

## Debunking the cliché of Italian military cowardice: the Italian military internees and Guareschi

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## Debunking the cliché of Italian military cowardice: the Italian military internees and Guareschi

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### ABSTRACT

This article has two goals. The first is to challenge the cliché (outside Italy) of the cowardly and clownish Italian soldier by recalling the voluntary journey to concentration camps (*Lagers*) of 650,000 soldiers and officers, the so-called Italian Military Internees (IMI), who said 'No!' to the German 'invitation' to swear an oath of loyalty to the Reich upon the declaration of the armistice on 8 September 1943. Despite a reign of terror in the *Lagers* in which they were interned, most continued to resist until they died or were repatriated at the end of the war. The second goal is to examine the idiosyncratic evocation of officers' experience as IMI by Giovannino Guareschi in his *Diario clandestino* (1949). He played a major role in the IMIs' 'unarmed resistance' in the four *Lagers* in which he was interned and the work consists mostly of material written *in situ* for his companions in misfortune.

**KEYWORDS** Cliché; Italian; military; cowardice; IMI; Guareschi

During World War II, the common stereotype of the Italian soldier was ruefully summed up as follows by an Italian in a British Prisoner of War (POW) camp in India: 'the original sin remained: we were Italians .... The English did not understand us at all: Fascists or monarchists, for them we were a rotten lot ... and lousy soldiers' (cited in Absolom 1991, 18).

This stereotype is belied by the terse 'No!' which represented an extraordinary, ethically based act of collective heroism by 650,000 Italian Military Internees (IMI) between September 1943 and April 1945. This article will deal with Giovannino Guareschi's unique evocation of officers' experience of the event in his *Diario clandestino*. Before and after the war, Guareschi (1908–1968) was a satirical journalist, cartoonist, humourist and writer. He achieved international fame after the war as the author of the bestselling series *Mondo piccolo* (The Little World of Don Camillo), the first volume of which was published in 1948, and was 'Italy's most published and translated author of the twentieth century' (Perry 2002, 39).

The historical background needs to be briefly recalled. By 1943, the Italian military was on the verge of collapse, under-equipped, under-manned, poorly

trained and demoralized. On 25 July 1943, King Vittorio Emanuele and the Fascist Grand Council called for Mussolini's resignation and exiled him to the Gran Sasso in the Abruzzo region. The king asked Marshal Badoglio to form a new government. A public pretence of continuing the war was made until an armistice, effectively an unconditional surrender, was publicly announced on 8 September 1943. This delay enabled the Germans, who had been expecting it, to make contingency plans. They overran northern Italy and theatrically air-lifted Mussolini from confinement, installing him as puppet head of the satellite Italian Social Republic (RSI).

The king, Badoglio and members of the government abandoned the Italian military in the north of Italy, leaving it leaderless and in chaos, and decamped to the Allied-occupied south. About two million soldiers melted away in two to three days, either joining the armed Partisans or going into hiding (Rochat 2005, 431). Those who remained, approximately 810,000 men, were confined to barracks and 'invited' to swear an oath of loyalty to the Reich, continuing to fight on the German side. About 650,000 men who said 'No!' to the offer were deported. This resistance was all the more amazing in that the IMI were, for the most part, young men under thirty who had grown up under twenty years of Fascist dictatorship conditioned to say '*Sissignore!*'

Initially, the Germans vacillated over how to designate them, reasoning that they were neither POWs, because Italy had not declared war on Germany, nor political internees, because they were not civilians; moreover, the Germans needed an excuse to turn as many Italians as possible into virtual slave labourers to compensate for their manpower losses. In the end, Hitler's personal brain-wave (Schreiber 1992, 798) was the unilateral expedient of designating them *Italienische Militär-Internierte* or *Internati Militari Italiani* (conveniently, the acronym, IMI, is the same in German, Italian and English), thus largely depriving them of their rights under the 1929 Geneva Convention, including the critical services of the International Red Cross. Moreover, they received negligible assistance from both the RSI, which concurred with the Germans in regarding them as traitors, and the Kingdom of the South, which was not recognized by Nazi Germany as their protecting power. RSI institutions, such as the Italian Red Cross and the Servizio Assistenza Internati, were largely hamstrung by internal bureaucratic squabbling, German obstructionism and a tendency to allow political considerations to overshadow humanitarian ones (Schreiber 1992, 694–743).

The deportees were sent in trains and cattle trucks through northern Italy to a 'galaxy' (Sommaruga 1995, 65) of *Lagers* (concentration camps) in Poland and Germany. There they ranked near the bottom of the Nazi pecking order of *Untermenschen*, just above Jews, Poles and Russians. Soldiers and non-commissioned officers had only one chance to comply, after which they were automatically pressed into forced labour; the treatment of officers was paradoxically closer to the Geneva Convention and they remained in internment.<sup>1</sup> Once they were in the camps, there was unrelenting pressure on them to say

'Si' to transferring their allegiance from the king to the Reich. Those who did so were called *optanti* or *aderenti*. The Germans unleashed an increasingly brutal reign of terror against the IMI and also conducted a propaganda campaign directed at both them and their families back home. Nazi-Fascist officials alternately threatened and cajoled the IMI, perfidiously offering them the bait of either returning home or enjoying easier conditions. Families were deliberately deceived about their travails and often exercised excruciating pressure: 'I am morally in pieces, torn between the voice of my conscience, the voice of my stomach and the voice of my mother waiting for me' (Sommaruga 2001, 91). Nevertheless, 86 per cent continued to say 'No!' although accurate statistics are notoriously hard to come by.<sup>2</sup>

The primary motivation of the IMI was fidelity to the oath taken by every soldier to serve king and country, epitomized by their *stellette* (military pips). Their loyalty was not so much to the person of the king as an individual – a strange, shy, indecisive and rather limited little man who had left them in the lurch – but rather to the king as a symbol of Italy. They saw themselves as *Lager* volunteers (Guareschi 1949 [hereafter abbreviated to DC], xiv) who were defending Italian honour by demonstrating that there were Italians ready to sacrifice everything for their country.

Other significant motives were: war-weariness; traditional anti-German feeling (especially after the Russian debacle); an aversion to fighting against their fellow Italians now that Italy was in a state of civil war both between north and south and between pro- and anti-Fascists in the north; a reluctance to contribute to prolonging the war, particularly in light of their first-hand knowledge of its brutality and destruction; anti-Fascism; religious or ideological conviction, be it Catholic, liberal or Marxist. With the passage of time, another motive, that of self-respect, assumed increasing importance.

Some IMI kept diaries (Strictly prohibited) as a survival mechanism, although this was *Streng verboten* (strictly prohibited) and punishable under German civil law. Most diaries started on 8 September 1943 and ended on the precise day in 1945 when the writers once again set foot on home soil. The diaries tend to be chronological, visual and factual, and perhaps this is why they may leave the reader with a fairly homogenous, although undeniably searing impression. An exception is Guareschi's *Diario clandestino* and he was the first to admit that it was not a conventional diary (DC, vii) but rather a selection of the material that he wrote for 'immediate use', going from hut to hut to read aloud (DC, x). It consists of short pieces in which he hauntingly evokes the physical and emotional experience of *Lager* life.

In the *Lager* Guareschi had kept a conventional diary, *Il Grande Diario*, much of which he subsequently burnt, although in 2008 his children, Alberto and Carlotta, published the remainder (Guareschi and Guareschi 2008). The present author had the privilege of seeing the square notebooks in which he recorded a large amount of material in his tiny, neat handwriting that made no concessions

to abbreviations. Guareschi was later to dismiss his *Grande Diario* as 'nit-picking, boring and very insipid' (Guareschi 1989, 232). Moreover, he did not want to be unfaithful to his fellow internees, alive or dead (DC, xiv), or for their experience, the 'extraordinary poem of pain', to be trivialized into a 'grim crime report' (Guareschi and Guareschi 2008, 556). Instead, after the war, he operated a catharsis by decanting in *Diario clandestino* the material he had written in the *Lager* and that had been vetted by his fellow prisoners. Its veracity is confirmed by Vittorio Vialli's extraordinary photographs (Vialli 1983)<sup>3</sup> and Alessandro Berretti's drawings, both created *in situ* (Berretti 1974).

By 1942, Italy had lost 50–70 per cent of her fighting strength either in battle or to German labour camps. One night, distraught at the news (later proved false) of his brother's death in Russia, Guareschi got so drunk on grappa that, when he left his hosts at 1:00 a.m., he took two hours to travel the 800 metres to his home. During those two hours he stridently informed the neighbourhood of his opinion of Fascism in general and its foreign policy in particular. He was denounced by an informer and arrested. The price of his freedom was immediate call-up (Guareschi and Guareschi, 2002, 214).

Soon after, thanks to the explosion of his stomach ulcer, he was granted six months' furlough. In August 1943, he was deemed fit for service and ordered to report to his regiment in Alessandria in Piedmont, where he found himself when the Germans took over on 8 September. As was his way, Guareschi uses irony to 'dedramatize' (Sommaruga 2001, 184) the circumstances of his capture. He jokes about the unpreparedness and disorganization of the Italian military and his own 'poor military attitude': he is only able to click his heels to attention properly when wearing the wooden clogs of a prisoner (DC, 4, 9–10). He gives a burlesque account of the transfer of the prisoners to the Citadel of Alessandria and thence deportation 'after a lively exchange of ideas' with an SS major (DC, 19–24).

Guareschi and his fellow officers were deported through Germany to Poland in cattle trucks. At stations they were greeted with pity and food by Poles and insults by Germans, who hurled at them such epithets as 'shits' and 'traitors' (Sommaruga 2001, 53) and sometimes mimed the action of slitting their throats (Conti 2008, 277). After ten days they reached the transit camp of Czeszochowa, by which time Guareschi had already lost ten kilograms.

In a bitter middle-European winter, the Nazis moved batches of officers to concentration camps. The environment in all *Lagers* was uniform: in Alessandro Natta's words, 'sandy heaths and barbed wire, hunger and the stink of turnips, wooden huts and insects ... bestial yelling' (Natta 1997, 50). Given the uniformity of the IML experience, Guareschi felt that a 'panoramic' view would not convey the essence of the experience, whereas focusing on individual events, impressions and feelings would (Berretti 1974, 3). In this article elements of the actual background will be identified, followed by Guareschi's unique evocation of them through poetry, passion, humour and pathos.

Guareschi inhabited four camps in all: Czestochowa and Beniaminovo in Poland, and Sandbostel and Wietzendorf in Germany. Although each, to borrow a concept from Dante's *Inferno*, represented a lower circle of Hell, he saw them as a homogenous composite, 'a carton of sand with a lid of melancholy' (DC, 170). Guareschi makes frequent use of poetic fallacy to evoke the sameness of the *Lagers*: in all four camps the sky looks vast, oppressive and suffocating (DC, 90); changes of season largely belong to another world (DC, 151); the August evening has a 'humid and evil-smelling darkness' (DC, 111); the appearance of the sun, even in June, is a miracle (DC, 90) and the sun itself is 'an ersatz sun, a propaganda sun' (DC, 110). Over the camp, inevitably enclosed by barbed wire, looms the sentry tower 'as vigilant and omnipresent as the eye of God. Of that God who – they say – is with them, and who is very different from ours, and who has a mysterious and grotesque name: Gott' (DC, 39).

The Germans aimed to force the Italians to collaborate through breaking them down physically and psychologically. The IMI were subjected to the 'excesses of a sadistic imagination' (Schreiber 1992, 795–796): starvation; abuse and violence; deprivation of clothing; overcrowding; rigid rules; total separation from the outside world; insanitary living conditions; inadequate medical care and no heating. Ensuing disease, including oedema from malnutrition, pernicious anaemia, tuberculosis, petechial typhus, diarrhoea, influenza and frozen extremities, led some to depression, insanity and even suicide. In Sandbostel, for example, 9,000 internees were crowded onto less than 0.5 km<sup>2</sup> (Avagliano and Palmieri 2009, 122). The men were housed in wooden huts with an approximate area of 500m<sup>2</sup> for fifty to ninety officers (Testa 1947, 7). Images of shipwreck, reflecting the IMIs' sense of having been abandoned by all, recur throughout *Diario clandestino*, as they do in other prison memoirs.<sup>4</sup> The dormitory huts looked like 'a convoy drowned in the sand' (DC, 40). The first time Guareschi's group enters a hut, they are horrified by this 'small Noah's Ark sailing in a Flood of gloom. And inside every species of life: from the flea to the poet, from the mouse to the parastatal' (DC, 41). In the June rain, the camp resembles 'a sea of mud' and the waterlogged huts look like 'filthy barges rotting in a forgotten port' (DC, 91).

The men slept in two-tier bunk beds (sometimes three-tier) that they ironically termed *castelli*, but castles without towers, jokes Guareschi (DC, 174). The dimensions of each prison cot were, very theoretically, 1.95 x 0.85 metres (Avagliano and Palmieri 2009, 122). The straw mattresses, which were never disinfected (Schreiber 1992, 640), were breeding grounds for fleas, lice and other insects, and Guareschi remarks that the shavings in his straw mattress have turned to dust and his bones swim in it, making him feel like a castaway (DC, 150).

The sanitary conditions outside were unspeakable. In his *Grande diario*, Guareschi noted that there were two water pumps for 3,000 people, which made the prospect of washing oneself a mirage and, as the water was polluted,

drinking a risk (Guareschi and Guareschi 2008, 272). In *Diario clandestino*, he uses his trademark technique of focusing on one element to evoke the whole, in this case the latrines. He ironically remarks that everything in the *Lager* is 'rational' and that the opening to the cesspool is on the threshold of the latrine. The opening has been left open for several days and at least ten men have fallen into the slime, one up to his armpits, reminiscent of a corner in a circle of Hell (DC, 72).

'Black' (Monchieri 1995, 91) hunger was probably the IMIs' greatest trial. It was, observed one IMI, too little to live on and too much to die on (Storti 1983, 181). The number of calories was consistently lowered over the eighteen months of internment (Avagliano 2006, 365). The *sbobba* (rations) usually consisted of watery, overcooked turnip soup, with the intermittent addition of rye bread, potatoes and minute amounts of margarine, jam and sugar. Clearly, calories were not the only lack: given the total lack of meat, fresh vegetables and fruit, the diet was almost wholly deficient in proteins, fats and vitamins (Schreiber 1992, 611–612). In March 1945, a Fascist representative of the Italian Red Cross reported that the internees in Wietzendorf and Sandbostel looked like 'a horde of skeletons' and their living conditions were 'catastrophic' (Schreiber 1992, 610–611). Given his political leanings and the fact that his organization had largely demonstrated passivity and indifference, he could scarcely be suspected of exaggeration.

In *Diario clandestino*, Guareschi provides little factual detail, not even mentioning his chronic ulcer directly. Instead he evokes the sensation of hunger and the different ways in which the men dealt with it. He speaks of weeping with hunger himself (DC, 56) and how fresh the sensation seems every day, even after eighteen months (DC, 162). In *Il ritaglio* (DC, 66–69) he describes it in hallucinatory detail:

Hunger pursues me and knots my entrails ... and presses down on my wretchedly weary shoulders. I quicken my pace. I try to lose myself in the most tortuous byways of memory. I'd like to shout out that I'm hungry, but I'm afraid to hear myself and I start running, fleeing. But hunger catches up with me.

Bread, milk, cheese: my mouth is full of acidulous water and my jaw muscles ache. How many hours left until I can chew again? Five more hours and then I'll have two potatoes and a spoonful of turnips and my stomach, quickly realizing that it has been fooled, will start aching even more painfully ...

I pace up and down, but hunger pants at my shoulder. I swallow saliva, I swallow air and my hands search my pockets in vain. A little tobacco could fool hunger, but to obtain a little tobacco would mean giving up bread rations. Down here it's an accursed merry-go-round.

He goes back to his hut and shamefacedly confesses to his neighbour that he is hungry. The latter wordlessly hands him a cutting from an Italian newspaper (actually, *Il Messaggero*), asking rhetorically and self-righteously: 'When will the interned Italian gentlemen tire of eating buttered rolls at Germany's expense?'

Smoking was the best way of cheating hunger, want, suffering and 'mortal homesickness' (DC, 169). It is a 'miracle' when the poet, Roberto Rebora, rendered moody by the *Lager* ordeal, hands Guareschi a birthday present, a little pink bundle containing his own cigarette ration. This is more than a gift: to Guareschi, it represents a pure, sparkling sign of civilization, 'a little rose-coloured poetry in the greyness of so much messy, filthy prose' (DC, 77–78).

Smoking was not the only way in which the IMI attempted to cope with hunger. Some did so by dwelling on food obsessively (DC, 27–28). They talked continually about eating, describing lunches, dinners, suppers, breakfasts, afternoon teas and different sandwich fillings; some even compiled a gastronomic guide to Italy. Their obsession, says Guareschi, results in a kind of madness that 'fogs their brains with anguish and these poor fellows become skin and bone and jaundiced more from a fear of hunger than from hunger itself' (DC, 28). It even reached the point in January 1945 that the prisoners were reduced to listening raptly to a mere description of the soup that the chaplain's monastery used to distribute to the poor every day and which included cabbage and horse fat (DC, 159).

Nevertheless, hunger was sometimes also faced with nobility or humour. One captain had bought three chocolate bars for his children after being captured by the Germans. They accompanied him in his tattered bag 'on the road to hunger and deportation'. Every so often he would take them out and smile, thinking of his children. He died of starvation in the infirmary, still clutching the three untouched little bars (DC, 161).

The bread or potato allowance was meticulously distributed between twenty to thirty prisoners. In *L'Achquestiere* (DC, 164), an untranslatable neologism apparently coined by Guareschi,<sup>5</sup> he describes the various ways in which the 'balancing commission' appointed by hut inmates attempted to divide equally, qualitatively as well as quantitatively, crumbs of bread or potato among twenty-two men. One method was for each man in turn to act as *l'achquestiere*, or representative of 'corporate justice'. This person would then nominate an officer, who would go and stand in a corner with his back to the others. The *achquestiere* would point to a tiny heap of crumbs and ask, 'Whose is this?' and the designated officer would, without looking round, give a name. Inevitably, at the end every single officer would mutter, 'And, today, as usual, I've been screwed'.

The men were dependent on food parcels from family to help assuage their hunger, but the postal service was unreliable and parcels could be delayed or plundered by German camp staff or Fascist authorities. Guareschi treats the issues of food parcels with humour and a surprising lack of irritation. He was a man who knew how to count his blessings. In *Il pacco rotto* (DC, 114–121) he describes the arrival of a parcel from home for him. It has broken in transit and all its contents have become mixed up: jam, butter, honey, cocoa, rice, white flour, tobacco, sugar, insecticide, cheese and soap. Guareschi and his friends make a pudding out of what they can use and start to 'feast' on it. Inevitably, it is



inedible and one of them begins writing an advertisement offering to exchange an 'excellent chocolate pudding' for cigarettes. However, when Guareschi discovers a photograph of his baby daughter in the wrapping, he realizes that he has received the 'most extraordinary parcel in the universe'.

The near-dearth of food and clothing led to a flourishing black market. In a calmly revolting scene, Guareschi describes how the black market sometimes becomes a 'cesspool market':

In the latrine a Russian, as filthy and wretched as Czarist Siberia, is squatting with his trousers down on one of those foul cracked lavatory seats, satisfying his needs. Italian officers are crowded in front of him and are bargaining with the help of gestures. At one point, the Russian extracts from the stinking and greasy maze of his trousers a piece of bread. He holds the bread out with his right hand and grabs the money with his left. (DC, 109)

However, even the camp black market could have its amusing or even inspiring side. It was set up like a business with quotations, brokers and advertisements (DC, 132). Notices written on scraps of paper were nailed to latrine doors, advertising, for example, a copy of the *Divina commedia* and rice in exchange for cigarettes, a German grammar and razor blades for an English grammar and a toothbrush (DC, 108). *Inchiesta letteraria* (DC, 141) lists books offered in exchange for other books or cigarettes. The titles were often incongruous given the environment and included, among others, a 'scientific' sex manual and books on electricity, mathematics, analytical geometry and photography.

After starvation, the *Appell* (roll call) ranked as the second-worst physical torture. It habitually took place outside, twice a day and in all weathers and lasted on average one and a half hours. Men were further dehumanized by being called by number, not name.<sup>6</sup> If the headcount seemed incorrect, the operation was repeated as often as necessary. The ill were not usually permitted to be absent and it was forbidden to help anyone who collapsed. Latecomers, often older or ill men, were mocked, kicked and bullied by camp guards (Avagliano and Palmieri 2009, 123–124). As usual, Guareschi does not give concrete details but evokes the Germans' intentional use of the *Appell* as an instrument of depersonalization. He has a sense of becoming an infinitesimal part of a 'collective impotence': he is one of a hundred thousand bricks in a wall (DC, 100).

Total separation from the outside world caused acute anguish. It has already been noted how frequently the shipwreck image recurs. The men felt forgotten by everyone and everything except death (DC, 170). The roar of a plane overhead is like 'the echo of other people's war', at the sound of which Guareschi feels 'a desperate anguish' (DC, 94). The occasional reminder that, while life within the *Lager* was static, life outside continued, was harsh. When Captain X hears that his fourteen-year-old only daughter has died, he has to be restrained by his friends from killing himself by flinging himself against the barbed-wire fence and so getting shot by the sentry. He then goes into what sounds like a catatonic state (DC, 79–80):

In the luminous immobility of midday, under the colourless sky, in the inflexible geometry of the huts and the dreariness of the sand, despair is no longer earth-bound, but hangs in the air and spreads into the void of this deserted life.

And all the men cooped up behind the electrified fence inhale it and the despair of one becomes the nightmare of all. ...

Despair: the precise, overwhelming, unbearable sense of impotence.

People by now accustomed to identical, static days had been deluding themselves that everything in their former life had come to a stop ... and that everything would start up again only when they returned home. And suddenly the illusion has shattered like a crystal bulb.

Time, life, death, all continue back there, and they feel abandoned by the roadside while others continue on their way and are already far ahead and it seems that they will never be able to catch up.

For men who could no longer bear the situation, there were three ways out: opting to serve the Germans, suicide or insanity.

Motives for opting were understandable: starvation was the primary motive but there was also terror for oneself and one's family, depression and, in the autumn of 1944, dread of the approaching second winter. The attitude of fellow internees who chose to continue being *Lager* and hunger volunteers varied. Nicola Della Santa said that heroism was not an obligation and that the *optanti* should not be despised (1986, 159). Lino Monchieri felt that individuals had the right to make their own choice, but that he was holding out because he wanted to return home 'unsullied' (1995, 95). Sommaruga was virulent in holding that the *optanti* had earned Judas's thirty pieces of silver (2001, 63). In *Diario clandestino*, Guareschi does not judge: he turns the agonized soul-searching of many into two tragi-comic descriptions of frantic indecision (*Il pendoliere* and *Il tentenniere*). However, he was later to recall that an *aderente* had seemed more foreign to him than a German captor (Guareschi 1989, 76). He himself had had an opportunity to leave the *Lager* when invited to return to Milan and resuscitate his former satirical journal in order to distract and mollify the Milanese. Guareschi's reply to a letter from his wife imploring him to accept had been three words repeated in minute writing over the regulation four-page letter allowed him: 'I am right' (Gualazzini 1981, 91).

Although suicide was infrequent (Sommaruga 1995, 72), a man would occasionally crack under the horror of the situation. One lieutenant caught a puppy belonging to a member of the German prison staff, dissected and cooked it. He was imprisoned and, during the night, started screaming that the dog was attacking him. He never recovered his sanity (DC, 160–161).

How did those who did not opt to work for the Germans, die or go mad survive? One way – and here Guareschi was a leader – was by building a strong inner life through organizing or partaking in intellectual and cultural activities, injecting oxygen into the murky air of the *Lager* (DC, 27) or, as Natta phrased it,

creating 'weapons for clinging to life' (Natta 1997, xvi). In the extreme material and psychological indigence of the *Lager*, culture was the IMIs' one inalienable possession (Dragoni 1996, 221) and pivotal to their unarmed resistance (Rochat 1986, 38). *Regia università di Sandbostel* (DC, 87) describes a university with open-air 'lecture halls' (simply, areas outside huts), a course schedule and the cream of scholars teaching courses in jurisprudence, literature, engineering, agriculture and accounting. There were also lectures on music, poetry, technology, painting, political economics, history, philosophy, theatre, the cinema, chemistry, religion and finance. The courses and discussions were not only a distraction and an antidote to boredom and depression in the present but gestures of hope for the future. Many of the men were receiving their first education in politics and were conceptualizing a democratic post-war Italy which, they hoped, would rise from the ashes of the conflict. However, Guareschi noted a downside to this flourishing intellectual and cultural life. Far from being idyllic, it could become manic frenzy. All too often people would leap onto a metaphorical soap box (actually a table) and perorate hectically, probably, comments Guareschi acidly, to compensate for twenty years of silence or timid whispering under Fascism (DC, 132–133).<sup>7</sup>

Given all the learned ratiocination expounded in lectures and courses, Guareschi felt that it would not be out of place to recall everyday normality at home, humorously and nostalgically. He believed that hunger and homesickness are easier to resist if one can manage to laugh at one's suffering (Berretti 1974, 6) and that 'those who weep don't feel hunger' (Guareschi 1989, 95–96). He founded a *giornale parlato* (oral newspaper), a feature common to many *Lagers*, which he read to his fellow prisoners by going from hut to hut with his musician friend Arturo Coppola, who provided the musical accompaniment. Guareschi bestowed on the paper, of which he was sole editor and reporter, the imposing name of *Bertoldo chiaccherato e sonorizzato. Edizione per gli italiani all'estero*. (*Bertoldo* was the name of the popular weekly satirical journal edited by Guareschi, whose impudence had not escaped Mussolini's attention.) It was a kind of feuilleton and included news, fiction, criticism and fables. The latter were often cheeky, containing double meanings and nuances which eluded the Nazi censors. They reminded internees of normality: clocks, shops, cafés, streets and gramophones. They brought to adult eyes the freshness of a child's vision with such opening sentences as 'Once upon a time there were table cloths' (DC, 151–152): the table cloth represents civilization, the 'white, pristine village square on which the whole family's hands meet daily'.

In 1944 he made Christmas cards for his friends and organized the production of his *Favola di Natale*, accompanied by Coppola and his band. It mocked the lugubrious inflexibility of the Germans, which could be conquered only by fantasy. He prophesied that, by this time next year, he would be able to begin it with the words 'Once upon a time there was imprisonment' (Guareschi 1971,

71). And, in fact, at Christmas 1945, he, Coppola and others staged the *Favola* at the Angelicum theatre in Milan.<sup>8</sup>

Fantasy was a crucial coping mechanism. In *Il sogno*, Guareschi (DC, 58–65) sees dreaming as a vital means for the IMI to continue to believe that their lives, past, present and future, were real. He frequently 'left' the camp at night to return home in imagination or else his children, generally his small son, Alberto, 'visited' him. Here and elsewhere he uses the analogy of memory and imagination to a roll of film projected onto the screen of sleep (e.g. DC, 82). However, a state of sleep was not necessary for dreaming. In *Ripasso generale* (DC, 95–96) he describes how Coppola plays the accordion in the hut, revivifying the 'pressed dried flowers' of home thoughts.

Not only did Guareschi's imagination permit his children and his memories to cross the barbed wire in both directions, but it also permitted God to enter and instruct him in matters prohibited by German rules (DC, 45–46). 'Signora Germania' could subjugate men's bodies, but not their souls. This is one of the rare references to God in *Diario clandestino*. Guareschi's faith was so much an inner frame of reference that he had no need to flaunt it.

Another way of breaching isolation was the clandestine radio, the possession of which was punishable under civil law. One such radio was the legendary Radio Caterina, constructed with typically Italian resourcefulness (DC, 183) using, for example, a valve extracted from a gaoler's bicycle while the owner's back was turned (Vialli 1983, Fig. 73). The news from German and foreign broadcasts was noted down and then verbally communicated from hut to hut.

Guareschi does not vaunt IMI motivation. Only three times does he give examples of overt resistance. The first two describe the death of a fellow internee who left the *Lager* in the only honourable way possible – through dying. Captain Musella (DC, 50–53), a composer, dreamed that his daughter several times appeared to him, prophesying that the war for him would be over in early March. He died in the infirmary on 2 March. Two long lines of internees accompanying the coffin to the grave were startled by the sudden 'explosion' of the colours of the flag of the royal House of Savoy over the coffin, giving the members of the funeral procession new energy because the flag represented reality in a place where 'everything was merely a desperate dream'.

The second piece tells of how Vincenzo Romeo was arbitrarily shot dead by the sentry on the tower because he put down his basin of water two metres away from the barbed wire and started washing himself (DC, 106–108). The corpse was taken to the infirmary and four friends stood guard. Unusually, Guareschi gives some graphic details: flies crawl over the dead man's eyelids, into his nostrils and between his half-closed lips; his slack jaw is kept in place with string. Fellow internees process through the hut, silently and still stunned, to pay their respects to the body covered with Romeo's ragged greatcoat. Guareschi's description is even starker than Vialli's photograph (1983, Fig. 85).

The third piece describes the refreshing impudence of technicians: sixty were called to a meeting and five hundred arrived. Attendees were invited to collaborate with the Germans in saving Europe from Bolshevism and anyone who did not really want to work was advised to leave immediately. At this point, the attendees left in a body (DC, 157–158).

As was noted earlier, the inner imperative of self-respect came increasingly to the fore (Schreiber 1992, 597–598). The growth of self-knowledge was the key to self-respect. In *Finalmente libero* (DC, 142–143), Guareschi realizes that he used to be a prisoner of himself, but now he is free, reduced to his very essence, having cast off the ‘cocoon of flesh and habit’. He discovers for the first time that he likes himself (DC, 74). In the bitter-sweetness of self-affirmation, Guareschi perceives that the Inferno of the *Lager* is a crucible in which each man can discover and conquer truth for himself and learn to resist the temptation of taking the easy way out through accepting facile, second-hand truisms. Clearly, he was hoping to avert Fascism redux after the war. ‘We have to prepare ourselves, “free ourselves” here in prison, so that we will not remain prisoners of the first person waiting for us at the station, or the second, or the third’ (DC, 158–159).<sup>9</sup>

By the early months of 1945, Germany was at bay and the war was nearing its end in a paroxysm of violence and brutality. The final stage of what many IMI regarded as their personal Via Crucis<sup>10</sup> took place in January 1945, when the diehards of the White Resistance, including Guareschi, were sent to Wietzendorf. Hunger was so excruciating that in March 1945 one captain burnt wood and ate it (Guareschi and Guareschi 2008, 464). The Italian death toll from starvation, cold, dirt, tuberculosis and mental breakdown rose daily.

Finally, on 16 April 1945, the British, led by the rubicund Major Cooley, arrived. The Germans retook the camp once more before they were finally ousted. Only later did the surviving IMI learn that they had been earmarked for extermination – ‘a permanent systemization of the camp’ (DC, 194) – in nearby Bergen-Belsen, of whose proximity they had been mercifully ignorant.

The road home was a long one (Monchieri 1995, 152). Many Italians waited for months before they were repatriated. There were a number of reasons for this. The Italian authorities did not regard them as a priority and did not want to deal with the problem (Dragoni 1996, 362). The IMI had no one to represent them on Allied committees and so everything had to be negotiated at least twice (ibid., 364). Then Foreign Minister and later Premier De Gasperi had apparently so little knowledge of their persecution at the hands of the Germans that he feared they might have been corrupted by Nazi doctrine (Giuntella 1995, 8). Guareschi and friends set up Radio B90 (‘B’ stood for *Baracca* or hut) to distract camp inmates from the stress, boredom and frustration of waiting for repatriation. On one occasion, an announcer was hypothesizing about the creation of a cordon between north and south Italy. A mob of enraged southerners marched on Baracca 90, threatening violence. Guareschi stopped them by narrating over the microphone a fable about two horses pulling a cart, the moral being that

both were necessary (Gualazzini 1981, 111–112). (Interestingly, the search for harmony in a post-war politically divided Italy was a significant theme of the *Mondo piccolo*.) Unsurprisingly, this incident is not narrated in *Diario clandestino*, given Guareschi's aversion to self-promotion. The IMI were returned to Italy as they had been deported – in cattle trucks and going for hours without food or water. Guareschi himself finally left the camp on 28 August 1945 and arrived home on 4 September.

The *Appendice*, the final section of *Diario clandestino* and the only section composed post-war, gives a blackly humorous and sometimes burlesque account of the chaotic comings and goings of the Allies and the Germans during the process of liberation. Guareschi does not mention the depression from which he was suffering, merely noting that the IMI had 'respectable doubts' about whether they were dead or alive (DC, 195). He narrates that when, finally, a truce was declared, the Germans permitted the IMI to walk six kilometres unescorted to Allied lines. Once there, they had to walk another eight to ten kilometres to find accommodation in a village. One can only imagine the effort that the debilitated men had to make, but Guareschi does not complain. Although some of the men, he says, felt crazy with joy, he did not know what he was feeling or thinking. Instead, he noticed the incongruity of an American driver with a Camel cigarette behind his left ear (DC, 195–196).

Guareschi recounts several episodes describing the reaction of men to the food they were allowed to plunder in deserted villages. When first liberated, he was so hungry from what he still had sparkle enough to call the 'calories provided by the outgoing administration' (DC, 181) that he had consumed three kilograms of sugar before he began to feel tremendous hunger. He graphically describes how five officers attempt to kill a pig with a knife and their bare hands: after a long struggle, someone remembers that a pig should be killed through the heart, which the five find by cutting the live animal open (DC, 199–200). He supposes that the SPCA might have a legitimate case against them, but that, before judging, its representatives should first spend nineteen months in a 'Lager administered by the German catering corps'.

Repatriation was traumatic. The IMI experience has been encapsulated in the subtitle of the ground-breaking work by the German military historian Gerhard Schreiber (1992): 'Betrayed, despised, forgotten'. They had been betrayed on all sides: by the king and Badoglio who had abandoned them, the Germans who had persecuted and lied to them, the Fascist government of the RSI which had neglected them, and, ultimately, the Allies who, at war's end, were not interested in differentiating between IMI, POWs and *optanti*.

Guareschi had remarked presciently on 11 July 1945: 'I dreamt that I was at home and was treated like dirt. I feel that it will be tremendously humiliating' (Guareschi and Guareschi 2008, 527). When the IMI came home, they were despised because their unarmed resistance was regarded as inferior to the armed Partisan resistance. They had not expected a reward for their ethical

sacrifice but, by the same token, they had not expected to be derided and the moral value of their suffering discounted; often they were regarded as fools who had allowed themselves to be caught (Dell'Oro 1947, 387). A common question asked of the returnees was 'Why didn't you want to work? At least you would have been able to eat'. Ironically, their captors had said the same (Sommaruga 2001, 207). The ideal of king and country, for which they had suffered and even died, seemed obsolete. In fact, in 1946, the king went into exile following a referendum.

Finally, they were forgotten as their unusual act of mass heroism was undeservedly consigned to virtual oblivion until the late 1970s because it was an embarrassment to all sides of the political spectrum. Erstwhile Fascists regarded the IMI as traitors. The Partisans viewed the military as guilty of having participated in Mussolini's wars and the IMI as cowards. The left held the military responsible for Italy's entry into the war whereas monarchists and the far right held it responsible for the armistice. All political parties were fighting to appropriate 'ownership' of the Partisan movement. In any case, the general population wanted to turn the page on a painful period of history. In the face of a lack of comprehension and interest, most IMI felt alienated and humiliated (Benedetti 1947, 243; Dell'Oro 1947, 387) and withdrew into silence.

From the late 1970s interest in them began to quicken, evidenced by academic conferences and the publication of prison diaries, memoirs and scholarly studies. However, in the English-speaking world recognition has remained, to use Roger Absalom's felicitous term, 'ungenerous' (Absalom 2005). For example, Richard Lamb states that 600,000 Italians were sent to 'labour camps' (1993, 88) and Richard Evans asserts that '650,000 Italian soldiers were seized by the German military as prisoners of war, and then deported to Germany as forced labourers in December 1943' (2009, 471). Although Charles O'Reilly aims to take issue with Anglo-American accounts of what happened after the armistice (2001, 1), he devotes little space to the IMI, other than noting that their story 'is unknown in Anglo-American writing about the war' (2001, 206). The IMI collectively – and Guareschi in particular – deserve better.

Had it all been worth it for the IMI themselves? The answer is mostly a qualified affirmative. Labanca said that the answer depended on the individual: for some yes, for others no (2000, 17). Natta was emphatic: 'Yes! As a man, an Italian and a politician' (1992, 331). Pietro Bettini found the *Lager* a personal growth experience, of which he was quietly and humbly proud but one which he probably would not have the courage to repeat (cited in ANEI 1988, 241).

Certainly for Guareschi's fellow internees, his presence had been crucial. When news of his arrival in various camps travelled along the prison grapevine from as far away as Leopoli in west Ukraine, there was rejoicing among the many familiar with his *Bertoldo* (Biscossa 1988). As noted in an interview given on 11 August, 1986 by Paride Piasenti to Cesare Furnari of *L'Arena*, initially Guareschi withdrew into himself but then, encouraged by friends and



admirers, he overcame his tendency to be a grumpy loner and swung into action to become a builder of moral resistance. In 1980 Piasenti, president of the Italian Association of Ex-Internees (ANEI), paid tribute to his outstanding contribution:

In the various *Lagers* through which he passed, Guareschi was an exemplary standard-bearer of dignity, unshakeable moral coherence and faith in liberty. (Cited in Gualazzini 1981, 82)

Guareschi himself acknowledged that, although the sacrifice had been useless, he was glad to have made it (Guareschi and Guareschi 2008, 527). His *Lager* self was the ideal to which he would strive to remain faithful. To him freedom did not mean anarchy or self-indulgence; it meant the freedom to be fully, authentically and ethically oneself, the freedom to choose to do one's duty, whatever the cost.

The days of suffering are not wasted days: no moment of the time that God grants us is lost or useless. Otherwise He wouldn't grant it ... I did not waste a single second of those two years. And if today I am the little that I am, I owe it precisely to those two years in the *Lager*! (Guareschi and Guareschi 2002, 492).

## Notes

1. Rochat attributes this to the caste structure of the Wehrmacht and Nazi state (1986, 39).
2. For instance, Pietro Testa (1947, 177–178) estimates that 10–12 per cent of deportees opted to transfer allegiance, whereas Mario Avagliano (2006, 363–364) puts it at 24 per cent.
3. Incredibly, Vialli was able to record the whole of his internment with his camera, outwitting frequent searches by camp guards with the help of his friends and even of the chaplain who, on one occasion, walked out of the barracks with his breviary in one hand and the camera hidden under his cassock.
4. For example, Pietro Testa (1947, 207), when he thought of resigning as *Anziano* (*Lager* Elder) of Wietzendorf, was implored by a captain not to leave 'the raft now that it's in a storm'. Testa concluded that his duty was to remain on board the ship.
5. However, it was apparently also used by POWs in North Africa. See Ferrera (n.d.).
6. Their individual number was indelibly printed on survivors' minds and, after the war, was recalled as a source of defiant pride in survival, often appearing in book titles. For example, in Berretti (1974) his own number, as well as Guareschi's and the translator's, appear on the title page.
7. Guareschi the Fascist was a post-war canard. As fellow IMI Oliviero Olivero said: 'Guareschi had his own ideas, which not everyone liked and so they discounted him. But they were wrong to discount him, because he was absolutely not a Fascist. If he had been, as were so many, he would have opted in prison for the RSI and gone home' (cited in Labanca 2000, 16).
8. For a detailed discussion of the use of the fable form as a 'heroic form of anti-Fascism', see Perry (2009).
9. For an analysis of how the theme of personal freedom of conscience informed Guareschi's life and work, see Perry (2001, 67).
10. E.g. Berretti (1974, 13); Monchieri, Ms. diary in the Imperial War Museum, London; even Natta, a committed Communist, felt that internment represented purification from the errors and misdeeds of Fascism (1997, xxvii).



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