

## **Of Luck and Duty**

**By Marco Messina © 2010**

### Preface

This collection of memories and stories is dedicated to my father Al Messina since he was the protagonist of many of them. Elsewhere I told some of this story as remembered by one participant (“Against All Odds”, Marco Messina, 2003 - Appendix 1). This story is not limited to the view and memories of one person or comments made by outsiders and participants at the time, but includes recollections by my father, the rest of the family, events I witnessed over many years and facts documented by historians in letters and books.

These events say much about “luck of the draw”, the possibly different interpretations of the word “luck” depending on the frame of reference and, most of all, about the character of one man in particular who lived a whole life true to a personal ideal of simply doing what is right not for gain or glory, only because it was the thing to do. As you shall see there are many threads to this story: I shall keep them as brief as I can and leave it to the reader to decide what may have caused what in what followed. Collectively they have also given me a sense of duty that my luck in coming to be at all carried some duty yet unsatisfied. But that is another story yet. For now, come, I’ll share with you my “family pictures book”.

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My father was born December 24, 1921 in Agrigento on the Southern coast of Sicily, a town rich in ancient Greek history and surrounded, in 1900, by a lot of rural poverty. His at-home birth, as customary in those days, was not recorded, because of the Christmas holidays, until January 1, 1922, a fateful delay of one week that made him younger by one whole calendar year for the rest of his life.

His father Antonino (Nino) had been born in a poor family in Raffadali a poor town in the center of Sicily near Agrigento. His father, illiterate left for America in 1891 and was never heard again<sup>1</sup>. Nino and his brother Peppino, fatherless at 11, and with little education worked to feed the family pulling a cart of cloths to sell door to door in rural villages. Over many years they built a successful wholesale textiles business.

My grandmother Rosa was born in 1896, was raised in Agrigento in a well-to-do family of doctors and intellectuals. She was a well educated, free spirited and creative young woman much too big for that provincial town. At age 30 and as a young mother, she decided that she wanted to be a haute couture designer in the Parisian style, so in 1926 at an epoch when young Sicilian women were barely emancipated out of a burka, she left her toddler son with family, took a three-day train ride alone to Paris to go study to be a high fashion designer. This was the time of Paris’ mid 1920’s Avant-Garde, the time portrayed in the movies of “Coco Chanel”, and psychologically a universe away from

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<sup>1</sup> The Ellis Island Immigration Center in New York was not opened until 1892, so no record of his arrival exist and no trace was left of his life after departing from Sicily

provincial Sicily. There, she finished her intended courses at the Academie Daydou. As if to prove a point, she entered a design and technique competition and won the Gold Medal and First Prize For Cutting Technique - She had devised a standardized method of taking measurements of the female body that let her send self-measurement instruction to a far away client, then produce a Parisian style evening gown from the measurements received, and send back the gown by mail confident that it would fit the buyer. It was a 1920's do-it-yourself version of the "Hong Kong Tailor" service popular around the world to this day. The idea, then far out of the box, enabled many well-to-do provincial dames to have custom made high fashion gowns without ever leaving town. Upon return to Sicily, the method proved so successful that grandma and grandpa decided to relocate with their young son Alfonso, to Torino, in northern Italy, to open her own high fashion salon, the "Maison Rosa". My father remembered, as a child, riding his tricycle in the huge salon of their boutique on the second floor of a landmark building, today the Cinema Coeso, in the fashionable center of Torino. Their wonderful adventure lasted only a short while. In 1928, grandma was badly injured in an auto accident and, before the invention of penicillin, after months in a hospital she died of infection at 42. Grandpa survived. My father was six years old.

Grandpa Nino's story is much longer. He died at 84 after having built a successful wholesale textiles business in Agrigento and then Torino after closing grandma's salon. When he died, my father, an engineer at heart, could not see himself running, in his words, "a merchant's business" and just left it to the people that had built it with his father<sup>2</sup>.

Grandpa and my father grew apart rapidly after grandma's death. Grandpa's not attending my parent's wedding (he wanted my dad to marry a Sicilian woman) did not help matters. As a child, I saw him only a couple of times a year, for the formality of good manners. At age 14, by the accident of entering a new high school close to his house and some inexplicably newfound curiosity, I started having a weekly lunch with him – he died unexpectedly of a cerebral hemorrhage only three months later.

My father, a Sicilian boy relocated, at age 6, to northern Italy at a time when "Southerner" was still a bad insult and cause for schoolyard beatings, grew up without a mother. Grandpa's new girlfriend openly voiced, to him and his uncle, her dislike of him as an intruder and an obstacle to the good life. With no siblings he grew up alone.

Through my father's entire youth (1920-1945) Italy was a fascist dictatorship. Force and threats was the only government and reality Italians of that generation knew apart from anything heard from abroad. Political freedom and independent thinking were suppressed by the "stick and whip" (note: the term fascist comes from the ancient Roman symbol of the supreme punitive power of the state: a bundle of sticks strapped together and containing in its center the ax of capital punishment). It was a time when most of the country lost its sense of a right to individual freedom: to avoid the feared communism of 1918 they cowered to thugs for protection while a vane megalomaniac mired the country

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<sup>2</sup> A peculiar coincidence: in the 50's and 60's my grandfather's business was one of the largest distributors of E. Zegna, one of today's most exclusive brands worldwide in men's clothing. By coincidence from the 70's through the 90's a first cousin of my mothers became Zegna's CEO. They never knew one another.

in continuous colonial wars. Eventually, much against the culture of its people, Mussolini sided with Hitler and WWII erupted. For Italy that was not the age of reason and individualism.

My father was officially of the class of 1922 by that accident of his birth date registration. Had he been in the class of 1921 he would have been called for military service in 1942 and been sent to North Africa, as some of his university colleagues were<sup>3</sup>. By sheer accident he was in the class of 1922, so he was “lucky”, he was not called until General Mobilization (men of all ages were called) following the Armistice on September 8, 1943. As a historical note, that’s when Allied Forces invading Italy from the South reached near Rome, the government fell, Mussolini escaped to the Milan region to continue the Fascist government (known as the Republic of Salò), a provisional government made peace with the Allied Forces and Italy’s civil war began. After the Armistice, Italians still loyal to Mussolini, and the German Army that had invaded Italy to “ensure loyalty”, were in control of the North. Among them, fighting from the “inside”, the Resistance Movement was an voluntary guerrilla force re-supplied from the air by the Allied Forces and directed by Italian Army officers that, fed up with fascism, had remained loyal to the king’s government in Rome, that had changed sides to the Allied Forces. Meanwhile in the South, the Allied Armies, including reconstituted regiments of the Italian Army, were slowly but relentlessly advancing to “liberate” Italy and Europe.

Upon the General Mobilization call, young men in northern Italy had five options:  
1. doing as commanded (join the fascists), 2. work in factories (aiding war production),  
3. join a civil defense service (firemen, hospitals, local police, roads and buildings repair crews), 4. hide until the war’s end, 5. join the Resistance to hasten the war’s conclusion.

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<sup>3</sup> One of my father’s class mates at the Civil Engineering School of the Polytechnic of Torino was Ferruccio Ferro. They were the same age, but he was in the class of 1921. In 1942 he “the unlucky older one” was called to arms, was sent to North Africa where he was taken prisoner by the US Army. He was interned in prisoner camp in Chicago, was given a job and a social security card and worked to the end of the war. He learned fluent English, fell in love with America and had a dream to emigrate to Chicago. At war’s end he was repatriated, completed (with my father) his engineering degree. He married into a wealthy industrialist’s family and ended up running a world class business. His wife and the great career he found, however precluded his return to the US. Eventually, in 1951 he had a son, Cristiano, born a week apart from me. At age nine, in fourth grade I accidentally met Cristiano at school and as a result our fathers reconnected. My father, like Ferruccio, a dreamer of America, a few years later chased his dream and emigrated to finish his life in Seattle WA. Ferruccio never did. Cristiano remained my best and longest standing friend and my true soul mate. He moved to France and with Françoise has a beautiful family of three children. Thanks to Skype we speak regularly to this day.

To prove once more that luck should never be discounted consider this: I met Ferruccio, a kind man with a sterling reputation when he was at the top of his industrialist career, reputation and wealth. One day, without any warning, the company he co-managed with his brother in law was found to have been embezzled. As customary in Italy, being Management, he was summarily jailed pending investigation. Months later, with much apology, he was released when his brother in law was found to be the embezzler. Ferruccio was fully cleared and was asked to be trustee in bankruptcy for the company he had once built. His life was never the same again. By then it was also too late to go to America as he had once dreamed. Years later, I lived through the exact same experience when my company was embezzled and I had to manage its liquidation (thankfully, there is no jail for this in the US). I thought of Ferruccio more times than I can remember.

Grandpa, by then a successful businessman, pressed for the safest option: to arrange for my father the “hide until the end” strategy. My father saw the world differently: he packed a suitcase and traveled by bus to the mountains outside of Torino, where the “Partigiani” (P-hart-e-janee), the Resistance fighters, were known to operate.

Aided by the introduction of an in-the-city secret “recruiter” he made contact and joined a “band”. By sheer accident he stumbled into a Brigade (“Brigata Sandro Magnone”<sup>4</sup>) that in the following two years proved to be a unique force in the region, and whose deeds can be readily verified in many current day history books.

The Brigade was operating in the Valley of the Sangone River above the small towns of Pinerolo, Coazze, Giaveno, Cumiana, Avigliana and tiny mountain villages of few homes each: Forno, Sangonetto, Cervelli, Indritto, etc.

Under the direction of two former army officers (Giuseppe Falzone – brigade commander and Giulio Nicoletta – commander of the whole valley with the Division “Sergio De Vitis”) the strategy of the fighters was a simple, if a dangerous one: 1 when possible, harass the German Army to keep their forces busy and prevent them from assignment to fight the northbound Allies, 2 lose as few men as possible, 3 stay fed and housed without abusing the civilian population, 4 minimize exposing the civilian population to the savage reprisals by the German and Fascist forces.

The strategy translated into a tragic game of cat and mouse: when the Germans and Fascists (G&F) went back to their barracks in the plains outside Torino to resupply, the Partigiani would follow and harass them, then they would return to the small towns in the lower Sangone Valley, work whatever odd jobs to earn some food and shelter, reorganize their escape routes in the high mountains for the day the G&F would return, run occasional harassment missions against barracks and convoys.

Eventually the G&F would return to “rake” the mountains to capture whatever partigiani they could grab. In the process they would terrorize the local population to keep them from supporting the fighters. They did so by public hangings, shooting babies in mothers’ arms, executing whole villages, burning homes occupants included. All these deeds are photographically documented in many books, and I heard first hand detailed stories from family members.

The Resistance war, after all involved the whole population. My mother’s family, in the small town of Coazze, was part of those civilians that came to the Sangone Valley as refugees (“sfollati”) to escape the nightly carpet bombing of Torino’s industrial infrastructure. My mother (Maria Pia) herself barely survived one of the most horrific civilian tragedies of that time and place.

My mother’s story is told here out of chronological order because in its brevity and tragic irrationality explains how the term “in the war” cannot be applied only to “warriors by choice”. A population under occupation, caught between opposing forces, regular armies or guerrillas, cannot be thought of as “outside the conflict”. To the contrary, they participate by collusion, silent support, endurance of savage reprisals, occasionally active

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<sup>4</sup> Bands, brigades and divisions were identified by the name of a leader and sometimes they changed it to take the name of a fallen hero that had been in their midst (e.g. Sandro Magnone).

participation, and most of all endurance of the irrationality of the “fog of war” – the civilians never can have a clue of the where, when, how, why and more than anything else of for-how-long. Yet they have intention and work by it in accidental ways. On Jan 9 1944 my mother, 20 years old, had gone to Torino to check the state on their apartment in the bombed-out city where my grandfather and my uncle still worked. In the afternoon she was returning to Coazze by the light-rail train (engine and 4 cars) that did commuter service for the “sfollati” (escaped to live out of the city) that commuted daily to Torino to work in factories. Near the small town of Orbassano four British or US fighter-bombers attacked the train. In seconds, 45 people died, over 100 were wounded. The woman sitting next to my mother was shot in the head, my mother took the next bullet in the foot (she still has the bullet). Mother limped home the following day to be mended by her mother; the woman in the next seat never did. It could have been the other way around. Side note: Preceding the war mother had been a member of the Italian Olympic Ski Team: the cancellation of the Winter Olympics in 1940 and 1944 and that tragic train trip put her Olympic career to rest. She lived an adventurous life until age 93.

That was the context for “civilians”. The Resistance fighters in that particular region executed their strategy with notable success and were greatly respected by the civilian population for their restraint in actions that were risky to civilians and for not becoming gangs of thugs and robbers as it happened in some other parts of northern Italy. Credit was given to their commanders and to the better educated members that were put in positions of leadership. Every few weeks the Germans would come up the valley, the fighters would escape to higher ground until the Germans would capture and kill enough of them or give up and switched to terrorizing the civilians before returning to their barracks.

On May 10 1944, however a particularly aggressive and well organized German “rastrellamento” (raking) caught the brigades by surprise. One SS column advanced up the valley with tanks and heavy artillery while a detachment of Alpenjagers, ski equipped storm troopers, come over the mountain ridge closing the partigiani traditional escape to higher ground. Unaware of this and escaping up the mountains about 70 fighters spent one night in an abandoned hunting lodge known as Villa Sertorio, used in better times by the eponymous family. During the night the fighters were surprised and surrounded; their sentry killed and at dawn they barely repelled the SS first attack. As morning went on, surrounded, they defended their precarious hold with the utmost care in using their scarce ammunitions. Eventually the German forces retreated to wait for reinforcements and artillery. Commander Nicoletta, seeing an opportunity to disengage proposed to go out and reconnoiter an escape route. “Messina stopped me saying that the brigade needed me more than anyone else. He did not allow me to go and went out in my stead” reported Nicoletta. “Messina went out, scouted all around the stone building and saw that escape was possible. He returned with an abandoned mortar. When time came to make a run for it, Messina again prevented me from exiting first, he went out with a machinegun and took position to cover our escape. As we began to run out a German machinegun hit Messina in the throat shoulder and arm. We saw him fall and it was my judgment that he would not survive. I ordered him taken back inside, so that he would not die in the open like an animal. Then in a break of fire we all escaped into the surrounding

woods. We all made it except for the sentry killed the night before and for Messina who saved our skin”.

Alas, the wounded fighter did not die. German soldiers soon arrived. Sitting on the floor against the wall he raised his hands in surrender. They shot him anyway. Collapsed to the floor he acted dead. They searched his pockets for anything of value. They took his shoes and presumed him dead. As they were standing there, an officer walked in, stood straight above him, aimed the coup-de-grace at the head and shot twice. Once he missed once he hit his throat. He continued to act dead. The soldiers searched the house, found nothing of value, set the house on fire and left.

As the beams supporting the floor and the roof began to burn, Al knew the house would collapse onto itself. He dragged himself to the stairs and let himself fall into the basement and crawled into the coal shoot. The house burned down, the stone shingles and floor fell inside the perimeter of stone walls. The winter’s night fell but the hot stones from the roof provided enough heat to survive.

In the morning Nicoletta and his men, having spent the night in the forest in the dark and without heat returned to bury their comrade. Nicoletta: “as we approached the house we heard ‘woo woo’ coming from the stone pile, then the coal-shoot door opened, ‘woo woo’, some of the men jumped away imagining a ghost, Messina emerged from the coal shoot, ‘woo woo’, his throat wrapped in a coat, he could not speak, his throat twice torn apart by bullets. We supported him away and ran back into the forest. We could not make a fire for fear that smoke would give away our position. We could not take Messina, he was not fit to walk hours to the nearest village and we had nothing to carry him on. We left him hidden in some bushes with a sentry and went for help”.

Al: “I was hidden in a bush; the sentry walked away, so not to attract attention to me if the Germans came. A gunshot rang, I believe from across the valley, a sharp shooter probably; the sentry fell dead. I stayed still until night for fear of the sharpshooter, but I knew I could not last the night there. I started crawling and stumbling my way down the side of the mountain without a trail. At the valley’s bottom I waded across the torrent. In the winter, the torrent frozen, there was little flow or I would have never made it. On the other side I crawled up to the trail I knew was there. The trail was easier but I was exposed to the sharp shooter, if he was still there. But I was so exhausted I had little sense of self protection left.”

Nicoletta: “we were going back to look for Messina, if he was still alive, when we ran into him on the trail. I just could not believe my eyes. We picked him up and took him to a nearby farm house. The farmers were calmly taking the risk of being burned alive in their haystack if they had been found out to be helping us. Eventually we let Messina’s father know and a few days later came with an ambulance to get his son.”

Al: “My father never could understand why I had taken the road I had chosen. He saw the world differently than me. Yet when the time came he too took a huge chance. If the ambulance had been stopped and inspected and he had been found to carry a civilian

wounded by gunshot, obviously a “partigiano”, he and the driver would have been hung. It took guts to do what he did for me.”

My father underwent multiple surgeries in secret in the hospital, conducted by doctors and nurses and hidden by administrators all willing to risk the gallows. They were courageous people willing to put their life on the line to support a cause, to save a life. My father never saw a difference between himself and his comrades, and the civilians in their various roles. “We all did what needed to be done, however we knew how. Some lived, some didn’t, that is the mystery that remains”. To him that was the valor of human decency. Before his last needed surgery was done, he returned to his brigade with half his vocal cords missing. The last surgery was delayed some months, with permanent consequences, but “that was not the time to put people at risk any more than necessary” when victory and peace appeared to be around the corner. He returned to the mountains to recover and continue to fight until “Liberation”.

He also had other unfinished business: he had taken a liking to a young woman, until then only a casual friend who was dating another man. As he lay waiting for transport to the hospital, and by then a hero to the local population, she had shown him some attention; he had resolved that he would return. With a smirk he had told the other sutor “I will come back for her”. The young woman too knew the capriciousness of fate having survived the great tragedy of the Orbassano train bombardment, and yet she had lost none of the vitality and character that had earned her a spot in the Italian ski team of the 1940 Olympics. And so, in the tragedy of war, two people that had escaped fate each by a hair, started a sixty-four year love affair.

Despite war, life continued along with death but also sometimes odd interludes. One such event involved my maternal grandmother Marie whose family, refugees from the city, were active, if secret, supporters of the Resistance. That’s the story of “the mule ravioli”. In North America mules are an uncommon sight. In the Alps instead they were commonly used beasts of burden that combine the donkey’s sure foot, load capacity and indifference to heights with the size and docile temperament of horses. They are the surest mountain transportation for heavy loads that horses could not handle on trails horses would not dare to tackle. Like the army’s Alpine brigades had done for centuries, the partigiani used mules to move equipment and supplies up and down their mountains. Alas, even mules have their limits: on a very unfortunate day one of the brigade’s mules slipped, fell off a cliff and died. It was a logistical disaster, but the commander tried to make the best of it: he had the mule dressed and sent a hind quarter to town. My grandmother Marie took it upon herself to organize all available women into a production line of ravioli using the mule’s meat. I never heard how many ravioli can be made from a mule’s thigh or how long it took to produce the whole thing, but I heard the story many a times in later years as testimony to the great help civilians gave the men in the mountains.

As the Allied Armies approached Torino in April 1945, the Resistance forces prepared to move in to take over the city and gain control infrastructure: railroads, industrial plants, power plants, utilities all crucial parts of Italy’s main industrial city. The retreating Germans and Fascists could be sure to destroy all in their wake. The tenacious enemy did

not give up easily and the conquest of Torino was costly (in the nearby town of Grugliasco the retreating Germans executed sixty six civilians just as they left town), but on April 25 Torino was free. By May 1, when the Allied Armies finally arrived, they found the city under control of 14,000 Partigiani with utilities and public transports running and the factory workers celebrating at the same time Liberation and the Italian equivalent of Labor Day. On this day another odd event happened that was not discovered until years later.

Two uncles of my mother Angelo and Luigi Ottone were career military officers beginning prior to WWI. Gino had become a General in the Cavalry and Angelo a General in the Artillery. Angelo had been in command of an armored division protecting Sardinia when the Armistice happened. On orders, his division was redirected to join the US Army and assist with the continued liberation of Italy. On May 1 Angelo was part of the Allied Forces top military officers that entered Torino and paraded in front of the partigiani aligned in formal review. One photo accidentally caught "Uncle Angelo" reviewing my father's brigade ("Brigade Sandro Magnone") with my father standing at its head as second in command. They did not know each other then. Five years later, however, Uncle Angelo was my mother's bride's witness at her wedding. My father's witness was Commander Falzone, under whom he had served. Nicoletta and Falzone nominated my father for a gold medal to valor for his deeds. A Silver Medal to Valor was granted in 1948: one of only 11, and of those only 4 were awarded to still living heroes.

Beginning immediately after May 1, 1945, Commander Falzone and my father worked to coordinate the recovery of all the bodies of partigiani killed in the Sangone Valley that had been summarily buried all over the mountains in the five years of war. Countless partigiani and valley residents participated in that honorable task. The exhumed bodies were collected and re-interred in November 1945, in a memorial ossuary outside the village of Forno. Hundreds of names are written on the memorial, some are "unknown", many from foreign lands (America, Great Britain, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Poland), all that joined a cause for freedom because doing nothing was not an option. Annually, to this day, citizens of Coazze, Forno, Torino and throughout the valley meet there to honor those that paid the ultimate price so that we could be free. As a child I was there many times and heard many retell what we must not forget. Hoping to clarify those motives and examples I translate here (from the original document) a speech my father wrote for Commander Falzone to deliver on the occasion of the Commanders' induction as Honorary Citizens of Coazze.

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Mr. Mayor,

In the name of your citizens, in a few moments, you will confer on Nicoletta, Fassino and me the honorary citizenship of Coazze in the name of what we did as commanders of the partigiani. In that context I must rely words exchanged between Alfonso and Toni, two men who were in the mountains with me. Alfonso asked Toni if, now forty years old, upon receiving my call he would have re-joined me. Without hesitation Toni replied: "yes, if it would be a good deed". As you can see my title as Commander of partigiani is still under scrutiny. That supports my belief in the principal characteristic of the



Resistance Movement. It was a voluntary choice of free men that willingly granted to other men the responsibility of leading them and gave themselves the name of “Volunteers for Freedom”.

That was not a time of merits, actions or personal initiatives, but a moment when, consciously or not we all reacquired awareness of our individuality and behaved accordingly. It was a sentiment common to all Italians, tired of dying in the camps in Russia, in Africa, in the Balkans, in Europe or in the bombings, or at the command of those that twenty years earlier, by the indifference of many and the opposition of few, nominated themselves leaders on a road that lead to the most tragic events of our modern history.

If credit was earned by anyone, it was earned by all Italians that died because they answered the call, by the Italians that died for freedom, by the Allied soldiers that defended in Europe the freedom they already had, so that all could have it, of our soldiers that in the South chose to form the Army of national liberation. And even those Italians that having lost their mind and their heart participated in that huge and useless massacre in which we rediscovered the value for each and for all of individual freedom.

And in this spirit, if through the honor you confer you honor our personal deeds, let's celebrate the actions of all those who contributed to our:

To the valley's residents who were already citizens by birth and earned it again by their sacrifices of lives and belongings to give shelter to those that sought freedom in the mountains.

To all the civilian refugees that came seeking safety for their families, but that ended up supporting the cause at the risk of terminal consequences including deportation to camps without return.

To the partigiani that return here every year to find the names of their lost comrades

To the mothers of the dead ones who hear rhetoric in my words since their time stopped with the death of their children back in 1944 and relive it here for a moment every year

To those mothers that left in this memorial the bodies of their children so that the unknown, the British, the Americans, The Russians, the Slovaks would not be left alone.

To all of them, may we give thanks for that freedom, small or grand, purposeful or forgotten that we have all come to enjoy.

The press reported that I was the mover behind this memorial; let it be known that it was my men who first wanted and endeavored, in their first days of freedom, to pursue this common spirit engraved on the memorial “usque ad finem et ultra comites”, “United Beyond Death “.

Today is YOUR day of witness, oh people of Cazze and Forno, closest to my heart, and of Sangonetto, Cervelli, Indritto and of the countless farmhouses throughout this valley. You all belong by name even if I did not call you out so.

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The echoes of those portentous events hardly dimmed over the years. We continued our annual pilgrimages to the Memorial at Forno, my father, gifted in rhetoric, continued to write the speeches for his Commander as he had throughout the war and we, the children,

learned by directly touching that memorial wall that freedom did not come cheap. My father in particular, in his speeches, seemed to be haunted by a sense of responsibility: those who survived had a duty to those that didn't to make a difference throughout their remaining life; a pay back so to speak to those that giving theirs had made it possible. As I look back I know he satisfied his bargain and yet even in his old age he never reconciled to be a hero. To prove it, here is another story.

In 1995 my father was 73 and retired living in Seattle Washington. A cousin of mine, Marina Mancini, was a middle school teacher in Avigliana, a small town just outside Torino at the foot of the Alps, near the entrance of the Sangone Valley. Marina gave her students an assignment that resulted in the following letter

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Via Vittorio Veneto 4  
10051 Avigliana (TO) Italy

27 March 1995

Dear Mr. Alfonso Messina

We are a Class of 3a Media ( 8th grade in USA) of "De Ferrari" School in Avigliana, Italy.

We know your name because our teacher of Italian, prof. Marina Mancini, has told us about you and we have read some passages of two books on "Resistance" in which you were named. In these days at school we are speaking of Constitution and "Resistance," so, knowing you were a "partisan," we would like to know the role you had in "Resistance" during World War II.

Can you describe us the sensations you felt when the Germans thought that you had died? Have you still got photos of that period or other material?

We would like to know something about your wife, Maria Pia, and her experiences, too, because we know she was involved in the Giaveno train bombing.

What did you do after the War?

Why did you go to America?

We hope you will forgive our curiosity, but your testimoniance will be useful not to forget the past.

We are looking forward to hearing from you soon.

The 3a Class of Scuola Media "De Ferrari"

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My father's reply follows

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1470 SE 45th Place, Bellevue WA

April 22 1995

Agli Studenti della 3a Classe, Scuola Media Statale "De Ferraris"  
via Vittorio Veneto 3, 10051 Avigliana (TO) Italy

Dear Friends:

The U.S. Coast Guard flies a squadron of seaplanes and helicopters that go out at sea in most terrible weather and rescue people from death in a storm. The crew know they might lose their own life in the act, and take pride in the squadron's motto: "So Others May Live".

Those four words could also be said to answer your letter where you ask to know about "Resistenza". At that time Italians became aware again that no life is worth living if not in liberty, and many died in pursuit of liberty for all.

The stories I could tell you would run the whole gamut from fear, terror, death to solidarity, exhilaration, triumph. Yet my memories always go back to those who did not make it to the end while I, for no reason at all, was allowed to enjoy peace after war. So let me tell you about one of them.

Sandro Magnone was the quintessential "Alpino" in love with his mountains, not given to many words, fierce in his dedication to discipline and efficiency of the unit he soon came to head because of his natural leadership. On May 10, 1944, in a violent fight against an SS force at the high end of Val Sangone, he saw his commanding officer, Giuseppe Falzone, fall to the ground badly wounded in a leg. Fire from the SS was blanketing the place, yet Sandro did not hesitate and ran to Falzone's aid and started dressing the wound to stop the bleeding. Then he kind of lay down on Falzone's leg. Falzone screamed in pain, "Sandro mi fai male!" (*"Sandro you are hurting me!"*), but Sandro was dead, killed. Was the bullet meant for Falzone? Sandro died, Falzone lived a long life during which he benefited many.

Knowing of episodes like that, I find difficult to talk about myself. After all, I survived, I became part of the "Others", I could go on and live my life. The Fallen did not. Why? Was I any better than any of them?

I would answer the questions in your letter with a suggestion. At Forno

di Coazze, not farther than 15 km from your school, there is an Ossario, which was built at the initiative of Giuseppe Falzone. He understood, and made us understand, that the only redeeming aspect of World War II could be that the Fallen won a better world for all of us, and therefore we should never forget them.

We retrieved the remains of many from the mountains where they had died, some to be unidentified forever, some to be recognized by their mothers from a rag of clothing, all to be sheltered in the Ossario. You may go there one day in May, read all the names on the wall, so many "Ignoto" (*"unknown"*), and think of the choices they made for us.

Thank you for your letter. It doesn't happen often that young people care to know about an old man's past.

In friendship,

(Al Messina)

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As my father said he was one of the lucky ones that lived to enjoy the fruit and duty of liberty. In his professional career he honored the commitment to do right no matter what, even when many found it expedient to do otherwise. He paid a price for that, but he never thought to do otherwise or complained about it. In pursuit of a dream to give our family a better future, like his grandfather, he came to America where his opportunities were more limited so that mine were greatly expanded. I am the beneficiary of that choice. For that reason I must tell this story that while luck will indeed determine the outcome, each has a duty to do right, whatever the price.

## APPENDIX 1

### **Against All Odds**

**By Marco Messina © 2003**

"You are here against all odds", said the old warrior as we walked down the mountain in the snow now covering the steep trail.

I was walking with Giulio Nicoletta. Now in his mid eighties, Giulio had been the regional commander of several brigades in the Italian Resistance. The Resistance, as it was called was the popular movement of rebellion against the German occupation and the remnants of the Fascist regime in the Italy of WWII. My father had joined the Resistance under Giulio's leadership.

I was on my first trip back to Italy in 30 years and I was looking for old memories. One of them was of the village of Forno, in Northwestern Italy's Piedmont region, high in the Alps' foothills, near the small town of Coazze. I had gone there many times as a child with my parents for the annual Remembrance reunion at the Memorial to the Resistance. There, surrounding a small chapel, behind white headstones, rested the men who gave their life in the fight. Born shortly after the war in a free and democratic country finally at peace, I had been one of the first beneficiaries of their sacrifice.

At those reunions I heard stories of how some had died in tragic accidents, others in acts of heroic self-sacrifice. My father never gave speeches hailing the surviving decorated heroes, of which he was one. He always told me "Let the dead be. Just remember they gave us freedom. All did what we had to do. As a matter of chance some survived against all odds, the unlucky ones are in the memorial". I always sensed an undertone of guilt in those words.

When I first met him, Giulio was surprised by my interest, but became visibly proud that I wanted him to lead again a Messina to the places where he and his men had become part of history.

The place I wanted to see was a ruined hunting lodge called Villa Sertorio. It was high in the valley that had figured huge in the war lore of the region. Nobody lived around there and the trail was too steep for a car. Giulio contacted the mayor of the small town for help. At the mayor's office I was surprised by the respect all showed the "Comandante", as they still called Giulio. He was a hero; even fifty years later people still showed him deference and gratitude. Curiously, they addressed even me with a new formality when Giulio introduced me as the son of Al Messina. Without delay the mayor put her driver at our service and requisitioned a four-wheel-drive van for our trip. We had little time, the last snow of spring was trying to fall and those mountains were no place to get stuck in bad weather.

The mayor's driver, Gianni, a transplanted Venetian, had never seen that road, had never driven on those mountain trails and had no knowledge of the events that had prompted

our trip. Giulio seemed to welcome the fact as it added adventure to our journey and put him in charge of directing the driving around hairpin turns of a trail become muddy under the rain. More importantly, Gianni's ignorance of the war events required a narration of the stories that lead to my mission.

"He is here against all odds", Giulio snickered motioning at me, "could have not been born at all". He liked that joke, which he had first delivered when we had met in Turin that morning. He seemed quite tickled by the strange coincidence of my existence.

He continued, "With his father we were up here in '43. I was the valley's commander. Messina was up here with a small unit. One May day of '44 the Germans conducted a dragnet to capture any of us. They had done this before, but this time there were more soldiers and more equipment. I had given order that all escape to high ground and keep moving until the Germans gave up and went back down the valley. I came up this way with forty men including Messina. We stopped for the night at Villa Sertorio, up there." He pointed toward our destination. "We placed sentries, but at dawn the Germans came over the ridge and surprised us killing the sentry. We started shooting. As the day went on our fire forced the Germans back some distance so I started out the door to see if we could escape before more Germans arrived. Messina stopped me, saying I was too valuable to put at risk and offered to go. After a while he reported the way clear for us to make our break for the woods. He went out again to cover our escape, but was hit by machinegun fire. He appeared mortally wounded. Surrounded again we could not take him with us. We took him back inside to die, and took off into the forest. From afar we saw the Germans surround the house, heard shots, and saw the house go up in flames. The Germans left. We hid in the woods until dusk, afraid they might be lying in wait for us, then we went to bury Messina. As we approached the smoldering ruins of the house, a ghost appeared in front of me howling – 'Whooo! Whooo!'. At first I got scared, then I realized it was Messina. He could barely stand, moaning. He had been shot in the throat. We took him away back into the woods. We found out that, wounded and unable to escape, he had resorted to playing dead. Two German soldiers found him, presumed him dead, emptied his pockets and took his shoes. An officer walked in and, standing right above him, shot point-blank to his head. He missed. They set the house on fire and left. How he survived the shots and the fire I don't know.

He saved my skin. He got the Silver Medal for Valor for what he did. And that is why Marco, here, was born against all odds." He smiled at me, and his joke.

Gianni repeated "Madonna Mia" several times, as if the Virgin Mary could explain what he had heard. The rain had turned to snow and the van got stuck on the icy trail. Unable to turn around in the narrow path overlooking the river, we had to abandon my mission. We started walking down the snowy trail, sliding in our unsuitable shoes. I could barely keep up with Giulio thirty years my senior but still agile as a goat. The old warrior was still setting the direction and the pace. Grinning he said, "I never thought I'd walk this trail with Messina again. And look here, against all odds."