

Maria Usai Post of her Father
Amedeo Usai's IMI Memoirs
GERMANY, 1943-1945

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(Further research undertaken includes links to such material.)

¹ Translation assisted by 'Google Translate'.

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Foreword

In this section² you can find the pages of a book written by my father to tell the vicissitudes of his imprisonment in Germany during the Second World War.

I apologize if, due to technical difficulties, I was unable to publish the photographs.

This is a work that, beyond its literary value, I invite everyone, young and old, to read for the historical and human testimony it offers.

Both me and my father would be very pleased to receive comments about it. Anyone interested in doing so, can direct them to my inbox.

Prologue : Kosovo, 1942-1943

It all started, as I will have to say, in February 42. I was a twenty-year-old boy, just enrolled in the *RG di Finanza*, with the aspiration to a safe place that would allow me to honestly earn my life and escape the misery that gripped Selegas and the other villages of Sardinia and beyond.

Kosovo was and is a harsh, mountainous region, where communications were difficult and the winters freezing and interminable. The population, then rather poor, was mostly of Albanian ethnicity and Islamic religion, very tied to traditions: women, for example, lived retired and wore headscarves.

But let's get to my story. In February 42 I had just left the school for financial students and was immediately sent, with a thousand companions, to the mobilization center of Bari, where we were detained for a couple of months and summarily trained and equipped. The Fifteenth and the Sixteenth Battalion Mobilized Regia Guardia di Finanza were formed. The first, of which I was a part, was sent to the Balkans, the other to the Greek islands. It was summer 1942.

We landed in Durres and some of us were almost immediately sent for a round-up in the Kavaje area, right where, during the civil war, our army's reception camp was located. In July they loaded us onto some vehicles and we traveled the Durres Shkoder Prizen Kukes route. The state of the roads was disastrous, but I also remember some Italian companies involved in renovating them. In Kukes, two unpleasant episodes: a fellow soldier loses the musket and I (we were not lacking in hunger) indigestion of walnuts.

From Kukes to Pec, always by truck: I basically went through all the places mentioned in the war chronicles.

The Battalion Command was based in Pec. Some of my companions and I were posted to an inland village on the border between Kosovo and Montenegro. Kosovo had been annexed by Albania to Mussolini (Italian protectorate) and our task was to guard the border. We spent

² Relates to website <http://lallastories.xoom.it/>

winter 42-43 there, so long and freezing to force us to accumulate supplies because, from October to April, the snow isolated our village making any movement almost impossible.

In early 43 they gave us the task of escorting a tax collector from Tirana. We ate and spent the night with civilians. The Kosovars, with us, have always shown themselves to be hospitable and well disposed, despite poverty and isolation. But the village of Melai was connected to the rest of the world only by bridleways and there was no radio or telephone.

The danger of attacks by the Titoists convinced the Command to move to Cerkwina, a place on the Serbian-Kosovar border, crossed by the truck, served by telephone and not far from Tutin, the headquarters of our Command. In the area, the population was mainly Albanian, but there was a substantial Serbian minority, however there was no serious friction between the two ethnic groups. The Serbian side of the border was guarded by the Germans, our allies until the fateful September 8th.

The armistice precipitated us into chaos, nobody knew what to do, not even the officers of the Command. The brigadier who commanded our department was worried because he would have to take military equipment to safety with the demobilization and, having no means available, we had to contact some capiclan to provide us with horses and carts. It was the evening of September 9th. On leaving the village, the German customs officers greeted us with the usual cordiality.

We then suffered an attack by Titoist partisans who wanted to rob us and we were forced to go back. It was then that the Germans, to our amazement, disarmed us and captured us: thus the ordeal of imprisonment began for us.

The Kosovo of my time was poor, but the ethnic tensions were not, or at least did not seem so serious; relations with us, despite our uncomfortable role as invaders, were marked by hospitality and cordiality.

1 September 8, 7.30 pm, 1943 Cerkwina (Kosovo)

From the Company Command of Tutin a phonogram is sent to inform us that Italy has asked the Anglo Americans for an armistice, all of us happy and enthusiastic about the good news, soon all at home. An hour later the proclamation of Badoglio came, "The war continues", it is not clear against whom, to increase vigilance and stay alert. The night passed quietly.

On day 9, as previously established, my colleague Walter Verde was ordered to go to Tutin, a town about fifteen kilometers away, where the Company Command was based, to bring and collect the correspondence on departure and arrival.

It starts early in the morning and around ten we are on the spot and upon arrival we found a big mess, practically they had given the save who can. My colleague and I introduce ourselves to the Command and precisely to Captain Avanzi, asking him what we had to do, stay or return to our department. He advised us to return. In those hours, the military of the Presidium, four or five hundred people, were raiding the warehouses of the supplies of food and clothing, so as not to leave them in the hands of the Germans or the Partisans. My partner and I decided to return to our department by listening to the Captain. We ate a bite and set off on the return journey, with a little fear in the midst of woods teeming with partisans who might be interested in our personal weapons (two muskets 91 and three or four ammunition magazines),

This location is located in the north-eastern part of Kosovo and precisely on the border with Serbia, an area garrisoned by German soldiers who until then had proved to be good neighbors.

Returning to our department, we found that there too we were preparing for a retreat.

The military garrison of the aforementioned locality consisted, on the Italian side, of a dozen Financiers belonging to the 15th RGF Mobilized Battalion, based in Pec, five or six Carabinieri and, on the German side, a dozen between Gendarmes and Customs Officers, with checkpoints and inverted border bars, that is, in the Italian area that of the Germans, and vice versa, Italians in the German area.

For the evacuation of the garrison, Tutin's military command had arranged for the return of all departments located in the district, to organize and then continue, always on foot, to a port in Dalmatia or Albania for the possible return to the homeland .

The higher orders were: to abandon everything except weapons, ammunition and dry food to face the long march; but the brigadier who commanded us had a pile of material, skis, winter equipment and many things, several of them bulky, and being afraid that in the end they would ask him for an account, he decided to take everything with him. Having no own means, that is, vehicles of any kind, he asked the local inhabitants for their collaboration, which consisted in supplying pack animals and some cart pulled by oxen: this happened easily because we were in good relations with the population and with the village chief.

On September 9, upon returning from the mission entrusted to us, around thirteen the colleagues and the Commander had already prepared everything for the withdrawal, about twenty mules and horses with a pack, three or four ox carts with their owners to bring back their beasts at the end of the journey.

Around 16.30, after saying goodbye to almost all the inhabitants of Cerkwina, we set off along the only existing road in the area, passing by the German checkpoint, who made everyone find themselves lined up to greet us. We started slowly, also because the means did not allow otherwise, the afternoon was hot and we took off our jackets putting them on horses or carts to be more free.

After a couple of hours of travel, we entered a valley with thick woods, from here on, the civilians who accompanied us began to melt with the excuse of some physiological or other need; within minutes, there was only one person left with us and he was also trying to get away. A financier sensed what was about to happen, smoothed out the musket and asked for the "stoi" (alt), but he did not even have time to point the weapon that a shotgun blast came upon us.

We, as we were able, took shelter and waited for the dark to be able to unhook and decide what to do, thanking God for not having been injured, but only a few bruises that had been obtained by seeking shelter at the time of the ambush. However, we lost everything because the horses and oxen, seen abandoned, at the time of the shooting ran away, what the Titoists wanted to steal everything from us.

At this point, we got together and we all agreed to return to the starting point, that is Cerkwina, where the Germans were waiting for us, to whom we had shaken hands seven, eight hours before, who disarmed us and made us prisoners. And here the Via Crucis begins.

2 Traveling on Livestock Wagons

The rest of the night we spent closed in a room of the German gendarmes barracks, on the morning of day 10 wake up at six and prepare for the transfer to Novi Pazar, a town about twenty kilometers away. The march lasted all morning and we were exhibited as trophies. Once in the new location, they took us to a collection point where the new guests were already arriving, and our caretakers were those gentlemen who had the two stylized on the lapel of the jacket and the cap frieze was a human skull: the infamous SS. At the moment, however, it is not that they were well known, so their presence did not bother us much: later they became known.

The treatment we were given from the beginning was not that it was the best, eating for two zero days, for us who had been taken out of the barracks and had not been able to stock up, were problems. When they finally decided, the meals were so combined: lunch, a ladle of slop perhaps made with turnips and various vegetables, ditto dinner, bread when there was, a kind of focaccia to be divided into three or four, made with barley, all awns and straw, which we managed to swallow with so much effort and so much water.

The stay in this location lasted about ten days, the time needed to collect a thousand prisoners and make a nice load. Between highs and lows, even if sadly, the days pass, and luckily, we are fresh from captivity and almost all young people in their twenties or so, melancholy does not take us even if being watched by those ugly, armed to the teeth it was so welcome.

After a few days, there was already rumored of departure for new destinations, who spoke of Italy, especially for us Financiers, because we were not considered by the German fighting forces, who of Germany, however the treatment, from all points of view, was getting worse.

A few nights later, on the occasion of the distribution of the meal, our jailers spoke to us about the imminent departure, in fact the next morning they wake up early and prepare for the unknown journey. This, too, is not that he was looking forward to pleasure: he started with about twenty kilometers of march to cover the distance between Novi Pazar (Serbia) and Mitrovitza, (Kosovo) a place where a train consisting of fifty cattle wagons awaited us; the practice was fifty prisoners per wagon and so it was. Between accounts and various calculations he spent the day and at dusk we leave, where we do not know.

What surprised us was that they did not close the wagon doors, but on the other hand we had a good escort, also armed with machine guns. The journey is not that it looked so comfortable, also because we did not even have a square meter each of space to be able to settle in the best way. The tran tran of the train, the tiredness for the day spent standing still or walking, however always standing, causes the forces to begin to fail and sleep takes over; the problem was how to settle in that little space, but if on the one hand it was uncomfortable, on the other it served to keep us warm, being free of blankets and even personal clothing.

The journey was very precarious from all points of view: without water, without eating, no toilets, so even for the most pressing needs one had to get by, for the small "things" in some slot of the wagon, for the other leaning out with his butt out of the wagon, being held by two companions of misfortune, all this because even with the train stopped it was risky to get off.

After the first night of travel, we hardly arrived in **Belgrade**; even there the stop had lasted for about fifteen hours, without being able to get off the wagons and without eating. Late at night we leave, ignoring the next goal. During these journeys with many stops in the countryside and due to the low speed of the convoys, someone flashed the idea of escaping, especially those who came from Friuli, Trentino, Veneto and Venezia Giulia, who thought they could easily reach families. For us **Sardinians** it was an impossible thing and the idea of escape has never touched us.

The following morning, the convoy stopped in a large port, with real water and toilets and permission to go down, so we did some personal cleaning, and also the laundry, as the day was splendid. We were on the outskirts of **Budapest** and I do not know if it was an initiative of some local patronage, or of the Germans (but it seems impossible to me), the fact is that towards midday we see civilian trucks loaded with pots and sacks of bread; you can not imagine our joy, we did not believe our eyes, all this good of God after days of fasting. During this stop, some prisoners took the initiative to collect cigarettes and offer them to the drivers to speed up the journey, in order to get to Italy as soon as possible. They got several packs of cigarettes, but we never got to Italy. After a day spent a bit differently from the previous ones, in the evening, among screams, shouts and jostling we found ourselves inside the usual horrible cattle wagons, ready for departure.

Once again we travel at night, we see that the night was foreseen, we start even now with open wagons. However, on the way, they were closed and blocked from the outside, for fear that, near the Austrian border, some prisoners would run away, given their proximity to Italy. We arrived in **Vienna** in the morning, with the wagons always closed, but this time our jailers remembered the meal, at noon they arrived with a crew, perhaps they too were prisoners, of other nationalities, they opened the doors so much that it was enough to put a hand in it and reach out to us a small bowl of pressed cardboard, as big as a cup of ice cream, but raw, with a kind of soup inside with a few pieces of dirty vegetables. These containers could only be used once,

We also left **Vienna** at nightfall; that of making us travel at night and during the day keeping us stationary on these dirty translations was a form of performance and propaganda by the Germans towards their fellow citizens "We are strong, we are dominating the world".

Now the journey took place in German territory so things became more complicated, in addition to the usual mistreatment of our jailers, was added that of the citizens who spat and taunted us by telling us all the colors: "Italien scheiser", translated into Italian, shit, we were all called "Badoglio". But he put up with holy patience, hoping it would end soon.

Before arriving at the terminus, that is to the concentration camp, a couple of days went by one worse than the other, I remember a detail that shook me a lot: the train had stopped in the open countryside and the ladies guards opened the wagons telling us that we could get off , that the stop was half an hour. We worked hard to be able to attend to our urgent physiological needs and get back on the wagons; someone lingered, the train left earlier and a boy with his pants still down was about to cling to the train and ended up with one leg under the wheel. I never knew what happened to it, it had been taken away by the German gentlemen with a hand cart.

3 The Camp

The concentration camp was located almost on the border with **Holland**, in fact, to get there, we had to cross all of Germany obliquely. As we progressed, we began to see signs of war, especially bombed factories, and it was a great relief to us.

I don't remember the exact day, but it must have been at the end of September, when we arrived at the concentration camp. I don't remember the location, because we changed a couple of them, but I remember that we were among the first to reach it. The station was not very close, but it's not that they worried about it much, in fact they were happy to make us make long laps to be able to perform like trophies.

This place of punishment was located in a desolate wasteland, few plants, almost no green, flat area, you could not see a hillock, all calculated to prevent any escapes.

The size of the factory impressed us so much, kilometers and kilometers of barbed wire with interspersed turrets equipped with machine guns and photoelectric for perfect surveillance. The perimeter fence of the field at the base was about ten meters wide, a real "wall" of barbed wire seven or eight meters high, plus a supplement of various tangles for another couple of meters. From the internal part of the fence, about ten meters away, a simple barbed wire flowed suspended with posts about eighty centimeters above the ground, complete with signs with the wording "Achtung" (attention), forbidden to approach and go beyond: yes he would risk his life, because the guards fired.

The extension was in the order of hundreds of hectares, divided into several cages, each containing dozens of large shacks without fixtures, therefore without doors or windows.

Upon our arrival, we were greeted in the anti-concentration camp, a large open space in front of the entrance. First of all, they searched us, the people and that little baggage that we carried with us, took away everything, even the pencils and the sheets of paper, let's not talk about knives or cameras.

After a couple of hours, at the end of these operations, a good rally was given to us, the preacher was an Italian in a hierarchical uniform on a beautiful stage decorated with some lictorian bundle and other symbols of the regime. The topic of the sermon was to join the **Republic of Salò**, since the Duce was free again and was in Germany to provide for the formation of the government of the new republic and the creation of the army; for this purpose, he counted on us deportees, instead of rotting in concentration camps, he offered us the possibility of returning home freely. Few adhered to this proposal: some outrageous fascists, some northerners with the intention of fleeing as soon as they set foot in Italy; for us Sardinians,

Towards evening, at the end of everything, we were sent into the field, in separate but neighboring cages: one for us, the other for those who had accepted what had been proposed to him. This had a very specific reason: we had to see the best treatment reserved

for these people, with the hope, for the Germans, that we, seeing these things, could change our mind.

4 Krieg Gefangenen

The accommodation in the new home was very precarious. Meanwhile the two meals of the day had been skipped and we were still fasting; not to mention the night that awaited us, in those latitudes it was already cold in early October, especially at night, the barracks were vast, without doors or windows, the floor of beaten earth, or rather, of better sand, loose sand; we had to rest there with nothing to shelter.

Near the barracks there were stacks of tables already used; we immediately thought that they could be useful to sleep on, taken and arranged like a floor, so at least we were not on the sand, but the guardian gentlemen first let us do everything, then, when everything was ready, they came pissed, telling us that we had to remove them, because they were infected, since there were petechial typhoid deaths of the Russian prisoners up there, so we had to remove all the tables and rearrange them as they were, and then sleep on the ground in the sand.

To keep us a little warm, we slept with all our rags on and stuck one to the other: when you had to change your position, you had to do it all at the same time.

Now the time had come to officially become prisoners; they made us pass one by one before a commission made up of German officers and some SS; first, they took the photo with the prisoner number, the plaque that has accompanied us for almost two years, secondly they stamped us with the paint on the legs of the pants, on the back of the jacket and on the headgear the initials KG (Krieg Gefangenen, prisoners of war). Then they made us a third degree interrogation, place and date of birth, place and department of origin, studies, religion, political ideas, profession or profession. We, for a more than plausible reason, declared that we were almost all farmers or peasants, with the hope that, taking this into consideration, we would start working in the countryside, far from the bombings of cities and industries, in places where it would not have been even difficult to gather something more to eat. But all this did not come true because none of us were sent to work in the countryside.

In the camp we stayed for ten days, to attend to all these things. In the meantime, thousands of new guests arrived every day, the lager was filling up, and the owners were already thinking of pouring this human tide (of interned Italians we were almost seven hundred thousand) in the smaller Arbeit Lager (labor camps).

As usual, the organization of the distribution of meals left a lot to be desired and more than once everything was missed, including the distribution of bread.

Another thing we discovered in that enclosure was that in some hidden and out-of-the-way corner the ground was more loose than normal, which made us suspicious; without being seen by the masters, we dug a little and it was discovered that underneath there were rotting corpses: immediately we connected everything to the history of the infected tables.

5 A Difficult Life

I believe it was around 10 October; in the early afternoon five or six Janissaries arrived, new faces, and even the uniforms were a little different. Almost all of them had scars on their hands and face from wounds on their forehead. They had a list with them and started calling a series of names, about two hundred. I was among these too. We had to leave.

They gave us an hour of time to prepare ourselves, gathered those four rags, greeted our friends and here we are ready. The journey was about two hundred kilometers, the means of travel a farm tractor with two or three trailers. We all went up, but we made the journey on our feet because there was not enough space. We arrived at our destination at two in the morning and at six in the morning we had to start working.

The new home was a sugar factory in production, there was no latticework around, but in return it was housed inside the factory. At six in the morning, ready to start the new activity, some Ukrainian workers (ex USSR) were also deported. With a bit of difficulty on our part, but with the guidance of the stubborn German, even if slowly, willingly or unwillingly, we have become good sugar workers. I had an almost privileged place, I was in charge of unloading the beets, which were transported with horse-drawn carts, because trucks and tractors used another place. My job was to press a few buttons to open and close the hatches, the time was twelve hours, from six to eighteen with a short break at noon.

I, unloading carts, was almost fine also because the conductors were almost all "colleagues", that is, Polish, French, Belgian and many other prisoners, who were surprised to see an Italian prisoner like them, given that up to a month before we were allied with the Germans. These carters had years of imprisonment behind them and had settled in; moreover, working and living in the countryside the suffering was less, you could see from their appearance, the complexion was beautiful and they were also in flesh. I, on the other hand, was very battered, and they competed to give me a few slices of bread, potatoes, fruit, especially apples; I roasted the potatoes in charcoal. The boilers were brown coal, which was abundant in Germany. These heaps ignited by self-ignition, and for us it was a godsend because we made ourselves roasted potatoes and cooked some beets without the Germans being aware of it, since it was forbidden. The food they passed was not that it was excellent and abundant, on the contrary, it was little and stinking, so we had to supplement it with something extra to be able to stand; when there was nothing else, an attempt was made to gather a few bags of dried beet pulp for zootechnical use.

The accommodations, that is, the dormitories, because there was nothing else, had been obtained from an old building that was located inside the factory: practically everything, home and work. They weren't shacks, but we didn't miss much. The beds were, as usual, bunk beds of three or four floors, read as a way of saying because it was a kind of shelving that one could barely enter, with a sack of straw that knows who knows how many had slept before, the outline of some animal, and a cover that half covered you. We slept with all the rags we had on us.

I also want to tell how the bread was distributed: they gave us a kind of brick, they said it was wholemeal, but I think it was wholemeal as well; this loaf weighed about a kilo and was to be divided into three. To ensure that this happened perfectly, not having a balance, we devised a system and this was this: bread was measured with a piece of string along its length. The twine was folded in three, the result was placed on the bread and three parts were cut. It's not over, because one of the interested people turned around, took every piece and asked him "Who is this from?", He had to answer by Tizio; then he took the other and this was from Caius and what remained was his. One moment though: the ration was for two days, one hundred and sixty grams of bread a day and the ceremony took place every forty-eight hours. With the hunger we had, we ate everything at once and then waited for the next distribution

6 Dessau

The sugar campaign was coming to an end, it was also seen by the thinning of the carts, and it began to be presumed that there would be another transfer for us. Work had been done for a few more days on cleaning and rearranging the sugar factory and then leaving.

This time we knew in advance the new destination: it was a large war industry, with headquarters and factory in Dessau, a city of about two hundred thousand inhabitants, located along the course of the Elbe, not far from Berlin.

The transfer trip this time was done with some ramshackle buses, if we want, but always buses were, sitting comfortably and not standing and crowded like the other times. We were very concerned about the designation of the new headquarters, since the Anglo-Americans were intensifying the air raids and some bombs were starting to fall there too; of these our worries, the German gentlemen were banging on it or rather they were saying "They are bombs of your friends".

As the destination approached, we noticed a large agglomeration of industries of all kinds, chemical, aeronautical, metallurgical and many other types. Our homes, that is, the fields where you had to reside, were there in the middle.

Arriving at our destination, we noticed that the lager was quite contained, yes and no we would have been a thousand people, and his name was M.Stammlager XI A. Ital. Mi. Arbts.Kdo. 170/37 Dessau Alten Deutschland. There were no cages, it consisted of about twenty shacks divided into rooms where about twenty beds were placed, always with the usual system one on top of the other. In the middle there was a table with benches around it and a stove. An enameled iron jug with a capacity of five or six liters, always full, was at the center of the table: the icy water it contained was used to wake up those who lingered in bed. The toilets, that is, the toilets, were out: it was a pit a couple of meters deep, about twenty long and about eighty centimeters wide, with tables so as not to fall into it: the most appropriate name for this place was latrine. For personal cleaning, there was a special barrel with taps.

With the arrival in the new headquarters, our legal status had also changed, that is, from Krieg Gefangenen (prisoners of war) we had become IMI (Italian soldiers interned) and for this they had to replace the acronyms that we had in the legs of the breeches and on the back, ie KG with IMI, evidently the international authorities concerned did not recognize us as prisoners of war, since we had not been captured in combat and that we had been allies of the Germans until the day before.

The new guardians were no longer the SS, but as for malice perhaps they beat them; they came from the Wermacht, that is, from the army, they were all disabled and mutilated of war who, for obvious reasons, could no longer fight. You can see that the bales were full of them and they let off steam with us. When they commanded us for something, their words were always "Rauss, rauss, schnell, schnell", translated hurry up, hurry up, quick, quick and, since they had the bayonet hanging on their belts, they added words to the back to spur us on.

The new job, even though it was in one of Germany's largest aviation industries, Junkers, was unskilled. Fifty other prisoners and I had been hired by a company that managed the building maintenance of the factory: with the bombs falling, there was no shortage of work. The rubble of the bombed houses began to abound and the cold, or rather the frost, made itself felt, because it was in mid-December. Not being able to do other jobs, they had come up with the mortar, which was crumbly and easy to remove, to have us cleaned of the bricks full of the characteristic houses of the place that had collapsed under the bombing. They had provided us with stakes and empty petrol cans to be used as braziers, stuff to burn was found on the spot in the middle of those dilapidated houses; bonfires were lit, we sat around there in five or six and the bricks were cleaned. The gang represented almost all the regions of Italy and the various weapons of the army, the age was for a good fifty percent of twenty, twenty-two years, the rest divided into various ages, with someone who was well over fifty. In other circumstances and with a full stomach, the speeches of such a large group of men would have concerned women. Instead we just talked about stuff to eat. "Tonight I dreamed of a pasta, steaks and a nice flask of wine"; with the hunger that one had, one could not speak of anything else. Speaking of cold, when the temperature started to drop several degrees below zero, our equipment was the same as in July. I had obtained a coat that had previously belonged to a deceased French soldier. The lack of T-shirts, socks and other woolen clothes made up for with empty cement bags and wrapping paper. The shoes we had at the time of the capture were now worn out and the Germans provided us with Dutch clogs, all in wood; until you made your hand (or rather your foot) you could not walk and if you had to run, which between alarms and bombing often happened, you had to take them out, take them in your hand and run barefoot, because it was not that we had socks to protect the feet but, when it was fine, cement and paper bags.

A very big problem for the prisoner was illness. As long as you were healthy, even if you died of hunger, you dealt with everything, but as soon as you accused some disturbance you collapsed, because there was no one who took care of you, then the food that made you sick sucked from sick became repugnant, what that I have tried in person. At the end of 1943 I felt bad, because of the great cold and because I was poorly dressed: I got a bad flu with a high fever, but the German gentlemen did not worry that much, they made you go to work even in that state. It saved me a boil of boils that had come out on my legs, perhaps because of the dried beetroot pulp I had eaten a few months earlier. I had to rest. The repulsive eating I managed to ingest thanks to several cloves of garlic that I minced in it, stuff that was given to me by my companions with some boiled potatoes. As for the treatments that the field doctors gave me, the ointment was grease that was used to lubricate machinery and toilet paper bandages. However, in about ten days I was back in shape by way of speech and able to get back to work.

I want to tell another fact, I don't know if analogues have happened elsewhere. It must have been mid-January, in the middle of winter, with temperatures below zero; one evening, the guards arrive around 8 pm and give, for each dormitory, a fairly large sack and a bucket of about ten liters. As I have already said, the barracks were divided into compartments with about twenty beds; we had to undress the clothes upstairs to put them in the only sack they would take away, we stayed in our underwear (who had them) and the bucket had to be used

to make us any needs during the night, because the doors of the barracks were locked . This situation went on for about a month. In the morning, at the time of the alarm, they threw the sack and everyone had to recover his rags, get dressed quickly and go to work. The rumor had spread that the Germans were afraid of the twenty million and passing prisoners, deportees and interned of all the races they had at home, while the valid Germans were all at the front or presiding over the occupied territories; they feared that we could rebel and create problems for them. But of all this there was no hint, the "radio shoe" of the lager had never mentioned it, it was stuff that whipped in the heads of the German gentlemen to make us feel that humiliation too.

Another nice scene was when, as often as they remembered, they made us take showers. They had to lead us to another camp, because ours did not have one. The workers in this sort of collective wash were Ukrainian women, who were also deported; we were skin and bones, they made us undress all together in a room in front and therefore these girls provided to accompany us even under the showers, it was a kind of brothel, a show to which the German gentlemen did not fail to assist, grinning and for us a strong humiliation.

Another agony, especially at the beginning was this: the field was located a few hundred meters from the test bench of the aircraft engines. I want to clarify that Junkers was one of the most important aeronautical industries in Germany, so there were dozens of engines permanently on day and night, on pylons a few meters above the ground, outdoors, without any shielding and you cannot imagine the din. They had headphones, we were becoming deaf, and luckily the Americans thought with their bombs to throw everything in the air.

7 The Junkers

Speaking of Junkers, it was a huge factory with an attached airfield. At that time, in addition to building planes of all kinds, they also manufactured the famous V1 and V2, that is, the flying bombs that were launched against Great Britain and that made Churchill desperate; these weapons were the first cousins of the current missiles.

The works were carried out, except for the technicians, by prisoners, deportees and interns of the most varied origins. The Germans were not kidding and made us work even with an empty stomach. Everything went smoothly until spring 44, then the Anglo-Americans thought about reducing production. Before that time the factory was intact. The Germans, foreseeing these attacks, began to transfer war production to less accessible places, firstly away from the cities, possibly in the woods, so the work for my team was not lacking: you had to move structures and machinery, you were always in I ride with trucks between Dessau, Leipzig, Magdeburg and Berlin, commuting from one city to another.

8 Everyday Life

Now I want to tell the typical day of a prisoner with normal work shifts: wake up at six, which was made by a German soldier with a whistle and accompanied by the words, or rather by the screams "Aufwecken, aufwecken, café holen", wake up, wake up, take the coffee. Two prisoners went to the military and went to the kitchen to pick up the exquisite drink which consisted of a half-bin of petrol, the same one that used to make soup, full of water, however dirty, indeed black, I don't know what they put in it, of coffee-coffee not even the shadow. The bin was placed near the gate where the distribution took place, we lined up with the usual jar that worked for the slop and poured half a ladle of that infusion into it; when we had it, we added a little piece of margarine,

Around seven o'clock they accompanied us to work. If the group was large, our own caretakers provided, if we were under fifty, someone from the firm would pick us up and, in the evening, take us back to the camp. Our group was of this magnitude and a seventy year old man came to pick us up, all barred, with ear covers, a kind of cap to protect his head from the cold and a cap with a rigid military visor, maybe he was a nostalgic. A group of Venetians from the same team had nicknamed him "Cerron" and every now and then they sent him to that country in Veneto and he always asking "Was?" (thing?).

At eight the work started, sometimes they were jobs suited to our forces, but they were usually hard, like picking up frozen earth (to do this we put a bin like a brazier with a nice fire, so there were two advantages, we warmed up ourselves and the frozen earth melted and we could work. Other times it was a question of making two or three flights of stairs uphill with a load of solid bricks all day: the cranes were not there, but the prisoners were.

At midday, half an hour to stop for lunch. I say drink, because to send down that usual slop that was delivered to us from our camp, neither spoon nor teeth were needed. In the evening it was stopped at eighteen, it took an hour to return, just in time for another slop and, if it was a day of bread, for those three hundred thirty grams every two days. At eight, all to bed on those beautiful permaflex mattresses.

It must have been **mid-February 1944**, it was a day of celebration, when the Lagerführer (head of field) came in person, who believed he was carrying out a great humanitarian act by delivering a postcard, even the return one, and a copying pencil (to be returned immediately) **to let our family know that we were welcome guests of Greater Germany**. It seems to me that my parents had received it almost a year later and that's fine too, they were in Sardinia. I have never received an answer.

Since there are, I want to continue with these little harassments. For personal cleaning, instead of soap, they occasionally had a person, usually a prisoner dragging a sack of about fifty kilos, distribute a couple of hectops of Solvay soda which was to be used for the face, teeth, feet and the rest, plus the laundry, you can imagine that cleaning, and they had the brazenness to make us bodily visits maybe on the coldest days and in the open air, making us completely undress and often finding the pretext for a nice washout with cold water.

Another little thing that I want to tell may seem trivial but it is not: in every location where several thousand interned and deported prisoners of all races resided, there was a special prison, called the "fifth column". Those who entered that "prison in prison" hardly came out alive; to get there was not enough, a hint of rebellion, a gesture of annoyance towards the guardians, and you received a sentence between your head and neck that could have been a month, two or three, and it was an indescribable thing, what you suffered in normal multiplied five, ten times. In our team, we happened to end up with a boy, also a Sardinian and a financier, who in a moment of despair had rebelled and taken the measure, a month of fifth column.

I want to continue with these stories, to interpret them far from trivial. My and my companions' work was often done in civilian camps. In those large industries, emigrants and Germans themselves worked before the war, who, as there was no possibility of commuting and also because of the problems caused by the war, resided at the factories, in camps that certainly did not resemble ours, all well equipped, with kitchen, canteen, bedrooms with a maximum of two places, in some cases even the swimming pool. We had the task of carrying out maintenance and, when we happened in those places, if we had time, we went around the kitchens to rummage in the waste bins in search of something to eat or potato skins, even the highly sought after ones : wash well and then boil, if there was a little salt, they became an excellent dish. But the story is different. At the hour of the evening meal of those gentlemen, we wandered near the canteen with the hope that someone would give us something. I noticed one, I think was Belgian, coming out of the canteen itself with a plate containing first, second and side dishes all mixed. Believing it was destined for the bin, I rushed and took it out of his hand making him remain stunned: the poor man did not say a word but turned on his heels and entered the canteen again, with the hope of remedying another portion, I do not know with what results , because I set out to eat that delicious meal: I want to clarify that we all always traveled with the spoon in our pocket and the jar hanging on the belt. In the evening we returned from work around seven. Before entering the camp, ours is understood, there were all the guardians available to search us and if they found something they were in trouble, what could we take with us if not some potatoes if we could get it. For each potato they found on us it was a punch (ein kartoffel ein box) and they then threw them into the latrines telling us if we wanted to go and get them from there. How bad these people were with us.

Strolling hungry through the camps of these free civilians, sometimes good people, especially women, also happened, who pitied us as we were reduced and tried to help us as they could, perhaps by giving us bread or something else, but in secret, because they saw there was trouble for them too.

Another problem that I never asked myself because I never smoked was cigarettes. Those who had this vice gave everything, even that miserable piece of bread, just to have them. Sometimes you could see scenes worthy of Totò. Walking in packs on the street, that is framed, these guys were always with their eyes on the ground, in the hope of noticing a tiny butt, I say tiny because even the hosts don't abound; when they found it, five or six rushed to be able to take it and the guards to lead with the butt of the rifle: someone came out pesto.

Many, unable to do without that damned smoke, were arranging themselves with dried potato leaves and that smell plagued everything.

Another fact that aroused much emotion in us was the death by starvation of a group of Bergamo. Maybe they were part of some alpine department. When we met them, at the beginning of captivity, they were the portrait of the health, of the giants, I think they touched the ton, with a pink color. The Italian Army, to those chosen troops, even gave a supplement of food, even the ranks were twice the normal. But after a couple of months of hardship, they emptied and wasted and in a short time they left, while we "normal" arrived dry, there we finished drying up but we resisted. They, poor people, did not make it.

9 War Over ... All Dead

Time passed slowly and five or six months, even if badly, had already passed. The war was waking up (not that before it was good) especially on German soil. The area where we were destined, when we arrived, was still intact and we expected the air alarm to do nothing; if the day was beautiful, we would put ourselves in the sun, a little secluded, and we would count the British and American planes that passed over us to Berlin, Leipzig, Magdeburg or Hanover and we were talking to each other, better that they destroy everything so it ends before. But if the Germans heard us, they would get pissed and they could give us some kick, at least.

If the war was turned off, even hunger is not a joke: the circle was tightening, the bombs were falling everywhere destroying stocks and ways of communication and creating problems even for highly organized Germany. We, seeing the effect that the first bombs made when they fell around us, made us pass the desire to watch the planes flying over us and come to run away, possibly in the countryside. After the first raids with bombings, they took us to the shelters that we ourselves had built inside the factories. More than real shelters, they were trenches with railway track sleepers above them, therefore unreliable, while for them there were reinforced concrete bunkers, also they had the opportunity to leave the factory and run outdoors, towards the countryside. Follow our grievances, which evidently were acknowledged by some kind-hearted person, they also allowed us to leave the factory fence, with the commitment to return there half an hour after the alarm ceased and to introduce ourselves to the team leader; in case of non-observance of these rules, serious measures would have been taken.

As for anti-aircraft defense, our masters were well organized. Not yet having the radar, in order to perceive the noise of the planes in the distance, there were some positions with large "ears", that is, a kind of funnel of two meters in diameter, with an operator who swirled them in all directions. They were also able to cause artificial fog to cover entire cities and had an extremely efficient anti-aircraft and an air barrier system with braked balloons. Despite everything, the Americans destroyed it completely.

It was late spring, but for us prisoners nothing changed, the Germans, with their stubbornness, always believed in the final victory, because the Führer had told him. Seeing what the situation looked like, we picked them and they didn't react as badly as usual and they seemed to have softened.

We were always waiting for everything to end soon, but unfortunately another year had to pass. Our jailers were always very hard on us, they treated us badly as usual, I think it never occurred to him that sooner or later they would take our place, that is, from jailers to prisoners.

Along one side of our camp, a road that led to the countryside ran for three or four hundred meters, where on beautiful days the mothers took the children for a walk and, at the same time, to see the fence with the slaves inside. We were three, four meters away from them,

eight, ten year old boys, elementary school stuff and what they told us ... Badoglio, scheiser, we were all called Badoglio and, in addition, it was all shit; in addition we were told "Fertig Krieg, alles kaputt", after the war, all dead. This surely felt it by adults or at school, because that was their theory.

For us Sardinians, who didn't even have the consolation of having news about the family, not even the postcard returning from prisoner had yet arrived to me, it was terrible, I think it was the same for the other southerners in general, they had other things to think about. Those of the north, in addition to correspondence, even received a few parcels from family members: south and islands, even in that circumstance, always last, just to change. I was exactly two years with no news of my parents, I think they too, or not, perhaps they had known that I was alive thanks to that famous postcard that they had given us after a few months of captivity.

There was no knowledge of how the war was going and the situation on the various fronts was understood only by looking around, they did not make us listen to the radio, if we could exchange some opinions on this with someone we had the impression that they too they were so informed or that the information was tame, they said that Hitler, in a speech, had reassured the population by saying that the war could be won five minutes after losing it, the program had "secret weapons", perhaps atomic bombs : We thank God that they didn't get to use them.

10 The Bombs Fall

IMI Camps <https://alboimicaduti.it/index.php/page/1/chi-siamo#>

Interactive Map has photo of XIA, photo : <https://alboimicaduti.it/index.php/maps/show>

The Anglo-Americans seemed willing to close the game quickly and, as the days passed, intensified their aerial actions, simultaneously targeting centers such as Berlin, Leipzig, Hanover, Magdeburg and Dessau, which were subjected to heavy bombing. The bombs fell everywhere and, as they were less "intelligent" than they are now, civilians were the ones paying the price, many died; however they did not give up, they were under the smoking rubble and, as they managed to get their heads out, it was as if nothing had happened, they were already praising their Fuhrer and we thought that with those turnip heads the war would never end.

If this happened at night (as often happened), our boss, "Cerron", was at the gate at seven in the morning to pick us up because we had to be punctual at work; we along the way saw what had happened during the night and commented. He, hard, without any emotion, said only Luss, Luss, walking quickly, because he thought we were late and we could lose a few minutes of work.

For us, in spite of everything that happened around us, nothing had changed, but they too did not show that they were very worried. Okay, there were few Germans and the people we met had no interest in things changing, since they were all foreigners and with a great desire to go home. Of these Germans, there were only the leaders in these industries, but with their stubbornness and with all the slaves they had available, they were able to put the bombed departments back into production in a few days, so the war efficiency was always assured.

In addition to the bombs, which were seen and heard, we began to suspect that something else was happening, because, even if we were kept in the dark about everything, it was seen that people were pouring in from the east, the Russians were pushing and, if they had not yet reached Germanic soil, in Poland they certainly were. We also contacted prisoners from those areas and confirmed that the Germans were giving way. To the west, the Anglo-Americans were preparing something for the landing in France, in fact, around May, June they created the bridgehead in order to open a new front in order to finally reduce Germany and its Fuhrer to reason. Along those coasts, the Germans had prepared large fortifications, because they waited for these moves by the Allies and had managed to give them a lot of trouble, holding on for several days, until the Anglo-Americans, thanks to a huge deployment of men and means and the skill of their great general Eisenhower managed to break through. Of course, we learned about this eight or nine months later when the Americans freed us.

With all that they were undergoing, between bombing and encircling a large mass of men and means, Russians in the east, Americans in the west, the Germans had managed to resist and get them to Berlin almost a year later, in April 45.

Speaking of airborne alarms, I want to tell a detail that did not escape us prisoners: **our camp was located on the outskirts of Dessau**. South of the camp itself, on a small hill, there was a small **village called Musikau**, which had a very special alarm siren: instead of being like all the others, that is, a fan that turned, this was a real "horn" which was operated by compressed air and emitted a sound so lugubrious as to inspire fear more than the others, also because, when it sounded, the carpet bombing was assured and we gave it a voice, today we must escape as far as possible.

Another thing that had intrigued us and which was often made of irony was this: in front of the entrance to the airfield there were three flagpoles on each of which, instead of a flag, a fairly large balloon was tied . All these balloons were of different colors and were used to keep the staff who worked there constantly informed of the alarms without having to sound the sirens. A balloon on a certain color meant that no part of the territory was flown by enemy planes, two meant pre-alarm, enemy planes entered German airspace, three balloons on top of the flagpoles were a sign that the planes were in the vicinity of that zone, then alarm. The irony was that we asked ourselves: how are the Germans' bales today? Up or down?

11 Finally Free. Or Not?

On the occasion of the visit Mussolini made to Hitler to congratulate him on having escaped the attack in July 1944, something in our situation changed. But let's go in order: some of the Fuhrer's closest collaborators, senior officers and politicians who no longer approved of everything the dictator was up to, had placed under a table around which he sat and the highest personalities of the regime, intent to discuss the war (which was not so good for them) a bag full of explosives. There were several deaths, but Hitler got away with a few scratches. Those responsible, of course, were taken and executed.

The circumstance also led the two allies to discuss us IMI (Italian interned military) arriving, by mutual agreement to the determination to free us.

We were led to believe that the magnanimity of our "leaders" was great. But we and others had taken little to understand, and it was also true, that Hitler needed soldiers, even if half disabled, given the situation that was presenting, therefore, removing those ten or fifteen thousand men used for our surveillance, he would could send them to fight. To savor this new condition of ours, we had to wait until mid-September.

12 The Taste of "Freedom"

With our new situation, it wasn't that it was all roses, yes, they had taken away the strict vigilance that made us slaves. We were freer, we moved more autonomously even during the deadly aerial bombings, but otherwise we were almost as before, the camp was the same, shack, bed, toilets, indeed latrines were the same, our clothing and the look was homeless. Before you left the camp just to go to work, now you could move everywhere during your free time, but in those conditions, who dared to do it?

Now I want to tell about the ceremony that our Lager Fuhrer (head of field) had done. On a day of non-work, he had gathered us all in the square of the camp he had presented himself with his head shaved shinier than usual, the uniform well-ordered and all the rest of his Janissaries. I would like to point out that he was a Wermacht non-commissioned officer, a marshal without Von.

He communicated the good news of the "liberation" with a speech and, still praising the two Gran Capi, Hitler and Mussolini, he told us that we had to be grateful also with the thought for that humanitarian act that they were about to perform towards us. He officially informed us that on September 15th we would have been free and that he was so sorry to have to leave us (not us). To test his reactions, we asked him "Fertig Krieg? (ended the war?) ". He, very annoyed, replied "Nein, nein", no, no, in fact he was right, it still took seven, eight good months to see the end of it.

The new head of the camp was not a soldier, but he was also a bijou, a carrion, this too was always between the feet, if he saw something he didn't like, he railed and shouted worse than the marshal; if then he found someone who was cooking a few cans of potato skins (the food situation was as before if not worse), he began to shout the word "scheiser" (shit), a word widely used in their dialectic and at the end gave a kick in the jar, he threw everything away and that unfortunate man remained without potato skins.

From 15 September 1944 we are without guards, a new life begins, hopefully better. First, we took off those bad acronyms that we had stamped on the trousers and on the back of the shirts and eliminated a plate that we had in the neck, in aluminum, with engraved our personal details and the serial number of prisoners. This was a nice memorabilia, I would have liked to keep it, but they forced us to return it.

In order to be able to move freely, they first gave us a pass with photos and general information, which had to be shown at every request from the police or other authorities and was used to access the jobs, so we had to always carry it with us. The benefits deriving from the new status were that we were free to move where and when we wanted, to go to work we no longer had an escort, the pass was shown at the concierge and the guards said "bitte", (please); no tag was stamped and they gave us some marks that we could spend on a glass of beer. There was no other because it was all contingent and we weren't given the card. The food, with that little piece of bread, kept passing through the camp canteen but with more human systems, the half-bin of petrol, the can and the row in the open had been eliminated,

13 Still Bombs

Freedom regained has certainly served to save the lives of several thousand prisoners. Before, at night you were forced to remain locked up in those enclosures whatever happened, including bombing. Now, always at night because we were at work during the day, as soon as the light was out we gave voice and off to the countryside, trying to get as far away as possible from the field, from the inhabited centers and from the factories, which were the preferred targets.

You didn't have time to walk five, six hundred meters and the prealarm was already playing. Another five hundred meters, the alarm and five hundred more, the bombs. If you managed to conquer a discreet and safe position, you enjoyed the show, if not, squeezed and prayed to the Lord that the bombs would fall far away. It should be noted that the bombs of the time were not "intelligent" and went where they went.

I want to describe how these war actions took place. If during the day, the large flocks of bomber planes were preceded by fighters, with the task of identifying the target and tracing a sign with smoke bomb; bengal were used at night. As soon as the bulk of the bombers reached the marked location, the bombs went down. One cannot imagine the effect that the hissing of these bombs as they fell caused those who were near these actions. If they were launched from five, six thousand meters, it took fifty or sixty seconds to come down, it was a heartbreaking thing, the prelude to what happened immediately after. As a side dish, there was a beautiful German anti-aircraft barrage, carried out by artillery and machine-gunners, usually with tracer bullets that sometimes also made the center.

14 Another Winter Away from Home

We were finally free, but there was a big problem to solve: **how to dress to be presentable?** We still wore those four rags that were worn at the time of capture; when he was locked in the camps they could pass too, but now we were ashamed. I do not remember how it came into my hands, but I managed to get a decent jacket, which unfortunately I had to share with a partner of misfortune: it was reserved for the free exit, and it was worn a bit for one, that is when one came out not the other came out.

The exits took place on Sunday; in the morning we went to Mass in a Catholic church that we had located not far from our camp. We had not been to a religious ceremony for more than a year. Among the six hundred and fifty thousand IMIs there were also a thousand military chaplains, but since these were officers, they had separated them from the troops. **The officers seem to have suffered another fate and I don't think it was better than ours, in fact, it was certainly worse because, I never understood why, the Germans** could not suffer this category of people.

In the afternoon, we made a trip to the city center, without staying long because we were afraid of airborne alarms; with regard to these, it was much safer in the vicinity of the camp, at least, if something happened, we were closer to the countryside, the best place to escape in these circumstances.

It was **mid-October** 1944, but in the region where we were, Brandenburg, it was already quite cold. The thought of having to spend another winter in these conditions made us shiver, because the past winter had been really black. We were more afraid of the cold than the bombs: these, by running away from here and there, we could avoid them, but the cold did not. We were interned civilians, with a little more freedom, but we had nothing to cover ourselves with. The previous winter we told ourselves to hold on, that the next one we were going to be at home, instead we were still there gritting our teeth.

A good 80% of the work of my team, including myself, was carried out outdoors, the cold was not lacking, and it was urgent work that could not be postponed. Mostly we disassembled prefabricated buildings, that is, barracks, which had to be moved to safer places.

While relocating these camps, I had the opportunity to meet **an Italian Jewish girl**, she must have been about ten years old; she said she was from Turin and had been deported to Germany with her parents a couple of months earlier. For the moment, they had been settled in that camp, but the fear was that they would transfer them to some of those **notorious concentration camps from which they did not come out alive**. This little girl, whose name I don't remember, always tried to talk to us as much as possible, even if the boss tried to chase her away. When she saw us, her eyes lit up. We had never seen parents before, it was evident that he had been prevented from moving. Even the little girl disappeared at a certain moment and we never knew anything about her again.

15 Fear, Hope and Still Bombs

Christmas in 1944 was also approaching. On the occasion of the previous one, we had hoped and promised that we would spend the next one at our house, with our families; in this circumstance, we simply hoped that the saying "there is two without three" was not true and we made horns.

As the holidays approached, the Anglo-Americans also seemed to be loosening their war operations and the Germans were catching their breath, they were ringing.

Christmas was very characteristic, with so much snow hiding the wounds caused by the war. And the lunch was also special: first, a soup of millet, what we give to canaries but which they consume instead of rice, a frankfurter per second with two boiled potatoes, a slice of bread, a glass of plenty of beer and water. Panettone and sparkling wine, to the next. After lunch, a singer with two or three orchestral musicians from some other camp had kept us company.

1944 is about to end but the war continues and nothing is seen in prospect that will soon end it; we all hope that the new year will be more lavish than the old, because we have been troubling for five years now, personally I have not seen my family for four years and for almost two years I have not heard from them.

The strategists of the war in Kosovo were right, when they said that with bombs and missiles the war is not won, especially against countries with dictatorial regimes: it takes ground troops, with all their armaments. In Germany at the time it was the same, until the German tanks on one side and the Russians on the other saw the Germans gave up. We all hope that spring brings us just that.

But the German gentlemen don't think about it, because they don't give up anything; the situation for us interned or deported foreigners is always the same, I work a lot; in addition to the usual routine work, they made us prepare, around the city of Dessau (and I think this also happened around the others) trenches, anti-tank barrier works and many other fortresses for a position war, so our friends were approaching, although no sign had yet been seen.

The air raids continued, because the Anglo-Americans had this principle: before sending out their infantry, they made scorched earth, because they kept even one of their soldiers alive.

January passed almost calmly, except for the usual bombing; in the last raids, in addition to dropping bombs, the Allies launched posters that invited the Germans to surrender and we foreigners to rebel. They also came down streamers, though made of aluminum, I think they served to obscure some device that the Germans had to locate enemy planes. I would like to point out that, at that time, the most sophisticated electronic device was a very rudimentary radar system and the Germans did not have it. I remember that, at night, to sight the enemy planes, they used very powerful flood lights, capable of pushing the light for several kilometers and, when the plane was framed by two beams of light that crossed right on the target, the anti-aircraft intervened and struck.

The anti-aircraft, for those who escaped during the raids, was more dangerous than the bombs themselves, because those little guns that the Germans had did not spare themselves and fired hundreds of shots that exploded in the air at four or five kilometers high, and the splinters bullets rained down on the ground, creating much danger for those who were in the open. These anti-aircraft barriers were usually located on the outskirts of cities, therefore near our fields and countryside where we ran away.

16 The Turning Point

That the war was taking a bad turn for the Germans was also deduced from the arrival of many refugees from the east: Hungarians, Czechoslovaks, Poles, even Germans, who sought refuge to the west hoping for liberation by the American army, because of the Russians did not trust. Many prisoners of various nationalities, including Russians, also expressed this preference because for the compatriots there was a trial by the People's Court with relative, sure condemnation, first for having been captured by the Germans, second for having collaborated with them, willingly or unwillingly; for the other prisoners the lengthening of another couple of years of captivity was sure: I met Italians "freed" from these gentlemen who returned to their homeland at the end of 46,

The refugees from the east arrived by all means: few, almost none, by motor, mostly on foot or with horse-drawn carts, bicycles, even handcart with handbags and various odds and ends; I think theirs was a return emigration. When I recently saw those from Kosovo on television, I remembered those times.

Seeing all this, we thought the situation was going badly. You will say: why did these refugees not travel by train or other public transport? Well, public transport was scarce because it was all broken, broken railways with destroyed bridges, disaster roads, and then it was risky to move on the road or rail axes important for airstrikes, because in those moments the Americans gave no respite.

Commented [JFS1]: Michael Kovacs Family

17 The Reich in The Vice

The month of February 1945 is almost over and something new seems to be happening; you can see it from the faces of the Germans, especially women, now they had a different attitude towards us. They had always been burbere, more "German" than the Germans, the regime had clearly seen them well. Even the leaders, towards us, it was as if they were softening, they were neglecting everything, even the work; you can see that they were afraid of all that mass of foreign people who had treated very badly before, but we too had a lot of fear: it was feared that, at the end of everything, some crazy people wouldn't come out and make some "fertig" jokes Krieg alles kaputt "(war over, all dead).

The sudden change in the mood of these people forced us to think that the general situation of the war was evolving in our favor. Americans and Russians were already in Germanic territory; if so, in a few months they will be here, we said: yes, it took a month and a half for them to free us, but it was the worst and most dangerous of the whole period of captivity. The Anglo-Americans were always struggling with the bombings, all saints day there was a nice portion of bombs. I say Anglo-Americans because I had never seen Russian planes before. Of course, with regard to the air force, nobody could compete with the Americans, also because they had industries beyond the Atlantic, far from the war, and they could produce at full capacity.

As I have already said, this large mass of people that the Germans had piled up in their territory and so far proved very useful, now began to become quite cumbersome. Although little, we had to feed ourselves; and then the matter was very risky from the point of view of order, I keep repeating that there were no valid Germans in Germany, they were all at the front, and their fear, especially in recent times, was a possible revolt of deportees, internees and prisoners. However, we did not arrive at this and preferred to wait for the liberators to arrive.

On March 7, 1945, around twenty-two, we have the usual air alarm; as always, first there is no light, and we, as usual, take what little we have and go towards the countryside. Some of us didn't move, saying "so much everything is destroyed here, they don't bomb, what's the use?" As we ran away to safer places, the alarm went off, we quickened our pace to be able to take us three, four kilometers away from the possible target. We settled in a ditch, and there we waited for events. Already in the distance the noise of the planes was beginning to be heard; the antiaircraft started the barrage, but the planes flew beyond their range; the scouts, the planes that preceded the bulk of the flock, were already on our heads and released the flares which, in addition to illuminating the night, they served to give the signal that you were above the target. That evening, I think they didn't have a set point, but they started from the first building in Dessau along its entire width, and went on until the last, a carpet bombing not of disruptive bombs, but of incendiary pieces, I think there are they fell one every ten meters and they burned everything that was left in addition to what had already been destroyed by previous bombings. The city suffered serious damage, the fires burned for several days because the buildings, especially in the old part of the city, were made of wood and there were also several victims.

This time the camp where we resided was also destroyed, it was also set on fire, and more than one of those who had not escaped in good time lost their feathers. I want to describe the bombs they launched during that incursion: I believe they had been specially prepared to be launched on the territory of Germany. I had never seen one before; the weight was about three, four kilos, hexagonal bars about fifty centimeters long, half in perhaps a very rough aluminum alloy, which contained a charge of about 500 grams of phosphorus; the other half of the bar was made of very light sheet metal, so that it would descend perpendicularly so, with the impact, that the phosphorus would shatter and come out which, in contact with the air, would ignite producing a flame that would not he could look, so powerful was the light given off,

This bombing lasted a good hour. Around midnight, the few remaining sirens sounded the alarm, but we didn't move from where we were until the morning.

On the way back, we found the camp completely destroyed by fire, with several of our companions who had remained dead and injured on the spot: they were the ones who had always acted brave, they said they were not afraid of bombs; we, whenever the alarm sounded, we invited them, we go, and we called them by name one by one, we go so we keep company and then staying here is very dangerous. They replied that he makes me do it, run for four, five kilometers, I stay here, nothing happens, the Americans know that the Italians are here and they avoid us. Until that night it had gone just as they thought, but after the Americans they forgot that there were friends underneath.

18 Like Mice

With the camp out of order, we had to look for another accommodation; it's not that the Germans thought about it. During the night, it was still very cold, we had settled like this: in the countryside around Dessau a beautiful agriculture flourished and there were several livestock farms. The farmers placed the hay outdoors, where it happened, making heaps that were not packed. We found accommodation for the night in the straw, we dug a kind of den and slipped inside; the risk was that someone would set fire, it was a difficult time and this could happen.

This arrangement lasted over a month; in the morning we returned to the camp where only rubble remained, with the hope that some Germans would come to pick us up to go to work, so there would be the possibility that they would give us food; in the evening the meeting was always in the haystack.

One beautiful thing happened to us one evening: there were about fifteen of us in the heap, all stuck in our lairs like rats; while we were sleeping, around two in the morning, we were awakened by a great din; we stood still and silent in our holes because we understood that a large group of Russian prisoners in retreat, accompanied by some German soldiers, had stopped here for a couple of hours. If they had unfortunately discovered us, we would have had to follow their fate. Fortunately, towards dawn they left and we were able to leave the nest.

I would like to clarify that we had now reached early April 1945; apart from the bombing, the roar of cannon fire was beginning to be heard less than thirty kilometers away: it was the Americans who were approaching. From that moment on, the Germans abandoned us and everyone had to manage by himself as he could. The problem was to eat, luckily the warmth of spring had brought herbs that, collected and boiled, made us survive for ten days. After a few days, we also abandoned the haystack, because that area had become no man's land and it was risky to stay there. We settled in the rubble of the camp, there were splinter shelters nearby, a kind of covered trenches and, for a few days, we settled there. Now it was even blacker because it had become very dangerous to go to the countryside to look for the herbs; however there is always something that comes towards you, you were like rats that come out four in search of something to gnaw. A small group, in its reconnaissance rounds, had discovered a bombed and burned grain silo; in the middle of the rubble there was toasted wheat, or rather burnt and we took it, washed it and boiled it. This was the meal of those bad days, I want to clarify one thing, that that stuff the stomach did not digest and was evacuated intact, so much so that, if one wanted, he could take it back. in his reconnaissance rounds, he had discovered a bombed and burned grain silo; in the middle of the rubble there was toasted wheat, or rather burnt and we took it, washed it and boiled it. This was the meal of those bad days, I want to clarify one thing, that that stuff the stomach did not digest it and was evacuated intact, so much so that, if one wanted, he could take it back.

19 What Will Spring Bring?

During these last days of hell, one afternoon the SS armed to the teeth returned, who with arrogant gestures and speaking forced us to follow them by force. In those neighborhoods, a hundred of these cops had managed to gather two or three thousand people of all nationalities, including us, to take them to who knows where.

They knew very well where they had to take us, the excuse was that the front was now a stone's throw away and they had to take us to safety in anticipation of fierce fighting. But the intention was to take us to a powder keg or a large ammunition depot, to blow us up if the Americans bombed him.

To reach this depot, we had to cross the whole city, the distance must have been thirty kilometers it took all night to make the transfer; along the way, we met many checkpoints with large anti-tank barriers thus made: fences of beams made from pieces of tracks and were large and deep so that the cart, falling into it, remained immobilized, giving the possibility to the German military to do so jump with bombs or set it on fire with Molotov cocktails. All these barrages were manned by soldiers from the Wehrmacht, from the army. It must have been the last remnants, all very old, people called back at the last moment to defend their cities, therefore very manageable.

Already the American artillery tested the ground with some broadside, it was not the ideal place for us prisoners so we decided to ask for an interview with the commander of those soldiers who guarded the checkpoint, asking that he authorize our transit so that we could return to the camp where, a few hours earlier, we had been rounded up by the SS. This officer was very good and in addition to authorizing us, he also recommended us to be careful that it was very dangerous to circulate in that situation also because, he told us, there were a lot of disbanded German soldiers around.

On the morning of the following day he had returned to the camp where we had spent almost two years of our stay in Germany. Even if it was destroyed, we had "grown fond" of it and wanted to wait for the Americans to arrive there. We had rearranged ourselves in the covered trenches that were made to defend against the flares of the anti-aircraft, but were vulnerable to bombs even if, thanks to their irregular layout, they did not suffer too much damage with the movement of air.

We are now around April 18: the Americans no longer bomb, at least in our neighborhood, with planes, but with artillery. A few bullets fell in our vicinity, but this did not scare us. The fear was that among the German soldiers who retreated, followed by the Americans, there could be some madman who broke into our shelters and fired on us.

In those days the first "storks" had been seen: they were US Army planes making observation flights at four, five hundred meters flying along the front line. They were very small and could also land on rudimentary clay tracks.

20 The G. Men Arrive

On the night between 20 and 21 April there was a slight mist: I don't know if it was natural or caused by the Germans. That night was very particular, in the distance there was a strange noise that was getting closer and closer, interspersed with a barrage of automatic weapons. We could not decipher this noise, but we were sure of one thing: the Americans were coming, it didn't seem like the time of day to make sure of it, in fact it was just like that. With the first light of dawn, we leaned out of those holes where we were refugees and we noticed strange soldiers who motioned us to stay underneath. They were Americans. They seemed strange to us because it was the first time we had seen them.

When we finally left the refuge, we understood what the noise of the night before was: we were surrounded by dozens of tanks and hundreds of other vehicles, including about fifteen ambulances fully equipped to help the wounded. And what tanks! They certainly did not resemble our sardine cans. The artillery was self-propelled, that is, the cannons were one with the tracked vehicle which was not a tank. Of course they were not to be compared with our artillery: at most the cannons were pulled by a tractor, most of the time it was the horses or the mules that performed this service; as for ambulances, I was in a ward of six hundred men and I have never seen one; of vehicles, throughout the battalion, it seems to me that there were five (25 / Spa), one per company; the battalion commander had a truck, a hybrid between sedan and van, then there were a dozen Guzzi motorcycles. As for weapons, we were really scarce. The individual one was the Muschetto 91 with six shots magazine, for each shot you had to operate the shutter; the submachine gun Breda seems to me that he fired the same ammunition as the 91, but he had the defect of jamming frequently, despite having the built-in lubricator and this operation often took place. The Breda machine gun was the most effective weapon we had. the submachine gun Breda seems to me that he fired the same ammunition as the 91, but he had the defect of jamming frequently, despite having the built-in lubricator and this operation often took place.

When we saw how the American military was equipped, we were delighted. At that time they did not wear camouflage suits, but the uniform was made up as follows: trousers, jacket, sashet or helmet, amphibious boots (but seriously amphibians, the water did not pass); all of the highest quality. We, on the other hand, were sent to the Balkans with cardboard-soled shoes and foot-patches, the uniform was that of a tattered gray-green cloth with bands in the legs. The emergency food was a couple of biscuits and the can of boiled meat; the Americans, when they were unable to eat a normal meal, had the emergency one which consisted of a large jar of three or four kilos which contained the following things: macaroni, chicken, white bread, freeze-dried drinks and coffee, toilet paper, cigarettes, candy, chewing gum, toothpicks. I was able to see these things in person because we went to the places where these soldiers had stopped with their self-propelled artillery, hunting for jars containing the "leftovers" that were not leftovers. I wanted to describe these things to make it clear what difference in treatment and equipment there was between us and them.

To refuel all the vehicles they had, the Americans would have had to bring along a not indifferent fleet of tankers, instead they had an oil pipeline that followed them, they only used

gasoline because the engines of their vehicles were all petrol, tanks, the famous three-axle MG trucks, tracked in general, even the generators (they never stayed in the dark). I think naphtha used it only in field kitchens. If we want to compare our army to theirs, I believe that the fuel they consumed in one day has not been consumed in the whole war. We moved with a 200 liter bin, often not even full, at least, this was what happened in the department where I was in force. As for lighting, in our quarters it was guaranteed by oil lamps or candles, and if they weren't there it was in complete darkness; the kitchen was wood-burning, with potholes placed on large stones.

21 Soldiers, "Bughi" And Baseball

That afternoon we were able to approach the Americans, exchange a few words with them. It could have been difficult to understand each other, because none of us spoke English, but among them there were many Italian Americans and a little Sicilian or Neapolitan chewed it, so we explained and understood each other; they told us to wait a few more days and then they would take care of everything, first of all to get us out of those dens, settling us in some public building left standing, then providing for food. For the time being, they told us to arrange as best we could, as long as it didn't bother the German civilians.

However, the Americans were speaking and, as soon as everything was settled (there was still some skirmish nearby with disbanded German soldiers), they thought of us, of all that great mass of foreign people who, as prisoners, deported and interned was in the newly liberated territory.

We, given that it was planned to stay a few more months in Dessau, tried to organize ourselves. First of all, in order to let people know that there were Italians there, we managed to get three pieces of cloth of our colors, we put them together and a large flag came out that we hoisted on an out of order trellis of the power lines located right in front of our home. With the fabric that is left over, we have always made tricolor ribbons that we have stuck on, we also brought to our hotel a piano that someone proceeded to strum to create a little joy.

The first few days, the Americans provided us with the meals we had prepared; then they equipped us and gave us everything we needed, to be able to prepare us for the rations, which was also good, made in our own way. The bread of the Americans, unlike that of the Germans, was far too white.

We have been in this situation for almost a month, and this has helped us get back in shape and get to know the Americans better, since we lived in close contact with them. I remember that, in the early days, they preferred to stay on their own, since the war was not yet over; one evening, it must have been twenty, while we were with the US military near their quarters, four or five grenades arrived from some Germans, who were not very far away. Nothing serious happened, but they asked us to be careful and take shelter.

After the war, it was always a celebration for the Americans: they had orchestras and danced every evening. We, at these demonstrations, were always welcome and, in such circumstances, I saw the first "bughi bughi" (we called it that) danced by the soldiers and their colleagues. In addition to having never even heard the music of this new American dance, for us, who grew up with fascism that directed women to the career of mothers and housewives, seeing girls in uniform was something very strange, even if they were not part of the fighting troops but they were simple "auxiliaries", nurses, typists and so on.

In addition to the Americans, he also confabulated a lot with the Germans, who had become meek as lambs. In our vicinity, there were houses with gardens, lovely two-story houses, however damaged. These people, who did not know where to go, had settled into their home at best, even if it was bombed and half ruined. Men, with the exception of old men and boys,

there were none, and women were seen doing what we had done before, namely scraping the mortar off the bricks, so they could be used again; we teased them, we said that slaves no longer had them to do that job, and they started laughing. They envied us because, they said, "in a few months from here you will go away, instead we have to stay and who knows what will happen again". They got it into their heads that **Russians and Americans would get bored at once**. This was the rumor that circulated in those days, it was not known who had put it around but it was in the public domain; since the **Russians were twenty kilometers away** and there was never any **good blood between them and the Americans, it didn't take much to** make something happen. But the Big Four, a few months later, thought about fixing things by dividing Germany in two. The conference was held in **Pozdam**, a location not far from where we were, halfway **between Berlin and Dessau**. In any case, it seemed that the Americans thought above all to have fun, it was as if these facts did not even touch them, they were always intent on organizing sports competitions. The favorite sport was baseball, and we were there to snoop around because that, too, was a new thing.

22 When Do We Come Home?

There was still no talk of repatriation, however news began to circulate and many prisoners from Istria and surroundings said that repatriation did not interest him, but they would have preferred to stay in Germany, better there than with Tito: they had known what the Titoists were by combining, they chased away or, worse, inflicted all those who were not on their side; not being able to return to their homeland, where would the family go to find them, assuming they were still there? However, this is a concern that we all ask ourselves, especially those who have been without news from home for a long time. When one was distressed and oppressed on all sides, survival was the first thought; now that we are savoring the taste of freedom, our distant loved ones are in mind, the fear of not being able to embrace someone else,

Someone, especially those from northern Italy, had come up with the idea of returning home, they had provided some means, but there was the problem of fuel that could not be found. The Red Cross, which was already showing up, and the Americans themselves had advised him against it, advised us to be patient and not to worry, that as soon as possible they would provide for their repatriation. It had been known that operations had already begun in some area of their relevance; but we could not expect it to happen all at once, the veterans to move were millions and to be able to do it easily there was almost nothing, the roads were disaster. Yet within a few months, the Americans were able to bring us all home, which the Russians did not do,

But let's get back to us. It was mid-May, even the warm season came to meet us to let us recover some of the complexion and strength that we had lost in those places of suffering. The Red Cross was often around the camps, to take our names and places of origin, and to ask us for the names of people we had seen missing. All this must surely have served to communicate to our family members that we were safe and sound, or, unfortunately, in the case of our companions who had not made it, the bad news.

The Americans were too strong and certainly had no financial problems. They had organized a special structure to deal with our repatriation: I think it was not a trivial thing to gather all these people and then convey them to Italy.

We were waiting for the transfer to begin as soon as possible; now homesickness was beginning to make itself felt. We were all intent on getting some presentable garments, because we were sorry to go home like beggars. The most sought after was the uniform of American soldiers: complete, it was difficult to have it, but trousers and some shirts were easy to obtain. Greyish, not even the shadow. I had procured a black cloth trousers tight at the ankle, a khaki shirt and a satchel, also khaki, which were part of the uniform of the Young Hitlerians. In the belt buckle there was the hooked cross and then I don't remember which motto was written on it. Of course, it was quite risky to go around in those conditions, but in the midst of the great mass of various uniforms, that too, in fact, stood out. I had also obtained a backpack, this was Italian and also gray-green, it was used to put in it something you had and very dear souvenirs that, like my companions, I had procured and I wanted to

take with me home. Among them there was also a German helmet that never came home, later I will explain the cause.

23 Towards the South

Our situation was beginning to exacerbate us, so we had mentioned a gesture of protest at the American Command, complaining that they had freed us for more than a month and still did not decide to repatriate us. They asked us to wait a few more days because, since all the large amount of traffic from Germany to Italy to flow onto the Brenner, this had become a kind of funnel that was blocked every now and then. The Americans were said to have asked the Swiss authorities for permission to pass us through their territory, but they refused.

We are almost at the end of May, forty days after the liberation and finally they decide: tomorrow we leave! The long-awaited news had caused us great agitation, perhaps it was for the contentment. But, I repeat, some of us were sad: those of Istria, Rijeka and Gorizia, for the moment, had even given up leaving.

The departure was to take place by train but, as the station was far away, the Americans would have accompanied us up there with their trucks, the famous three uncovered MG axles, led by colored soldiers who were frightening as they drove because they ran like crazy. About fifty of them arrived and we were accommodated in about twenty per truck.

Arriving at the station, we found a translation of cattle wagons, this time we were not crammed into fifty, and there were even benches to sit on. But the destination was not yet Italy. I think we would have traveled two hundred and fifty kilometers in four or five hours to get to the new location. The trains were going very slowly because the railway tracks were terribly battered, and priority was given to other more important trains. Even at this station there were trucks ready to pick us up.

This time we were placed in a large barracks where there were already other returnees waiting for us. Before entering this barracks, a team of exterminators were ready to spray DDT with powder; they had a compressor with a dozen torches that we slipped under our clothes. After the operation, we were placed in a wing of the barracks and, the next day, shower for everyone and sterilization of clothing and everything we had with us, as well as subsequent accommodation in other rooms.

Also in this location we were detained for about ten days; the place was very nice, the barracks just as bad, pity it was here and there damaged by bombs. These accommodations were usually in out-of-the-way places, so we spent time taking walks in the surroundings and attending some shows organized by the Americans.

What amazed me, indeed, has left everyone stunned, is the amount of stuff that they had brought to Europe in just over two years; you could see columns of tanks moving from one point to another in Germany: for hours and hours, indeed, days and days, vehicles of all kinds paraded with that star that stood out on the sides, you didn't see a soldier on foot and they all had new uniforms and in order. To us Italians, when we were still "Italian Army", they did not replace a piece of clothing if it was not exactly worn out, and in any case the old man had to be returned.

In a few days we leave for the new destination, which is still unknown, the only sure thing is that it is not yet Italy, but a further step towards approach. It seems that it is **Ulm**, a German town not far from the **Swiss border**, with the hope that these will decide to make us pass through their territory. **Again, we were accompanied to the station by trucks** and left by train. **From the center of Germany, we head south**; also this time the journey lasted **five or six hours, always on freight wagons**. Railway cars were not seen. During that trip, we had a very unpleasant episode. At night, we passed through the **territory garrisoned by the French**, in a railway station where the train stopped, they played a bad joke on us, so much that it seemed to have gone back two years, that is when they had brought us to the concentration camp. **The French gentlemen** got into the cars and began to shout and threaten us, saying that Italy had to forget it; they searched the little baggage they had and also on them; on that occasion they took away my German helmet. We had a few marks and they wanted to take them off. This situation lasted a good hour, then fortunately the **French** got off and the train left again returning to the American area. Many had justified the behavior of the French saying that with us Italians they had it to death because we had "stabbed them in the back" that is, they were already under the German blows, we also intervened against them and we also beat them. that is, when they brought us to the concentration camp.

At the end of our journey was Ulm. Also on this occasion we were picked up and transported with US vehicles and accompanied again to a barracks where we underwent the usual treatments, **so they assured us that this would probably have been the last stop before returning to Italy.**

Ulm was a beautiful town, albeit very damaged by the war, with a splendid cathedral. Also this time the stop lasted about **ten days** and we had the time to visit those places and even to rest, since the Americans demanded from us only the jobs inside our community, such as cleaning the premises and distributing meals, nothing to do with the British and French who had trucks of material belonging to them discharged from ex-internees or, worse, Russians who often used rifle butts or even stunted with those who did not readily obey.

24 Finally, We Go

We have now reached the beginning of July 1945, finally we leave for Italy. On the eve of the event, word had spread that the departure was now imminent, it was presumed to be the same day, at most the following day, and so it was. The number of returnees was a thousand, so a nice convoy had to be set up, always with freight wagons. The departure took place in the afternoon and the train was even a little wide, but along the way so many other "passengers" had added that someone eventually had to manage between one wagon and the other, taking a seat on the buffers.

As I mentioned earlier, the Swiss had not allowed our transport carriers to pass through their territory, perhaps because, being neutral, they had always kept out of certain affairs. Furthermore, precise and orderly as they were, they did not like the passage through their state of a large mass of people without any documents and therefore without the possibility of being subjected to controls of any kind. The way forward was towards Austria (Munich-Innsbruck-Brenner-Bolzano), of course, passing through Switzerland, we would have shortened the journey by a few hours, but it didn't matter to much, our only thought was to leave, and that's it.

Departing from Ulm in the afternoon, we traveled all night before arriving near the border with Italy. In Innsbruck we met a translated charge of German prisoners returning to Germany; we stood side by side for a couple of hours, I don't know if it was a coincidence or something prepared before; for us and also for the German prisoners it was still very useful, first because we were able to exchange each other's opinions and then because we had the marks, their lire and even if the evaluation was certainly not precise, we exchanged them, they were interested in brands, in us lira, advancing to queue in front of some bank branches. With this exchange, I had procured about fifteen thousand lire; not knowing the value that the sum had at the time, to me it looked like a nice nest egg, even compared to my first salaries as a new financier, which in 42 amounted to one hundred and forty lire a month. But when we arrived in Bolzano, the first stop in Italy, we had to find out, making the first small purchases (a couple of sandwiches with ham and a flask of wine, a thousand lire) that it was appropriate to tighten the purse strings if we didn't want to stay immediately broke.

In Bolzano the first companions of misfortune left us, they had found the villagers waiting for them to take them home, so they arrived a few days earlier. From Bolzano onwards, many of our other friends from northern Italy had found their fellow villagers who had gone to pick them up at the nearest stations, by their own means or made available by the Municipalities, so they could get home earlier, since traveling by train make long laps, as the railways were all broken and our translated ones were always the last to leave, for reasons of precedence: first the trains that transported the allied military, then the freight and food, the passenger ones, finally ours, so the journey inevitably became long. These "taxi drivers" were found at the stations where our translations passed and could be recognized thanks to megaphones and banners. Of course, we were very happy to return home, but it was a pain to separate: after two years of that bad life, we had become more than brothers.

After a year of returning, my service in the Guardia di Finanza took me around the north east of Italy: Rovigo, Venice, Treviso. So I was able to embrace these "brothers", Boscolo di Chioggia, Mazzucco and Pizzo di Rovigo and others: it was a promise made when we said goodbye.

25 How Will We Rebuild Everything?

The departure took place around thirteen, to reach **Pescantina**, the first Italian stop, where we would have stayed a few days, in the evening. There were no trucks to pick us up at the station, but some Italian soldiers, who accompanied us on foot to a rest camp, which was really a camp since there were tents and even if it was not really a five-star hotel, it was beautiful for us because for the first time in years (three for me, and for someone else even more) we were finally able to spend our first night at home. That piece of Italy that we had seen **from Brenner in Verona** was all destroyed, railways, stations, roads and bridges, towns and cities, just like in Germany. The first thought that came to our mind is: "How are we going to rebuild everything?" It will take a long time and who knows how many sacrifices.

It starts from **Pescantina**, destination **Bologna**. The large group when we crossed the Brenner had almost halved: on the translated just left we would have been a thousand, now many of us, those who lived north of the Po are now at home. Others will leave us in Bologna. Even in this city the accommodation is in tents; the Italian military will think about meals, we only have to worry about consuming them. These few-day stops were used to make all the large mass of people flow easily.

As I said, it was almost all out of order, including electric train traction. The locomotives were coal-fired and there were also several diesel locomotives that the Americans had brought with them. Given the state of the bridges, which no longer existed, **to cross the Po we had to tranship, cross a bridge** of boats in the area of Ostia and then take the train that brought us to **Bologna**.

This city too was seriously damaged by bombs and land fighting, which had not spared even the surrounding countryside, several isolated villages and farmhouses had been razed to the ground, who knows if whoever had started all that tragedy had ever foreseen that it would go to end like this.

In **Bologna**, one did not stay in the camp, but went around the city; we were stopped by many people. Everyone wanted to know who we were, perhaps they were impressed by our rather extravagant way of dressing. When we said we were **veterans**, they gladly stopped with us and wanted to know many things about the life spent in the concentration camps and the **malice of the Germans towards** us. They had to know this too well because even in Italy and in particular in those parts, the Germans had really combined all the colors.

We also leave from **Bologna**. I don't remember the exact date, I think it was **around July 10, 45**. The next stop would have been Florence. As you can see, they made us tourists, even if the moment was not the best: crossing half of Europe a couple of months after the end of that disaster was a very bad experience that surely would have remained etched in our memory for who knows how long.

Even in **Florence**, already from the train we glimpsed the many ruins that the war had caused to that wonderful city. However, it must be said that the Allies brought a certain respect to the

artistic and cultural value of Florence and that the anger of the Germans had caused the greatest damage to the city.

Even at the station of S. Maria Novella there were Italian soldiers waiting for us; they accompanied us to a barracks near the Arno, the accommodation was discreet, we could not expect more, what they were doing for us was the best that could be done, just think that those barracks on September 8 had been sacked of everything and everyone and that, from that date on, there had never been a truce.

In Florence, the surprise: I accidentally met two villagers, the first after four years, were soldiers of the Italian Army which was reconstituting itself after the defeat. They were not involved in the assistance of us veterans, but knowing of our arrival and stop in the city they came to snoop, you never know, sometimes there was no villager, and they found me. These soldiers were Martino Podda, and Sebastiano Zuddas, from the hamlet of Seuni. You can imagine my joy! They were shortly missing from Selegas and therefore had very recent news. First of all, I asked about mine, all right, but in the midst of the good news the sad one could not be missing: a few months earlier, my sister-in-law, my brother's wife, a still very young woman who had left three children in tender age.

26 Florence, Monuments and Ruins

I met with my villagers Martino and Sebastiano every day, in the hours they had free and, since they had been in Florence for a few months, they had served me as a guide, since for me it was the first time I saw that city. Here, too, the break lasted the usual five or six days and they took care to make Florence turn far and wide. The place where we lingered more was the Lungarno with the Ponte Vecchio, the only one that (fortunately, given its historical value) remained standing; the rest were all destroyed and the Americans had reactivated some of them by setting up their temporary bridges.

Our party was getting smaller and smaller, now there were practically only Sardinians and southerners in general. Among those who did not have to cross the sea, every now and then someone ventured and set off in a hurry with makeshift means, even if both the Red Cross and the Military Commands advised against doing so because in this way every right to assistance during the trip was lost.

From what the Florentines had made us understand, it seemed that the bridges over the Arno had been blown up by the Germans during the retreat, and luckily a monument like Ponte Vecchio did not suffer the same fate. The railways too had been the ones to reduce them to that state; I think that the Allies would have limited themselves to bombing railway stations and stopovers, without being able to place an explosive charge on the tracks every seven, eight meters along kilometers and kilometers, for whole sections: in doing so, they made the rails unusable at the time of the reorganization, but perhaps this was part of their eagerness to destroy everything and leave scorched earth behind them.

Our stay in Florence is also about to end and we are preparing for departure. I said goodbye to the villagers and was ready. The direction is direct for Rome, we thought: Florence Livorno Rome, passing through Civitavecchia, the main port of connection with Sardinia. Instead they diverted us to Naples. The journey lasted more than a day, without any stop, as it always had. We thought we were going to stay a couple of days in Rome, now the usual stop every two, three hundred kilometers had become a custom. Instead, we are traveling to Naples and we are in the lower Lazio region, Cassino area, one of the places most affected by the war. While traveling by train, I saw several of my companions crying as they prepared to get off; they said they had noticed the ruins of their homes and were very worried about the fate of their loved ones. In the plain, dominated by the destroyed Montecassino Abbey, there were numerous carcasses of armored vehicles on both sides, a sign that the battle had been bloody, scrap metal that would later be useful to our steel industries to start reconstruction.

Naples is approaching and the ruins are everywhere, nothing has been spared: it will be hard to recover if they don't give us a hand.

27 Neapolitan Carousel

Finally we arrived in Naples. Luckily the train can go all the way to the center, at **Garibaldi station**, not far from the place where we would have been hosted for this last stop, the usual barracks whose name I can't remember precisely, it seems to me "Granigli". It was located near the port and all the military, both veterans and non-veterans, flowed there, you can imagine that there was a crowd, also because the departures of the ships were rather sparse.

Subsequently, the Command decided to transfer us Financiers to another barracks, in **Vomero**, where we had a great time, both as regards food and accommodation. There were not many of us, at most twenty, and the days spent in this city did not weigh us, on the contrary, they served to cheer us up. **Living in Naples in those days was a continuous party**, we continued to celebrate the end of the war, even if it had been over here for over a year, there were fireworks every evening, each district was equipped with orchestra and the song more in vogue of the moment was "Where is Zazà". Everywhere you could see allied soldiers, especially Americans, half drunk, with the 'whisperer' below to steal something from him, and the agents of the MP (Military Police) with the jeeps and batons who provided for the order. With the port crammed with Liberty loaded with all sorts of things, the Neapolitans managed in every way, they said they were able to empty all their goods of whole ships, **the women** and not only they rubbed their wallets full of dollars to drunk Americans. I believe that Naples has never experienced better days, the city was a whole market: stalls of all kinds, cigarettes, American rubber, undergarments and not, always made in the USA; the **colored soldiers**, who were usually drivers, as soon as they saw a little woman, gave up the truck with all the load and there were those who took advantage of it.

Even the shadow of boarding, there were not enough ships for this service; every now and then we saw some warships embarking the veterans bound for Sardinia, but we see that even those were not enough.

To better understand how we were reduced even several months after the end of the war, I want to tell you about a journey back made by me five and it was January 2 or 3 of 46 and being, as I said, an agent of the RG of Finance, I was in the process of moving from the Legion of Cagliari to that of Venice. The weather was bad, the ship just as bad. Its name was "Campidoglio", I don't know if it was from Tirrenia; his size did not reach two thousand tons. We danced 48 hours before reaching Naples and we were all so afraid, including the crew. Once in Naples, a very special train was waiting for us, particularly suitable for the season it was, freight wagons such as those on the return trip, but now there was also the cold; to warm us, a bonfire was made inside the wagon, in the middle of the wagon the rim of a truck wheel without the tire had been arranged, with a piece of sheet metal to cover the holes in the hub and the bolts; in this sort of large brazier some wood was burned which we got at the stops, it was a very dangerous thing but nobody told us anything. This journey lasted for an abundant week, with a stop of two or three days in Rome. What was nice about Venice is that the city had not been touched by the war.

But let's go back to our stay in Naples. It was at the end of July 45; during these rest days there were medical examinations and even vaccines, in particular the anti-violent one because it seems there had been cases of smallpox. But maybe we didn't even need vaccines, because with everything we went through we must have become immune to everything.

One thing that puzzled us and made us and even the Neapolitans come to doubt about the education of American soldiers was this: in the evening hours, when people strolled, they enjoyed making it rain, from the walls to which they overlooked the heads of this flood of people, condoms that had previously inflated like balloons. And to think that our discretion didn't even allow us to name those gadgets!

28 On The "Garibaldi"

The stop in Naples served, among other things, to make us meet again with people, villagers and comrades whom we had lost sight of because of the vicissitudes of the war, so much so that we even came to think of bad things. I met with two of my countrymen, the Brigadier of the RG di Finanza Beniamino Anolfo, who came from Greece and had not been seen for at least four years, and the Italian Army sergeant Evaristo Sechi, in national territory following the allied troops.

Meeting some known people aroused great joy in us, we told each other all our vicissitudes and indescribable adventures, and in the end we thought of those who had not returned: from my country, which was small, twenty or so dead and missing in the war, all very young.

Now I open a parenthesis to describe a feature that Naples no longer has: the plume of smoke on Vesuvius, which was in full swing at the time. In 44 there had been a great eruption, so the Germans had told us and that was perhaps the only news they gave us of Italy during captivity. The fumarole phenomenon lasted for a few years and then went out, becoming Vesuvius as it is still.

Perhaps the day of departure was approaching, the hosts had hinted that he was expecting a warship, more precisely the cruiser "Garibaldi", which seemed to be the only means available to ferry us from Naples to Cagliari. On August 3, they finally assured us that the next day, in the afternoon, we would embark on that very warship. They always warned us in advance of the departure, to give us the opportunity to greet some friends who remained, the colleagues who had hosted us, to take a last stroll around the city of Naples, to prepare the suitcases we didn't have and wait for the fateful hour.

On day four, around fifteen, we were accompanied (on foot, since it was not far away) to the port. We traveled a couple of kilometers along the main streets of the city and the Neapolitans, knowing that we were veterans from captivity, clapped our hands in solidarity and admiration.

When we arrived at the port, we were accompanied on board these ship's poo that, with all its cannons and turrets, impressed us a lot. Between us we jokingly said "Here they bring us back to war". Before getting us on board, the Captain or whoever welcomed us through the ship's amplification systems, apologizing if he could not offer us a better service, since the ship had been built for other purposes, so we had to get by at best and settle wherever it was possible, on deck, in the corridors and take advantage of every small space because boarding six or seven hundred people in such a medium was not easy. Even the crewmen, he told us, then we could see for himself, they rested in the hammocks set up at the moment because the space was very limited; he urged us not to create problems for him, the ship and the crew, so he wished us a pleasant journey, giving the order that we could get on board.

Going up, we could see for ourselves what we had been told by the Commander: there were no salons as in modern passenger ships, perhaps only the Commander, his deputy and

some officers could have cabins; the rest of the crew, all inside the nets that looked like those shopping bags that were used years ago, before the era of plastic bags.

In warships, the bulk of the space was reserved for storing weapons, ammunition and provisions, and the crew had to sacrifice themselves. We, the passengers, had settled almost all on deck, under those mighty cannons with which the cruiser was armed. Luckily the season was appropriate for cruising, the beautiful weather, the calm sea, so don't worry.

Around twenty we sail. For most of us it was a novelty to witness the maneuvers commanded by our boatswomen with the sound of a whistle and this amused us a lot.

Just off the **Gulf of Naples**, the ship points its bow towards Sardinia, and off on that sea as smooth as oil, to put it in seafaring jargon. I don't think he pushed hard, because it had to come in the light of day, since the ports were made dangerous by the size of the sunken ship. The night is not that we slept so much, because of the great euphoria we felt for the approach of returning to our land, after so many years of absence and many hardships.

29 Rubble and Flags

When we began to see the first offshoots of the Sardinian mountains, we shouted for joy. After a few hours, Cagliari was already visible, and the joy was growing, however, as the ship approached, they began to see the wounds of the city and the port; the ship had entered the gulf, at times it was about to cross the breakwater, which was also very damaged. Just inside, the "Garibaldi" released the anchors and stopped, not being able to approach any quay due to the carcasses of the sunken ships that cluttered the waters of the port. From that point, we were able to see well the city tormented by bombs, the Via Roma on the sea side, that beautiful avenue of wonderful plants mowed by explosions, a destroyed wing of the Municipal Palace, the Hotel Moderno, the Vivanet palace, the arcades of via Roma all equally battered, with heaps of rubble everywhere. Four years earlier, when I had gone over there for the last time, it was certainly not like that and I think nobody would have thought that it could have gone so far.

Not having been able to dock the cruiser at a dock, they had to ferry us to the ground with tugboats and another minute ship, I don't know who had made it available, but I certainly know that they came to the edge with these vehicles full of people with flags of all colors except the tricolor; we rebelled and told those gentlemen that it was not the case, that we still had to settle a lot more to forget all the troubles we had gone through in the past five years. They understood how we thought and, having withdrawn the flags, they limited themselves to the greetings of welcome back, giving up the intentions that I think were political. Finally for me, after four years and one day, I set foot on Sardinian soil: I left on August 4, 1941 and I never went back there even on leave.

Me and my companions, left alone, we decided what to do: to begin with, we let everyone go down, then, gathering in port, by mutual agreement we decided to go home and to present ourselves to our commands after a few days. Greetings, hugs, and then everyone on his way.

With others in my area, we went to the station of the Sardinian complementary railways, which were also seriously damaged by bombs and with a pile of destroyed railway material. This line was at the time the only communication route worthy of the name that connected the capital to the center-east of the island; there was also some dirt roads in poor condition and the means were few, so all those who had to go to Cagliari or return to their countries of residence poured on these trains which, although very run down by the war (it even seems to me that the locomotive burned wood instead of coal) were always full. I wanted to describe this situation because our fear was that of not being able to find a seat on the train that would take us home. Fortunately this did not happen,

30 Homecoming

Finally, after three hours of travel we arrived. Truly Selegas, my country is about four kilometers from the Suelli railway station, so you should also take into account about three quarters of an hour's walk.

We can see that some of the passengers arrived before me and gave everyone the news that Amedeo Usai was arriving. The country, and my family in particular, mobilized to receive me: mine was a great surprise because even knowing that I was on the way back, they did not imagine it was that day.

The meeting with my family was very moving for both sides. Even though little more than four years had passed, my parents seemed to me to have aged a lot, even compared to the age they were (mom 55 and dad 62); little sister Rosaria, whom I had left ten years old was a young lady, my brother Peppino, who had been widowed six months earlier, had remarried the day before my arrival, the older sister Anna had brought me other grandchildren: four years passed without seeing each other and without having news, these are things that are not easily forgotten. We thank the good Lord that everything ended well.

Around August 10, in agreement with the other colleagues who returned to Sardinia on day five, we presented ourselves to the RG Finance Command of Cagliari, Delegated Office for the discrimination of the financiers dispersed in conjunction with the Armistice requested by the Italian authorities to Allies on September 8, 1943. The commander of the ward was Colonel Demontis (I hope not to be mistaken) a rather robust, very nice person, who always chewed the cigarette butt. He had been instructed to carry out the interrogations individually and to put everything we declared on the record. "Where were you on 8 September 43? What happened in consequence? Where did you spend the two years of absence? " He practically wanted to know everything that had happened to us. After the interrogation and the minutes signed by both parties, they left me free: from that moment the status of prisoner officially ended. The Commander then asked me if I wanted to continue to be part of the RG di Finanza, I said yes and he shook my hand making me the best wishes and inviting me to go to another office for the handling of the practices related to my situation and why I a sheet indicating two months of repatriation license was delivered, after which they asked me where I wanted to be assigned. I asked Cagliari, I believe that after four years of distance it was a right. I was satisfied for three or four months, then the transfer for the Legion of Venice arrived. months later, practically on the same line, even if on the contrary, from Cagliari to Naples.

Epilogue

Many will wonder why I spent fifty-five years before deciding to tell this dramatic story. You're right, I was always pissed at everyone, especially with politicians and the press, because too few times they remembered the sufferings suffered in two years of imprisonment by the Italian Military Interns, raked by the Germans in the Balkans and in many other places, Italy including, certainly not through our fault but by the High Command who, in such a difficult period, have not been able to handle the situation.

In recent years, I have been invited by the fifth grade teachers of the elementary school, who explained to their pupils the Second World War, because they wanted to interest the children in the topic with the testimony of those who experienced the facts firsthand. On that and previously on other occasions I realized that the history books on the subject prisoners have often flown over and of the teachers themselves, only a few knew what had happened to those six hundred and fifty thousand poor people, having had some ex interned among their relatives.

I say: there has been a lot of talk about the Resistance and we could have spent a few words out of respect for those poor people who, certainly not because of them, left us life in the German camps. On official occasions a hint to remember these "passive defendants" certainly would not hurt.

These days, the media are saying that the German authorities would be willing to allocate funds to somehow reimburse Hitler's slave-prisoners, forced into forced labor. I would like to know where the interned Italian military will be located, certainly outside, for the "too much" interest of the Italian state. Personally, I am not asking for money, but at least an apology from today's democratic Germany for what was done to us by the Germans back then. I want to remind everyone that, in order of bad treatment by the Germans, we occupied second place, together with the Russians, immediately after the Jews. All other prisoners and internees, English, French, Poles, Belgians, Greeks, Czechs, Yugoslavs, etc., were under the protection of the International Red Cross, that the Germans were required to respect because they are subject to continuous checks. They also received many other forms of assistance, including sending parcels containing food and comfort items. For us, who were not recognized internationally as prisoners of war but only as interned Italian military, there was none of this.

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