

“GUIDO, BE PATIENT ...”

by Raffaella Cortese de Bosis

Round pages bound in wood. It is the diary of a tree, written in its rings: they reveal his age, the climate, the nutrition, the light. A precious, natural record. If a person could write such a diary, we would see the same system of concentric rings, some would be thick indicating health and wellness, others would be thin indicating some form of suffering. The rings of a man born in 1920 are healthy and strong for several years, and then this changes abruptly in the year 1943. Between 1943 and 1945, his rings indicate that he lived in total darkness, that his nutrition was insufficient and unhealthy, and that it never rained.

The diary of this man, born in 1920 is Guido Bianchedi's, one of the pillars of the better side of Italy. He sowed goodness abundantly and even if he is no longer with us, we keep harvesting those precious fruits. Among these fruits are fortitude and inner strength, generosity, deep serenity, his smile, attentiveness to the needs of others, surprise in the presence of a kind action, trust, an authentic sense of freedom.

His name is not as well-known as other pillars of the better side of Italy because he preferred to live a whispered life, rather than a life lived with the megaphone, he preferred shaking hands rather than delivering grand speeches on friendship. He preferred discretion to the limelight.

Guido Bianchedi was born in Ostia on July 27, 1920. He was the son of Pietro Bianchedi and Angela Ricciardi, who moved here from Piangipane (Ravenna). He was a conscript in the 51st Infantry Unit, Cacciatori delle Alpi, in Perugia and served in Lubiana. September 8, 1943: the Armistice. Italy surrenders to the Allied forces. Germany reacts with Operation Axis. After the Armistice, Guido Bianchedi was arrested by the Germans and deported to Buchenwald. On his arm he bore the tattoo of his number 0616. After some time in this ghost-like site, they brutally order him to climb on a truck, with other soldiers, all inhumanly piled up. They are taken to another camp. It is freezing cold. The rain is pouring down. There is mud everywhere. And starvation!

This camp is perhaps the most secretive among the camps created by the Reich: Mittelbau Dora. An unending network of galleries carved in the mountain, invisible from the outside world. It is secret because in this bleak and asphyxiating labyrinth, the infamous V1 and V2 missiles were built. The engineer managing this death factory was Werner von Braun.

Thousands of prisoners, from many countries, were made to work here. An exhausting, grueling, and cruelly overwhelming work. The tunnels were dug by the prisoners with pickaxes and mechanical excavators. There was no aeration system, so the dust stayed in the tunnels and was breathed by the prisoners.

The deafening noise and the unbreathable air were add-ons to the merciless conditions: the prisoners slept in 5-stories bunkbeds, on a handful of dirty hay. Following a rotation of sorts, they took turns in sleeping on the highest story. Guido remembers that it was a coveted bed because the dirty hay from the higher beds would fall on the faces of those who slept in the lower beds. The light was turned on only in emergency situations. They were not fed every day, and when they were it was a disgusting and non-nutritious slop. Using water from the faucets was forbidden, so they could drink only from tanks that contained water and other material. Personal hygiene was impossible. Parasites and insects attacked the prisoners, "they were like armored tanks," he recalled. When someone died, the remains were left there, among the living.

In such a dire situation, what can you hold on to in order not to surrender to evil? Guido found comfort in a daily, imaginary dialogue with his father. His father encouraged him, gave him strength, and urged him to be patient. "Whom did I ever hurt? I don't think I ever hurt anyone. So why am I made to serve this sentence?" And his father's voice would reply: "Guido, be patient".

In the galleries, the missile assembly continued at a hectic pace. The missile was five-stories high and completely assembled underground. While a lot of test launches failed, many V1 and V2 hit their targets. In London, they killed thousands.

April 11, 1945. The Third United States Army (today known as U.S. Army Central) finds the camp. They are joined by the men of the 104th Infantry Division. But a few days earlier, on April 3rd, the Nazis evacuated thousands of soldiers from this camp and sent them to Bergen Belsen. And they did the same on the 6th: with outrageous brutality, more thousands were loaded on cattle trucks and sent to Saschenhausen and Ravensbuck. So, when the U.S. troops arrived, the prisoners of the Dora were not many. On May 2, 1945, Werner von Braun was arrested by the American troops. He would eventually be taken to the United States where he worked in various positions, including as director of the Huntsville NASA Headquarters. He designed the U.S. space program, along with other Nazi scientists. He was never put on trial or sentenced.

Guido was saved and can embrace freedom again.

It will take him a long time to get home. His family has had no of him news for two years. Guido, the strong, burly soldier now weighs 85 lbs.

He arrives home. He stops on the threshold. "Dad, I'm Guido!"

Translated from Italian by Alessandra Cortese de Bosis