

Italy's people and the crisis of 1943

DIANA RUZZENE GROLLO

HISTORIANS of the modern Italian experience regard the year 1943 as the turning point of that people's history. The year marked the end of Mussolini's regime and the collapse of the Italian military, so the cry went up, 'Tutti a casa' ('Everyone, go home!') Peasant families were hit hard in 1943, as Diana Ruzzene Grollo explains in her autobiography, *Growing through the brick floor* (1997). She describes how her father, Giovanni Ruzzene, was making his way back from the Russian Front to his own home township of Mure, Treviso.

The Retreat

The 8a Armata Italiana had originally been divided into two sections – the South Block and the North Block. The South Block included the Divisioni Sforzesca, Torino, Ravenna, Celere and Pasubio. The North Block consisted of the Divisioni Julia, Cunesse, Tridentina, Vicenza and Cosseria. There had been several German divisions between the two blocks. All these divisions were stationed between Stalingrad and Belgorod along the Don and Donets Rivers.

“*The cry went up,
'Tutti a casa' ('Everyone,
go home!')*”

By December 22 some of the Torino, Pasubio and German divisions were encircled by the Russian army at Arbusow. The fighting lasted three days, with heavy casualties. The Axis units retreated to the town of Tscherkowo and again were encircled. Bedeschi claimed that the

Italians needed help but had no communication with their superiors. In late December the Italian General Pezzi and Colonel Bocchelti flew in to review the situation but, when they flew out, their plane was shot down. The encircled divisions were left to sort out their own problems because so many officers had died. “La forza controllata al 31 dicembre è di circa 7000 militari di cui circa 3800 feriti e congelati. Ma anche i rimanenti non sono in buone condizioni.”¹

By January 1943 it was clear that the Armata was encircled, along with many German, Romanian and Hungarian divisions, as well as the entire German 6th Army in Stalingrad. This army was under the command of General Paulus who was ordered by Hitler to remain and fight. It has been claimed that Stalin would not allow a city named after him to be overrun by the enemy; equally adamantly Hitler wanted it destroyed. While General Paulus and the 6th Army remained in Stalingrad, the other divisions began to fight their way out of the circle and to retreat. The semicircle had a radius of several hundred kilometres, with Stalingrad its most westerly point. The divisions caught further in the circle had a tougher time getting out as the circle tightened. Communications were so bad that some divisions found themselves going from one clash to another, simply because they did not know where the enemy was.

It became obvious by mid-January that the Axis armies near Stalino, Stalingrad, Voroshilovgrad and along the Don River would become prisoners unless they were able to break out. "This rear attack by Russian troops was successful partly because the Germans were forced to send to the front their rear security troops, whose primary functions had been the protection of the German and Axis army's communication."²

Giovanni recalled that it was on January 14, 1943, at morning assembly at the depot that "Colonel Buonincontro, crying and highly distressed, barely able to speak, told us we were all prisoners. I was in a state of shock. It was all incomprehensible to me as, after all, the war seemed so far away. Nevertheless, we were ordered to make some attempt at freedom and to be prepared to evacuate on the day. The plan was to head towards the cities of Kharkov or Gomel. The entire depot was in a frenzy and within several hours we were all ready to depart with a small convoy of trucks. We of the 6th Automobilistico also joined the slow-moving amalgamation of other retreating divisions of the Axis.

"After a day of travelling, having suffered air raids, clashes with the enemy and still trapped inside the enemy circle, Colonel Buonincontro realised that the entire depot was left full of new machinery - a feast for the advancing Russian army. He summoned six of his men, including me, and commanded us to return and destroy the depot. I do not know on what criteria the other men were selected, but I was chosen as punishment for having been late for morning assembly several days earlier. It was a very harsh punishment as I was compelled to return towards the advancing Russian armies, making any chance of escape even more improbable. I was appalled by this, because the Colonel should have ordered it done before we left.

"One truck was sent back and the trip was much quicker because we were travelling against the traffic and the driver wanted to get the work over quickly. We remained there three days, destroying everything from papers to huge armoured motors and trucks. We built huge fires to burn tyres and papers and, with

sledgehammers, destroyed everything else. It was like a frenzy of madness. I felt a sense of shame that such beautiful machinery should be so wantonly destroyed."³

By January 19 the six men were back in the long, slowly-moving convoy. Their unit had moved on, so there were no officers to give them orders. The Russian planes often swept down to drop bombs and there were constant skirmishes with Russian soldiers.

A corridor had been opened through the circle by the German divisions. This gave everyone hope of escape, but getting to it was difficult. The retreating Italian soldiers on foot had to fight cold, hunger and thirst, because no supplies were dropped. The German units in the convoy had some radio contact and regular drops of supplies and ammunition. According to De Laugier and Bedeschi the Germans received orders and information about the whereabouts of the enemy direct from their superiors, whereas "noi non avemmo il bene di veder apparire nel cielo nulla che ci recasse la gioia di un contatto, la sensazione di un collegamento; se una sola volta fossimo stati sorvolati da un aeroplanino coi contrassegni tricolori, all'istante ci si sarebbero duplicate le forze."⁴ De Laugier and Bedeschi claim that when it was learned in Italy that 100,000 Italian soldiers were trapped behind enemy lines, many Italian pilots had requested to fly in with supplies, but their requests were denied.

One Italian Alpino in the long convoy recorded in mid-January. "Noi della Julia marciammo per tutto il giorno e la notte; eravamo stati fermi un mese intero nelle trincee di neve, i muscoli delle gambe erano fuori allenamento, la fatica a procedere era enorme, di notte si camminava a tentoni, nel buio ansimando, nessuno voleva restare indietro perchè tutti capivano che il fermarsi e restare soli significava morire assiderati, con quei trenta, trentacinque gradi sotto zero."⁵

Originally, the retreating soldiers had hoped to reach the city of Kharkov and from there to get transport onwards. But unknown to them, Kharkov was under Russian control so on arrival there they realised they had to march towards Gomel in the Ukraine.

Giovanni's truck had ran out of fuel the day after joining the convoy. Along the way the truck had picked up sick or weak soldiers, but now everyone had to walk. The retreating convoy of men, mules, sleds and a few machines was sometimes 30 kilometres long.

Bedeschi describes one scene: "La neve ha una striscia rossa di sangue per 2-3 chilometri. é uno spettacolo orrendo."⁶ The convoy was so long that those at the front had to wait for orders from the officers, who were in the middle. It also meant that those at the front either received or confiscated food, shelter and transport from the local people, but those at the rear - the Italians - got nothing. The Germans, who received regular supplies and were at the front, had first pickings of the pillage from the local houses.

Giovanni chose to sleep in stables or chicken coops, even if there was room in the houses. He believed there was less chance of enemy soldiers or partisans charging in with hand grenades. He always felt respect and gratitude towards the Ukrainian people, who were kind to the Italian soldiers, even though they had participated in attacking their country. The local people willingly shared their food and shelter with the Italians. However, this kindness was not extended to the German soldiers. On my visit to the Ukraine I was told that the local people liked the Italians because they were friendly and happy. The Italians sang, played music and tried to communicate, whereas the Germans were hostile towards the occupied people. Nikita Khrushchev, a former leader of the Soviet Union who had soldiered in the Donets Basin during the war, also said that he had respect and admiration for the Italian soldiers. In 1961 he said: "Italians had fought very well and we assumed that they would have had some hatred against us (Russians) but, instead, they were basically good natured-people. I interrogated many prisoners, yet they did not display any hatred of an enemy."⁷

Corporal Ruzzene marched onwards. He saw 'the infamy' of the German trucks carrying their own soldiers yet, when an Italian soldier clung onto the side of the truck for respite, someone from within would hit out with a rifle or smash the hands or head of the unfortunate non-German soldier. This infuriated many Italians. After all, they were supposed to be allies and able to share any supplies or assistance that was received. By comparison with the other Italian soldiers, Giovanni was fit and healthy because he had not endured the hardships of the men in the snowy trenches.

One day he saw on the side of the road the familiar face of a man who was obviously in a lot of pain. It was Toni Retti. The two had often met during their military training and both came from Veneto. Toni, too, recognised Giovanni. Toni had been shot in a skirmish with the enemy outside the last town. Giovanni tried to make him comfortable and sat with him for some time. They spoke of home and shared Giovanni's cigarettes. Giovanni found himself in a dilemma. The convoy was moving on but he could not leave his comrade to die like a dog on the side of the road. Toni told Giovanni to go and not worry about him. Finally, just as Giovanni had decided to do as his friend suggested, he saw the Red Cross doctors and called out to them to attend to his injured friend. Giovanni then said goodbye and caught up with the the convoy. (After the war Toni arrived at Giovanni's house on crutches. His leg had been amputated. He came to thank Giovanni for his act of kindness, which had given him hope. He had lain on the side of the road for a long time, yet few had bothered to talk with him.⁸)

Giovanni continued his journey towards freedom. He scrounged for food and sheltered in chicken coops or barns. While these places were warm, they were also full of fleas and lice. It was impossible to bathe or change clothes and some of the soldiers had not done so for several months. On their retreat they had taken only their rifles and some ammunition and many had thrown away even these

because they were heavy to carry. Now there was another enemy - fleas that caused itching and painful sores.

Bedeschi wrote of his experience: "Le uniche forze che ci salvavano dall' abbandonarci su quella neve furono, la fiducia in Dio, l'amore per la famiglia che ci chiamava da lontano, e la volont  di uscire a tutti i costi da quel mare di ghiaccio per ritornare alla vita fra la nostra gente."⁹

Gomel, still a free city behind the Russian troops, had become everyone's destination. Most of the Alpini from Divisione Julia marched the 1300 kilometres from the war front to Gomel. Because they had been stationed to the north, they initially headed towards the city of Kharkov, hoping that the trains could transport them to Gomel. However, because the tracks had been destroyed and Kharkov was controlled by the Russian soldiers, they had to keep marching out of the frozen hell, many dying on the way.

Giovanni was more to the south, so he was one of the lucky ones. He was able to go part of the way by train before the lines were destroyed.

In the second week of February, soldiers of the Axis armies began to arrive in Gomel. Once they had arrived in the town, the Italian soldiers were reassembled and transferred to Poland or back to Italy. The remains of the 6th Parco Automobilistico and other similar units were reassembled in Poland in the town of Rova Rusca.

Giovanni, like the others, was given a clean uniform and had all his hair cut off to get rid of the fleas. He stayed there, with what was left of his unit, for three months' rest, until the military could decide where to torture them next.

The Torino division left the Don River with 11,000 men. It arrived in Starobelsk with 1200 men.¹⁰ A total of 85,000 men died or were lost, 30,000 were wounded or frozen and 11,000 were taken prisoner. (They were gradually released, the last in 1954). More than half of the 8a Armata was destroyed. Recently a war monument was built in Udine - Il Tempio Nazionale di Cargnacco - in memory of the men who died serving on the Russian Front.

Corporal Ruzzene returned to Italy in late May 1943, after having been absent for one year. On his return he was seconded to the barracks in Udine, not far from his home, and was given leave for three weeks. Many things had changed, especially Giovanni himself. He felt a sense of total helplessness. After the few weeks at home, he received orders to report to the Ponci Ponci barracks near Siena. Again he left Maria holding Francesco on the railway platform. He was off to another theatre of war - to resist would have meant being court martialled and imprisoned; to go could mean death or prison. It was a Catch 22 situation.

The unexpected change of barracks was due to a new development in the war. In July, the King and anti-Fascist ministers in the cabinet, including Marshall Badoglio, had wanted to negotiate a peace treaty with the Allies and made Mussolini a

prisoner. This seemed the only solution, as the Allies were approaching Italy from Africa and the outlook for Italy was becoming increasingly gloomy. At this time Giovanni, with his division, was preparing to go south to fight the Allies' advance.

Armistice

The call for an armistice by the head of the Italian state, King Victor Emmanuel III, and several ministers, was not quite as spontaneous as the Italian people were led to believe. It came after several months of negotiation and debates with the Allies. By July 1943 Italy realised that too many battles were being lost and, even when the Allies landed in Sicily, there was little resistance by its people. The King had wanted to topple Mussolini and make peace with the Allies. He, Field Marshal Badoglio and Ivan Bonomi aspired to organise a new government. This was within the powers set out in the Italian constitution of 1848. The monarchy had supreme power, even over Mussolini. The Duce objected to this return of government to a traditional order and was subsequently incarcerated. After this development, Hitler's armies flooded over the Alps in reprisal. The new Italian government began to negotiate with the Allies, but rather indecisively. According to historian Richard Lamb, the inability of the new government to work with the Allies and organise air landings, "lost a heaven sent opportunity to emerge from the war fighting side by side with U.S. troops against the Germans".¹¹ Perhaps the indecisiveness of the new government arose from the fact that it did not want to offer outright support to the Allies for fear of even worse reprisals by the German armies already in Italy. The King and Badoglio may have envisaged Italy as neutral, rather than changing sides. However, while not offering armoured support to the Allies initially, the King did announce the armistice on September 5, as had been agreed. The King's radio message ordered Italians not to fight the British and Americans and to resist attacks from wherever they came.

The following day the King and most of the new government left Rome for the safety of Brindisi and the Allies. The Germans, feeling betrayed by Italy, attacked the troops of their former ally, in barracks and everywhere. Many Italian soldiers were shot or sent to Germany in cattle wagons, but many escaped and went home.

From September 8, 1943 to May 1, 1945 Italy and its people were in a state of chaos. Eric Morris claims that "the so-called civilised world has watched aghast at the atrocities committed in what was once Yugoslavia. Much the same happened in Italy 45 years earlier. The Italians in the north emerged from the artificiality of Fascism hungry, discredited, the objects of derision, 'cornuti e mazziati' - cuckolded and beaten up."¹² It was in this chaos that Giovanni and Maria had to live.

Giovanni had been in Ponci Ponci barracks in Siena, waiting with his unit to travel south to stop the Allies' advance. He said that by September 13 the barracks were in chaos. Everyone was in a state of shock. The soldiers did not know what was expected of them, and their superiors had no orders to issue. By September 14

German soldiers had disarmed about 56 Italian divisions and partially disarmed 29 others. The Germans also took control in central Italy, which included the mountain lodge where Mussolini was being held prisoner. The Duce was freed by the Germans and taken to Vienna. After discussions with Hitler, Mussolini was installed as head of the republican government established at Salò on Lake Garda. However, most politicians and historians agree that all power was in the hands of Hitler, and Mussolini was a puppet.

Giovanni avoided being shot or taken prisoner and headed for home. The first thing he did was to discard his uniform and buy civilian clothes to avoid il rastrellamento (the 'raking' or rounding up) by the Germans. The rastrellamento was used by Germany in its occupied territories. It was a way of scrutinising everybody. In the cities several blocks would be surrounded by the military and

everyone would be forced out into the street. A systematic search was made room by room and, when it was finished, the searchers would move to the next street.

Now this system was also being used in Italy. At first the trains and army barracks were 'raked' of soldiers and later, able-bodied civilians were also taken.

Giovanni threw away everything that might indicate his status. The only thing he kept were his military papers, hidden inside his newly-acquired gymnastic shoes. Then he

bought a train ticket for Venice. But just as the train began to leave, it was stopped by German soldiers. Everyone was ordered to line up on the platform. Giovanni was petrified with fear, more so, when two men made a run for it and were shot in the back. All men in uniform were taken away, including all those who wore army boots. The rest of the travellers were allowed to reboard, including Giovanni. He was relieved when the train set off again.

However, his peace was short-lived, because within a few hours the train was stopped again. This time the German soldiers were checking all identity papers. Giovanni eased his way to the back of the crowd on the pretence of relieving himself and quickly hid behind some trees. He was terrified. After some time the train began to move and the German soldiers left with more prisoners in their trucks. Giovanni was left behind and spent several days walking near the tracks and in the fields. After two days he decided to board a home bound train. It was stopped for a check for anyone in uniform and again Giovanni missed the raking. That same evening the train was stopped for another check. This time Giovanni alighted unseen just before it stopped, and took cover in a stock wagon on the tracks nearby. He found a large round of cheese and was set for the night.



Dante Tesoriero and a mate in the Australian army in New Guinea during World War II. From the IARP collection.

The next night he caught another train heading towards Trieste. Once it had crossed the Piave river he jumped off. He decided to walk the rest of the way and not take any chance of being captured in the town of Oderzo. Giovanni knew this area well, and walked through fields and back roads, avoiding the towns, until he reached his sister's farm near Motta di Livenza. I suppose his retreat in Russia had taught him how to avoid been caught and where it was best to walk.

The family was ecstatic to see him alive and well. Giovanni's young nephew was sent to tell Maria that Giovanni had returned. The boy escorted Maria back to the house, which was about a kilometre from Mure in the middle of the fields. The sight of her husband's clothes was ridiculous considering the gravity of the situation. The shoes were later referred to as shoes for a ladro di galline (a chicken thief). However, it was most likely that those shoes saved him, as it was difficult to find ordinary shoes in war time.

Giovanni remained at his sister's house for several days as it was off the main road and the young nephews could keep a lookout in case the partigiani or German soldiers arrived. Now Giovanni was no longer in a position to tell who the enemy was. Maria remained for the night, then returned home to continue her everyday life, if for no other reason than to stop anyone suspecting that Giovanni might have deserted. Giovanni returned home several days later, in the middle of the night, so that no one would see him.

A total of 600,000 Italian soldiers were taken to Germany, plus 10,000 civilians. These people lived in prison camps and were forced to work in factories and on farms so that Germans could join the army. This policy did not create a good image with the civilians of the occupied territories. In the rastrellamento in Italy, Jews, able-bodied Italian men and recently released Allied prisoners of war, were all 'raked up'.

My uncle Bepi Naresi became a victim of the rastrellamento. Naresi had been exempted from conscription because he was a sole parent and also manager of Contessa Wiel's vast estate. In late 1943 he was in Motta di Livenza on business when he was rounded up. Though his papers were in order he was taken prisoner and sent to Germany. His family was in shock. They had heard that civilians were being taken to Germany but had not believed it. These prison camps were known to ill-treat prisoners with hard work and poor food. On many occasions Mussolini tried to get Hitler to improve the conditions at the camps but his requests fell on deaf ears. No one heard of Bepi until the U.S. soldiers liberated the prison camps in May 1945.

It has been claimed by historians that at the time the armistice was declared, there were 65,000 Allied soldiers imprisoned in Italy north of Rome. Some of them were taken to Germany for labour, others escaped to join the Allied advance and others joined the partisans.

Clearly, Giovanni and Maria had every reason to fear the rastrellamento. Giovanni hid indoors during the day and ventured out for walks at night. One day a group of German soldiers approached the house. The family dog, which was tied up, kept barking at the strangers. Maria was in the kitchen with three-year-old Francesco while Giovanni was in the stable. Fear shot through Maria. She picked up the boy and walked out to meet the intruders to prevent them going further. In halting Italian one asked a few questions about the area and the people who lived there, saying they were looking for partigiani. Maria answered them as calmly as she could, without saying anything that might bring reprisals from the local partigiani.

Meanwhile, the dog kept up his barking and Giovanni turned into jelly under the hay in the stable. He always carried his army papers with him (he still had them neatly preserved in a drawer when he died 50 years later) because they would show that he was a soldier who had served alongside the Germans in Russia. Also, the consequences for a captured Italian soldier were not as bad as for a suspected partisan. As Maria was talking, one of the soldiers pulled out his revolver and played with it. Soon after, he pointed it at the dog and killed it in front of the child. Maria remained composed - the death of the dog was nothing compared to what could have happened. Giovanni was horrified by the shot, but when he heard Maria talking calmly again, he felt relieved. After a quick look around, the soldiers left. The young mother returned to the security of her kitchen, hoping Giovanni would stay wherever he was hiding until dark. In the night Giovanni returned to the kitchen and later, in the dark, buried the dog in the corner of the cortile. The following day rumour spread through the local community that the partigiani had attacked a convoy of German trucks about six kilometres from Mure and the Germans were seeking them.

Apart from the rastrellamento, there was great insecurity among the Italian people who had become fragmented by factions and partigiani. This fragmentation divided many families, forcing brother against brother. Subsequently people became distrustful of each other. Maria feared for her husband and their home. Giovanni avoided being seen. He was in danger because the politics had changed. He could be considered, firstly, a deserter by the Fascists, for his military papers were not officially signed off. Secondly, he could be taken prisoner by the Germans. Thirdly, the partigiani might force him to join their group, because he was a skilled mechanic. This had happened to many tradesmen. Giovanni was in limbo. He stayed in hiding, sometimes spending the night in the fields because it was known that both the Germans and partigiani swooped on homes in the hope of catching their victims in bed. Needless to say, Maria felt anxious for her small son, as it was felt that these raids could also hurt other members of the household.

I partigiani

The practice of rounding up people forced many men to join the partigiani rather than be caught and sent to Germany. Consequently, the partigiani movement grew

stronger after the armistice as disbanded soldiers and other men who feared being taken as prisoners to Germany, joined up. However, on many occasions men were forced to join against their will. By the war's end, it has been said, there were nearly one million partigiani in Italy. These people were not a homogeneous group with common ideals. Among them were supporters of communism or socialism of different kinds, Christian Democrats, royalists, former Fascists and republicans. According to historian Eric Morris there was a lot of factionalism and political infighting. Clearly, the Allies did not trust the partigiani, and rarely included them in strategies regarding the liberation of Italy, whereas Tito's partigiani in Yugoslavia and the French resistance received support in the form of arms, money and intelligence.

One former partigiano, whom I shall call Renato, told me that he had served with his regular army unit in Greece, and then had gone home and married. Shortly after, he had been told to report for duty and was sent to Albania. After a brief time there he was taken prisoner by German soldiers, only to be liberated later by a group of communist partigiani. They gave him the option of joining them or staying and suffering cold, hunger and disease at the hands of the Germans. He joined and became the group's cook. They moved camp frequently as they made their way through Yugoslavia. He said that whenever sabotage or other action was to be taken against the Germans, a group would go out, but only a few would return. This resulted in a constant search for new recruits, as his comrades were killed, captured or defected for a better way of life.

Renato claimed that he had always remained at camp cooking or nursing the wounded. He said that they had received a uniform, money, food and intelligence from the Allies. Most of their work had been in collaboration with the Allies and possibly General Tito. He survived the war to return to his wife and three-year-old child whom he had never seen. Renato felt that because of his association with the communist partigiani he was not looked on favourably by the Italian government after the war. I suppose the proverb *Dimmi con chi vai e ti dirò chi sei* was widely believed ('You are known by the company you keep.'). However, Renato felt that he had had no choice as to what to do in that time of turmoil.

In the north-east of Italy the Garibaldi communist partigiani collaborated closely with General Tito's partigiani. This created greater rivalry with the Italian Democratic partigiani. Nevertheless, a united partigiani committee was formed in Milan, called the National Liberation of Northern Italy. The objective was to unite all partigiani activities for the liberation of Italy, leaving aside ideologies. However, the British did not trust this committee. By this stage Italy had three forms of government: the first, under the monarch and General Badoglio in Brindisi; the second, Mussolini's Republic in Salò; and the third, the Partigiani Committee of Liberation. The main purpose of the committee was to aid the liberation of Italy through sabotage, help the Allied prisoners of war in north Italy to freedom, and to push the Germans out.

Despite their factionalism, the partigiani had some success, if only for a short time. They were able to take three large areas of Italy and declare them independent for several months. There was Domodossola, Carnia and Montefiorino.

Montefiorino was a large territory taken by the partigiani in June 1944 and declared neutral. It lasted a little over one month. This small republic was close to the Gothic line (the war front). The Allies had proposed to assist the republic by sending in a battalion of parachutists, but were too late in organising it. Meanwhile, the German soldiers disbanded the partigiani groups in the area, causing the collapse of the small republic.

Another neutral independent section was the Domodossola region created in September 1944. This was a little more successful because it bordered on Switzerland and had two railway lines out of its territories, so that supplies and ammunition could move freely. In this small republic coupons were issued as money and the postage stamps were overprinted with the partigiani mark. The Domodossola republic lasted nearly two months. Again the partigiani complained of insufficient support from the Allies. They believed that with extra support they could have extended their boundaries. The historian Richard Lamb claims that "the establishment of the Republic of Domodossola was spectacular and courageous."¹³ Eventually it, too, collapsed against the formidable German army.

Carnia and its surrounding region in the Friuli was also declared independent in September 1944. The area was on either side of the Tagliamento river and extended up the valleys to the Austrian frontier. It covered 2550 square kilometres and had a population of 90,000 people. The factions among the partigiani, who consisted of the non-communist Osoppo Brigade groups and the communist Garibaldi groups, could not agree on policies. The majority of the population objected to the Garibaldi partigiani having too much power as they were closely allied to Tito's partigiani. After all, Tito had openly declared that he would make the Friuli region part of Yugoslavia after the war. All this internal squabbling ended when the Germans and several Russian Cossack divisions took over the region.

The Cossacks and other White Russians were another group of actors in this scenario. Because they were anti-communist during the war in Russia, they had collaborated with the Axis forces. Therefore, when Germany and Italy withdrew from Russia, these people were compelled to join them. There were about 800,000 people of Russian descent for whom Hitler had promised resettlement. Thousands of them were sent to north-eastern Italy. They had arrived like refugees with their families, furniture and animals. To these people the land around Carnia was 'like the promised land' - green and fertile. "Hitler decided to use them to subdue the partisans in Carnia, and offered the large area in that part of Italy to the Cossacks as their new homeland."¹⁴

It has been reported that Goebbels wrote at this time that the Veneto should be ceded to Germany. The local people were confused. Their land would be taken

away, either by these non-communists or by Tito and his communists. Which was the better of the two evils? Unrest and clashes occurred and a number of villages were taken over by the Cossacks with the help of German soldiers. Several eminent local people wrote of these abuses to Mussolini and to the Pope, but little was done. The assumption was that the places the Cossacks took over were probably from supporters of communism. Eventually, everyone came to some agreement or was compensated. Recently, in speaking with several people from that region, the opinion was expressed that overall the Cossacks were a good-hearted people who became violent only when provoked. Admittedly, they stole the occasional sheep or chicken, but they were never ruthless. This sympathy may have derived from the fact that many local men had served as part of the Alpini forces on the Russian front. The Italian soldiers had received tremendous help from the local Russians during the epic retreat in freezing weather and the Italian people felt a moral obligation to repay hospitality to these refugees.

From September 1943 to May 1945 Italy was a melting pot of nationalities and politics in which many innocent people suffered. Atrocities occurred everywhere, with one faction blaming the other. Maria often claimed that the Allied forces had allowed things to run along for far too long without helping.

Morris claims that atrocities occurred more in some places than others. The area between the provinces of Bologna, Ferrara and Modena was the so-called "death triangle". He says: "In many cases whole families were butchered, including the youngest children. Homes were ransacked and every item of furniture and clothing looted, so that nothing remained. Women and young girls were raped, some so many times that death must have come as a merciful release."¹⁵

Maria and Giovanni lived with this situation on their doorstep. Some atrocities had occurred around Mure, too. Signorina Padovan told me that "the partigiani took everything: bicycles, food, anything they wanted, all in the name of la Patria. In Azzanello (3km from Mure) they burnt down three houses as a reprisal. It was said that an informer had been wounded and had left a trail of blood leading to the houses. Therefore, it was assumed, someone in those houses had been protecting the culprit.

"Then there were the Germans who killed anyone who collaborated with the partigiani. These reprisals occurred everywhere and nearly every village has its own horror story. In one village a youth of 17, an only son, was accused of supplying bread to the partigiani. He was hanged with an elderly man of 75, who was accused of collaboration. I have been told that the soldiers went up to the second storey of a house in the centre of the village and pulled two beds close to the window, then tied two ropes to them. The ropes were made into nooses and put around the necks of two men, who were standing on a truck. They died when the truck accelerated away. A large board with slogans was hung between the two victims to deter others from supporting the partigiani. These public hangings were

seen by all, and the bodies were left in place for some time. These horrors left a permanent impression on young children.

"On another occasion a Guido Regini from Malgher, a distant relative of Giovanni, was taken by the partigiani and tried by a kangaroo court, as an alleged informer and Nazi supporter.¹⁶ He was found guilty, and hanged from a nearby tree. On the other hand two young men were also hanged because they were partigiani. De Faveri said that in Motta di Livenza "... impiccati ai piloni dell'illuminazione pubblica del ponte sul Livenza, di fronte al ristorante Disaro, il Capo partigiano Antonio Furlan, comandante della Brigata omonima ed il suo aiutante Angelo Artico."¹⁷

People could be accused of many things - of being a Fascist, Nazi, Communist, informer, murderer, or deserter. Throughout this period local priests and bishops became mediators, often in the face of danger. As the active agents of peace, some were killed, as happened in the village of Ovaro in Friuli. So, when the German soldier killed Maria's dog, it was a small 'sacrificial lamb' to pay for peace.

Gradually, more men were returning home like Giovanni. They were distressed, disillusioned, betrayed and battle-scarred. They no longer had any interest in the war. They just wanted to live their lives, get married and watch their children grow up.

Giovanni kept a low profile. He began to work part-time in Motta di Livenza at the mechanic's garage. He needed the money to live. The war was still raging. Mure and Meduna di Livenza were a little removed from the main highway leading to Germany but the Allies bombed most major towns, including Motta di Livenza, Oderzo, Treviso and the bridges crossing the Piave river.

Treviso, the capital of the region, about 50km from Mure, was bombed by the Allies on Good Friday, April 7, 1944. Authorities claimed that the bombing was so horrendous that it destroyed 83 per cent of the town. The 150 bombers destroyed Roman buildings, ancient churches and a number of air raid shelters in which 1500 people, including many children, were later found dead. This behaviour infuriated those who supported the Allies, who, after all, were supposed to be the liberators.¹⁸

Signorina Giovanna Ruzzene told me of her experience. She had been working in Treviso for four years as a nanny to four children. Early in April she was given the week before Easter off, so she returned to Mure, taking with her one of her charges, an eight-year-old girl. On her return to Treviso she found that the girl's entire family had been killed, the house destroyed and parts of human bodies were still scattered around. For fear of an epidemic, ammonia was thrown around the town.¹⁹ It was speculated that Treviso was bombed because a meeting of high German officials was taking place there. Another mooted reason was that Treviso was a distribution centre for German supplies.

According to Eric Morris “855,000 operational sorties were flown over Italy by the Allies which caused 64,000 civilian deaths and even more were maimed. Contrastingly, in Britain 56,000 civilians were killed by the German Luftwaffe raids. So the figures suggest that the Allies, in the name of liberation, killed more Italians than the Germans in the name of aggression.”²⁰

The Allied bombing intensified shortly after the declaration of the armistice and continued until mid-April 1945. Odile Zanatta told me that at 15 years of age she was part of a working party with the German soldiers. Her 22-year-old only brother, a prisoner, was also in the party. Like many young people, they were forced to maintain roads, bridges and work wherever labour was needed. Miss Zanatta and the other young women were permitted to return home in the evening, whereas the young men were imprisoned nearby. Their job was to rebuild a recently destroyed bridge across the Piave river. The group worked all day and in the late afternoon was discharged by their guards. Miss Zanatta farewelled her brother and began to walk towards home with the other women.

The men stayed near the work site, waiting for their guards, when several Allied bombers swooped down and began bombing the area. The girls took cover behind some walls but the men were easy targets in the open. The bridge was destroyed again and a number of young men were killed. The young girl saw the remains of her only brother in pieces.²¹ (Ironically, this family had relied on the young man’s earnings because their father had died as a migrant in Australia 10 years earlier.) The Allies certainly killed and destroyed as liberators. Several people have told me that booby traps, as well as bombs, were dropped. These were disguised as watches or trinkets that would explode when touched. These traps were dropped at night, after curfew, by a plane nicknamed ‘Pipo’.

The infamy was that children were often the victims, as happened in Vietnam. Ironically, the same planes possibly dropped food and other supplies later. (I have acquired a memento of these food drops from my Zia. It is the remains of a wheat bag with the weight, and the country of origin - United States - written in English.)

Maria and Giovanni lived an insecure and deprived life. Maria recalled the heavily laden bombers flying overhead to drop their loads somewhere north, especially when the Germans began retreating. Later, the bombers would be seen returning. When the targets were the towns of Motta di Livenza or Oderzo, bombs fell nearby. Maria, heavily pregnant, would run into the fields with her small boy beside her and lie in a ditch. She would cover her son and wait. It was assumed that it was safer to be away from buildings so that one was not hit by flying fragments. Maria was reliving a nightmare. As a child she herself had lain in ditches with her parents to escape the bombing of the previous world war.

Early in 1945 bombs were dropped in the town and 16-year-old Piera Innocente, who was walking along the road just out of Motta towards Mure, was killed

instantly. Relatives later found her body in the ditch beside the road. (A cross still stands on the spot today.)

Small units of German troops were often about keeping a check on partigiani activities in the area. Whenever German troops were nearby, the message was passed on so that men like Giovanni could vanish. Everyone was on the alert, but sometimes things did not work out.

In January 1945 the Ruzzene family was peacefully eating when a German soldier appeared at the door. There was no dog to warn of intruders. Giovanni turned white with fear and did not move. Any sudden movement might be read as a form of aggression or an attempt to escape, which would result in being shot. Maria approached the soldier to ask what he wanted. The soldier spoke only German, but indicated that his bicycle was broken and that the neighbours had sent him there. Giovanni moved to the door to look at the damage. It was a simple job, a ruptured tube. Giovanni asked the soldier into the kitchen, so he could get his tools. The soldier was fully-armed, with several hand grenades attached to the handle bars. These were carefully removed. In a state of acute fear, Maria and Giovanni tried to be as pleasant as possible. Giovanni fixed the tube in no time, hurrying to get this stranger out of his house. The soldier was friendly and tried to pay for the work, but Giovanni did not accept, implying that they had been fighting on the same side until recently. The soldier put everything back on the bicycle but, as he did so, one grenade fell. It made a sharp clang as it hit the brick floor. Maria was stunned and let out a cry, thinking they would all be blown up. The soldier smiled and picked up the grenade, indicating that nothing would happen unless the pin was removed, then left.

This experience left Maria a nervous wreck. Giovanni kissed Maria and ran off across the fields with his heart in his mouth. He remained in hiding for several days, in case the soldier returned with reinforcements. However, nothing more was heard of him. Maria and Giovanni spent almost two years in a constant state of anxiety.

In February 1945 Maria gave birth to their second son, at home with a midwife and her mother to assist. Giovanni was also at home but kept out of the women's way until the birth was over. They had both agreed to name the boy Davide, after the maternal grandfather. However, when Giovanni went to register the birth he changed his mind and named the child Angelo, in honour of his long dead mother. Maria was furious and decided to call the boy Dino instead.

Shortly after Dino's birth, news arrived that Maria's sister Rita had died in an accident. Maria was devastated, for she and Rita had been very close to each other. Telling the news to old Marietta was equally devastating. This old woman was losing her children, either through distance or death. Brazileo, the only other mature man left in the family, went to Vicenza to bury the body and sort out the death certificate, as his sisters were too distressed. He made rushed funeral

arrangements while the Allies were bombing everywhere. Apparently Rita died in unclear circumstances. Some said that she fell off an army truck on her way home to Mure, but rumour had it that she might have been shot by a sniper or died in the Allied bombing. Rita became a statistic in the continuing war, which officially ended in Italy on April 25, 1945.

People began to re-establish their lives. However, in the north-east of Italy, as the Germans retreated, Tito and his communists began to battle for a piece of the Friuli and Trieste region. The Bishop of Trieste and several other people became mediators between the partigiani and the Germans to persuade them to stay on to protect the civilians against their common enemy, Tito. To avoid civil war, it was proposed that a German division remain, with the democratic partigiani supporting them, until the Allies arrived. This strategy worked until the New Zealanders arrived and Trieste was handed over to them. The German troops, who helped keep the peace and did not resist the Allies when they entered the city, were taken as prisoners of war. They were handed over to Tito's communists and the majority were shot.²² This was how they were repaid.

Chaos ensued. Tito and his communist regime set up people's tribunals to judge anyone accused of being pro-Fascist. Thousands were found guilty and put to death or sent to concentration camps. Thousands of bodies have been found in the caves of what is now Slovenia. Many Italians living in this area were deported and their property confiscated; others simply disappeared. All this was happening a little more than 100 kilometres from Giovanni's and Maria's house in Mure. Tito wanted the entire Friuli region, whose border is only two kilometres from Mure. This war was closer to the Ruzzene family than when Giovanni was in Russia.

“Tito wanted the entire Friuli region, whose border is only two kilometres from Mure.”

The chaos continued. It was no longer a war of the Axis against the Allies. Factionalism separated the Italian partigiani; there were divisions between Tito's communists and the Mihailovic royalists army, against the other Russian Cossacks and White Russians. The Allies removed the prisoners of war who were most in danger from the communist elements, especially the Russians and Cossacks. Meanwhile, the partigiani cornered and decimated retreating colonies of Germans and Cossacks in the valleys near Avanzis and Ovaro. In retaliation, those soldiers who survived, sacked villages and massacred many civilians, including two priests.

The Allies repatriated the captured Cossacks back to Russia, where they were killed or sent to the gulags as enemies of the communist state. Some of those who survived have only recently been released.

After nearly two years of negotiation, Tito and the Allies came to some agreement over the area: the city of Trieste and the Friuli region remained part of Italy; Pola and the Istria province went to Tito as part of a unified Yugoslavia. About 300,000 Italians left these areas as refugees. Conflict continued among the new Yugoslavian states until 1954. Maria recalled that blankets and food went to refugees there, sometimes to the detriment of the Italians. Many years later, in Australia, Maria befriended one of these refugees, who had moved away from the communist-occupied area into Trieste. This refugee claimed that they had received many goods after the war, and even an over-supply of blankets, which were used to carpet their floors! Maria felt betrayed by such extravagance at a time when she and other Italians had struggled to live and had been forced to emigrate.

Germany surrendered officially on 7 May 1945, marking the end of the war in Europe. The Allies liberated many prisoners of war from the German labour camps, including my zio, Bepi Naresi. After two years of imprisonment he was emaciated and needed to be spoon fed. He had seen many starving prisoners gorge themselves with food too quickly and die. I was told that these Italian prisoners had experienced the same conditions as those experienced by the Jews. Giovanni and several other Italians I have spoken to claim that they knew nothing about the Holocaust. Admittedly, people were rounded up in Italy, in Russia and in other occupied territories, but it was always assumed that these people were partigiani supporters, prisoners used for labour, or people removed for their own safety. After all, deportation or evacuation of an entire community did not occur only to Jews, as evidenced by the arrival of tens of thousands of Cossacks in Italy. It could easily be assumed by many Italians that the Jewish community was removed from danger, as happened to the Cossacks, and later to the Italians in Yugoslavia.

The Holocaust, according to Giovanni, was just one of the many barbaric incidents of war. It was only later that its enormity became obvious. Six million people executed is an enormous number, but there were also one million Cossacks who, when repatriated, were killed by Stalin, along with countless other nationals who were eliminated inside the Soviet Union. According to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Stalin was carrying out ethnic purging many years before Hitler, and historians speculate that Stalin's policies killed 10 million people.

Notes

1. Bedeschi, Giulio. *Fronte Russo: C'ero anch'io*, vol. 1, p. 37; "The forces on 31 December consist of 7000 soldiers of whom 3800 are wounded and frozen and even the rest are in poor condition."
2. Weinberg, Gerhard L. *A World at Arms*, p. 428
3. Ruzzene, Giovanni. Oral account, 1989, Melbourne
4. De Laugier, C; Bedeschi, G. *Gli italiani in Russia - 1812, 1941-1943*, p. 235; "We did not have the benefit of seeing anything in the sky which would raise our joy of a contact, or a sensation of unity, if only once we could have had a flyover by a plane carrying the tricolour (flag), our strength would have doubled."

5. De Laugier, C; Bedeschi, G. *op. cit*; p. 221; "We of the Julia division marched all day and night. We had remained stationed in the trenches in the snow for an entire month. Our leg muscles had weakened and the hardship of providing for ourselves was enormous. During the night we walked tentatively in the dark. No one wanted to stay behind as everyone knew that to stop and be left alone meant certain death in the 30-35 degrees below zero cold."
6. Bedeschi, G. *op. cit*; p. 69; "The white snow had a red line of blood for two to three kilometres. It was a horrendous spectacle."
7. De Laugier, C; Bedeschi, G. *op. cit*; p. 205
8. Rigoni, A. Oral account, 1993, Italy
9. De Laugier, C; Bedeschi, G. *op. cit*; p. 233; "The only strength that could save us from giving up in that snow, was faith in God, the love for our family which called us from far away, and the desire to get out, at all costs, from the sea of ice, to return to a life among our people."
10. Bedeschi, G. *op. cit*; p. 43
11. Lamb, Richard. *War in Italy - The Brutal Story*. 1943-1945, p. 17
12. Morris, Eric. *Circles of Hell - The War in Italy 1943-1945*, 1990, p. 3
13. Lamb, R. *op. cit*; p. 221
14. Lamb, R. *op. cit*; p. 240
15. Morris, E. *op. cit*; p. 3
16. Padovan, Signorina C. Oral account, 1994, Mure, Italy
17. De Faveri, Angelo. *Le vicende di Motta di Livenza 1878-1988*, p. 124; "hanged on public poles on the bridge across the Livenza, opposite restaurant Disaro were Antonio Furlan, leader of the partisan brigade bearing his name, and his assistant Angelo Artico."
18. Documentary film: Treviso 7 Aprile 1944
19. Ruzzene, Giovanna. Oral account, 1993, Italy
20. Morris, E. *op. cit*; p. 43
21. Cusignana, Zanatta O. Oral account, 1994, Italy
22. Lamb, R. *op. cit*; p. 256

DIANA RUZZENE GROLLO was born in Mure, Treviso, in 1948, and migrated to Australia in 1955, growing up in the northern Melbourne suburb of Thornbury. She is a Masters graduate in history from LaTrobe University. Diana was the fourth of six children born to Maria and Giovanni Ruzzene, a survivor of the ill-fated Italian army campaign in Russia. She was delivered by the district's midwife, in her parents' snow-covered, brick-paved cottage on a cold winter's night under the light of an oil lantern.

COPIES of *Growing through the brick floor* are available from Diana Ruzzene Grollo, Groset PL, 344 Mansfield Street, THORNBURY 3071. An Italian edition is presently under development. The price is \$24.95, plus postage, of which \$10 is donated to the Assisi Centre for Aged Italians.