

Guiding escaped British POWs to Allied lines in south-central Italy

My maternal grandfather, Mariano Silvestri, of Introdacqua, Italy disappeared in late 1943 and was probably killed by a German patrol during his last trip guiding escaped British POWs from the Sulmona area of Abruzzo province to Allied lines in south-central Italy. Recently married to Concettina Bonaventura and having become father to a baby daughter Filomena, he embarked on what turned out to be the last of several trips guiding escaped British POWs to Allied lines.

In the area where he lived, there were many British POWs in hiding after the POW camp near Sulmona, in which British troops captured in North Africa had long been interned, was dissolved during the confusion after Mussolini was initially overthrown. When the German Army moved south to occupy the area, many of these British POWs were kept in hiding by local Italian civilians, with some of these refugees making the hazardous journey, guided by Italians, to Allied lines in the south. (See Donald Jones's memoir, *Escape from Sulmona* (1980), for an account of these events by one of those British escapees.) Having made several trips already (with the paperwork attesting to his efforts from several escapees in his apartment), Mariano was warned not to undertake what turned out to be his last trip. Rocco Mampieri in his book, *L'Invasione Tedesca in Abruzzo del Settembre 1943* (1980), records that, "Before he left on his last trip, I discouraged him because I knew that the Germans had intensified their patrols at the Ford of Coccia and along the River Sangro, but he wanted to leave just the same, he had to escort several English officers. On the Maiella mountains there was already a lot of snow. We heard from someone that while crossing the Sangro they were machinegunned by a German patrol at the cost of some of their lives."

In 1983, I heard from Mariano's brother-in-law and my great uncle, Pietro Bonaventura, that he warned Mariano that someone in the village had denounced him to the German authorities and urged him to cancel his upcoming trip. Also in 1983, my grandmother, Concettina, told me that some days after her husband had left on what turned out to be his final journey, she heard the heavy tread of boots on the stairs outside followed by fierce knocking at the door. Thinking that she was going to be killed by the Germans, she tossed her infant daughter, Filomena (my future mother), under a mattress and opened the door. German soldiers barged in, yelling at her, and conducting a cursory search. After they departed, from under the mattress she recovered her baby, who she said was red in the face from almost suffocating. My grandmother then took from its hiding place the paperwork her husband had gathered from the Brits he had previously helped on his prior missions, and which the German had miraculously missed, and burned it in the fireplace.

My great uncle Amadeo Silvestri, older brother to Mariano and a POW of the British shipped off to a camp in India for the duration of the war after he was captured in North Africa, told me that after he returned from the war and heard of his younger brother's disappearance, he made his own search. Crossing the Maiella mountains on foot and journeying southward to the River Sangro, he asked local people if they had heard of the ambush or had come across and buried a body. Finding nothing, he returned to the Sulmona area and helped his widowed sister-in-law, Concettina, my future grandmother, go to Rome to get a pension as a war widow.

The loss of Mariano was, of course, devastating for the young mother. She struggled financially until she was married off by her brothers working in Venezuela to an Italian bachelor there, Carlo Rinaldi. From Venezuela, her daughter (my future mother) came alone to the US to visit some relatives, which turned into permanent residency when she met and married an Italian immigrant, my future father. I've long wondered about that last trip of my maternal grandfather, wondered who his British

companions were, wondered whether there would be any way to track one of the survivors down to get some details on my grandfather's final days. His premature death cast a permanent shadow on my mother's life, I think, partly because of the uncertainty about his ultimate fate. (Mampieri, in the previously cited book, notes that on p. 43 of another book, *Maiella eroica*, there is mention of a Mariano Silvestri dying in a February 3, 1944 Allied assault on a German fortification on the Maiella mountains, which raises the possibility that my grandfather survived his last POW escort trip and joined the Free Italian forces of the Allies only to die several months after he supposedly was lost at the River Sangro.) While my mother always felt loved and protected by her numerous maternal uncles, there was something about growing up without a father and siblings that left a feeling of insecurity in her and fostered a sense that she would always have to fight for herself. According to all accounts, her father had been a clever and charismatic young man from a local family of some means who would probably have made something of himself in postwar Italy had he lived. With his premature death, his daughter eventually ended up in America.

In the decades after the war, Sulmona and Introdacqua became destinations for many of those former British POWs and their grown children. In fact, some even bought property in the area and resided there part of the year. After her retirement, my mother and her beloved companion spent part of every year in Introdacqua and came to know some of these British part-time residents. As an American kid growing up in the sixties, I was fascinated by books and movies about the Second World War. It was only once I had grown into an adult that I discovered that my own life had so decisively been shaped by the consequences of that war, in particular by my grandfather's fateful decision to go out on that last mission of guiding British POWs to the Allied lines.

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