

Readers respond to previous issue, NIAF's work

Reacting to "It Happened In Italy"

A student of mine recently brought me some information about [Elizabeth Bettina's book "It Happened In Italy"] from the *Ambassador* magazine (Vol. 21 No.1) because the topic of World War II concentration camps and Campagna comes up occasionally in my literature classes.

I teach Italian literature for the Museo ItaloAmericano in San Francisco and none of my students want to believe that concentration camps ever existed in Italy. When asked, my Italian friends try to minimize it as much as possible. But, it doesn't take much effort to find a lot of information about concentration camps in Italy; even just doing a quick search on Wikipedia yields information about camps all over Italy.

My uncle, Hugo Forster, was interned in Campagna (Prov. Salerno) Caserma Concezione; he passed away in 2002 in Menlo Park, California, where he lived for more than 50 years. Around a year ago, my cousin, one of Hugo's daughters, let me look for anything written in Italian in his personal papers, since she does not speak or read the language and knew I was trying to find out more about the time he spent in Campagna. Among the things I found were one of his letters sent from the camp (dated August 17, 1940), a photo and a postcard from that same time. I have been treasuring these ever since—they seem historically significant to me.

Prior to her death in 2004, my mother Isabel—Hugo's sister—recorded our family history. Hugo, three years her elder, was born in 1915 in Berlin. Although all four of their grandparents were of Jewish

origin, their parents and siblings were Lutherans. In 1930, their father—then employed as general director of Snia Viscosa, an Italian artificial silk concern—was transferred to Milan, Italy.

In her memoirs, my mother wrote of the changing climate for Jews in Italy. "Then one day the shattering news came out



A postcard from Hugo Forster, uncle of Francesca Lane Kautz, shows Salerno, Italy, around the time he was held in a fascist internment camp in that province. Photo courtesy of Francesca Lane Kautz.

that Hitler and Mussolini had made a pact," she wrote. "All Jews and people of Jewish extraction had to leave Italy before March 15, 1939, excepting those who had lived there before 1918. So now it was our turn, though we had been Lutherans for two generations... Hugo was a metallurgist with a fine job and a big career ahead of him. His company [in Livorno] saw to it that he could stay on and work despite the new laws."

My mother Isabel and her sister, Marielis—who still lives in Menlo Park today—traveled to England to wait for the opportunity to leave for the United States. But Hugo was not so fortunate. "Hugo, despite all earlier assurances to the contrary, was thrown into jail in Salerno," wrote my mother. "He was deprived of freedom because of his accident of birth...Jewish blood. He was well-treated by the jailers, playing cards with them, etc. Italians never felt anti-Semitism. It was Hitler who had imposed the law on Mussolini and Mussolini, who had reasons of his own, obeyed."

Uncle Hugo's letter of August 17, 1940 fills in important details about his time in captivity. He described life in the camp, advising his family that, "I am well and if that were to unfortunately change then there are so many doctors here that one can [choose] one for each bone. There are fruits and vegetables to eat, so one is always o.k." He continues, "Here one can eat Viennese, German and naturally Italian cooking. Among the doctors I found several who know well Uncle Fritz (Fritz Forster, head of Red Cross Services in Vienna, who, in 1940, was taken into custody by the Germans and transferred to Poland) and so we all sent him a post card with several signatures a few weeks ago."

At the time, he still hoped to avoid immigration to America. "If there is hope for me to return to my work, then I will wait for the end of the war here in Italy and I will not do anything to prepare to leave for America," he wrote. "If there is no hope, which I



A letter from Hugo to his family written on August 17, 1940, sent from a fascist internment camp in Italy. Photo courtesy of Francesca Lane Kautz.

will know at the most within two or three weeks, then I will do everything necessary for my departure.”

He also reflected on how this experience has changed his perception of life. “How many times I think today of small things from the past, to which I gave no importance and that today sparkle in a very different light,” he wrote. “I am certain of one fact: When we will be together again, it will be a beautiful thing. Because how we are financially will not be of any importance. We will be content and happy with the minimum means. And I don’t think that this day will be very far off. I have trust in the future.”

As his letter draws to a close, Hugo says, “I could

write still many more things, but I am afraid that if I do the censor will get annoyed and will not send my letter, [and I would like for] you all to receive my news very soon. Don’t worry if you don’t hear from me sometimes, ...one must consider the present moment.”

Hugo finally reached the United States via Lisbon, Portugal, in 1942. My family reunited in San Francisco, California, and have lived on the West Coast ever since.

I’m looking forward to reading [“It Happened In Italy”], which I just received today from Amazon.

Francesca Lane Kautz
Palo Alto, California

Not famous, but not forgotten

I am a professor at the University of Perugia’s School of Medicine and for several years I have researched about the story of the concentration camp of Ferramonti di Tarsia. Although I am not a professor of history, I am involved in historical research and recently wrote a book on Ferramonti (“Ferramonti di Tarsia: Voci Da Un Campo Di Concentramento Fascista 1940-1945”). Recently, a friend of mine from the United States sent me *Ambassador* magazine’s recent article entitled “Ferramonti di Tarsia: Calabria’s Forgotten Internment Camp” (Vol 21. No. 1). Sincerely, I disagree about the way you approached the story and I suppose I may give a modest contribution.

In your article, the term “forgotten” appears several times linked to Ferramonti and the way you describe its history easily induces a general reader to imagine a “forgotten site” where the local people “don’t want to remember what happened here.” I don’t want to be stickler, but the term “forgotten” is very different from “unknown.”

I work and live in Perugia. However, my family hails from Tarsia, where Ferramonti is located. Since I was kid, my grandfather and my father told me about Ferramonti because the whole town was involved to help those people. In the middle of the fascism, in the middle of a terrible war, during racial laws, a rural town of *sud* Italy offered to those people all possible help and support. My father and grandfather often were going to the camp to spend time with the “new friends” there (the cover of my book shows a photo of a party hosted in the camp by the people of Tarsia, including my parents!).

The story of Ferramonti obviously (but very luckily) is not as famous as other camps in Germany or in Poland. I can understand if a general reader doesn’t know about Ferramonti or other stories from World War II...However, the possibility that many general readers may not know about Ferramonti does not

change Ferramonti into a “forgotten internment camp,” since its story is absolutely well-known to all professional historians that studied the Shoah and those interested in that history.

I agree with you that Ferramonti was an untold story up to the 1980s, however, after that time

several serious historical or descriptive books have been published about Ferramonti. Other coverage has appeared on RAI in addition to Austrian and German television and, last but not least, a movie about Ferramonti was produced some years ago and entitled “18.000 giorni fa.”

Contrary to your article, none of the original barracks are still present, all were destroyed. The few big buildings in concrete (not barracks) visible through the locked entrance are not original. They are the museum and a room for meetings. Even the place where the actual museum is located is out of the perimeter of the camp. I was also there last summer and I can confirm that [the camp’s sign] was on the ground (as was shown in a photo that appeared with the article), but simply because at the time

there was yard work going on...

Briefly, Ferramonti is not really a forgotten and untold story, but it is an extraordinary Italian story where heroic deeds done by Italians need to be described to general readers. For this reason I was very sorry reading your article because you missed the opportunity to tell to a wide audience some nice and incredible stories of Italians. For example, Paolo Salvatore, the director of the camp, was an Italian hero. [German industrialist Oskar Schindler] saved some hundred people...Salvatore saved thousands. These are the stories to tell to our friends in U.S. since many of the “Ferramontini” went to the U.S. and actually live there.

Prof. Mario Rende
Perugia, Italy



Mario Rende, a professor at University of Perugia’s School of Medicine, hails from Tarsia and has authored a book on the camp, “Ferramonti di Tarsia: Voci Da Un Campo Di Concentramento Fascista 1940-1945.”





Ida Spagnoli stands in front of her ruined apartment this summer in L'Aquila, flanked by firemen Richard Bordoni (left) and Guido Ferrara (right). Spagnoli wrote *Ambassador* to share the story of her earthquake experience, including how she was able to evacuate her second-story apartment uninjured with the help of university rugby players passing nearby. Photo by Rebecca Heyl.

Earthquake survivor's tale inspires readers

Thank you for printing the story of Ida Spagnoli ["Lettere: Moved by *Ambassador* article, L'Aquila earthquake survivor shares story"] in [Ambassador Vol. 21 No. 1]. It's gut-wrenching to read. She closes her story with "Please help me find a way to keep their story alive." I would like to know what can be done to help. I'm talking about more than making a donation. I feel frustrated because I want to help, but I don't know how. I'm sure many Italian-Americans feel the same way. It's very hard to get information about what is going on over there. What kind of help do the people need? How can we help? I don't want this to become "old news" either, but I fear that is what's happening.

Valorie Guanella Erion
Silt, Colorado

AMBASSADOR RESPONDS:

The National Italian American Foundation's Abruzzo Relief Fund continues to help displaced students from the University of L'Aquila, as well as addressing the academic institution's needs. In addition to making much-needed donations, NIAF members across the country have hosted fundraisers to assist our efforts. For more information on how you can help, visit www.niaf.org or call 202-387-0600.

Other groups involved in providing assistance to earthquake victims include Sustain Abruzzo, a group that works to aid the region's small agriculture producers affected by the quake. The group raises funds through events held at restaurants and wine venues, promotes products from Abruzzo to vendors in the United States, encourages tourism to Abruzzo and fosters relationships with the region and businesses in other countries. Visit www.sustainabruzzo.com.

For information about traveling to Abruzzo, visit www.abruzzoturismo.it or contact Abruzzo Promozione Turismo.



Most of the façade of a palazzo on L'Aquila's Via Roma is left standing, but the interior floors collapsed following April's earthquake, revealing framed pictures still hung from the walls on the third floor. Photo by Rebecca Heyl.

Support for NIAF's Abruzzo relief efforts

We have seen NIAF at work with a project that showed [members and supporters] what they expect from the investments of their donations. "Five, ten, twenty dollars, gave us the possibility of making this happen...." The message is clear: NIAF is reaching out again for the people.

Vincenzo R. Marra
New York, New York

General praise for Ambassador

It is always great getting the *Ambassador*. I read every page and like what I read.

Andrew F. Santoro
Palm Bay, Florida

Contact Us

Ambassador Editorial

Send comments and questions with a subject line of "Ambassador Lettere" via e-mail to Ambassador-Magazine@niaf.org, by fax to 202-387-0800 or by mail to Ambassador Lettere, The NIAF, 1860 19th Street NW, Washington DC 20009.

Please include your name, address and daytime phone number. All submissions become property of *Ambassador* and may be published in our magazine or on our Web site, www.niaf.org. Letters may be edited for clarity, space or to remove objectionable content.

Ambassador Advertising

For information on advertising in *Ambassador* magazine, e-mail AmbassadorMagazine@niaf.org with a subject line of "Advertising" or call 202-387-0600.

Find Past Issues

Previous issues of Ambassador are available on the Web at www.niaf.org/ambassador/ambassador_magazine.asp.