

War education



An entire generation grows up in the fascist school. Educational policy is one of the main tools of regimentation of Italians that from an early age wear the uniform and practice walking. The regime wants obedient workers, loyal soldiers and female mares.

1936 - 1940

The condemnation of Italy by the Society of Nations for the occupation of Ethiopia binds the regime of Mussolini to Nazi Germany in a pact he has economic, social, political and military consequences. Labor is the main bargaining chip of Italy to obtain coal and raw

materials indispensable to the industrial apparatus. An intense enlistment campaign leads to the Reich, between 1938 and in 1943 over 350,000 voluntary workers, who enjoy treatment and working conditions equal to those of German workers. In 1938, fascism initiates a racial policy and issues persecutory laws against Jews.

June 10, 1940 - July 25, 1943

Mussolini calls the "balilla" to the Nazi-Fascist war and soon the Italian soldiers measure the inadequacy of the army in the war contingency. The war of aggression in France, Greece, Africa of the

North has high costs in terms of casualties, to which yes add those incalculable from the campaign of Russia. Anguish for relatives, hunger and bombings bend the spirit of the country.

July 25 - September 8, 1943

On July 25 the monarchy, after having indulged for twenty years of fascism with the complicity of the classes executives, Mussolini arrested. The regime dissolves in a few hours and its symbols are shot down by crowds cheering. The military government initiates secret negotiations of surrender with the allies, landed in Sicily.



Taken from "L'Italiano nuovo" Text for schools - 1938



War as a culture - "Balilla" exercise



Francesco Agostani - French front, 1940



The withdrawal from Russia, 1943

8th September 1943 the capture

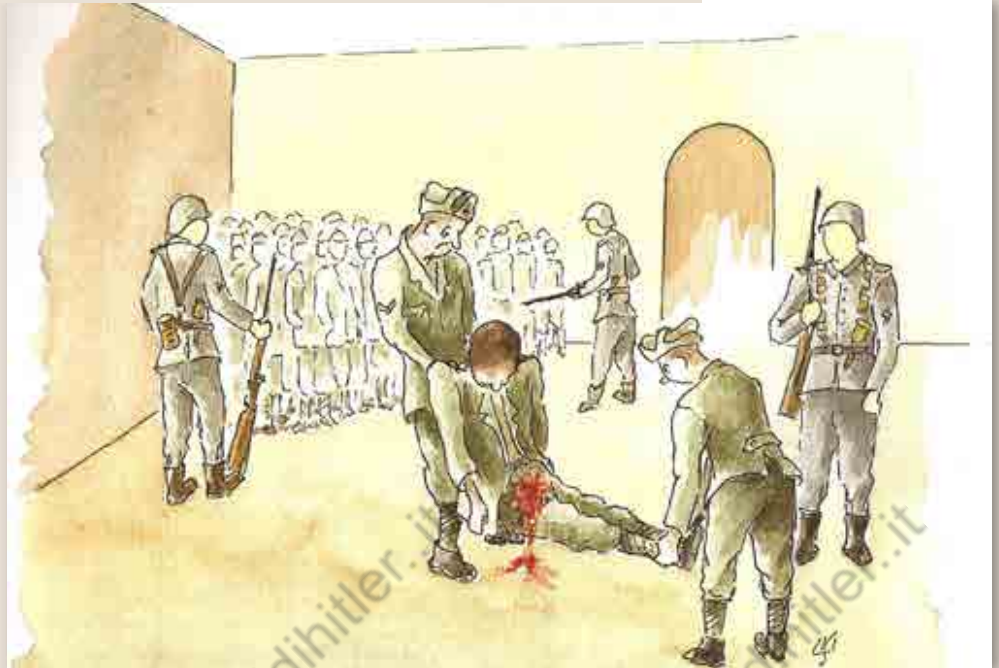
When the communication that the armistice had been signed came there was a moment of exultation... "The war is over, let's go home!"

Agostino Pessina, aged 22, captured at the Brenner Pass,
a video interview by Valter Merazzi



I had become a soldier only a few days before, I felt I was a soldier because of the uniform I was wearing but my mind was elsewhere. I had been at home during the war. About ten days after the fatal 8th September my struggle for survival began. It only needed two Germans, an interpreter and an armoured tank to make me submit to the will of the Germans. The only thing I possessed was a mess tin.

Primo Bazzotti, aged 19, captured at Bressanone



Drawing by Lodovico Lisi, taken from: "Appunti di viaggio, 8 settembre 1943 - 8 aprile 1945", Anei, Padova

*Son tutti scappati
Siam stati gabbati
Le armi ai tedeschi
Abbiám da dar
Ed anche Dalmazzo
Scappo' come un razzo
Siam qui in imbarazzo
Lo possa accecà
Di tutto st'imbroglio
Ne ha colpa Badoglio
Io voglio tornare
Non voglio restà*

Chant from: "Dall'Albania al Lager di Fullen. Storia di un pittore internato"
by Giovanni e Deborah Frisone

At 2 o'clock in the morning of 14th September the order to attack the German troops stationed at Gruda airport arrived. The encounter was terrible and we lost one man in ten. Towards evening the Germans came back after having blown up our powder magazine. The confusion caused by the explosion made my squad, which was inside the enclosure, scatter. (We were under the command of second lieutenant Vannucci who was later executed with five other officers.)

There was a state of rout as we did not have anyone to command us and under fire from the Stukas. I was captured the 16th September 1943.

Aurelio Bernardi, aged 19, captured in Croatia

The armistice was announced on the radio by Marshall Badoglio on the evening of 8th September 1943. It gave the Italians the illusion that the war was over. However it did not take the Nazi authorities by surprise. Since the arrest of Mussolini they had been bring Wehrmacht divisions into Italy. Within a few days the plan "Achse" was put into action and the Italian Royal Army was neutralised in Italy, France, the Balkans and Greece.. There was total confusion. Whole divisions were disbanded, isolated and without any command, at the mercy of vague orders coming from those in command. The flight of the king, ministers and the general staff of the army threw the country into one of the most dramatic periods of its history. About 1.000.000 Italian soldiers were captured together with a sizable bounty of arms and instruments of war.

In Italy the episodes of resistance were isolated and soon put down. In the north the troops of General Rommel took possession of strategic centres. In the south and centre of the country, after having occupied Rome, General Kesselring had to fight against the advance of the Allies and was forced to release a number of prisoners owing to the lack of military personnel to guard them. For the soldiers on the run the help of the civilian population was very important. Thousands of Italian soldiers in flight managed to pass into Switzerland. In the south and beyond the front others joined antifascist civilians in the mountains giving birth to the first groups of partisans.

Early in the morning of the 14th September we set out for San Pietro del Carso to get back into Italy.

However after we had walked for several kilometres we had a surprise. We found a German armoured tank and motorcyclists with machine guns on the handle bars in front of us. They stopped us and we were surrounded. In the evening they made us form ranks and march to the station of Trieste where a troop train was formed of several wagons.

Mario Oldani, aged 27, captured at Trieste





Armistice and dissolution of the army, Istituto nazionale per la storia del Movimento di Liberazione in Italia, INSMI 2000



Italian soldiers celebrate the armistice - Photo by archivio Viali

8th September 1943 the capture

I went immediately to the battery commander.
He was highly agitated.
No order had come from division command.

Raimondo Finati, aged 23, second lieutenant
"Le giovani generazioni del Fascismo nel ventennio
e in Guerra" Anrp 1999

In the Balkans and in Greece most of the Italian military surrendered following the promise of being sent home. However when they arrived at the railway stations they were closed in armoured wagons and sent to the territory under the control of the Reich. Other divisions put up a strenuous resistance against the Germans who then committed many war crimes. Over 6,300 Italian soldiers, among them many officers, were slain after surrender in Cefalonia, Corfu, Coo, Lero, Split and other places. Another 13,300 were drowned when the ships taking them to the mainland sank. About 100,000 remained prisoners in the hands of the Wehrmacht. Another 44,000 escaped capture and joined the partisans in Greece and Yugoslavia in the Garibaldi division and the Italia brigade which took part with Tito's army in liberating Yugoslavia. The prisoners were asked to enrol in the German armed forces and 97,000 soldiers declared their loyalty to the Alliance and passed under the Wehrmacht. They were used for manual labour or put at the service of the organisation called Todt for the construction of the lines of defence and rail and road repairs. On the 12th September 1943 the German command communicated that martial law was in force in occupied Italy. Over 700,000 Italian military were deported to the territory of the Reich.

We were surrounded by Germans with armoured tanks and machine guns with four barrels. They threatened to decimate the division because they wanted to convince us at all costs to fight along side them.

To tell the truth the decimation had already started as those who smoked, those who had their uniform undone, those standing out of line had already been taken away.

Orlando Alesse, aged 22, captured in Albania

In the general confusion I believed along with other comrades that we should try to amalgamate with one of the irregular troops which were being formed everywhere with the aim of protecting ourselves and then support and collaborate with the partisans of Marshal Tito. (Brigata Garibaldi).

Salvatore Vellozzi, aged 20, captured in Yugoslavia

On the 8th of September I was in Genoa, an ordinary seaman defending the aircraft carrier Aquila which was being fitted out at the Somalia quay. On one side a merchant ship was anchored which at 9 in the morning turned out to be a hive of German troops on the warpath who suddenly attacked us, wounding two of my companions and forced us to stay in the cave bunker under the lighthouse.

Some of us managed to escape catching a train in the hope of avoiding capture. But at the station of Reggio Emilia we were captured by the Germans.

Luigi Febbraro, aged 19, captured at Reggio Emilia

There was a military chaplain "No, no the worst comes now". Calling and recalling an orderly from Bolzano replied "Boys what do you want me to say. There is nobody here, everyone has run off."

The army corps of Bolzano had cleared off on the 8th of September. Our officers, the two we had, what could they do with forty unarmed men?

Agostino Pessina, aged 22,
captured at the Brennerpass.
interviewed by Valter Merazzi

The deportation

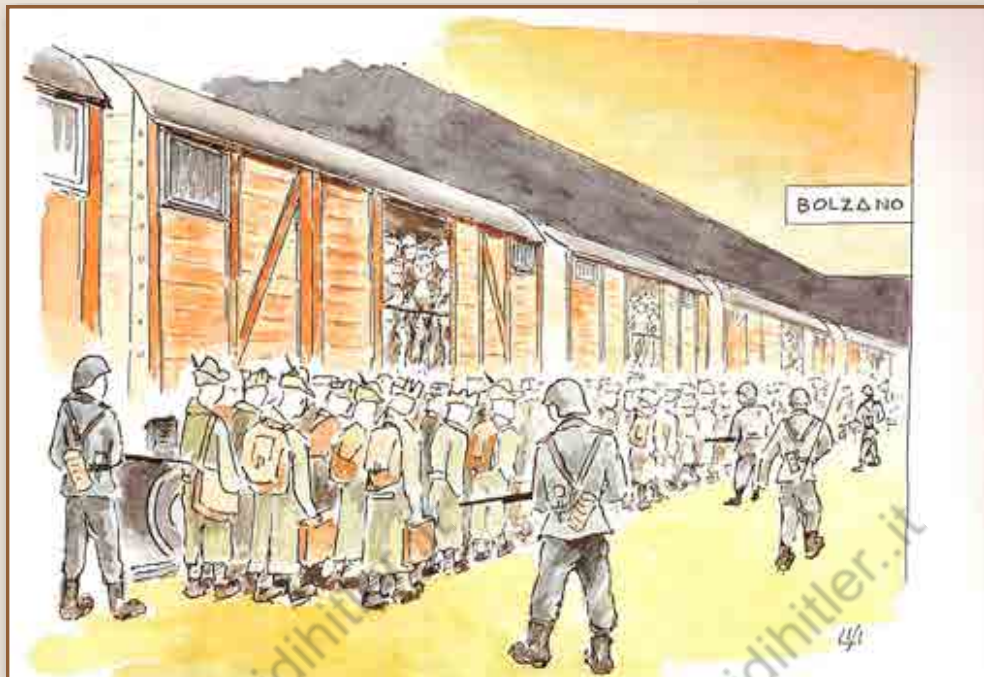
We felt that we were no longer human beings but animals taken to the slaughter. It was hell with the nightmare of not knowing what was waiting for us at the end of the terrible journey.

Carlo Viganò, aged 23, captured in Dalmatia



In the station: the last heartbreaking good-byes across the bars of a closed gate between who was going and who was staying. The last messages, scraps of paper scribbled in secret to give to compassionate women...an address so that the family would know that they had seen us deported, that we were well, that we had done our duty and not to worry about us...many white lies like..."our moral is high we will be back soon."

Claudio Sommaruga, aged 23, Army officer captured at Alessandria, taken from "No! Anatomia di una resistenza" Anrp 2001



Drawing by Lodovico Lisi, taken from: "Appunti di viaggio..." op.cit.

There were more than 60 people in each truck which were dirty with dung and cement...it wasn't possible for us to stretch out our legs or move our feet without causing a cloud of dust, to urinate we used bottles which was alright but for the other needs we used cloth trousers tied at the bottom of the trouser leg to avoid smell; we hung them as high up as we could in the truck to be able to use them again; the four windows of the truck were closed by grills, if it rained during the night, in the darkness we held up the lid of the mess tins to catch some drops of water which was half fog, so that we could wet our lips...We were made to get out at a little station, some companions had died or were wounded, giving the possibility of some drops of water.

Dino Morandin, aged 20, captured in France



Drawing by Lodovico Lisi, taken from: "Appunti di viaggio..." op.cit.



Archivio Albe Steiner
Politecnico di Milano - Fondo Albe e Lica Steiner

The train stop on a dead end track in the middle of the countryside. They opened the doors of the trucks and we got out to stretch our legs. We saw at about 30 metres away some vegetables, cabbages and red chicory. Hungry as we were we raced to eat them, a burst of machine gun fire hit us, we returned with our hands up, five or six remained stretched out on the ground or bent kneeling over the cabbages without moving. They were dead.

Maffezzoli Demetrio, aged 20, captured in Albania

At Verona the Germans got down and we asked a railway worker for help.

"Can you give us something like railway workers clothes so we can escape?"

He gave us four or five, one at a time we put on the black overall and the railway worker's hat and sat on the edge of the truck.

After Verona the train slowed down for a curve and three jumped off, but they were seen and shot.

They stopped the train, they picked up the three, and they showed them to us saying "Who tries to escape finishes up like this".

Giuseppe Marzocchi, aged 22, captured at Padova

Squeezed into cattle trucks the soldiers of the Italian Royal Army were rapidly taken into the territory of the Reich. In the stations in Italy some civilians tried to pass food to the prisoners and take the messages they had written to their families.

The hunger and above all the thirst were unbearable. The cold too was particularly felt by those who had been captured on the shore of the Mediterranean and were wearing light clothes. Reserves of food, clothes and blankets which escaped being taken away on capture or during transportation would be vital during imprisonment.

Armed guards controlled the trains. It was difficult and dangerous to try to escape and to some it cost them their lives.

The conditions inside the wagons were terrible and the journey could last up to a week or more and this, in the context of the realisation of being a prisoner caused a collective disorientation.

Distress and frustration was felt both by veterans with years of experience behind them and young recruits who had been called up in August '43

Arrival at the lager

When we got off the train to be able to stand upright we had to hold each other up we were so exhausted.

Abbondio Canzani, aged 19, captured at Merano.



They made us form ranks of five and sent us towards the concentration camp.

As we walked along the way there were piles of rubble... teachers and their students stoned us with the stones... we covered our heads and faces with our hands but many were bleeding from the violence.

Nobody came to help us, it was as if we were animals that had to be done away with..

When we arrived at the gates of the concentration camp we were covered with insults by the Germans and prisoners of other nationalities.

It was as if we were responsible for what the government of the time had done

Emilio Bacci, aged 22, captured at Merano



Entry to the Fürstenberg am Oder lager, drawing by Paolo Boni

High above the area, fenced in by barbed wire and guarded at the sides by towers armed with machine guns flew the red banner with the Nazi swastika.

Stop at the entrance to the camp... another stop in front of a long, low, dirty disgusting hut... against the walls there were strange bunk beds like shelving for storing cheese.

Three or four shelves of bare wood for the prisoners.

Without straw, without bedding, without covers. We looked at each other in the eyes.

We felt lost and without words.

Lino Monchieri, aged 21, Army officer
taken from "Diario di prigionia 1943-1945
published by Del Laboratorio 1985



Photo by di Vittorio Viali

They made us stand in line in the yard and they called the roll; while they were speaking our eyes started to look around and saw the barbed wire that encircled the horizon and the wooden huts that would become our homes.

Guido Boiardi, aged 2, captured in Montenegro

I became prisoner of war number 191,436 in camp KRZ.GEF.ARBTSKDO 6068 M STAMMLAGER XI B simply a number among many others an incomprehensible row of numbers and letters and what I found around me was just as incomprehensible.

Nicolò Biasiol, aged 19, captured at Fiume

When the prisoners arrived in Germany the gates of the prison camps opened wide to them. Here there were already the first signs of winter. While being transferred from the station to the camps the "badoglio traitors" had their first taste of the hatred against them from the local population created by the propaganda of regime. In the prison camps for many prisoners from allied countries they were enemies. The officials were separated from the others and sent to an officers camp (Oflag) many of which were in Poland. For the most part the lower ranks were kept in the Stammlager (Stalag) and dependent camps. The guards were brutal and treated the military with contempt full of revenge and racism. The Italian had to learn quickly to understand the orders in German and the time table of the camp with its early awakening, continual role calls, frustrating queues to wash and for a miserable plate of food.

The prisoners were photographed and given a disk with a number, the huts were dilapidated and overcrowded. Being in the camp meant losing your personality and suffering hunger, cold and disease.

We were taken to one of these camps where there were already many prisoners, we were photographed with a number of identity and then they took away everything we owned, identity cards, watches, money, clothes and we were disinfected.

Mario Morelli, aged 23, captured at Asti



NO to the nazifascist war

The soldiers who signed for political ideology or because of hunger returned home

Giovanni Mazzolari, aged 19



After being in this camp for 20 days, after being ill treated, the victims of physical and moral violence, lack of food and fasting, the Germans made us form ranks in front of the main door of the camp. There were about 10 to 12 thousand of us with two machine guns pointing at us. They told us that Mussolini was in Germany with Hitler and asked if any of us were ready to fight alongside them. Under our breath we whispered, "Must we betray Italy". Only two men accepted the offer.

Alfredo Orfenghi, aged 19

As soon as we arrived they delivered a speech to us in German which was then translated into Italian. We were then marched five in a line to a fork in the road those who wanted to fight with them turned right, those who turn left took the road to exile. Nobody turned right.

Orlando Alesse, aged 22



"La Voce della Patria" periodical for IMI published in Germany by the RSI

Aderisco all'idea repubblicana dell'Italia repubblicana fascista e mi dichiaro volontariamente pronto a combattere con le armi nel costituendo nuovo esercito italiano del Duce, senza riserve, anche sotto il comando supremo tedesco, contro il comune nemico dell'Italia repubblicana fascista, del Duce e del grande Reich germanico.

Written formula for joining the armed forces of RSI

After five days without food an Italian Navy Officer made a speech in which he invited us to join Commander Grossi in the Atlantic to continue the war alongside the Germans. I remained there and from that day my sufferings began.

Rodolfo Manfredini, aged 17

At Deblin Irena I met some officers from Mantua. My brother was there too. "I have joined the Republicans because it's the only way to return home." I was surprised and a little perplexed... "He is almost free, he can eat sufficiently and can go out of the Blok". He tried to convince me and dragged me to the building where I could sign on. No I couldn't do it, I didn't enter and I turned back. We said good-bye to each other affectionately and he gave me an egg, a precious gift, food I had forgotten existed.

Giuseppe Marchesi, aged 23, Army officer taken from R Finati "Le giovani generazioni del fascismo nel ventennio e in Guerra" Anrp 1999

Joining up would have only reinforced Fascism and the Germans...

Most of the officers and soldiers however understood that this choice wasn't the easiest and smoothest way out and that life in prison would not be easy, not simply waiting peacefully for the conflict to end but a mortal risk.

Alessandro Natta, aged 25, Army officer taken from "L'altra Resistenza" Einaudi

With the cold and hunger we were becoming real men, not puppets. It doesn't matter if the King and his family have escaped to the South and if that other puppet in the hands of the Germans is in the North with his Republic waiting to welcome us with open arms.

Paolo Desana, aged 25, Army officer taken from "La vita del Lager" Alessandria 1994



Drawing by Marcello Tomadini taken from: "Venti mesi fra i reticolati" Editrice S.A.T., 1946

In the late autumn of 1943 Mussolini proposed to form an army under the command of Marshal Graziani. This encouraged exponents of the RSI to go to the camps to look for recruits.

Gathered in the "Appellplatz" the IMI heard the call to the "war for civilization" rewarded by the possibility to leave the camp, food, clean uniform and to go back to Italy but they did not give into the temptation and the threats. The requests were repeated but this generation brought up in the schools of the regime said a solid "no" to the civil war.

There were several reasons for these men to prefer to stay in the camp. Some out of loyalty to the king, others wanted to stay away from who had abandoned them on that day in September. There was also a strong idea of the necessity to rebuild the nation but most of all it was a refusal of the war together with a feeling of hatred for the Germans.

Only 16 % of the common soldiers and 20% of the officers accepted to enrol.

The Wehrmacht and the Nazi hierarchy were not in favour of the formation of the fascist army. The first and foremost interest of the Reich was to use the work force of the prisoners.



Mussolini and Graziani baptize a department of RSI

From prisoners to military internees

We were never able to use the help of the Red Cross seeing that after the liberation of Mussolini, from prisoners of war we became simply prisoners.

Aldo Scotti, aged 21



The Red Cross in Geneva was aware of the terrible situation of the Italians. Many times it tried to put on pressure to be able to send parcels of food and clothes to us too. It actually sent a truck of parcels to Berlin to be distributed to the Italians. The fascist and Nazi governments sent them back saying that we were not prisoners but interns of an ex friendly country and they would look after us

Don G. Barbero, aged 26, military chaplain
taken from "La croce tra i reticolati" 1946



Drawing by Alessandro Berretti taken from: "Attenti al filo!", Anei 1946

They had told us clearly that we were not prisoners of war (KGF) because no war had been declared between Germany and Italy, we were not political prisoners either because we were not civilians. We were classified deserters of Badoglio, Italian Military Inmates (IMI)- The greatest irony was that our enemy state the Italian Socialist Republic, illegal and anything but neutral, would be our protector.

Claudio Sommaruga, aged 23, Army officer
taken from "No! Anatomia...op-cit.

During the two years of deportation we military prisoners were under constant armed surveillance and forced to do all sorts of inhumane work and to live at the limits of survival in areas under bombardment by the Anglo Americans contrary to every international convention and regulation regarding prisoners of war.

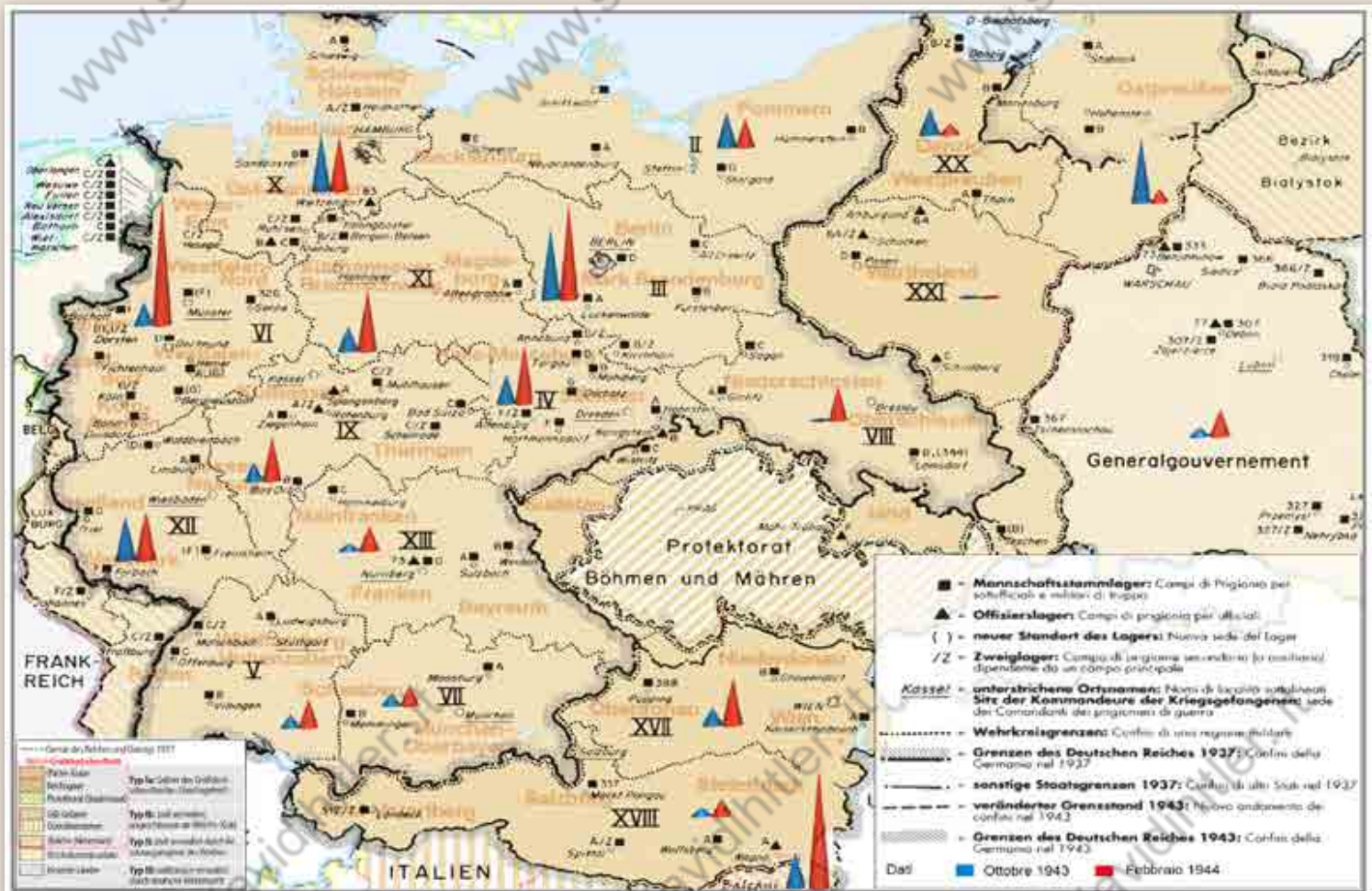
Achille Rega, aged 24

The deported Italian prisoners were denied the status of prisoner of war.

On the 20th September, on the orders of Hitler they were classified as "Italienschen Militarinternierten" (IMI) a status which then did not exist and was against international law. In this way the Germans could treat the "badoglioian" prisoners any way they wanted. They were excluded from the Convention of Geneva and from assistance by the International Red Cross which assured the allied prisoners of humane assistance and a control of the condition of life and work. The Italians quickly understood that they had to defend themselves. Under the control of the Wehrmacht the prisoners (IMI) were transferred to the major industrial areas where they were employed in all sectors of the economy but especially in the war industry. The Italian Social Republic (RSI) was nominated "Protective guarantor" of their condition.

When they told us we were prisoners of war my mind raced" my life will be saved" my fate would be protected by the Red Cross. All the others thought like me and we put up with the brutality of the situation in silence convinced and hopeful of a change in the near future.

Primo Bazzotti, aged 19



The officers in the lager

I found myself in a camp in Masuria. I held back the anger as I remembered how things had gone at the Brenner pass. We were so hungry we ate grass.

Mario Rigoni Stern, aged 20 taken from "Soldati italiani dopo il settembre 1943" FIAP 1988



"Here we are all almost equal. The hierarchy of the barracks doesn't count. What does count is age, common sense, a strong character, charisma. Under fascism we were without democracy now we are inventing it to govern ourselves, from the election of a leader of the hut to the shifts for the fatigue party, with candidates, voting, and rights for the minorities.

Around the unlit stove, we young men discuss, make auto criticism of fascism and of our wasted youth. We become men. we form an anti totalitarian political conscience and we organise a European ,international democratic party which is for most of us republican."

Claudio Sommaruga. aged 23 army officer taken from "NO! .

Claudio Sommaruga, aged 23, army officer taken from "NO! Anatomia..." op.cit



Drawing by Gino Spalmach taken from: "La Resistenza nei Lager vissuta e vista dai pittori" Anei 1979

The camp at Wietzendorf had been previously inhabited by Russian prisoners who had been moved elsewhere because the German health commission had declared it uninhabitable. In this camp Italian officers lived for 15 months resisting the pressure, the force, the humiliation.

Pietro Testa, aged 37 army officer taken from "Wietzendorf" Sansoni 1946

I had a lump blocking my throat, a sense of uneasiness, perhaps from the cold, from the loneliness, the bitterness at being separated from things dear to me, in those terrible moments when I screamed "Mamma" it was to no avail because "mamma" couldn't do anything...I saw myself near death far away from you ignorant of my condition, lost forever without hope. And I clung to the thought of God.

Enrico Zampetti, aged 22 army officer, taken from "Dal Lager. Lettera a Marisa", Stadium 1992"



Drawing by Piero Ricci, taken from: "La Resistenza..." op cit

"We have arrived here"... (Schokken-Oflag 64/Z in Poland)... "Courage...the sun will come out again after this cruel and unexpected storm"... "I have become a prisoner without being guilty and without even being captured in combat"... "we have really been abandoned by everyone."

Alberto Trionfi, aged 51, taken from Maria Trionfi "Il generale Alberto Trionfi" Anei 2004

The theatre saved me even in a concentration camp, where I suffered hunger and cold. But I did not lose hope. What gave me strength even then was the theatre . With my companions of misadventure we improvised some shows...It was our way of resisting and not dying.

Gianrico Tedeschi, aged 23, army officer, taken from "Corriere della Sera", 2nd September 2013



Drawing by Alessandro Berretti, taken from: "Attenti al filo!" Anei 1981

After being separated from the troops, the officers were imprisoned in the Oflag, many of which were in Poland. The higher ranking officers were taken in cattle trucks to the isolated camp of Schokken where they were imprisoned.

The conditions of life for the officers was more bearable than that of the troop as they did not have to do forced labour. However the conditions in the prisons were just as precarious as the treatment was arbitrary just the same.

The hunger, the cold and the terrible hygienic conditions devastated the spirit and caused a worsening of the physical condition. Health assistance was gravely insufficient and in some camps the situation was catastrophic.

Regardless of all this the prisoners managed to organise cultural activity. The religious assistance gave comfort and helped the will to resist to thousands of young reserve officers who, to defend their dignity, discussed politics, experienced democracy, inspiring the principles on which the Italian Constitution would be based.

The admirals Inigo Campioni and Luigi Mascherpa were brought back to Italy. They were accused of high treason in front of a special fascist court for having opposed the Germans on Rhodes and Lero. They were executed at Parma on the 24th May 1944.

The slave market

The Germans considered us all traitors and they kept us alive only to make us work.

Vincenzo Pace, aged 23



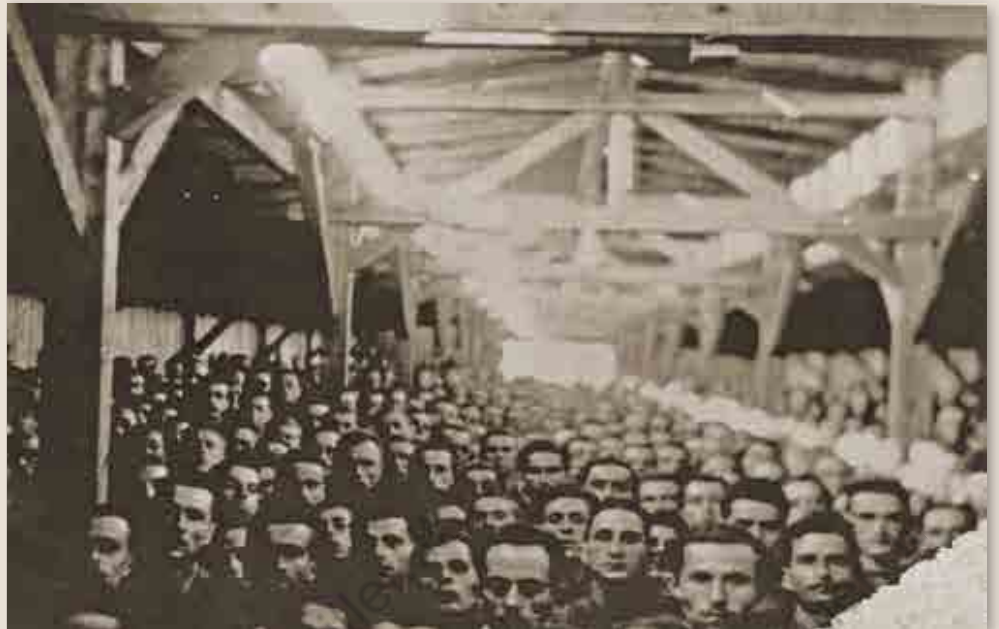
We had to work for 12 to 14 hours a day at the farm of Baron Von Natusium. We cultivated the land. Our tools of work were our hands. We had to harvest the potatoes which were under the icy ground and we were neither fed nor clothed adequately.

More than once I found myself secretly eating the peel of the potatoes and if I had been discovered I would have been killed.

We were constantly watched over by guards holding a rod ready to strike anybody who stopped working.

We went on like this for two years with fear in our hearts. I never thought I would return home. I was even resign to dying.

Bruno Barbini, aged 23



Gathered in the Lager

We had said we were cooks and waiters to avoid being sent to the factories or to the mines. However it didn't help because recruitment was done without any criteria. We had to wait for those we called the "slave drivers" to come and get us.

Giulio Giuseppe Almasio, aged 30

In the factory the work became more and more intense and fatiguing.

The German "meister", the bosses, were insolent, cold, cruel, real tyrants. They were beasts, inhuman, they treated us worse than animals.

They made us work like machines at a pace which became more and more intolerable

Pio Songini, aged 21



Drawing by Antonio Sprecapane

Some German civilians arrived acting as middlemen or mediators (I am talking about for animals) and each one chose a number of Italians they needed to take to where??? forced labour.

Francesco Invernizzi, aged 20

After a month I was transferred to a factory 28km from Nuremberg. Two hundred of us arrived at the factory where the manager made us line up with our hands palm up so that he could inspect them...

Michele Valentino, aged 24

A German officer arrived with an interpreter and two men in civilian clothes. The two civilians came up to us and inspected us, feeling our muscles, making us open our mouths to look at our teeth and sometimes shaking their heads woefully. They considered us too weak, too unused to hard work to be good workers.

Raimondo Finati, aged 23, army officer,
taken from "Le giovani..." op. cit.



Forced laborers in the Hersenwinkel Class

The Reich urgently needed manual labour to replace the German workers who had been called up and the Italian soldiers offered a precious reserve of this. They were the last in the line of prey in the criminal war which had already brought about the deportation of thousands of individuals from all over Europe. The Wehrmacht, the Waffen SS, the Luftwaffe, the Todt organisation, the Arbeit Front (work force) and Gauleiter (governors) fought to have them. The urgency to send the soldiers to work did not give the Germans the time to make a selection of who would be most suitable for what job.

At the beginning some of the prisoners were used for agricultural work or in the food industry but after only a short time Albert Speer the minister for armaments managed to use them mostly for the manufacture of arms.

In the "Appelplatz" the slave market took place. Industrialists, craftsmen, and farmers came to the camp to choose their work force weighing up the quality.

The Italians were transferred to the camps set up by the German industry which now was completely dedicated to the war. The stronger workers were sent to the mines.

Thousands of IMI remain in the main camps at the disposition of the Wehrmacht which used them to clear away the rubble in the cities after bombing raids and in the construction of the lines of defence.

The lager system

*The camps put Italians into contact with the oppressed part of Europe...
The mechanism of the German camps took all and tortured all.*

Alessandro Natta, aged 25, army officer, taken from "L'Altra..." op- cit.



I had received a card from the Russian government which enrolled me from the 15th September. I was enrolled as a nurse which was my actual work in the city hospital. We arrived at the front but after a week the Germans arrived and took me prisoner. It was 3rd October 1941. It was the beginning of living in Russia under German occupation. In the spring of 1942 our journey to Germany in cattle trucks began... I met an Italian who had come to work in Germany because of the lack of work in Italy. He didn't work with the Russians but as he was not a prisoner he enjoyed greater freedom. So he brought bread, food and clothes to me and other prisoners. On the 17th May 1945 we got married.

Wera Sisonowa, aged 18



Ukrainian forced laborers. Photo by Vittorio Vialli. Istituto Parri Bologna, fondo Vialli

The French with a cigarette in the mouth and their hands in their pockets looked on with mocking smile on their faces and from their height made ironic comments and they were those, as we learned later, the International Red Cross helped regularly with their rich parcels and supply of uniforms. They were entertained by the marches of Feldwebel Komm, march, links, rechts, raus, tempo tempo discipline...

Bruno Betta,

taken from Paride Piasenti
"Il lungo inverno del lager" Anei 1983

In the factories there were Russians, French, (who however collaborated with the Germans and the French soldiers while in the camp received help from the International Red Cross) English, political prisoners and other unfortunates who had ideas different from the Nazis.

Luigi Febbraro, aged 19



Women deported from Eastern Europe, photo by Ostarbeiter

Regardless of the strict surveillance of the guards, under and between the huts tunnels and secret passages were dug which connected up the various parts of the camp.. By using these tunnels various Rumanian, Gypsy and , Polish women visited the Italian prisoners during the night. Naturally the sexual services were repaid in black bread.

The Germans even tried to organise courses of German for prisoners in the evening but hardly anyone went to them. Because of the hatred everyone felt towards them and their language.

Luigi Panizza, aged 28

The Jewish women arrived. Without hair and of all nationalities- We were speechless , we couldn't find the words. The Jews worked separately, we were with the Polish, the Russians and the French but not with the Jews. They seemed to come from another world, like little monsters, about more or less 100. They seemed like silk worms . Undernourished they moved with difficulty. It was a shock for us. We were without words to see these women hungry undernourished like skeletons who could hardly move.

Aldo Valerio Cacco, aged 19

The exploitation of the slaves, captured by coercive means in occupied countries and brought to the Reich, was the foremost objective of the Nazi war as much as the racial principles which governed it.

After 8th September 1943, 700,000 Italian soldiers became victims of the Nazi system of concentration. The camps were of various types and organisation.

They housed men and women separately and treated them under a rigid hierarchy which decided what few rights they had and the intensity of the suffering.

The IMI too, without any status to protect them were just "Stuck"- things, "Untermenschen"- sub humans, under the stick of the "chosen people". The Russian and Italian prisoners were at the bottom of the social ladder.

However theirs was a condition very different from the political prisoners, Jews, Rom, Jehovah's witnesses, homosexuals exterminated by selection and killed by work in the KZ under the command of the SS.

Life in the lager

What hunger! Our skin held our bones together
Giovanni Ferrari, aged 29



Our situation was such that the prisoners who were engaged in civilian work took pity on us. These sometimes managed to elude the surveillance and come close enough to us to give us food (a potato or an onion) ...I remember one evening when the guards broke into our hut where we were trying to cook a potato using the stove given to us. They took away the potato and as a punishment we stayed six days without receiving our daily ration of two blocks of fuel to heat the hut.

Stefano Ripamonti, aged 23

The days were long and endless waiting for the evening to have the slice of bread, which I ate lying down tasting every little piece, swallowing slowly to remember the taste.

Primo Bazzotti, aged 19



Receipt for confiscation of money

Life was hard and sad. There was little food and a lot a hunger: I lost a lot of weight. They gave us only broth and some piece of black bread. There was the biting cold which paralyzed us, the dirt which clung to us. We could not go out of the camp, the German soldiers were domineering and arrogant. They called us traitors and any excuse was good to treat us like dogs.

Francesco Agostani, aged 27

The daily meal, and by that I mean it was the only one, consisted of leaves of beetroot and discarded rice. On Saturday and Sunday, as we did not have to work, they did not give us anything to eat. We were perpetually hungry so we ravaged among the rubbish and ate food which was fermented or had gone bad.

Giacomo Brentan, aged 30

One day they took us to have a bath after 40 days. We were full of fleas. They cut our hair and we went under the showers. There was a mirror at eye level and when I saw myself I saw a skeleton, even the sacrum was visible. My knees were bigger than my thighs. I was really a skeleton.

Gualtiero Battaglia, aged 30



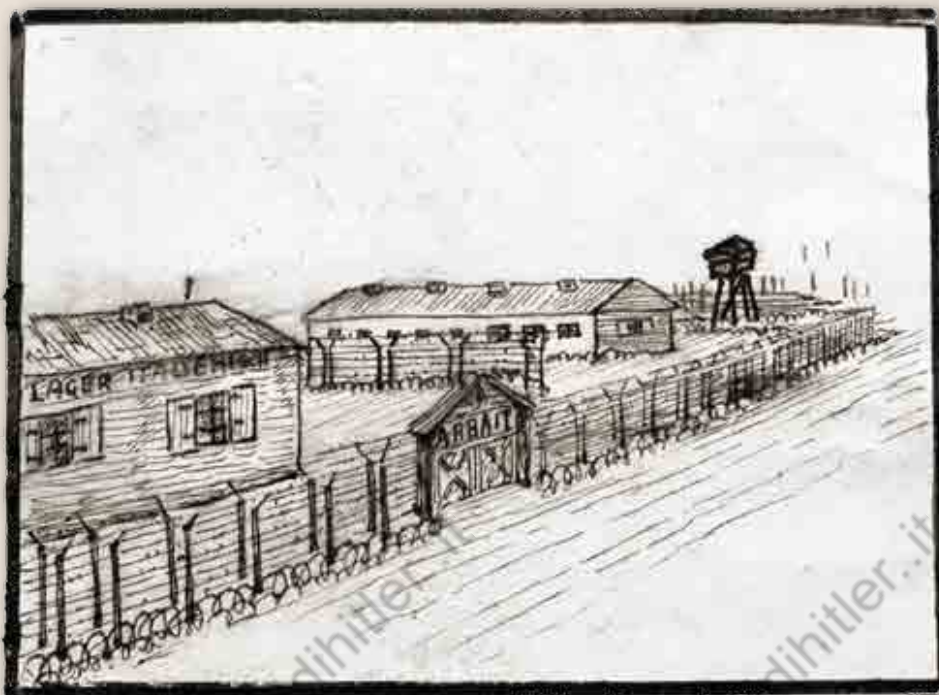
Personalkarte (identification document) of an inmate



Drawing by Antonio Spreccapane

For Christmas 1943 the Germans left us without food and hung a notice on the door of the camp which said, "If you are hungry ask Badoglio to help you".

Emilio Fendoni, aged 26



Lager CLAAS, drawing by Dario Maraschi

The IMI were transferred to their work destination where they were enclosed in sub camps of the main camp or handed over to Arbeit Kommando, or in camps set up by the factory.

The Nazi management and the local population were convinced that the Italians were traitors and lazy and had to be "educated on how to work". The scarce and contradictory indications of how they should be treated wavered between retaliation and exploitation. They could treat the prisoners how they pleased with differences between camps and between various regions. In the Balkans, in Poland, in Silesia, in Saxony and along the Rhine, the conditions of life and work for the Italians was hard. They had to submit to the contempt and cruelty of the guards. In the treatment of the guards and the Nazi authorities there was retaliation for the "betrayal" which was similar to that in 1915-18. For the Italian prisoners too, the Germans were the historical enemy.

There was the risk of ending up in the camp of "re education" run by the SS, for having broken some rule, disobeying an officer, or not having understood a command. Discipline was maintained by privation and exemplary punishment, both individual and collective and sudden and frequent searches were made.

Life in the lager

I believe that the incredible suffering that we went through will remain engraved in the bodies and minds of each one of us.

Luciano Zambra, aged 23



We were dressed in rags, we covered our bodies with strips of material taken from sacks or anything else we came by here and there. We had wooden clogs for shoes, cut directly from trees with holes to put our feet in.

Giacomo Brentan, aged 30

Punishments were hard; exercises with bricks, bare feet in the snow carrying rucksacks full of sand, boxing matches against the guards, whipping with electricity wires. For people who were in our condition these meant death.

Virginio Rotta, aged 20

It is difficult to talk about the time when a German, seeing a foot poking out of the end of a bunk, shot at it and mutilated one of my friends.

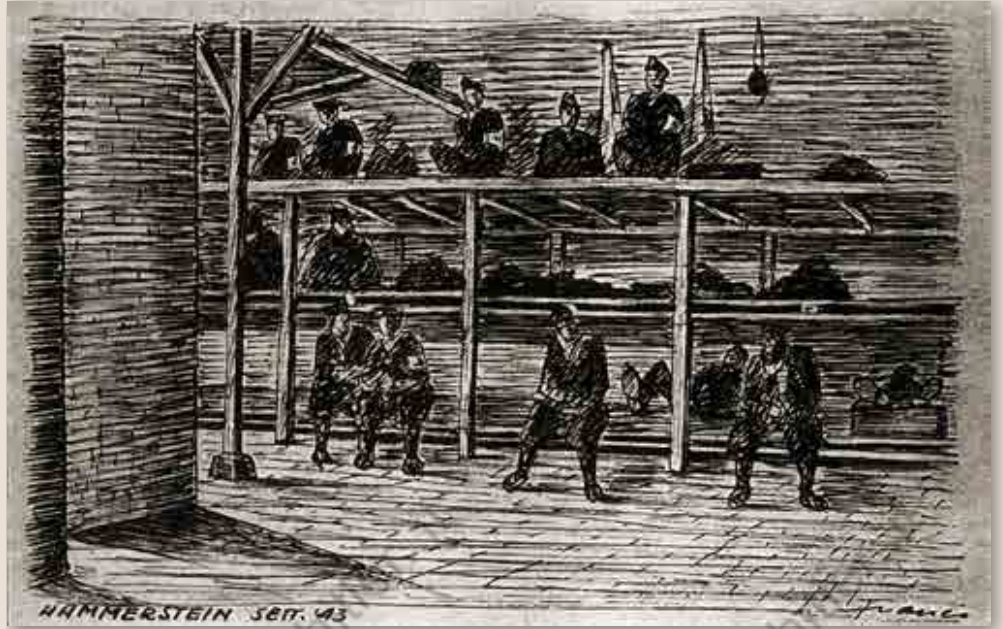
Angelo Bonati, aged 19

It was difficult to have relationships with the others. What was there to say? We were all struggling to survive and we were all afraid of not coming out alive from that Hell.

Arsiero Gilardoni, aged 23

It was difficult to make friends with someone because the next day they might be taken away or found dead next to you and then to survive you had to take their clothes and food.

Carmine De Angelis, aged 23



Drawing by Franco Lombardi

I could write tens of pages about the suffering, cruelty and the inhumane conditions of work, not to mention of the hunger, the cold and the fear. Even now after 55 years during the night I have terrible nightmares.

I was hit on the hand with a bayonet only because I tried to gather a wisp of wild chicory outside the barbed wire fence. (There is a big scar visible even today).

Vincenzo Ilardo, aged 19

I was in that camp for two years without being able to wash and wearing the same clothes I had been wearing in Greece. The trousers, dirty torn, patched, were covering a skeleton. We lived in the hut continually under the control of the German soldiers and we slept on piles of straw. I have to stop here because the memories are too vivid and alive and they give me too much anguish.

Francesco Agostani, aged 27

We often had to get up in the night to urinate and sometimes we wet our trousers because even our manliness was disappearing.

Franco Catelli, aged 23



Disegno di Paolo Boni

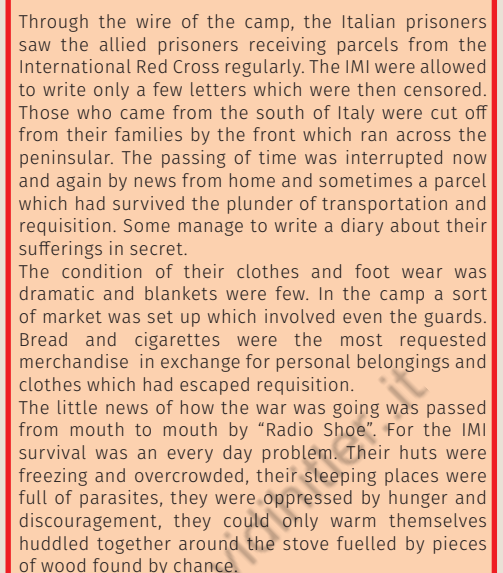
The camps where the IMI slept were guarded or by reservists or elderly and invalid soldiers or by the territorial army. From here they left for the factory in columns under guard every morning after having been woken at the crack of dawn, having queued for some cold water, the roll call in the open in all weather conditions.

They were brought back to the camp in the evening without having eaten anything. The food that was distributed after work was little and monotonous; a broth of turnips or potatoes without any substance and some margarine and black bread which they fought over for the crumbs.

The socialisation became more difficult day by day owing to the deprivations and hard work.

The prisoners searched in the kitchen rubbish and a few managed to get through the wire of the camp to steal vegetables. There was the risk of being killed for a few potato peelings.

Giulio Galli, aged 21



Forced labour

Killing shifts of work, alternating with continual roll calls in the freezing cold and if anyone complained they were beaten.

Francesco Agostani, aged 27



They gave the Italians the heaviest work like carrying liquid smelted iron to pour into the moulds.

For this work they should have received a supplementary ration of food like the other workers, German or foreign.

However the two managers continued to refuse to give this to the Italians despite their protests.

The prisoners were often made to continue working after the regular eleven hours a day and they were not allowed a day of rest.

On holidays they were made to load and unload materials.

A soldier called Luigi L who was physically weak could not do such hard work.

Many times he was brutally beaten by the guards and in the end he disappeared to an unknown destination.

Michele Morstabilini, aged 24



"At work", drawing by Lodovico Lisi, taken from: "Appunti di viaggio ..." op. cit.

We worked in the furnaces sweating like cart horses. The heat was unbearable. We were controlled by two armed soldiers.

There the suffering began, 11 hours during the day and 11 during the night with a production figure which had to be met.

Mario Oldani, aged 27

We were sent to Sverin on the Russian front on the river Oder, where the Germans had only a small bridge head and we prisoners had to dig trenches and pathways.

We were divided into two squads.

One week we worked by day and the following by night.

We were taken to the front line only a few meters from the Russians and so we were in the middle of the two enemies, the Russians on one side and the Germans on the other.

Luigi Airoidi, aged 20



Factory regulations for Italians (CLAAS company)

The Germans said that the work done by my companions and I was not unpaid but paid, only that as we were prisoners of war our wages and contributions were being deposited in special bank books which we would be given at the end of the war, (which never happened).

Carmine De Angelis, aged 23

They made us sign a document which said we were not allowed to speak to our companions or have contact with women and we must not sabotage anything and if they suspected us of any of these things we would be shot.

Giacomo Maggi, aged 19

Besides the impossibility of receiving food parcels from the Red Cross the was also a disposition from the supreme command of the Wehrmacht on 28th February 1944 that stated that their board and pay was in relation to how much the prisoner produced. Other measures were legitimated; piecework, coercion, heavy sanctions and the use of violence in order to make the prisoners produce more.

Weakened by hunger and the punishments for not producing enough, a life with new deprivations began for the IMI, It was a vicious circle.

The severe controls and the punishments obstructed any protests. For the Germans any error made, distraction or slowing down in the work was considered sabotage which mean being transferred to a punishment camp.

Big and small companies such as Faben, Auto Union, Daimler, Benz, Siemens, AEG, Volkswagen backed up the policy of the regime, exploiting the piecework of the prisoners which they did for miserable wages and low social contributions paid to give an appearance of health assistance.



Drawing by Carlo Slama, taken from "Lacrime di pietra", Mursia,

Forced labour

Young men of 20, gunners, alpine corps, grenadiers who had to survive and work on millet and vegetable soup.

Guido Boiardi, aged 20



As they had tools and metal sheets to hand, the prisoners tried to get food by making and selling objects in tin (milk saucepans, nickel rings tobacco boxes and various other things with engravings).

These objects were hidden from the Germans who would have taken them away and we sold them to superiors at work, civilians or with the outside world through them.

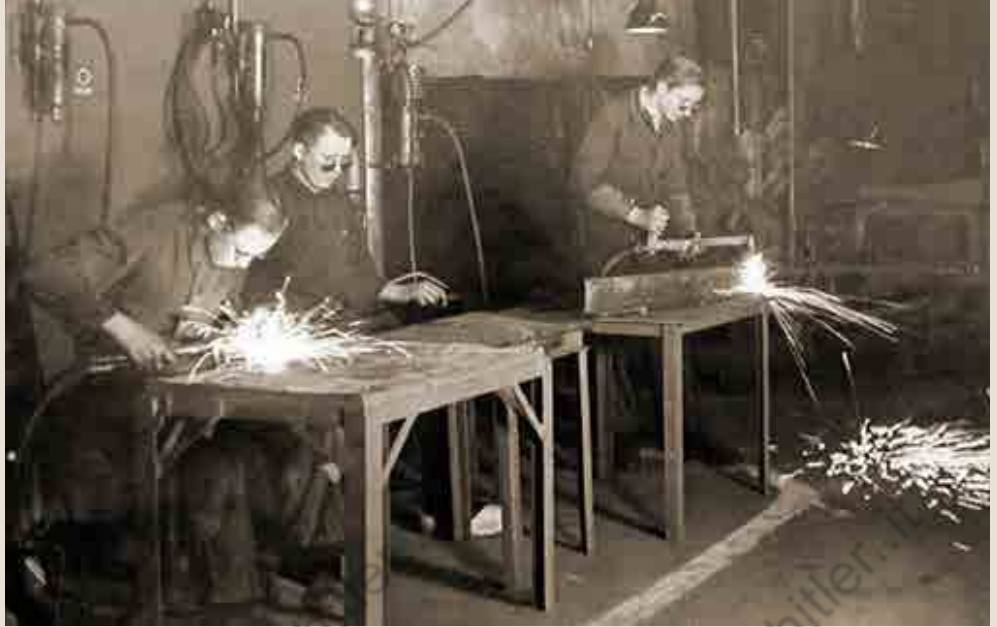
The pay was always in the form of black bread.

Luigi Panizza, aged 28

I started to work on a metal lathe, continually under bombing by the English and we had to work following plans to the centimetre for the construction of engines for submarines and ships.

Who made a mistake was accused of sabotage and was sent to Belsen and certain death.

Renzo Mereghetti, aged 22



Forced laborers at CLAAS in Hersenwinkel



CLAAS factory in Hersenwinkel



Snuffbox self-produced by an IMI

I have never forgotten when the youngest man in the camp was killed. He had stayed at the camp because he had a fever. When we returned in the evening we found him dead from percussions because they said he did not want to work. After this our greatest fear was to become sick and so we went to work even where we had a fever.

Celestino Motta, aged 21

There was a German woman who took pity on my state of health and when possible she brought me slices of bread giving up part of her own ration. One morning she made a mistake and she gave me her part as well. When she realized this she came back to me and I regardless of my own hunger said that I had not touched it and I gave it back to her willingly.

Giacomo Brentan, aged 30

Work camp O.T.B.I.A. There were 280 Italians there in December 1943.

In May 1944, 38 had died of hunger and beatings, 80 from tuberculosis, 100 were sick or invalids from accidents at work. Two were found dead in a toilet where they had been locked in as a punishment. When we protested to the German authorities they replied, "You are not prisoners but internees and so you have all the obligations of prisoners but none of the rights of prisoners. You are not prisoners but traitors". Only the Russians were treated worse than us.

Don Giuseppe Barbero, aged 28, op. cit

The Italians were included in the production process at the end of 1943, when the war took a turn against Hitler and allied bombing of German territory increased.

The war effort caused an increase in the hours of work in the factories bringing them up to 10-12 hours a day. The growing difficulty of finding food was being felt by the whole population but it was even worse for the prisoners. The use of coercion, exploitation, brutal violence and abuse of power cancel out any improvements in living conditions and imprisonment.

The companies found it very hard to find lodgings which were safe and isolated for the prisoners of various nationalities. Contact was forbidden and penalties were hard even for the Germans themselves.

Regardless of this with the passing of time transient relationships were developed between the forced workers and kind actions on the part of elderly German workers.

Forced labour

The work was killing because we were forced to remove rubble even in the snow, in the cold, in the frost, in the rain and we had few clothes to cover us...

Mauro Sanvito, aged 20



I came down with malaria and I was on the point of death owing to the lack of medicine. I was clearly too thin and weak. I had a high temperature and I felt the cold a lot. When I was at the factory I tried to keep warm by getting near to the lights of the machine so that nobody would see my sickness. In fact in this condition I was not much use for work so if I had been discovered I would have been "eliminated": Luckily I was transferred to a farm.

Annibale Crippa, aged 21

I was taken with about 20 of my fellow soldiers to a large farm near Stettin. That was the only time when we had enough to eat: milk and potatoes and turnips as much as we wanted, and we all had violent stomach ache

Wladimiro Antonio Brando, aged 22

I was taken to tunnel number 7, known as "the tunnel of death" because of the cruelty of the guards. These were mostly old miners who had fought in the First World War. They hated the Italians in particular. They beat and kicked the prisoners who stopped even for a second during the long fatiguing hours of work... Now and again one of us died from hunger and maltreatment. None of us could go to their aid or even go near them as the dead person was dragged away without pity, by the feet, by the guards.

Mazzini Bevilacqua, aged 20



January 14, 1944, Hannover, group of Italian prisoners



Drawing by Alessandro Berretti, taken from "Attenti al filo!", Anei, 1974

I worked in a mine for 5 months shovelling coal. The shifts were enough to kill you, many died from fatigue and hunger, those weighing less than 35 kilos were eliminated. I was afraid I would weigh less so I put stones in my pockets.

Vincenzo Pace, aged 23

We entered the mine at dawn and came out at night. I saw the sun again in the summer of '44 and I wasn't able to keep my eyes open.

Luigi Salvato, aged 20

I was sent to the farm of a man called Sass and made to harvest the crops, clean the stables etc. We slept in the hay covering ourselves as best we could in a room made out of boards nailed together and we were closed in like animals and we didn't have the possibility to wash so you can imagine what condition we were in. I can't begin to talk about the sufferings we went through.

Antonio Zanniello, aged 18



5 Mark ticket, which can only be spent inside the Lager

The expenses for board and lodging were detracted from the prisoners wages and in the hands of the IMI only a few "lager marks" remained. These could only be used in the camp shop to buy, when rationing permitted, soap, razors, cigarettes and sometimes even beer.

The daily rations were far below the number of calories necessary. And this situation was made worse by the lack of medical assistance. The rations were even reduced for those who were sick so the prisoners hid the symptoms of their illness.

There was also the fear of being eliminated which made the prisoner drag himself from the camp to the factory in whatever state of health he was. It was during this first terrible winter that the highest number of deaths was recorded.

In the workshops of Krupp at Rheinhausen a quarter of the Italians died from starvation.



Drawing by Paolo Boni, taken from "Ricordi di prigionia 1943-45"

The false medical aid

Are we in a hospital?

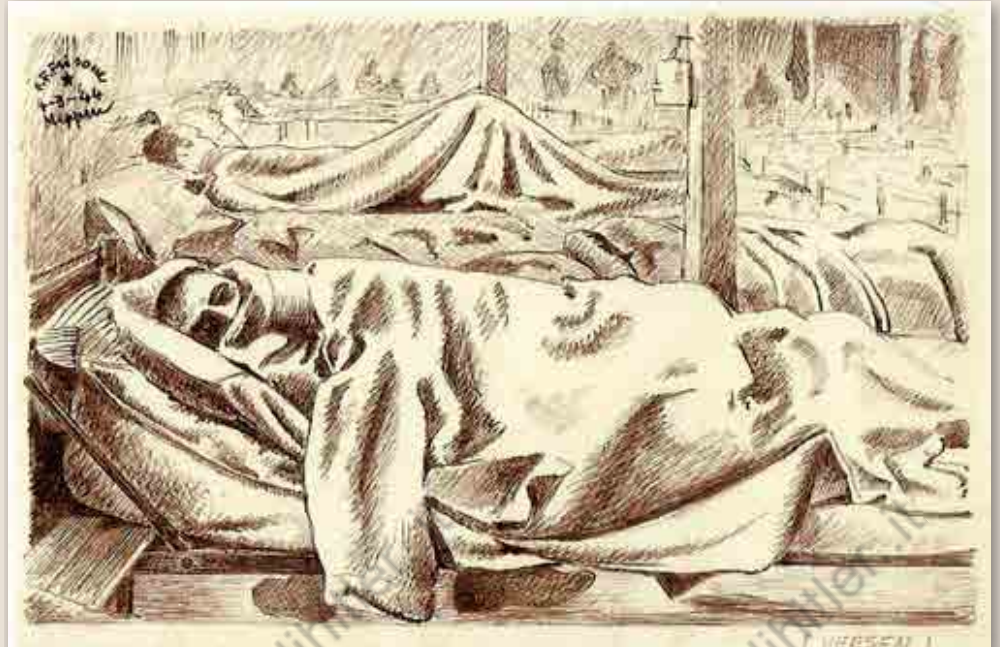
We are in a rubbish dump, horrible to see or imagine.

P. G. Ettore Accorsi, chaplain, taken from "Fullen, il campo della morte." Bergamo 1946.



"14th to 19th October 1943. I should have with me 185 ordinary soldiers and 50 nursing soldiers but I have no idea where they are. I go into the infirmary hut and the first thing which hits me is the nauseating smell...We go to the end of the room for medical examinations and medication. Here the smell is unbearable.: a combination of putrefaction and carbon monoxide coming from a stove issuing smoke everywhere but up the chimney...On one side, on the ground there is something that I take for rubbish but then I am forced to recognise it as material for medication. We go on to the wards. Here the scene is painfully dramatic. On each double bed made of wood the patients are lying like dead bodies covered in dirt...they are our poor soldiers...It is a heartbreaking scene which has remained in my heart and mind without the need of taking notes."

Dr. Guglielmo Dothel, aged 35, taken from "1939-1945: Schiavi di Hitler in Renania e Vestfalia", Hagen, 2003



Drawing by Francesco Frisone taken from: "Dall'Albania...", op. cit.

"Fullen is the camp where those for whom there is no hope are sent. During the night 180 suffering from tuberculosis arrive and one is already dead. It is like a scene from Dante's Inferno. All those naked bodies without flesh that show the signs of suffering, those swollen bellies and feet, those wasted faces...the worst cases are loaded onto a cart wrapped in covers and taken to the railway."

Ferruccio Francesco Frisone, aged 34 taken from Giovanni and Deborah Frisone "Dall'Albania al Lager di Fullen" 2010



Fullen, drawing by Alessandro Berretti, taken from: "Attenti al filo!", op.cit

Many of my companions were taken to hospital. They were mostly those who worked in the mines and had had to suffer the worst conditions.

The companions from the mines were in a desperate condition when they left. The privations, the heavy labour and malnutrition had reduced them to living skeletons. Half of them never returned home.

Guido Boiardi, aged 20



Medical examination, drawing by Francesco Frisone, taken from: "Dall'Albania...", op. cit

The rations of the IMI were far below the number of calories necessary and this caused a rapid deterioration and the onset of sicknesses connected to hunger and this situation was made worse by the lack of medical assistance. Ill treatment and the terrible hygienic conditions favoured infection, epidemics, severe depression and death.

The conditions in the camp hospital (lazaretto) were a disaster. It was a ghetto for those dying, where there were not enough beds and blankets and where the Italian doctors and Red Cross nurses, deported with the prisoners, shared the conditions and degradation of the prison. The medical personnel were forced to operate without instruments or medications and watched helplessly as the patients died when a simple medicine would have saved them. Zeithain, Fullen and other lazaretto contained men with malaria which they had contracted in the Balkans, men seriously injured, invalids and above all those with tuberculosis.

After long discussions with the Germans, they finally allowed those patients who were dying to be transported back to Italy but no more went because they were bad propaganda for the Germans and fascists.

One figure has remained impressed in my memory, that of Dr. Leandro Bonini. He was not only a doctor but also a father or a priest, always a friend. He represented all our sorrow, all our suffering, our hopes. Despite the many difficulties, with his professional ability and his tenacity he managed to construct two perhaps three rudimental but efficient machines for pneumothorax.

Giuseppe Biagini taken from Paride Piasenti "Il lungo..." op. cit.

From IMI to civilian worker

Up until 1st September 1944 it was the military who accompanied us to the mines, then it was decided that we were civilian prisoners and we were no longer accompanied but we were however prisoners.

Giuseppe Rufolo, aged 22



It was a life saver, The life was the same, the work was the same, but the conditions changed greatly. We no longer had an armed guard either in the camp or at work. The camp was open and we were free to come and go after work. We made the best of things, we managed to acquire in different ways what was necessary to make life better which in the conditions of the first year had been reduced to a shadow.

Adrio Bizzarri, aged 19

From prisoner to civilian, from Berlin to Leipzig with hope and depression alternating. Months passed in this way before my eyes and in my heart, only one desire, one thought, to return home! "But when, when will this happen? Haven't I suffered enough yet? And will that day come? Or will all my sacrifices be in vane?"

Carlo Barbero, aged 30



Work book for foreign workers

The SS forced us to sign under threats that we agreed to the change from being considered military to being civilians in exchange for an improvement in the conditions of life, of work and the conditions of being prisoners in general. Out of distrust I refused to sign then and later.

Aurelio Bernardi, aged 19

In August 1944 we had the privilege of being able to go out into the area around the factory after work. However the conditions of work and the food given us did not improve... We had a special card for re-entry.

Armando Stefani, aged 21

Once I went to repair a roof of a house in the snow. The house owner gave me a loaf of a kilo and a half but on the way back a German civilian took it from me accusing me of having stolen it.

Donato Bosica, aged 22



Passport for civilian workers

The only ray of humanity in this desolation was a German technician who lived near the camp. Sometimes on Sundays, with a close friend he came to pick us up and took us to his house to cut wood. He gave us something to eat and comforted us saying it would soon be over. He had two sons missing in Russia too. When the Americans arrived we collected signatures to testify his good behaviour towards the prisoners.

Emilio Fendoni, aged 26



Document certifying the transition from IMI to civilian worker



German propaganda on the change of status of IMI from: "Storia fotografica della prigionia dei militari italiani in Germania", Bollati Boringhieri, 2005



On the 20th July 1944 Hitler modified the status of the IMI who thus became civilian workers. This decision was a political act to give credit to Mussolini. The Italian government saw this as a solution to the problem of the IMI whose fate involved that of millions of families. Even Sauckel was convinced that their treatment had to be improved for productive reasons. However the change in status did not really change the conditions of the prisoners. They, like the rest of the population, had to come to terms with the ever diminishing supply of foodstuffs as a consequence of the collapse of Nazi Germany.

Only one third of the military accepted this change of status. Many refused for the maltreatment received, for the fear of being called up again, for the fear of losing economic rights at home. After threats and coercion the change of status was quickly enforced.

The Wehrmacht handed the prisoners over to the police and the barbed wire around the huts was taken down. The prisoners were given personal documents and permission to enter the factories which they had to reach under their own steam if they wanted to be fed.

A limited freedom was allowed which brought them into contact with the civilian population.

About 100,000 prisoners were excluded from the change of status and had to remain in the camps under the control of the SS.

Political deportees in the KZ

Every morning the corpses were laid on a low farm cart pulled by one of the prisoners. Tied by a rope rarely covered by a cloth, they were taken to the crematory ovens.

Don Giuseppe Elli, aged 69, political deportee, taken from "Mia prigionia..." op.cit.



On 6th March 1944 when I entered the factory the atmosphere was completely different to the usual. Leaflets were being passed around and they asked us to take part in a strike.

Everybody stopped work. The management came in and somebody called the police. The police chief named Pozzoli came accompanied by some fascists.

When we came out at midday all the gates were closed and the workmen blocked. Pozzoli called 4 men and 2 women and told them that they would be sent to work in Germany. I found myself in front of the chief of police and I defended my companions and made him understand that if everyone had gone on strike it was because we all wanted to and it wasn't right to put the blame only on these people when he could punish everybody.

He had to arrest us all.

Naturally this was impossible, and I played on this.

Ines Figini, aged 21, political deportee, video interview with Valter Merazzi



Group of deportees to Buchenwald

After passing through various Italian prisons, I and my companions were sent to the camp of Mauthausen in Germany. There my odyssey started. One of the cruellest tasks was that of digging a grave large enough to take about 200 prisoners, mostly Jews who had died from maltreatment. Many of them still gave signs of life desperately asking for water. These were heartbreaking scenes which we saw before our eyes every morning. The surveillance by the SS was so constant than every time we refused these inhumane tasks there were severe punishments.

Luigi Maglio, aged 20, absent at call up RSI



Entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp 1

Because of an escape I was sent to the death camp of Dachau. I took part in the disciplinary campaign of the special guards. I arrived there at the end of December 1944. My job was to dig communal graves, transport corpses, undress the dead, clean the camp, take the bodies from the places where experiments were carried out and work in the crematory ovens.

How many died nobody will ever know.

Carletto Borin, aged 19, IMI



Lagermark of a Buchenwald sub-camp

According to the latest researches almost 24.000.000 men and women, for the most part antifascist of various political leanings and religions, partisans, supporters of the Resistance and civilians who had been arbitrarily captured by the Germans and the fascists of Salò were deported from Italy as enemies of Germany, and handed over to the SS. They were imprisoned in the Konzentrationslager (KZ) KL of Dachau, Mauthausen, Buchenwald, Flossenbürg and Auschwitz.

Also 779 IMI and 170 civilian workers were sent to these camps where many died from the hard and inhumane work.

Reduced to slavery, marked by physical and mental suffering, more than 10,000 died from the violence suffered, the extreme exploitation in the quarries and mines of the SS and working for the production of weapons.

In the KZ those too weak to work were left to starve to death or were brutally killed.

Children, old people and the sick, only guilty of being Jewish, were deported from Italy and were immediately sent to the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Birkenau on arrival as they were not fit to work.

Only 837 out of 6836 survived the horror



Card of the I.G. Farbenindustrie, Auschwitz

The factories of death

Many Italians died in the camps. You could be talking to somebody in the evening who would be a corpse in the morning. We no longer noticed these things.

Dante Cabrele, aged 17, deported to Dora,
taken from Ricciotti Lazzero, "Gli schiavi di Hitler" Mondadori, 1996



The Pirelli at Bicocca Milan took part in the strike on 23rd November 1944.

As one man, everyone took part. The commanding division of Saeveke arrived and indiscriminately took out 181 workers and 2 clerks. They were taken to San Vittore prison. Of these 17 were then released because physically unfit, the others were forced to sign a contract of work to be sent to Germany as voluntary workers. Francesco Gervasoni was one of the 181 workers.

On 7th December he arrived at Kahla and was assigned to hut 7 later known as the camp of death by the Germans themselves. He survived the slavery of the forced labour, with little food, the extreme cold, fleas and beating.

On 27th February 1945 his companions in the hut found him dead on the camp bed.

Memories of **Bruno** son of **Francesco Gervasoni**,
aged 40, political depotee who died at Kahla



One of the many entrances to the Kahla bunker factory

At Kahla there were slaves who were worked to death. In that place there was only death. It was a camp for punishment of any type, it was a camp of forced labour because the SS didn't leave you in peace: Evening would come...you came back from work and you didn't even have time to drink that little amount of broth they gave you and there was a second roll call.

Peppino Camelliti, aged 19, IMI



Ausweis of the REIMAHG company in Kahla

About 30th September I arrived at a concentration camp and after 2 days I was transferred to camp Dora.

Those who had been deported didn't have documents on them because we were outside the world of the living.

My work in camp Dora was slavery, closed in for 6 months without ever going out.

Working, eating, sleeping, satisfying our physiological needs, all the time inside the tunnel of Hell of Dora.

Giuseppe Algeri, aged 19, IMI

In the morning we were lined up in the courtyard. The 95 companies which existed in Kahla came and took who they needed. They made millions, I did all the work. We were watched over by the SS.

There wasn't a priest, nor a doctor, no assistance.

We didn't have recognition disks Who died did so without leaving trace and for him there wasn't even a cross.

Balilla Bolognesi, aged 23, deportato civile

At camp Dora I was employed in soldering on the V1 and V2. We Italians were housed in block 18. Every day in the early afternoon we were gathered in the courtyard and we had to watch the hanging of who, in their opinion, had transgressed or done something.

Giuseppe Zanatta, aged 21, IMI



A Me262 takes off from the Kahla factory



Drawing by Emilio Matticari

To avoid allied bombing, German secret weapons were produced in underground factories. In the concentration camp of Dora Mittlebau near Nordhausen, 60,000 slaves were made to work in terrible conditions in the centre of the mountain by the SS, in the construction of the V1 and V2 missiles. Thousands of IMI and Italian political prisoners passed through this hell where about 20,000 forced to work here died.

Also in Turingia, in the tunnels of Mount. Walpesberg, in the Reimagh of Hermann Goering, the Messerschmitt 262, a jet plane destined to change air war fare, was assembled.

15,000 deportees among them 3,000 Italians, mostly civilians, were used for construction work at the camp of Kahla building roads, bunkers and enlarging the tunnels.

The intensity of the exploitation and the condition of the prisoners were the cause of the high mortality rate, among those forced to construct a runway on the top of a deforested mountain, served by a rack and pinion railway.

Military chaplains in the lager

I had the task of giving religious assistance in as many as 20 work camps situated near Hagen. However I was rarely allowed to visit them, in fact in many I never set foot.

Don Giuseppe Barbero, military chaplain taken from "La Croce..." op. cit.



Faith had unified the spirits and had carried them above that world of hate and violence which our persecutors had created. It was at certain moments the only human expression in the wrecked lives of the prisoners, the only possibility of recovering one's own humanity in the context of certain universal values which eternally survive in life when all other values have been extinguished.

Father Giannantonio Agosti, aged 58 chaplain, taken from "Uomini e Tedeschi: scritti e disegni di deportati" Casa di Arosio, 1947

To say the name Don Pasa for a million and a million and one is like a gleam of light among the oppressive clouds, a light of hope in the dark desperation, a certainty of faith among so much cold uncertainty and doubts.

Giuseppe Lazzati, aged 34 Officer, taken from Don L. Pasa "Tappe di un calvario" Vicenza 1947



Drawing by Gino Spalmach, taken from "La Resistenza..." op. cit

I had to force myself to go to the cemetery to see those who had recently been my companions before they were buried ...40 centimetres of soil on top of them is not much. Underneath was the water from the peat bog. "So you can finally wash yourselves. The paper sacks that cover you can hide the holes the rats have made in your hearts from the sight of the dying still in the camp and the gravediggers."

Father Ettore Accorsi, aged 34, military chaplain, taken from "Fullen, il campo..." op.cit.

A sentinel was always with me in these visits and he was armed with a gun ready to shoot and a bayonet already in place as if I were a criminal.

It was forbidden to walk on the pavements (dogs must walk in the road) we were often subjected to abuse and scorn by the super polite Germans, who spit on the ground as we passed.

Don Giuseppe Barbero, aged 28, military chaplain, taken from "La croce..." op.cit.



Military chaplains of various nationalities in the Fallingbomel Lager

At Dachau the Holy Communion was distributed just like in the times of the early church. The priests in civilian clothes had hidden the Holy Sacraments in ugly tins for wax polish. So it was administered...even to the dying in "Revier" hospital.

Don Giuseppe Elli, aged 69, political deportee Taken from "Mia prigionia mio internamento." 1946



Sandbomel camp chapel.



Fullen, drawing by di Ferruccio Frisone, taken from: "Dall'Albania..." op. cit.

Amid the desolation of the Oflag, religious faith and the presence of a military chaplain who had also been deported, helped to raise the spirit of survival and the will to resist of many officers. The simple soldiers did not have even this spiritual assistance because there were only few Stalag which the chaplains were allowed to visit. The chaplains shared the same treatment as the prisoners, the same miserable conditions of life, hunger and anguish. They are the witnesses of how great the tragedy was of the prisoners of every nation, there for political or racial reasons.

They were under pressure from the fascists to join the army of the Republic of Salò because of the influence they had on the troops. They were under suspicion from the Germans who tried to stop them having contact with the prisoners and wanted to know beforehand the contents of the sermons and they were considered instigators.

The work of the chaplains among the sick and the dying, from whom they received the last messages for their families, continued even after the end of the war. They were particularly active in organising the repatriation of the Italians.

The priest who were deported because they were considered "political" were imprisoned in KZ camps and guarded by the SS.

Voluntary workers

From the day I started working, for the fact that it concerned military secrets, I was not allowed to return to Italy, even when it was my right to do this, such as the five days for the death of my mother and my brother.

Fanny Tebai, aged 19



I left for Germany as a volunteer, I arrived the 2nd September 1944 and I was transferred to the camp at Muldenstein where I was put to work on a lathe immediately for the construction of pieces for the missile bombs V1 and V2. Here we slept in huts in rooms with six bunks, we work wearing our own clothes, and none of us women had menstruation owing I think to some medication they put in the food.

Fanny Tebai, aged 19

"In the camp of Gelsenkirchen there are also civilian Italians working, probably those who went to Germany after the Rome-Berlin axis was established. They too live in the huts but they are free to come and go. They don't make themselves known, they don't come near the other Italians, they don't speak Italian but the prisoners know who they are."

Mario Antonio Caccialanza, aged 19



Departure of voluntary workers for Germany

I left in 1944 when I was 14 years old with a division of young people from the "Fiamme Bianche" (I think there were about 100 of us) for a period of training in Germany. As soon as we arrived they made us stay in the theatre of the town which already housed Italian prisoners. The day after we arrived, the Germans took away our arms and in place of a gun they gave us a pick and shovel and sent us along with the other prisoners to construct huts in the wood which was about 2 kilometres from the town.

Rino Granozio, aged 14



In front of the barracks of the camps

In June 1943 together with my sister Maria and my brother Olindo we left to go to Germany as we had a regular work contract for six months. I worked at the Kreker farm in a place called Daberkow in the province of Demmin. I was paid regularly until 30th September 1943. From that day on until we were liberated by the Russian troops on 30th April 1945 I was forced to work without pay at the same farm.

Giovanna Cesaro, aged 18



Propaganda poster for voluntary work in Germany

After 8th September 1943 the desire for revenge against the Italian "traitors" by the Germans was extended to those Italians who had agreed to go voluntarily to Germany to work (this following the political economic agreements between the two countries at the end of the '30s). These were refused permission to repatriate. The Reich could not allow itself to lose the work force which was necessary for the war economy. Surrounded by the contempt of the Germans the "Gastarbeiter" soon found themselves having to share the same social conditions as the deported civilians with whom they were ideologically separate. They lost their privileges and became victims of negligence, absolute power and racism. The policy of the occupation of Italy was to exploit the local industries and work force and at the same time there was an intense propaganda of recruitment of volunteer workers to go to Germany. The failure of this caused the use of methods which were increasingly coercive. And to the deportation of civilians, the flow of which continued until the end of 1944.



German Manifestos for Voluntary Work and the Todt Organization

The civilians captured and summoned in Italy



As I worked at the Breda in Sesto San Giovanni I was exempted from military service. Round about February 1944 the German and fascist authorities closed the factory and the workers were summoned to go to work in Germany.

Antonio Colombo, aged 21

We received a written order to present ourselves at the police headquarters in Sondrio in order to be sent to work in Germany.

We hid in the house of a family we knew.

As we hadn't presented ourselves the police declared that if we didn't obey orders the father of Enrica and the mother of Ernestina would be imprisoned.

Ernestina Gilardi, aged 20

On the 9th September I ran away from home living as well I could, sleeping in barns and lofts because the houses in the village were often searched by the carabinieri and the soldiers from the Republic of Salò.

On 8th March 1944 I presented myself to the RSI because who didn't do this could be shot (this was the latest order). They put us on sealed carriages with the destination Aldebreck on the border with Poland.

Luigi Pagani, aged 19

I was 12 years old. My mother worked for the Siemens in Italy and when she was transferred to Germany she took me with her. When we arrived at Nuremberg we were imprisoned in the camp in Carolinenstrasse.

After a few days I was transferred to a camp for Italian military in Sud Friedhof and after because of the bombing in the camp in Sport Platz. Every morning, all those in the camp walked to the Siemens factory. I remember the bombing by day and by night. In the factory we were not allowed to go to the shelters, only the Germans could go.

Giuseppe B., aged 12

In the first week of May 1944 I took the train to go to work. There were about twenty of us in the carriage, and some passenger threw rubbish at some fascists who were training. They made us get out and we were taken to the barracks and kept for 4 or 5 days. They transferred us to the prison of San Vittore in Milan and then they put us on cattle trucks to be sent to Germany.

Leonardo Ballerini, aged 16



German notice against defaulting on compulsory employment service. Naples, September 1943



Engagement receipt for the mandatory call to work



Ausweis from Otto Schickert Werke, Rhumspringe



Call to the job service



Ausweis from Siemens-Schuckertwerke A.G., Nuremberg

My father was captured during a round up in July 1944 while he was cutting the grass in the field below our house.

He was locked up in the prison of Bardi for three days, transferred by lorry to Verona and sent to Germany along with many others in a sealed carriage.

Giovanni Assirati, aged 38
by the words of his daughter **Maria Teresa**

In Italy tens of millions of civilians were obliged to work for the Wehrmacht and the Todt in the construction of instruments of defence.

Hunting for slaves (as it was called by the Germans themselves) and the threat of deportation caused a popular revolt in Naples and enlarged the number of groups of partisans who were already welcoming all those objectors to recruitment of the Republic of Salò, in the centre and north of Italy.

The German military organisation was involved in fighting the allied offence and was not able to put into action the project of Fritz Sauckel for the full use of the work force which had foreseen the deportation of a million and a half Italians to satisfy the insatiable request for workers in Germany.

With the help of the Republic of Salò, by calling up contingent workers, indiscriminate capture and manhunt in the cities and in the areas of the front and anti partisan action, 100,000 civilian Italians were deported by the Germans.

In Rome almost 1,000 men between the ages of 16 and 60 were arrested in the district of Quadraro considered to be a nest of partisan and objectors to recruitment. They were taken to the camp at Fossoli where they were forced to sign a contract for voluntary work and then transferred to the Reich

The officers' refusal to work

"he only thing that we desire: the end of the war, and to return home. We well know that accepting the work only means prolonging this and running useless risks."

Raimondo Finati, aged 23, officer, taken from "Le giovani..." op.cit.



The great campaign for work. Our wardens used every means possible to have volunteers, even armed threats. For futile reasons they fired 4 barrels against our hut in one night. A sergeant broke the handle of a shovel on the shoulder of a soldier and an officer had a bayonet thrust in his thigh. All this on the eve of a request for workers. With this we remained firm to our decision.

Anellino Mannocchi, officer, taken from R. Finati "Le giovani..." op. cit.

We were asked if we wanted to work for Germany. "Never. We will never help to prolong the war even for a day with the suffering that this causes for all the Italians at home, prisoners in their own country and for myself!"

Oreste De Felice, aged 22, officer, taken from R. Finati "Le giovani ...", op. cit.



Photo by Vittorio Vialli, group of officers interned in Benjaminowo

We made it clear that we would never work on principle and we called on the convention of Geneva, even writing it down, we always refused.

Regardless of our protests we were forced to work telling us that if we did not we would never return to Wietzendorf but we would be sent to a prison run by the Gestapo. They made us work 12 hours a day with only one day off per month as manual labourers in a thermal electric power station being constructed.

We tried to sabotage the construction and not work-

Gianfranco Cucco, officer, taken from "Bergamaschi nei Kz", Aned 1992

The Nazis had no intention of listening to group action. They tried to break this type of resistance by picking out those who represented the group, transferring them and punishing them to give an example to the others. The 360 were defined as enemies of Europe, not considered as simply refusing to the work offered in accordance with the Hitler-Mussolini agreement but as political opponents to be deported.

Paolo Desana, aged 25, officer, taken from "La via" op. cit.



"Expectation", drawing by Piero Gauli, 1944

There was no doubt that it was our duty to refuse any compromise, any form of collaboration with the Germans. Otherwise why had we been in the camps so long?

What logic was there in saying "yes" to the Nazis after having said a resolute "no" to the fascists.

Alessandro Natta, aged 25, officer, taken from "L'altra..." op.cit.



Diary of an inmate officer

The officers of the Royal Italian army were also affected by the change of status to civilian worker. Until that moment they had not been forced to work but they underwent continual requests from the Germans to work as volunteers.

The measure excluded chaplains, doctors and higher ranking officers but on 31 January 1945 it was extended to all regular officers. The resistance to the measure was especially widespread in camps like Wietzendorf, Oberlangen, Hammerstein where very few accepted to work despite the continual heavy threats.

The officers who agreed to work did so simply to avoid hunger.

Most of the officers opposed the demilitarization because of the oath they had sworn, because of the treatment from the Germans and not to contribute even indirectly in prolonging the war.

Among these there were 2,000 officers who were considered "political enemies of Europe" and were transferred to a punishment camp organised by the SS. The resistance of the Oflag consolidated by the refusal to work, was further strengthened by news of the progress of the war transmitted by clandestine radio.

Bombing raids

The last memories are those of the bombing raids by the Allies which caused us fear but for all of us it meant the end of the war and so the end of imprisonment.

Remo Conti, aged 19



Everywhere there was the danger of being killed. The great Germany was dying and wanted to take with it all those who had helped in its collapse.

I entered the camp and I found all my companions overcome by fear, not only for the bombing but also because after the raid some had run off and when the roll was called they were found missing, then they were found, taken to a wall and in front of everyone shot.

Orlando Alesse, aged 22

As the months passed the bombings started: alarm, they closed the windows, blacked out the factory, they went to the shelters and we continued to work.

Mario Oldani, aged 27



The streets of a bombed German city

The alarm sounded every night and then the German soldiers took us quickly to the shelter, we just had time for blankets, we went in the bunker and we sat on the lumps of coal one next to the other like lost sheep. The alarm for an attack could happen even three or four times a night.

Guido Boiardi, aged 20

We were on our way to work watched over by a guard when suddenly the alarm sounded. The guard immediately took us towards a shelter and made us enter too. But the other Germans threw us out shouting "Raus Badoglio".

We took refuge in the cellar of a house in ruins and by a stroke of destiny a bomb fell on the bunker killing some, while we were saved.

Aldo Scotti, aged 21



Permit to access the bunker issued to an Italian



Air-raid shelter

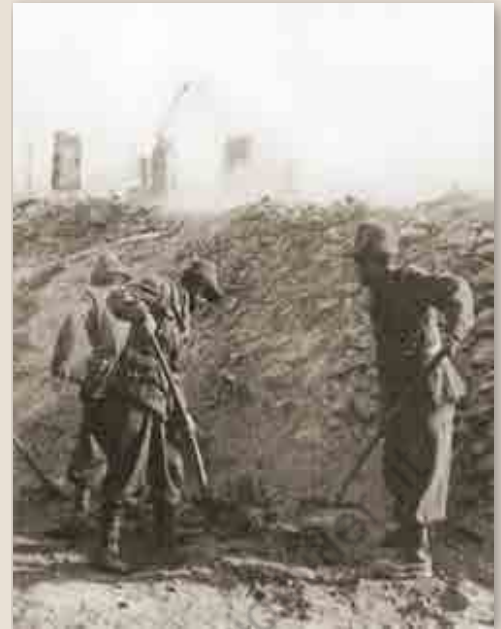


Italian prisoners recover bricks from the ruins of Bremen

The Allied bombing raids intensified after 1943 reaching the highest point in the last four months of the war. The nocturnal raids by the British were back up by those of the Americans during the day using thousands of planes. Industrial production, fuel deposits and the transport system were the main targets. However the cities too were destroyed by thousands of bombs and incendiary bombs which caused between 430,000 and 630,000 deaths for the most part by suffocation. Prisoners and deportees were used to clear away the rubble and to take away the dead. In most cases the Italians were denied the use of the bunkers and their only protection was by using shields against flying debris.

The situation of the IMI became worse in July 1944 when the Wehrmacht ordered that emergency personal must remain in the workshops during the raids. For the deportees this was a daily nightmare which was accompanied by the hope that Germany would be defeated and the war would soon end.

About 42,000 of the forced labourers of various nationalities, lost their lives in the bombing raids which hit factories and the huts of the camps.



Italian soldiers engaged in clearing the rubble in Kassel

The massacres

They went with their heads bent down without a lament like sheep to the slaughter.

Don Romeo Rusconi, Military chaplain, taken from P Piasenti "Il lungo inverno..." op.cit.



"There was a dead man sitting against a wall... with a bag. I am there to work, I open the bag and inside there is a piece of bread...I take the bread...The guard watching over those working sees me and catches me..." "Goodbye I am done for".

That day they caught 26 of us and they took us into the market place in front of the Town Hall... Everyone lined up four by four...the gallows were already in place.

They strung up the first four. They put the noose around their necks, put them on a stool and then kicked away the stool and that was that and they were taken down. Another four, then those of the third line. Now it was my turn. The Americans arrived for a bombing raid, everyone fled and so did I. They all fled and I remained for 8 days in a hole under the German firing range.

Giovanni Tartari, aged 19,
survivor of the massacre at Hildesheim



Treuenbrietzen. Cemetery of the victims of the massacre

The 79 people killed (at Kassel)...were from the alpine corps...frontier guards...and soldiers... There was a bombing raid...

"We need 90 people...to put the railway lines back in place," they said. The 90 men worked all day and they didn't receive either a ration of bread or a bowl of turnips or anything to drink... The food wagon had arrived so they took an apple but there was also some margarine and they ate that.

...They divided the Italians in three groups and they made them stand in front of three enormous holes...They shot them in the neck with a pistol. After the first was killed the second had to cover his body and then put himself in position. Who shot them were extremely young boy volunteer Volkssturm.

Pietro Maset,
taken from Ricciotti Lazzero "Gli schiavi..." op. cit.



Italian soldiers employed in Kassel after a bombing



Recovery of the corpses of the victims of the Treuenbrietzen massacre

In January 1945 the advance of the Red Army across Poland caused the camp of Schocken to be dismantled. 159 Italian higher ranking officers were forced to march 350 kilometres towards Luckenwalde during which 7 generals were killed.

By the spring the Wehrmacht and the SS were fighting in the territory of the Reich reinforced by elderly soldiers and youth of the Volkssturm. The Italians were the witnesses of the violence and massacres which caused victims during the death march. At Sandbostel hundreds were killed during a rebellion by Russian prisoners in a nearby camp.

At Hildesheim 93 IMI were hanged in front of the Town Hall in the square for having taken food from bombed railway wagons. The Volkssturm youth killed another 79 at Kassel. At Treubretzen 112 IMI who had been liberated by the Russian were recaptured by a German division, taken to a quarry and shot by machine guns. Of other massacres which took place at the end of the war there are only rumours. At Wietzenhof, Kahla, Dora and other camps by chance or because the German commander refused to carry out orders, the final massacre aimed at eliminating all proof of the atrocities which had been carried out, was avoided.

Treuenbrietzen was liberated by Russian troops on 21st April 1945...

On the 23rd April the door opened...There was a German soldier who ordered us to get out.

The German soldiers took us towards the open country. We found a cave. We were heading for Hell...and the commander gave the order "Fire". They started to shoot at us with every type of weapon, machine guns, rifles, pistols, so much so that at a certain moment they ran out of ammunition...

It was possible to hear the cries of the wounded, they dying, who called out for their mother, their wife, their children...

They finished off the dying with a shot in the neck. Silence....

In the evening they started to cover us with earth...

I wasn't wounded. Suddenly all was quiet, I tried to raise my head slowly, slowly, struggling to get out with the help of my arms because I was under those of the second line, and there was another companion called Antonio C...he too was trying...There was another who came out from behind to where we were. I think a sort of dip in the plain could have contributed to saving us.

Edo Magnalardo, aged 20,
survivor of the massacre at Treuenbrietzen

The liberation

We were under fire from both armies. Fortunately it only lasted one day and one night and only after some hours of silence did we dare come out. Outside we found the Americans.

Venerando Ambrosino, aged 20



In the spring of 1945 as the Russians advanced, the foundry was closed and we left by carts with luggage towards Germany accompanied by a guard.

At night we rested in the huts of peasants.

The roads were invaded not only by those interned but also prisoners and Jews who exhausted by the fatigue were almost dead and were killed there and then, but also many civilians who were terrorised by the advance of the Russian army.

Francesco Pesenti Rossi, aged 22

As soon as we were free we ate everything there was to eat but this only made us ill.

When the Russians found us they took pity on us. They made us eat little and often, rationing out the food to get us used to using once more our stomachs and our teeth (those who still had them).

Arturo Colombo, aged 27

Old captain Lohse was the only German officer at the camp when it was abandoned by the Wehrmacht and he was the most humane. He was an artist and anti nazi. After the liberation of Wietzendorf when the SS came back for a short time he was hanged by his own soldiers who were afraid of being punished for not having defended the camp.

Pietro Testa, aged 37, commander at Wietzendorf, taken from P Piasenti, "Il lungo..." op.cit

All the Germans disappeared, both civilians and military, the factory was in the hands of the prisoners.

There followed scenes of looting of all types and at a certain moment there was the sound of gun fire coming from outside, we climbed up the boundary wall and finally we saw our liberation arrive.

Wladimiro Brando, aged 22

There were those who thought that the liberation would be a blood bath in which we had to take an active part. But these were only verbal outrages caused by the suffering and rancour.

Alessandro Natta, aged 25, officer, taken from "L'altra..." op.cit.



Nuremberg, forced laborers after the liberation. In the center, an American soldier. Photograph by Primo Bertoletti, former IMI

We all knew that the allies were now only a few kilometres away. The mayor of a nearby city had mined the only (or perhaps the last) bridge which connected the two parts of the city.

His son begged his father not to blow up the bridge considering it not only a useless action but also suicidal given the situation. The mayor ordered his son to be hanged accusing him of treason.

Stefano Ripamonti, aged 22



Document issued by the Italian command of the Lager upon release

The news of the liberation was brought by civilians in flight, by the disappearance of the guards and the collapse of the German army. It is a story of a great silence in the midst of the noise of war. The prisoners found themselves in the middle of a battle or they were surprised by the arrival of Allied troops.

The liberation was a mixture of joy and disbelief, it was being greeted by an American soldier speaking Neapolitan and giving you chocolate and cigarettes

It was above all the end of the hunger which was consuming the body. In the following days there were raids on deposits of clothes and food and isolated incidents of revenge on the Germans.

The Allied troops were horrified by the condition of the deportees.

One of the first tasks of the liberators was to cure and assist millions of men and women still gathered in the camps and in the houses which had been abandoned or requisitioned. They were occupied immediately after the surrender of the Germans in demarking the borders of their sectors of occupation.

Regardless of the destruction of the means of communication, the various countries quickly organised the repatriation, even by the use of air bridges. However the Italians had to remain for months before being sent home, waiting in hope despite continual delays.



Berlin liberated by Soviet troops.
Photo by Timofej Melnik

Repatriation

I made my way towards my home with my heart beating fast. When I arrived they weren't expecting me.

Guido Boiardo, aged 20



In just a few weeks the prisoners of all nationalities, except the Italians, were sent back to their respective countries with the help of their own civilians or military.

For we Italians nobody arrived, nobody!

Wladimiro Brando, aged 22

I and another 4 companions from the prison started to make our way back to Italy – on foot. We found a cart and we divided the tasks (who entered the house to ask for something to eat, who looked for a place to sleep), we crossed Germany, Austria arriving at Innsbruck and then the Brenner pass.

Francesco Agostani, aged 27

I too with my companions were put on a train passing through Bolzano and Pescantino. At every station we stopped there were many women and many mothers who asked about their sons.

Franco Musazzi, aged 21

We were liberated in July 1945 but we had to wait several months before we were sent home. During that time we tried to do the best we could to find food and we often had to steal from the German stores.

We went on foot to the station under our own steam to try to find a train that would take us to Italy.

Mario Citterio, aged 28

At Pescantina in the province of Verona I was finally given a new pair of trousers.

I got home the 28th October after being away for twenty six months. I cried.

When I had left to enter the army I wasn't yet twenty, only a boy. I returned physically weak but the sad experiences during my imprisonment gave me back to my family a mature man.

Egidio Piatti, aged 18

I felt I was nearly home but then we found ourselves faced with the last problem. The ticket inspector didn't want us to get on the train because we didn't have any money. I was filled with despair. What a homecoming after five years of war and the great suffering sustained for my country.

Franco Catelli, aged 23



Bolzano. Former IMI are registered on repatriation, photograph by Tea Olzer, from: "L'impegno", magazine of the Institute for the history of the Resistance and contemporary society in Biella, Vercellese and Valsesia "Cino Moscatelli", June 2013



Photo taken from "La Domenica degli Italiani", may 1945

From March 1945 deportees made their way to the Italian frontier on foot. They were in a terrible condition having escaped from the prisons following the advance of the Russian troops in Austria. There was a continual flow which lasted for months. After having been freed from the camps, most of the prisoners waited until the summer to be repatriated by the Allies or by the assistance of the Vatican through the untiring work of Don Pasa.

The troop trains entered the country at the Brenner Pass, Tarvisio and Chiasso. The stations were crowded with members of their families trying to have news of their loved ones. The last prisoners, coming from eastern Europe did not arrive until the winter.

At Pescantina there was a centre which offered assistance to the home comers (Centro Accoglienza Reduci). This gave the men medical assistance and those suffering from tuberculosis were taken to clinics and sanatorium. According to Claudio Sammaruga at least 80,000 Italian soldiers were killed during the first Resistance after 8th September 1943, during the transportation, dying in Germany and in the post war period from the suffering caused by the imprisonment.

In post war Italy, struggling to rebuild itself, there was no space for those who returned from imprisonment. The nation wanted to look to the future as quickly as possible. It had no time or desire to think about the home comers, especially those coming from Germany who put the responsibility on the King and the High Command of the army and for this they were looked on with embarrassment and suspicion.

The experience of the imprisonment and forced labour had created a fellowship among the IMI which soon disintegrated.

I was back home and I could embrace my wife and for the first time my little daughter who I had only seen in photographs. However the first impact was tremendous because my daughter asked her mother: "Who is that man? Send him away"

The memory haunts me still today.

Giuseppe Boscolo, aged 29



"Homecoming", drawing by Alessandro Berretti, taken from "Attenti...", op. cit.

After the war: memories and trying to forget

For the men who were taken to Germany, who were interned in the concentration camps, the war has continued. They are still fighting another tragic battle they are ignored by their country.

Giuseppe Brignole, awarded the gold medal, taken from "Uomini..." op.cit.

Once back in Italy I made a request for a war pension, but it was useless. They said that my invalidity was not caused by serving in the war.

After 35 years I was given an indemnity of 99,000 lire which if divided by service in three campaigns are like the 30 pieces of silver paid to Judas for his treason.

I sent the 99,000 back to the sender.

Guido Mario Marchetti

Il and the millions and millions like me, some better than me some worse than me found ourselves mixed up in this war as an Italian allied to the Germans at the beginning and as an Italian prisoner of the Germans at the end.

In 1943 the Anglo Americans bombed my house and in 1945 they freed me from my prison and gave me condensed milk and soup in a tin. As far as I am concerned this is the whole story.

Giovanni Guareschi, officer
taken from "Diario Clandestino 1943-45"
Rizzoli 1950

For the suffering, the hunger and other things even more terrible how can there be any compensation for them?

My imprisonment under the Germans lasted a year. It would be easy to hate them but I too fought in the Second World War and perhaps we too behaved in a similar way towards other populations who we fought against. The only way to win a war is not to fight it.

Vincenzo Pace



To say thank you they issued my passport and in 1946 I left for Belgium as a miner and here in Italy too I have earned by hard work my tons of coal.

Rodolfo Giozzet

The images and the experiences of those years of imprisonment remain etched in my mind, the hunger suffered the sacrifices and the humiliation which the German government has never compensated in any way.

Carmine De Angelis

I asked everyone who knows and is able to write, never to give up trying to make young people understand the stupidity of war which forces a man against his will to kill another man who he has never seen and who has never done him any harm.

Loreto Benedetti

The deportation, internment, forced labour and slavery of the Italian prisoners took second place when compared with the drama of the war as a whole, which had involved entire armies, civilian populations and compared with the tragedy of the Shoah.

Italian society, which immediately became immersed in the rigidity and the new reality of the Cold War, tried to put behind it fascism, the war of aggression and the crimes committed, the 8th September, the German occupation with its massacres and complicity with the Republic of Salò.

The experience of deportation and forced labour and slavery were confined to individual memory. Nobody wanted to listen to them. "If we said little it was not right, to tell the truth was not to be believed. So I avoided saying anything just I had been a prisoner and leave it at that."

Especially the Resistance to the war and fascism of the IMI "betrayed, despised, forgotten" as Gehrard Schreiber has described them and their civil and personal redemption of an entire nation, has not been recognised. After seventy years they have not yet received justice from either Germany or Italy. They remain numbers locked up or lost in archives.

To the chorus of witnesses to whom we have wanted at least **to give a name** this is dedicated.