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Memoirs of the lager

(1943 – 1945)

*The beginning of the Resistance:
The Application School of the Infantry of Parma*

THE EVIDENCE OF A PARTICIPATION TO THE DRAMATIC EPISODE

The wide path siding “Palazzo Ducale”, the seat of the Application School of the Infantry was merged in a sort of padded silence of expectation that evening of Sept. 8th 1943 coloured with a vague red of a serene sunset.

I had been in Parma since the first day of that month, unloaded there by a clanging rickety troop train, after the random choice of a group of men made by the marshal quartermaster at the Troop Command of the 65th Infantry Motorized Regiment in Piacenza, where I had been stationed following my repatriation caused by a disability contracted in Greece the year before.

I had found myself well at the Application School since the first day. The town of Parma had an advantage over Piacenza, a rather murky town with narrow streets and hostile then towards military men. Parma was instead hospitable to the soldiers as well as a more comfortable dwelling place with its limpid sky and its wide streets. I was allured by its monuments, then, the living memory of a lyceum quite near in time, approached with the serenity that even in the saddest events, are the heritage of one’s twenties (I was then, twenty two, precisely), and also that vague premonition of the imminent end of that tragic war, which was so much suffered, because unwanted, a premonition which haunted the air after the invasion of Sicily and the consequent fall of fascism, The Duomo, in particular, which had often and emblematically been mentioned by my teacher of Art history, enchanted me with its famous romanico-gothic baptistery. That evening, we of the infantry were not off duty; we were allowed to go freely out every second day, in alternation with the grooms. It was a precautionary measure taken after that 25th July which marked the fall of fascism. That date started a sense of insecurity among the Germans and as far as I can remember, some disciplinary measures had been taken towards some soldiers who had come back one night to the Application School singing “Bandiera rossa”.

That night of 8th sept, in compliance with what is the norm for any soldier, that is “to shift always for oneself”, a group of colleagues and I went out stealthily all the same, through the carriage gateway, to go and drink, as usual, a glass of milk and pressed of course by the necessity of a prompt coming back. But after a few steps along the path we were struck by the sight of animated people gathered in knots. We approached them with curiosity: the great event we were all waiting for was the object of their talking: the radio had informed that an armistice between Italy and Anglo-Americans had been stipulated! We re-entered the barrack-room in a rush and embraced one another weeping like children.

The war was already over, and we would go back to our houses and our business thoroughly free. Moreover, this expectation was confirmed by what we could see in the ample path: very long queues of cars with German soldiers on board – Emilia was in that moment swarming with them - glancing slyly as if nothing had happened. (Were they waiting for precise orders from Berlin or wondering about the best way of bottling up the Italian army?). Consequently we inferred that if Italy released itself from the alliance with Germany, the latter would of course find itself in the necessity of asking itself an armistice after a few days..

We took therefore our place again on our camp bed in the wide barrack room that night, serene and glad with a mind to have the rosiest and most golden dream of our life. In such a mood we were enjoying the sleep of right man, when, at about one a.m., we were woken up with a start by a deafening cannonade. We rushed down the stairs after shouldering the '91 model gun, the veteran weapon of the first world war, while the Germans kept making us hear the rumble of cannons and the unceasing rattling of machine-guns. We placed ourselves besides the windows opening at every flight of stairs, decisively trying to save as much as possible in the use of our magazines.

The uproar of the German artillery and machine-guns reached us through the open windows, frequently breaking the pitch dark of that night. We shot then madly from the windows. At dawn there was silence again everywhere, but at a certain point a sinister shout (both sharp and guttural) of a German officer was suddenly heard; a peremptory “Raus, raus!” ordered us to go down to the yard. That soul tearing shout has always come back to my mind and I associate it

sadly with the first impact I had with a truly arrogant and overbearing German. It was the same dawn that saw the king flying together with Badoglio from Rome for Brindisi, the seat of the new government of armistice Italy, We went down the stairs still followed by that shouting and in the yard we realized what really had happened during the night: the inside of the Application School of Infantry presented large holes: a big clock, placed high up at the centre, had its hands stopped at about one o'clock, the time when the German attack had begun. Five years later, when I went back to Parma to see again the place where I had been taken prisoner, the clock, reminder of sorrowful events, showed still that time. Another detail which we learned with understandable pain was the death of five of our fellow soldiers and the injuring of some others.

The Germans allowed us little time to look at those damages, because they lined us up with our faces to the wall, while the antitank cannon that had riddled the façade of Application School stationed still behind our backs. Any resistance to the Germans was forbidden: we had resisted, so, being put against the wall, we could not expect – we thought – but being shot in the back. But we were not shot, who knows for what afterthought: a possible utilization of us at their service?... They limited themselves to tear off, furiously, stars, stripes, chevrons and decorations from our military uniform. Then we were ordered an “about turn” and soon after we were in the garden facing the Palazzo Ducale, rigorously escorted and on the point of getting through the gate, while a lot of German soldiers placed in the most strategic points discouraged any possible attempt to escape.

We were in summer clothes and remained so even when the wagons with a lead seal opened, later, to deliver us, common wares the identity of which was only a number, under the cold sky of eastern Prussia.

We were taken to Mantova after passing by various gradually larger and larger gathering centres, In that town there began our odyssey of people damned to the terrible reality of the “lagers”, a reality thoroughly ignored then. In some well stocked military store we dressed ourselves in new clothes; nothing was missing there. Some days before I had had a frustrating experience in Piacenza, where a captain had answered my request to have my pair of split soled shoes replaced, shouting “Shift for yourself!”, which was to me a real

damper. In fact, I had actually shifted for myself in the common simplest manner, by resorting to a piece of iron thread. Now we had there so many and various good things. The Germans allowed us to take as much of anything as we liked were they even sheets or blankets. But once arrived in Germany, we had to give up anything, even our threadbare and miserable summer clothes and to cover us, poor and ragged, with worn down tattered clothes of other prisoners of different nationality.. On our going through the gate of Palazzo Ducale, a captain had the courage to speak in a stentorian voice, in that absorbed silence of expectation; “Boys, now that we are going through the town, let’s keep calm; let us raise our spirits; let’ straiten our uniform”. And then, with as much strength of voice as possible,; “Remember: we are not defeated people”. In fact we did not feel defeated at all: the evening before, and even in the first hours of night, we could flee – as somebody did - , but we remained in our place of honour, while others in charge of political and military affairs ignored thoroughly the hundreds of thousands of men of the Italian army..

We kept our place of honour in observance of the principle that a soldier possesses in himself the values of his dignity, apart from the fact of receiving or not pertinent orders, as it is symbolized by the stars he wears, and we were also convinced that in that moment the right cause, that is the fight against the brutal aggressor needed us, in order to mark a new and honourable turning point to the fatal tragic events of our Homeland.

MEMOIRS ON THE INTERNEES AT DÜISDORF

Our concentration camp was in Bonn. Forty of us were transferred to Düsseldorf in the winter of 1944, when following the landing of the Allied Forces in Normandy, they fought throughout Renania.

At Düsseldorf there was a Magnetfabrik of “leichtmetal”, in which small metal objects were ground until they got about 2 cm thick and as long as a cigarette. We were assigned to this work at a later date and it was a really dangerous work, in so far as a huge number of pieces were to be got ready before night and in consideration of our debilitated physical conditions owing to a poor diet. To get round the necessity of preparing the number of pieces requested to us, the speed of the grinding wheels was accelerated, with the risk of getting a finger crushed.

At first, however our task was one of excavation and earth moving. A huge water tank was to be built, in the vicinity of the factory, to prevent any fire which a possible bombing might start. Somebody got one of his legs smashed because they operated inside lower and lower galleries as the work went on. The removed earth was carried away by a truck running on a narrow gauge track. Such a truck was drawn by a windlass, on which an iron pull rope was canalized and set in motion by other companions by means of a crank. One of us had the task of acting as a counterpoise and many a time it was I who was in charge of it.. One day I was replaced by another internee and this because of a derailment of the truck got a leg crushed.

For a period I was in charge of the maintenance of the small hut with a wood stove where we would spend some minutes' rest from work. I must however notify that some rare kind gesture was accomplished even by some German; in fact, some surveyor policeman gave me stealthily a signal, every now and then, to let me fill some mess-tins with boiled potatoes, which represented a precious addition to our very poor nourishment. So, stealthily too, the hand of a German worker stretched from a window of the factory and deposited a transparent slice of bread.

There was there a piece of heart, throbbing with life, in spite of the risk of being put to death run by the benefactor. Another day, instead, the surveyor of the works shut himself in his shed with some prisoners and gave hint to his bestial fury against them, because they had stolen some potatoes. Then the floor of the shed appeared full of wide blood stains owing to the blows lashed out by the policeman indiscriminately left and right

In the factory, alternately we worked the day and the night shift. On Sundays some of us were chosen to unload the goods trucks full of coal. "The voice of our homeland" – as we called the cannonade of the Allies – made itself heard more and more intense.

One night an episode of extreme stoicism occurred. Some companions of mine, who worked the night shift, had gone out stealthily through the country, to get some potatoes for themselves, under the long rows, filled with frozen mud and straw, that protected the stocks of the precious tubers for the Germans during the winter: a lot of patience was needed, working with their fingers benumbed by ice. On their coming back happy for having got some potato, German policemen, sensing the unusual movement, launched their big mastiffs to them. The unlucky fellows took to their heels, but the barbed wire fence held them back; they climbed tearing their rags and flesh owing to the sharp iron thorns and the dog bites. They resumed their working place, and policemen, entering the factory to look for them found nothing of what they expected to find: in front of the machines that emitted their monotonous tran tran there were only men busy with their work (some of them hid their wounds stoically). One day the sergeant major Luigi Ciccarelli from San Giorgio a Liri (Frosinone) appeared in the factory. He was there for a short time and was sent to a locality nearer to the front. Interceding for him, I tried to convince as better as I could, using my French, the head of the factory to let him remain there; and I succeeded in that.

How did we dress? The Germans on arresting us, had stripped us thoroughly. We were dressed with uniforms taken away to the Russians – as I conjecture – of a faded green and at the extreme condition of their use. As to the Russians, I feel obliged to say that these prisoners proved to be very humane toward us; even though they

were treated in a despicable way as we were, they often gave us the content of their mess-tins (boiled turnips or the like). The Social Republic of Salò sent us a small cup of rice per head, every month, if I am not wrong, until they hoped to have us agreeing with their plans, or as long as the advancement of the Allies consented it.

The hardest days were those. Of the Advent, as the Church call them, that is all the month of December 1944, when Hitler hoped for a successful “flick of the tail” and they fought harshly in the zone of the Ardenne. The factory underwent two bombardments

After the first partial demolition, the factory went on working only in some of its departments. The seriously damaged deck and walls let us see the sky and the large expanses of snow, in that rigid winter. We were informed of the USA bombings by the leaflets – which we were forbidden to gather – launched by the planes.

The bombing during the days just before Christmas 1944 was rather terrible. It was Sunday and some of us were working our shift for the unloading of coke coal. The uproar of the motors of the planes led all of us who were in the shed to scatter through the country. When the bombing was over we got to know that a certain Mangerini engaged in the same work shift had died in the factory because of a blast. The Germans rendered him regardful funeral honours, unexpectedly, since the dead man was one of the “badogliani” (that is one the traitors). They wore top hats and frock coats and, together with us, threw flowers and leafy boughs in the grave. I delivered a speech, which proved to be very moving – as I was told then – owing to the references I made to the families living far away and the unhappy sort of dying in a foreign land “You urged tears from us” a fellow soldier told me.

From that moment we remained without a shed and found the rests of it scattered throughout a large space together with our poor chattels.

Where did we sleep then? We learned that on a hill near there a solid bunker existed, made with stout trunks within, in which prisoners of various nationalities staid overnight. In the evening, cutting a path across the snow, we reached it. The place allotted to me was between the open and the very bunker, I having been the last to arrive. I tried to crouch as best as I could in the sole blanket I possessed, I laid with my knees raised, while my back leaned on the snow. In the morning we resumed work in the factory, not before moving and stirring our knees

a little, they having thoroughly ankylosed during the night.

Being informed that there would be a carpet bombing by day, we went – which we did twice – to a proper bunker made for German officers, at a certain distance from our factory, even if there too we - poor beggars! – could stay not further than the entrance of the bunker. That night, beside a pouring rain a hail of bombs came down. We went to the bunker of the German officers and, soaked to the skin, absolutely silent not to make us heard, we placed ourselves in the entrance, happy for having found finally a shelter from the bombs and the rain. Every now and then the door opened and we could half see German officers smoking and drinking. One of them caught sight of us and ordered peremptorily to leave. We begged him to let us stay there, considering the rain and the hail of bombs. He re-entered the room and we had the impression that he had pleased us. But, after a while, he appeared, frowning at us in a harder mood and repeated the same injunction. A fellow soldier, trying to move him to pity, showed him a picture of his family and a child of his in particular, in the name of whom he begged him. The officer re-entered once more, but, after some minute, he presented himself to us again and, extracting the pistol out of his holster, was about to hurl against us; we, then, rushed up the stairs and were soon at the entrance of the bunker: The rain was still pelting and the bombs fell near there. Wallowing in the puddles and more and more soaked to the skin, we returned to our factory: we had no other choice.

I remember we have passed the last days before our release in the basement of our factory, because of the unceasing bombing. The Germans were apparently living in a sort of apathy and this accounts for their behaving more humane with us. A German soldier who was - I wonder why - with us in the basement of the factory, spoke already of a sure defeat. One day we were employed to load some lorries with a great quantity of foodstuffs stored in some warehouses: it was a precautionary measure taken by the Germans not to leave all in the hands of the Allies, for they intended to continue the war in the interior of their Country. Thus we got the opportunity to make large provisions of mixed-cereals flour and milk, which proved to be most useful to us on the days we spent shut up inside a hole made inside an escarpment, while the first lines of the Allied troops operated in the breakthrough zone. But of this episode – that is of my liberation – I told a detailed tale sent to the magazine “We of the Lager” and it may be read at the

end of the publication with the title: “Free at last!”. Here suffice it to say that the bombing and shelling gave us no peace anymore – the Allies were on the hills above Düsseldorf – and one night was particularly tremendous, the one when Bomb was carpet bombed. Even someone of us was found injured in the basement of the direction of the factory.

As the Americans were rescuing us, we were led by them to a store overfull of military biscuits: it was advisable to make a good store of them for the days to come. But the illusion prevailed that we would be no more missing the food, we being already in the hands of the Americans, so we abstained from doing what we were tempted to. Actually our prediction did not come fully true.

The first line troops abandoned us to our destiny, we went forward and walked for about one hundred kilometres in stages, from Düsseldorf to Aachen (or Aix La Chapelle), where we found a very wide gathering camp of former prisoners, and from where we left for our Homeland, after some month, that is after the refitting of the railway.

Along the way Düsseldorf-Aachen we came across French detachments, who showed us a certain animosity, which soon died down when they heard that we were “badogliani”; in this case we were offered food and also cigarettes, In fact, the name “Badoglio”, symbol of treachery among the Germans (and that is why they hated and insulted us), made us object of gratifying appreciation by the French. Along our long walk we observed the desolation left by a war harshly fought: pylons thrown down, wooded zones mined and crossed imprudently by us, dead bodies of German soldiers in the margins of the road, for whom we felt very sorry.

At a built-up area, what do I find? Something looking like a brick; but I wish it were something that in Germany, then, had the same look. It was really a loaf! We found also tinned meat, eggs and something else which the advancing troops had consumed leaving small residual quantities still usable.. This was obviously useful to us to replace the victuals we missed during the one hundred kilometres’ walk from Düsseldorf to Aachen

FREE AT LAST!

A German sergeant of the S.S. drove us forward with a sub-machine-gun levelled along the wide path. We proceeded in single file, with death in our soul, almost indifferent to what appeared in front of our eyes: soldiers holed up in the trenches at the margins of the road, the small blocks of flats of Düsseldorf, a village in the vicinity of Bonn with their coquettish grace, now turned to a heap of ruins, centuries old trees broken off.

Every now and then, in that silent dreariness, we heard the American artillery placed on the hills and behind us drumming, What a comfort was that rumble to us! It was “THE VOICE OF OUR HOMELAND!”, we said when we heard it, because our liberation was to come from there. Yet, now that their shooting were within reach and the Americans, we could say, a few inches from us; now that finally they had moved from those positions where they had stayed motionless along the line of Renania a very long time, we could not be happy.

We had been so long in expectation, but now, some day, if not some hour before our liberation, we were ordered to leave, to evacuate: the Germans drove us towards the interior, towards other working places, or rather places of exploitation and pains, and even so they would cause the iron and fire vice to tighten gradually around them.

But why did not they leave us where we had been exploited, that is in the basement of the factory? They had let us stay there, perhaps not knowing where they could send us, in those emergency days, then, could not they let us stay there any longer?!

Whom could we hurt, we bearing the signs of two long years of unutterable pains? This was our logic, a logic quite different from that used by those stone hearted men. Should “The Italians of Badoglio”, the traitors – they probably said –be left there and given the opportunity to receive triumphantly their liberators? We went on walking, or, we had better say, dragged our feet, exposed to the shoots, in that zone that was already a fighting zone. We were five or six who were going towards a destiny that revealed itself more and more terrible.

At a certain point the threatening voice of the German sergeant was heard no more.

What had happened? We thought it impossible that a fellow like that, who would never release his victims, had disappeared. Yet, that was the case. I turned back and realized that the SS sergeant was not there! An immediate decision was called for on which the possibility of our living or dying depended. We remembered having made a rudimentary shelter, best we could, in the margin of a nearby vale some time before. It was a little stable shelter set on a soil liable to slide, hardly supported by four disjointed boards. There was nothing better, in that moment of sudden decision, than trying to reach it.

But what could we do if it happened to find itself just under the direct fire of the American artillery? But it was not advisable to waste any time in discussions. A daring act was needed, and we started running through the country towards that shelter in which we had often spent hours and hours waiting for the end of those terrible bombings that annihilated the towns of Renania and riddled their country.

The American artillery, in the meanwhile, having detected us aimed their fire at the place where we were. Fortunately the vale was not so far. Yet I was unable to go on: I threw myself down with my heart in a turmoil. I could not see my companions any longer. After recovering my consciousness and strength, I gathered my poor chattels and I too tried to reach the valley. I could not see nor hear anything while running desperately across the fields amid frequent and sudden explosions that launched heaps of earth to the air. Thank God, out of breath and a heart which I do not know how come did not burst, I got to the shelter joining my companions.

We closed up the small hole of the entrance with a big circular wooden board and hid ourselves inside. The American cannons kept firing just above us, where they had noticed the unusual movement of supposed enemies. The earth was already sliding down and we embraced one another, like brothers as they had never felt facing the same sort of buried alive. But we escaped that terrible destiny and the fires changed their direction.

How long did we stay hidden in that hole? I could not say it now and perhaps I could neither say it precisely then, eighteen years ago.

In the tragic moments, those of intense pain, one loses the notion of time. I think it was the experience of three nights and three days, during which the cannons did not cease their hammering rumble, which often caused us to start in fear, for an explosion so near us that we could think that some shell was about to slip into our shelter..

Of those dreadful hours I remember also the inevitable torturers of our flesh, which in such moments make themselves felt more, and a thirst which, tormenting us more and more, urged us to draw water from a pool of rain water; I wonder whether could this act be called: one of audacity or one of recklessness.

* * *

The rumble of the cannon had gradually branched out and faded. How come? We were absorbed in a sort of apathy. We did not know anything of the situation. Nor would we think of our wish, being afraid of remaining disappointed.

It was the morning of one of those days, early morning: a strange noise outside the hole shook us suddenly out of our torpor; it sounded like a vague alternation of women's voices. A certain presentiment was dawning upon us. We went out, to the open air, and we find ourselves in front of a small crowd of women in a clearing near there.

Turning casually our eyes, we were attracted by a huge oak, quite near the entrance of our shelter, thoroughly split, evidently by a cannon shot.

Perplexed, without understanding anything, looking like abbot Faria of dumasian memory, covered with dust, shaggy and thick bearded, slim, I try to rack my brains about what might have happened, and my companions, knowing that I could speak a little German, urge me to ask the women what we wanted to know:

- "Wo sind die Amerikaner?" (Where are the Americans?) - I dare
- Weit...Weit (far away...far away...) – one of those women answers me, with a vague gesture of her hand

It might be so – I think – the Americans far away! Then this means that the Germans have repelled them. And here a lot troubles for us are beginning again!

Those women, then, laughed, who knows why.

At the end, when our patience reached its extreme limit⁶, they decided to speak and told us that the zone was under the control of the Americans. That night the German garrison troops had abandoned it. In proof they showed us a rifle, left on the ground casually and then they prudently threw it on a brook flowing near there. Then we remembered that during the night before we had heard vaguely the noise of agitated steps. What would our sort have been if those Germans in their flight had discovered us in the shelter! In the meantime – an unexpected pitiful gestures that astonished us! – there arrives a woman with a basket full of raw potatoes and a loaf.. We, quite amazed, were about to thank her, when another woman exclaims: - “The Americans! There they are!

In fact we saw two soldiers camouflaged and in fighting trim, with their sub-machines levelled, who had popped out from behind a bush and advanced across the clearing close to the slope to explore the zone. But were they really Americans? See if they were Germans, policemen of the Gestapo, who were dragging out the “Italian traitors”! But the joy that our dream could finally come true, the dream to be free again, indeed to get human being again, made us leave aside any consideration. I rushed up that slope towards the liberators. They advanced cautiously toward us, always in the same position, while I ran, followed by my companions, I ran madly towards them

In a moment in which our brain lit up a little, a companion advised me to wave my handkerchief. I, instead took off the body-belt I was wearing around my neck and started wagging it. But the two soldiers remained impassive, with their sub-machines always pointed at us – Luckily no shot was fired! – even when I reached them and threw myself on my knees.

They, blind instruments of Providence, perhaps people who had had to do with justice and “made war”, in front line, to recover their reputation, could not be aware of what they were doing, that is rescuing from a life of hardships, hunger, cold, exhausting work some poor unhappy people, who thanks to them would go back to feeding like men, protecting themselves from cold, being inserted in human society as all civil men are, with a dignity and a work in keeping with human beings, and above all, no longer slaves to anybody.

Gerardo Sangiorgio

(translated by Enrico Fichera)