Rinvolucri then returned to Wales to develop his career in ecclesiastical architecture. In 1930 he had designed alterations and additions to a former military drill hall in Conwy, located just outside the town walls on Mount Pleasant, for use as a parish hall for St Michael and All Angels Catholic Church. He then he designed a Lourdes-inspired Grotto behind the church, including a life-size Calvary sculpture, erected in 1932, and twelve Stations of the Cross, mostly set into the nearby town walls and dedicated in 1934.

In association with this Rinvolucri wrote and planned, in conjunction with the parish priest Father McCullagh, a Passion Play that would proceed through the streets of Conwy to the Grotto on Good Friday, 1934. Rinvolucri said of the play that 'hardly any town in Europe could give a better architectural image of Jerusalem or form a more ideal setting of the tragic processional way to Calvary.' But the police did not see it that way and they banned the procession because of possible traffic disruption.

The next few years saw Rinvolucri design a number of innovative Catholic churches in north Wales and Shropshire. The first was Church of The Most Holy Redeemer, Porthmadog, opened in 1933. It is in a simplified Romanesque style, with Arts-and-Crafts influences. The nave and chancel are rectangular, tall and narrow, built of bare rubble stonework inside and out. The roof was originally concrete with a rounded interior ceiling but is now covered with a steep slate roof. A year later his church St Therese of Lisieux in Abergelie was opened. It is a neo-Byzantine cruciform building with semi-circular and domed apses, constructed of reinforced concrete faced with stone on the outside. His next church, opened in 1936, was St Peter's in Ludlow, Shropshire, which fused Byzantine and Romanesque influences. It too was built of stone-faced reinforced concrete.

The next year, 1937, saw the opening of his most remarkable and modernist church, Our Lady Star of the Sea and St Winefride in Amlwch, Anglesey. This departed from the usual references to early ecclesiastical architecture and instead took its inspiration from Amlwch's maritime heritage. Composed primarily of reinforced concrete, the roof is a parabolic shape designed to look like the upturned hull of a ship. The base plinth of the building has porthole-like windows. The roof has ribs of small stained-glass windows and the entrance is surmounted by a star-shaped window. It has been called 'a piece of Italian architectural daring' by the Pevsner guide and 'a rare and unique church' by the Twentieth Century Society.

Rinvolucri's last church, The Church of St Teresa of the Child Jesus, in Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire, returned to the usual ecclesiastical Baroque and Byzantine influences. Unlike his other works this is brick-built and is on a triangular and hexagonal footprint rather than cruciform or rectangular. It was opened in 1938.

In 1936 Rinvolucri was engaged to be married to Lucy Cecilia Shaw, an elocution teacher from Rhos-on-Sea, but the marriage never took place. Three years later, on 29 June 1939 in St Peter's Church, Cardiff, he married Dr Mina Josephine Moore (1902-1991), a lecturer in the Teacher Training Department of the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire who was born in Liverpool and gained her Ph.D. from Strasbourg University in France. After their marriage she joined him in Conwy and took up a lectureship at Liverpool University, where she had a very successful academic career in education, with numerous publications. She was awarded the Médaille de Vermeil and the Officier d'Académie by the French government for her services to French culture in Britain.

After Italy declared war on the UK in June 1940 all Italian citizens, Rinvolucri included, were classed as enemy aliens. He was detained, then released two months later due to inadequate medical facilities in the camp. However, he was reinterred in March 1941 in a camp on the Isle of Man. This was because of reports of possible Fascist sympathies. In the years after his wife Anna's death he took to wearing all black clothing. He said it was because of his clerical aspirations, but others saw it as Fascist uniform. He was also known to have met other Italian ex-officers in Liverpool on occasion, and went back to Italy for army reserve training in 1935. Another source of suspicion was that he was close friends with Robert O. F. Wynne, landowner of the Garthewin estate at Llanfair Talhaearn, who was a prominent Welsh Nationalist and supporter of **Saunders Lewis** during the 'Fire in Llŷn' trials in 1936.

His wife Mina ran a spirited letter-writing campaign to convince the authorities that he was loyal and should be released, enlisting support from many prominent people, including MPs **Megan Lloyd George** and **Ivor Thomas**, as well as the Archbishop of Cardiff **Michael Joseph McGrath** and the architect Clough Williams-Ellis. He was eventually released in March 1943 on a work program for internees and was sent to work on a farm in Oxfordshire for several months before returning home to Conwy. He eventually became a UK citizen in 1951, having had his previous application for naturalization rejected in 1938.

Giuseppe and Mina's first son, Mario, was born just before he was detained, with the second son, Bernardo, following in 1947. Both were home schooled by their parents. The family lived in St Francis Grange, Glan Conwy, an art deco house designed and built by Rinvolucri himself in 1937.

He stepped back from active architectural work after his string of 1930s churches; in the 1939 *Register* he describes his occupation as 'Engineer retired and market gardener'. He had a smallholding of around two acres, on which he grew daffodils and strawberries for the hotels in Llandudno, and he kept hens and goats. He also taught classes in Italian and led language and culture trips to Italy. A Giuseppe Rinvolucri Prize, awarded to the best student in the beginners Italian course, was established in his memory at the University of Liverpool by his wife.

Giuseppe Rinvolucri died of a heart attack at St Francis Grange on 22 March 1962. He is buried in St Agnes Cemetery, Conwy, along with his wife Mina.

Author

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Sources

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Further reading

'Giuseppe Rinvolucri (1894-1963)', Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig / Dictionary of Welsh Biography, People's Collection Wales

Wikipedia Article: Giuseppe Rinvolucri

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