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Ex-Paparazzo
in Biafra

This week's lead story on the civil war in Biafra is largely the work of an Italian named Romano Cagnoni who began his career as a roving beach photographer near his native town of Pietrasanta. He went to London in 1957, briefly tried his hand at taking wedding pictures and at 22, to earn money for a better camera, became what he calls a "scoop" photographer. In Italy, they call them *paparazzi*.

One of Cagnoni's early successes was a picture of Elizabeth Taylor, who, with her husband Eddie Fisher, was then hiding from photographers in the Dorchester Hotel. He painted his hands black "so they would not be easily seen through a window against the night outside," lowered himself by a rope to Miss Taylor's terrace and took pictures of her dining with Fisher and the detectives she had hired to protect her. Later he crawled through a sewer to photograph Sir Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles in a closed rehearsal, and he once disguised himself as a Mexican musician and photographed Princess Margaret dancing at the Savoy.

"I didn't like all that hiding in bushes with long lenses," he says. "I found this sort of thing very artificial. It made me money to buy equipment, but it did not satisfy my curiosity about the world. At the same time I was taking other pictures that I knew would not sell. Pictures of people in human situations." About six years ago he went to work for *Report* agency run by Simon Guttman. "He talked to me in an intelligent way. I thought I could learn a great deal from him. He had close relations with Cartier-Bresson and all the photographers I always admired." For *Report* he went to North Vietnam, where he shot a LIFE cover picture of Ho Chi Minh and his prime minister. "It was very difficult," said Romano. "Ho Chi Minh did not want the pictures taken. I kept saying they would help him. Finally he said to me, 'Optimists make good revolutionaries. You are such an optimist you would make a good revolutionary.'"

For the Biafra story, he went first to Lisbon where he sat 20 days before getting permission to get on one of the nightly flights to the rebel African territory. Finally he was flown in—with a whole planeload of journalists. When the other journalists flew out after a guided tour, Romano talked officials into letting him stay. "I found the Information Ministry completely disorganized," he says. "I had to organize my own links for information, to find out where the bombing was going on." He was forced to take cover more than once, and one time shrapnel from an exploding mortar shell struck his knee. Luckily it was not serious. "I repaired myself with my own first-aid kit which I carried with me. I did not want to depend on their hospitals."

Thinking of his *paparazzo* past, Cagnoni says, "I did not want to be a sensational photographer. Some pictures in Biafra I could not even make myself take. There was a man whose daughter was killed. He carried her to me and said, 'Here, take this picture.' I couldn't photograph her. It hurt too much."



ROMANO CAGNONI

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Starving Children of Biafra War

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