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## All Those Who Shall Pass An Italian's Resistance & Nazi Occupation

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Article

# All Those Who Shall Pass An Italian's Resistance & Nazi Occupation

Alexandria Willis

## Introduction

The song “Bella Ciao” was originally written as an anthem for the struggles of the 19th century Italian working class.<sup>1</sup> Amidst the beginning of Italy’s monumental wrestle against fascism (both from Italy’s own government and Nazi forces), the words were changed to reflect the struggle of the resistance fighters, known as partisans. “Bella Ciao” was now a song mourning the loss of their beautiful Italy. It was not just a song of grief, but also a song of belligerent determination to resist.

Benito Mussolini was the fascist Prime Minister of Italy, a one-party dictatorship, at the start of World War II. In June of 1940, he would officially align himself and Italy with the Axis powers. However, in 1943 he was removed from power by his own people. Imprisoned and powerless, he watched as the new Italian leaders signed a peace agreement with the Allies. It took only days for Hitler to send German troops pouring into Italian towns to occupy the country. Mussolini was freed and returned to power as a puppet for Hitler and Axis powers. It was at this time that a resistance movement would grow throughout Italy to fight Nazi occupation and the return of Mussolini’s dictatorship. The

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1. Vladimir L. Marchenkov, *Arts and Terror* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 34.

resistance movement was supported through airdrops and military training, most significantly by American, Soviet, and British forces. By August 1944, it is estimated that there were 100,000 partisans resisting Nazi occupation. This number would escalate from that point on, reaching its peak around 250,000 in April 1945 at the time of Mussolini's death.<sup>2</sup> While the Italian resistance is certainly not the most well known resistance of WWII, it is one of the most brutal efforts in any sphere to fight against Nazism and fascism, and can be seen as one of the most successful.<sup>3</sup>

The lyrics of *Bella Ciao* move through the stages of many partisan fighters' lives.<sup>4</sup> As heroic as the effort to resist Nazi forces was, the successes of the partisans seemed quite bleak due to a lack of resources, centralized leadership, and overwhelming Nazi cruelty. They awoke literally to invaders in their homes and would go on to resist until being laid to rest as martyrs. This micro-history follows a man named Luciano Righi through the stages of partisan life. Each section will be based on a verse of the partisan anthem "*Bella Ciao*." Additionally, each individual section will reflect on Luciano's relationship with a specific person embodied by that verse.

As verse one mentions awakening to an invader, we will see the connection of our main partisan, Luciano, to the invader. The voice of the next verse pleads for salvific rescue, explaining that they feel death approaching. And so, in this second section, we will witness Luciano interacting with an American pilot, shot down over Nazi-occupied Italy and rescued by the partisans. The voice of the third verse asks that if they die resisting, they be buried. In this third section, we will view Luciano's relationship with a Catholic priest who served the partisans and would bury and bless their dead. I will leave it to you to draw your own conclusions regarding the final verses.

The song is well known among Italians and has been sung from memory by every surviving partisan I have ever had the honor of meeting. It is sung with tears and an awesome combination of both reverence and power. Just thinking of the song brings great emotion to my heart, and I highly recommend that before continuing through this micro-history, you pause and listen to a recording of "*Bella Ciao*."

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2. R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

3. Maria de Blasio Wilhelm, *The Other Italy: Italian Resistance in World War II* (New York: Ishi Press International, 2013).

4. John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 52.

## Bella Ciao Italian Partisan Anthem

### Italian lyrics

Una mattina mi son alzato,  
o bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao!  
Una mattina mi son alzato  
e ho trovato l'invasor.

O partigiano portami via,  
o bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao  
o partigiano portami via  
che mi sento di morir.

E se io muoio da partigiano,  
o bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao,  
e se io muoio da partigiano  
tu mi devi seppellir.

Seppellire lassù in montagna,  
o bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao,  
seppellire lassù in montagna  
sotto l'ombra di un bel fior.

E le genti che passeranno,  
o bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao,  
e le genti che passeranno  
mi diranno «che bel fior.»

Questo è il fiore del partigiano,  
o bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao,  
questo è il fiore del partigiano  
morto per la libertà

### English translation

One morning I awakened,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao!  
(*Goodbye beautiful*)

One morning I awakened  
And I found the invader.

Oh partisan carry me away,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
oh partisan carry me away  
Because I feel death approaching.

And if I die as a partisan,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
and if I die as a partisan  
then you must bury me.

Bury me up in the mountain,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
bury me up in the mountain  
under the shade of a beautiful flower.

And all those who shall pass,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
and all those who shall pass  
will tell me "what a beautiful flower."

This is the flower of the partisan,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
this is the flower of the partisan  
who died for freedom

## Part One: The Invader

*One morning I awakened,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao! (Goodbye beautiful)*

*One morning I awakened  
And I found the invader.*

On March 24, 1944, men and boys were gathered from the streets of Rome by Nazi forces. They were ushered into the Ardeatine caves, man-made tunnels on the outskirts of the city. Every local prisoner with a potential death sentence already stood waiting in the caves. Seventy-five Jews also stood pushed into the

tunnels. Boys as young as fifteen were pulled from the streets, men as old as seventy, all at random. Their hands were tied behind their backs, they were lined up, forced to kneel on the dying bodies of those shot before them, and executed, bodies falling on top of bodies. Three hundred thirty-five dead in hours. Those murdered were “rich, and poor, doctors and lawyers, workers and shopkeepers, artists and artisans, teachers and students, men and teenage boys from every walk of life, and even a man of God to walk among them.”<sup>5</sup> Some were tortured with blow torches, having their nails and teeth ripped from their bodies.<sup>6</sup>

The events of this day are known as the Ardeatine Massacre. Days before the massacre, an attack from the Italian resistance had successfully killed thirty-three Nazi officers. However, there was an unfathomable cost associated with any partisan success. Nazi leaders recommended that for every fascist soldier killed, ten Italians be executed, be they rebels or civilians.<sup>7</sup> Soldiers in the area were given complete immunity by their supervisors for any atrocities committed.

Ten for every one.

Three hundred thirty-three for the thirty-three.

And when Nazi leaders counted the men corralled into the caves and found 335, they chose to include five extra lives in the final count. There was a name for acts like this in Nazi occupied Italy, “*rastrellamento*.” This is to mean, the roundup/the mop up.

Six months before this brutal massacre in July 1943, Italy signed a peace agreement with the allies. The people rejected Mussolini, fascism, and the Axis powers. A prominent partisan, Ada Gobetti wrote that the days after Mussolini was removed from power felt like “a whirlwind . . . a joy . . . so superficial and free, almost with a spirit of innocence, a state of mind being on vacation.”<sup>8</sup> The armistice was a betrayal that Hitler and the German leaders would not allow. Gobetti then recalls the day that the Germans arrived in her home of Turin,

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5. Robert Katz, *The Battle for Rome: the Germans, the Allies, the Partisans, and the Pope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 23.

6. Former General Simoni was among the tortured and murdered. He was 64 years old and told his executioner before his death, “My only regret is that I was not younger because there was so much more I could have done [for my country].”

7. Richard Raiber, *Anatomy of Perjury: Field Marshal Albert Kesselring*, via Rasella, and the Ginny Mission (Newark, Delaware: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2008).

8. While this microhistory focuses almost exclusively on the stories of male partisans, it would be an extreme mistake to remove women from this narrative. Ada is a powerful example of the role that women played as a main pillar in the resistance movement.

“the absurd incredible hope that (her) heart had nourished . . . crumpled. [She] started to cry and could not stop.” Italian soldiers were locked in buildings and given the option to continue fighting with the Axis or be moved to death camps. Walking through Turin, you could see the young men and boys pushing their faces to the windows, begging every passerby to send messages to their families.

Hitler was clear that Italy was to be punished brutally for betraying the Axis. Nazi General Albert Kesselring issued the following order: “The fight against the partisans must be carried out with all the means at our disposal and with the utmost severity. I will protect any commander who exceeds our usual restraint in the choice of severity of methods he adopts against the partisans.”<sup>9</sup>

The Italian people, military leaders, and the Nazi forces were all informed of the armistice in the same moments. The prisoners of war in Italian prisons were suddenly allies, and the Germans were now enemy invaders. With no time to prepare, the Italians found themselves under attack. Allied prisoners were released and encouraged to flee quickly into neutral Switzerland.<sup>10</sup> Though the citizenry could do little more than wait and watch as the German forces poured in, women and men continued in those early days of Nazi occupation to oppose the fascist movement, organizing themselves as partisans.

The events surrounding the Ardeatine Massacre were far from unique. Men and young boys were rounded up and sent to the Russian front or to brutal work camps. Those who refused to fight for Germany were imprisoned, sentenced to camps, and killed in mass executions. On June 16, 1944, around 1,600 men were gathered up from the local factories in Genoa, put on trains, and sent to Germany. Their destination was the merciless work camps that would kill more than they spared. The remaining men and older boys were suddenly forced to decide how they would survive. There were few options. In northern Italy along the coastline, many chose to flee to the mountains, where they organized an underground resistance. This resistance, though its membership varied in philosophy and belief, is collectively known as the Partisan Movement.

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9. Kesselring, “*From Cloak and Dagger*,” 145.

This order would be used as evidence of war crimes committed against the Italians, and was used to convict Kesselring at the Nuremberg Trial.

10. One of the most fascinating Partisans stories comes from Piacenza, Italy where several POW British officers were released and chose to stay behind in Italy to build and train the resistance members. For more information, see *Captains Courageous: Gunner Gregg, Donny Mackenzie & the liberation of the Nure Valley* by Shaun Hullis.

One partisan wrote of these bleak days of early Nazi occupation: “from the despondent weariness I felt around me, from the emptiness where I seemed to find myself, initiatives and hope were born. The desire for resistance was taking shape.”<sup>11</sup>

Amidst this chaos stood a 21-year-old boy named Luciano Alessandro Righi, suddenly caught in a cross wind. He felt the rush of bodies around him, bodies put on trains never to be seen again, bodies falling in his streets, and bodies marching in to occupy his land. Weeks after Mussolini was elected Prime Minister, in November 1922, Luciano Alessandro Righi was born. His birth coincided with Mussolini’s rise to power, and their deaths would later align as well. As Luciano was learning to walk, the campaigns raged for the election of 1924. At this age of two years old, the last multiparty election in Luciano’s lifetime occurred, ushering in Mussolini’s dictatorship, and opening an era of undeniable fascism in the country. This was the only Italy Luciano would ever know.

His mother, Caffarena, died when Luciano was young, and he grew up an only son.<sup>12</sup> His father, Alessandro, raised his “dear boy” alone.<sup>13</sup> We don’t have any written memoirs of Luciano’s childhood, but what we know about who he was as a young adult helps us to draw some conclusions. Luciano was able to speak English and French, something rare even today in that region.<sup>14</sup> He was passionate about philosophy, education, and the written word. These interests and abilities speak to his above average level of education and privilege.

This privilege leads us to assume that Alessandro must have complied, at least outwardly, with the demands of the Fascist party. During Luciano’s childhood, businesses were closed for refusing to comply with Mussolini’s standards, which included simply being a party member. People would regularly

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11. Ada Gobetti, *Partisan Diary: A Woman’s Life in the Italian Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

12. Bosworth, 382.

Luciano may have been an only child as well, but we only know with certainty that he was an “only son,” as written in a letter from Luciano’s father after Italy’s liberation.

13. In the same letter referenced in the note above, Alessandro refers to Luciano as his “dear boy.”

14. Curtis Willis’s memoir mentions Luciano’s ability to hold a conversation in English. He also writes that Luciano studied in America at some point. A relative of Curtis believes that Curtis mentioned that Luciano studied in Chicago, but that has not been confirmed.

Mauthausen camp documents list French and English as languages that Luciano was fluent in.

disappear at the hands of Mussolini's secret police. Fascist policies directed his world during Luciano's adolescence, his future corralled by Mussolini's control of the people.

The streets of his youth wound down to the sea on cobblestones. Genoa was a brilliant port city with a deep history. Statues of Christopher Columbus, old churches, and sea breeze filled the city. Even in the deepest winters, it rarely froze and the sun shone.

While Luciano would see many invaders in his Italian home, Mussolini's fascism was the first. Luciano, as part of a mandatory draft, joined the fighting against the Allied powers. He served as a driver in the fascist military. Like many Italians, he was forced to fight in a war he opposed. Following the armistice in 1943, he was required to continue working for Nazi leaders.

Partisan fighters often worked to free Italian soldiers who had been forced to join with the Nazi military.<sup>15</sup> In late July 1944, Luciano would be among a group to escape, climb the mountain, and join the resistance movement. One must wonder what his father knew of his life then. When a man joined the resistance, it was said simply that he "came up the mountain."<sup>16</sup> Going up the mountain was an act of rebellion, a bold defiance of faciscm. It was to risk your own life and well-being, to be compelled to hide in the shadows, and to accept that you may never see your loved ones again.

Among these defiant souls was Luciano—a 21-year-old boy, college educated, a philosopher, musician, an only son who spoke at least three languages, who had lost his mother as a boy. He had dark hair, a crooked nose, gray eyes, and *now* he was a partisan.

## Part Two: Going up the Mountain, Carry Me Away

*Oh partisan carry me away,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
oh partisan carry me away  
Because I feel death approaching.*

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15. Tom Behan, *The Italian Resistance Fascists, Guerrillas and the Allies* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

16. Berto Bartolomeo Ferrari, *Sulla Montagna con i Partigiani*.



Only two weeks after Luciano officially enlisted with the Partisans, on August 20th 1944, an American pilot named Curtis L. Willis stood on an island off the coast of western Italy. He reflected on the options in front of him. Planes took off all around, ruffling the short red hair that was his most distinctive feature. In front of him was a P-38 reconnaissance aircraft. This particular plane had a reputation for faultiness and carried with it a general aura of bad luck. Without it though, there would not be enough planes to complete all the missions at hand. He pulled out his flight log, and logged the plane—he would take it out today on a reconnaissance mission.<sup>17</sup>

His objective was the photographing of a key bridge in the Po Valley. The Allies were close to liberating Italy from Nazi occupation and were in the preparatory stages of their final offensive. Before embarking, he was briefed regarding a partisan stronghold near Genoa. Should something go awry, his best bet would be to land as near to there as possible. Just after 11 am, Curtis entered the plane and flew toward northern Italy.<sup>18</sup>

Almost immediately after crossing enemy lines, his plane began billowing dark smoke, alerting Nazi forces to his location. A pair of German aircraft soon began following, forcing him to continue onward rather than abort the mission and return to the Allied base. His instruments began to malfunction, and he was left with very few choices. Given the state of his plane, there was no way to escape his pursuers. And so, he continued his northward flight, deeper into enemy territory. His only option was to hope that the partisan stronghold was still intact, and that he could somehow find them. As his plane entered a bank of clouds, he bailed out. In an effort to elude the Nazi pilots that followed him, he tucked his knees into his chest so that he might be mistaken for a piece of tumbling debris, and prayed. “He . . . launched with a parachute and descended near the lakes of Olbicello, just within the Partisan area.”

“At 11 o’ clock he was still at the canteen in an aviation team in Sardinia, just before 12 o’ clock he was already a partisan.” Curtis’s journey with the partisans would last for several months. Within a few days, he had joined the Carlos Divisione de Garibaldi. The camp was made up of about 200 partisans, mostly men. Among these partisans was a man named Morris (Moritz). This name was a cover to protect his family, but he shared with Curtis one night that his given name was Luciano Righi.<sup>19</sup> Curtis would take the name “Red” as his battle name while with the partisans.

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17. Curtis Willis flight log, Aug. 1944.

18. Curtis Willis, Ms., *My Time with the Partisans* (University of Utah, n.d.).

19. Wilhelm, 69.

Curtis wrote of Luciano after the war in the fall of 1945, saying that he had become his "best friend."<sup>20</sup> His ability to speak English fluently drew them even closer together. Luciano was an intellectual and would keep them up at night discussing the war, the source of these invaders, and the future of Italy. To him, they were not fighting Nazis, or Mussolini, or any other single army; they were fighting fascism. This was a war of philosophies and morals. His dream was to liberate Italy through rebirth and education. Words and ideas would be what won back their country from more than 20 years of a sleep-like death. Every spare moment was spent discussing and planning.

Often, nights would grow too dark for discussions of a new Italy. The Germans were now more aggressive than ever. The rastallamente was growing, round-ups reaching further and further up into the mountains. The deaths were increasingly brutal, often completely unprovoked, gathering innocent men and women.

Ten for every one.

The goal of the Nazis was not justice, but the demoralization and conquest of the Italian people. It was at times like these that Luciano would stray from his normal talk of politics and philosophy. Sitting next to Curtis, the small young man would instead play the guitar he carried with him through the mountains. On one such night, a fellow partisan named Don Berto recounts the feelings that came from his music:

Everyone ponders. Everyone's imagination processes the same images, the same paintings. The thought of all and one is identical: your own distant home. What will our loved ones do? What will they say of us?

How much melancholy in our homes- even if they are crowded, they will feel our absence. And who will suffer for us more than our mothers, certainly in this moment our mother's will always think of us, everyday. How many spasms and how much pain for her poor heart! Our mother's soul will muster a prayer.<sup>21</sup>

A soft voice awakens us from that dream. Bill had sung a partisan song. In an instant everyone formed a chorus. The powerful voice of all the partisans. The mighty voice of all the partisans rose to the heavens. It seemed that everyone wanted their song to carry to their home. The ears of their mothers, to console them.

"The wind ceases, calm is the storm, the partisan returns home"

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20. Curtis L. Willis, *Memoirs of Curtis L. Willis*.

21. Bartolomeo, 157.

Moritz accompanied us on his guitar.<sup>22</sup> He was back in good spirits. The singing had made us rediscover the joy and enthusiasm of the whole day. The enthusiasm of all time.<sup>23</sup>

In mid September, Curtis and Luciano would experience the roundup personally. The Germans would often surround an area with a strong partisan presence and close in, killing any men within the circle. One evening, Curtis and Luciano received notice that thousands of fascist mount troops, known as *Alpinis*, were closing in on the area. Soon after being warned, the area was bombed. They packed immediately in the night and spent the next three days slowly working around German offensives.

Curtis writes, “we slipped through the German enclosure and concealed ourselves in a small grove of trees about one-half mile from the German headquarters near Genoa. We stayed there under their noses for four days while they searched for us.”<sup>24</sup> While waiting in this grove of trees with Luciano, they saw hundreds of B12 and B24 American aircrafts fly overhead during an air raid on German camps in Genoa and the surrounding area. In the weeks and months that Curtis spent with Luciano and the partisans, he would see signs of the allied movement and success in southern Italy. Curtis writes that he lost about “twenty-five pounds on this trip due to food shortage and hard traveling.” They traveled by foot, carrying more than 50 pounds each in makeshift packs. After several more days in hiding, this small group of partisans was able to return to their original camp- most other groups were not so lucky. In those weeks, hundreds of other partisans were captured and killed in these same roundups.

Despite the brutality of the Nazis’ retaliation, the partisans continued to gain ground through guerilla warfare. They would attack then withdraw, back to the sheltering safety of the mountains. Their numbers had grown to an estimated 100,000 and were growing quickly. In the next six months this number would more than double to 250,000. Allied forces were continuing their slow advance north from southern Italy with the help of the partisans. In northern Italy the partisans were isolated from almost all allied support. However, with the aid of occasional airdrops, even this northern resistance was able to gain complete autonomy in certain remote towns. The more success the partisans saw, the more brutal the German occupation became. German General

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22. Code name for Luciano Righi.

23. Bartolomeo, 67.

24. Willis.

Kesselring wrote in his memoir "It was clear to me . . . that the partisans might critically affect the retirement of my armies. The best (Nazi) troops were only just good enough to be used in fighting (the partisans)."<sup>25</sup>

In the final days of September, Curtis and Luciano parted ways. Curtis was moving to a new division in the slopes of Mount Antilla where U.S. paratroopers were stationed, staging coming airdrops that would provide life-giving resources to the partisans in the mountains near Genoa. Luciano would continue with the Carlos division. Luciano gave Curtis his family's address in Genoa, and they promised to reconnect in a liberated Italy.

### Part Three: The Fight, And if I die

*And if I die as a partisan,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
and if I die as a partisan  
then you must bury me.*

In October of 1944, a young and unassuming man walked through Tiglieto, close to the coast. Bartolomeo Ferrari Berto was on his way to visit his sister in town. As soon as the rain stopped, he would climb the mountain to Rosilione, and his sister would follow in the coming days. He knew he could expect hospitality upon his arrival in the mountains. He was a partisan and a priest and there was always help for the partisans in his commune. The climb was not abnormal for him, as he often traveled by foot going from towns to partisan strongholds, bringing with him both information and comfort.

Often, he followed death. Don Berto was a priest to the partisans in the Mingo/Carlos Division. His job was to bury the dead, redeem the living, and educate the masses.<sup>26</sup> Over the course of the Nazi occupation, his feet traveled thousands of miles through the mountains. He acted as spy, informer, consoler, and, most importantly, Father to the partisans. During the roundups, he spent days blessing and burying the dead, offering their final sacraments. After roundups, he would go into town and speak of forgiveness. He led funeral marches for the dead unflinchingly through Nazi-occupied Italy and blessed the partisans openly.

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25. Raiber.

26. Bartolomeo.

In the summer of 1944, he, along with others, began to gather printing equipment with the goal of printing and distributing anti-fascist partisan propaganda. He believed, with Luciano and others, that education would be the greatest tool in overthrowing fascism and the Nazi regime. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was to organize and publish the newspaper of the Mingo/Carlos Division.

In the endeavor to free Italy from intellectual slavery, he enlisted the help of Luciano. They and a few others, including one new recruit with the code name Aldo, set to the task of creating a newspaper. Initially titled “Il Ribelle” (*The Rebel*), the paper was meant to be a testament to the resistance against fascism and Nazism. The name was later changed to “Il Patriota” (*The Patriot*). This movement was not about rebellion; it was to reclaim the Italy that they knew still lived somewhere. The task was arduous, requiring printing presses, paper, material, and ideas.

Nestled within their early editions was the following prose:

In this decisive moment in which all of our will is strained from the luminous goal of liberation/freedom/liberty. We must unite together in our conviction, our ideals, to temper the spirit and the weapons of the resolute phase of a battle that is now turning to a victorious conclusion. This is the goal of our little newspaper, to reflect all of our lives, to educate and more than anything to re-educate our soul to sincerity to honesty to acts and to thoughts, to lucidity and objectives to views and analysis to love of the homeland and to brotherhood, to the right sensation all these values.

We have had a sad twenty years of awe and moral degradation that has, if not destroyed, at least slept in all of us.

**Everything we write and read in our newspaper will be a living expression of this common desire of rebirth.**<sup>27</sup>

Despite Luciano’s dream of a newspaper, the roundups were increasing. In late October, the paper was nearing its maiden printing. Gathering the materials needed for printing was incredibly dangerous, and possession of such materials was punishable by death with no trial. Luciano, Don Berto, and Aldo kept the equipment at a sympathetic family’s farmhouse in Mertolla, south of Genoa. They were always prepared to hide the materials to protect the lives of all those who lived there.

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27. Bartolomeo, “Il Ribelle.”

## Part Four: Bury Me

*Bury me up in the mountain,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
bury me up in the mountain  
under the shade of a beautiful flower.*

In November 1944, the weather began to turn to winter for the last time in Mussolini's Italy. There was a pervasive sense that liberation was near: the Allies were continuing to move their line steadily northward, and the Partisans were maintaining their own strongholds. However, the threat had not passed. While it may have been tempting to lean into the warmth and promise of the coming spring, this winter would yet prove cold, deep, and permanent for some. German forces had begun their boldest effort yet to destroy the partisans with roundup—a winter-long, brutal effort to find and destroy all resistance. Though the German forces would later be held responsible for the war crimes of that winter, this offered little comfort to the hundreds of men and boys slaughtered in mass executions with no trial.

As the weather turned, Luciano's brigade found refuge in a farmhouse beside the river in Mertolla. On November 17th, the morning crept in with a heavy fog and quiet stillness. Tullin, a partisan who often took early-morning lookouts, sat watch as his partisan family slept among the farmhouses. Perhaps because of the darkness, perhaps because of the fog, approaching German forces went unnoticed until they had almost come upon the group. Tullin raised the alarm, and the partisans immediately began disappearing into the woods and traveling down the river. Even with the late warning, all were able to escape. All, except for those who chose to stay behind. Luciano and Aldo scrambled to hide and destroy evidence of the partisan newspaper.

Luciano and Aldo, understanding the need for a potential hiding place, had prepared a foxhole several days in advance. It was completely camouflaged and indiscernible from the surrounding forest. They made it into their shelter in the final moments before the Germans descended on the farmhouse and began their search. Luciano hid with Aldo, breathing shallowly and listening intently. He soon recognized a familiar voice among the Germans. He knew the voice as one of his partisan comrades. The voice was even and calm as it came closer to their spot, leading the Germans to their foxhole. They had been revealed by a traitor to the rebels.<sup>28</sup>

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28. Bartolomeo.

Aldo was pulled from the hole first, then Luciano. The cold air bit at their skin as they were forced to load the German vehicles with any valuables left behind, and burn the farmer's land and equipment. This was their first day of captivity. Don Berto outlined all he knew of Aldo and Luciano's story after being captured.

The evening after beating down the local citizens in their houses, the Germans left the area. The people of Garonne later spoke of what happened, Moritz and Aldo were exhausted. It was from more than hard work, they were demoralized. Maybe they were omens of what awaited.<sup>29</sup>

The journey north began soon after for Aldo and Luciano. They were close to the home where Luciano's father was still living, but he had no opportunity to bid him farewell before moving further north. Eventually they traveled by train, making their way toward what would be their final destination in Melk, Germany.

The news arrived to us in the mountains in the following days. That made us see the long and hard Calvary, after they were taken to Marassi, the student house, and Bolzano, and ultimately to one of the hellish concentration camps in Germany.<sup>30</sup>

As they traveled in brutal conditions, the Mingo division published its first edition of *The Patriot* and distributed it through all the local communities. The words seemed to catch fire. Don Berto buried a copy of the first printing in a tin box, preserving at least one copy for Luciano, should he ever have the chance to return. In the months of Luciano's imprisonment, 11 more editions were printed.

Only weeks after Luciano's arrest, Curtis journeyed south into safety, arriving at Florence behind Allied lines. Luciano continued north, not knowing if his American friend had survived.

The beautiful hills of Austria offer a strange contrast to the hellish camps constructed in the countryside. Luciano and Aldo were first taken to the base camp at Mauthausen. The trains that carried them stopped almost two miles from the camp, where the prisoners began their march through town. People watched on,

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29. Bartolomeo.

30. Bartolomeo.

witnessing the fate of those who had dared to question Hitler's authority and resist his regime. How different this town of complacency was to the villages in the hills that previously hid them.

Luciano's name was replaced with the number 114085. It was tattooed onto his arm. His information was recorded:

Last name: Righi

First name: Luciano

Born: November 26, 1922 in Genova

Status: single

Father: Alessandro

Admitted: December 19, 1944

Reason: Protection given to Allies

Size: 5'2", slim face, green eyes, crooked nose, normal ears, 2 missing teeth, black hair

The camp at Melk was classified as stage 3, the toughest of camps, reserved for the "incurable political enemies of the Reich."<sup>31</sup> Upon arriving, prisoners were ushered through the front gates into a courtyard where all were beaten brutally by the guards. Many died in these first moments. The Jews among the prisoners rarely lived longer than 24 hours. Suicide rates were high, with prisoners throwing themselves into the massive charged fences along the perimeter. They died slowly from the burns. The so-called infirmary was a place of death, where the only treatments offered were lethal injections.

After the beatings, Luciano and Aldo were deemed strong enough to be moved to the granite mines, a sub-camp. Here, the means of execution was death by labor. Luciano and the other slaves spent every day carrying granite up the "stairs of death" until they collapsed from exhaustion. At this point, they were either executed, or more likely left to succumb to the elements. In the isolation of the camp, Aldo and Luciano received no news of the outside world. But they were just 4 months from liberation. They just had to survive for 4 months. The average life expectancy for a prisoner in the quarries was less than eight weeks.

I went down to the city after the liberation, and we reunited with great joy to dear Aldo, who returned healthy and safe from Germany.

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31. Amy Schmidt and Gudrun Loehrer, *The Mauthausen Concentration Camp Complex: World War II and Postwar Records* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2008).



He brought us the sad news of the death of Moritz. One sad day, he had been thrown into a crematorium.<sup>32</sup>

Surviving camp records show that Luciano died April 2, 1945. Mauthausen and the surrounding sub-camps were liberated 2 weeks later. The records held in the Italian Partisan Archives state that Luciano “died for the fight for liberation,” the highest honor given to fallen partisans.

The news was another blow to our comrade hearts. Who didn't love Moritz? All the partisans remembered him with deep sadness. How many evenings he had cheered us up with the sound of his guitar! How many times did he entertain us with his long philosophical reflections!<sup>33</sup>

While attending college in Utah, Curtis wrote to Luciano several times in the later months. His letters received no response. Finally, after almost a year, he received a piece of mail back from Luciano's father, Alessandro Righi. Alessandro wrote of his “dear boy,” whom he would never see again.<sup>34</sup> With the letter he sent a copy of a memoir written by Don Berto, the Catholic priest who had loved his son, and a small photograph of Luciano's youthful face. Luciano had been beaten to death, he wrote. Though the camp records state he died in the infirmary, we know there was no true care given. This was a place of death. He wrote that he could never escape the “everlasting sorrow.”<sup>35</sup> Alessandro now lived in reborn Italy, one dreamt of by his son. And Curtis never removed the picture of Luciano from his home.

The day before Luciano's recorded death, the Allied forces began their final campaign in northern Italy. On April 2nd, Luciano's death was attributed to severe beatings. Three weeks later, on April 28th, Mussolini was captured by partisan fighters, executed and hung upside down in the Milan square, 90 miles north of Luciano's boyhood home.<sup>36</sup>

Just one month after Luciano's death, Italy was liberated from Nazi forces. In Austria, Luciano's surviving inmates were liberated from Mauthausen Camp by Allied forces. Aldo was released and returned to a reborn Italy where he

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32. Bartolomeo.

33. Bartolomeo.

34. Alessandro Righi, *Letter to Curtis Willis*.

35. Alessandro Righi, *Letter to Curtis Willis*.

36. Bosworth.

reunited with Don Berto. The Partisan movement of rebirth and liberation was finally successful.

## Epilogue: All Those Who Shall Pass, Bella Ciao

*And all those who shall pass,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
and all those who shall pass  
will tell me "what a beautiful flower."*

*This is the flower of the partisan,  
oh bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao  
this is the flower of the partisan  
who died for freedom*

In 2018 I found a letter in an old trunk. The letter was from Luciano's father to my grandfather, Curtis Willis, an American pilot rescued by the partisans. The letter was a response to Curtis's most recent attempt to contact Luciano after returning home from the war. Though hard to read, the tear-stained letter with its compact, sloping cursive is seared in my memory. Alessandro wrote of his "dear boy" and of his "everlasting sorrow," knowing Luciano's body would never come home.

Soon after reading the letter, I found out that I was pregnant with my first child, and as I lay in bed that night I thought of my hopes and dreams for my child. I thought of Luciano's father, his everlasting sorrow. I thought of how he too must have had dreams for his child, and how those dreams were unwillingly sacrificed for my own. His dreams for his son, ripped from his hands, and my dreams for my daughter made possible. That night I curled my body around my stomach and thought of my own existence, the life of my child, and the survival of my grandfather, Curtis Willis, who would never have made it home from war without Luciano Alessandro.

The next year, in 2019, I stood in the basement of an "infirmary" in Northern Austria within the Mauthausen Concentration Camp. The room to my right was a crematorium, and the room to my left was a gas chamber. The room I stood in had been transitioned into an archive of over 83,000 names, with Luciano Righi's name among them. It was a list of the dead.

The day was cold and windy, and the camp was nearly empty. My husband was carrying our six month old daughter as we toured the area. There are no

words to offer in such a place, and so we were mostly silent. I realized here that I have always studied this part of history by averting my gaze a bit, by looking right beside the atrocity, not letting my eyes really focus in or settle on what I was reading. On this day there was nowhere for me to look to escape the raw reality of what had happened here. A nearby woman asked a guide, “How could anyone have ever done this to a human being? I could never be capable of this.”

The man responded by pointing at my daughter and I, and asking me “What would you be willing to do to prevent your baby from being here? Would you allow some stranger to take her place? Would you be willing to help put that person here to protect your daughter?” I have considered that question many nights since. And again, I am grateful that my child is safe. And again, I am grieved by the loss of a son, a dear boy and the “everlasting sorrow” of Luciano’s father.

*And should I die as a partisan  
you must carry me  
and bury me up there in the mountains  
O beautiful farewell  
Bella Ciao*