

GIACOMINA CASTAGNETTI (Italy)

CLIP 1

My name is Giacomina Castagnetti. I always accept enthusiastically when I'm asked to talk about my life. Not because I think it's very important, or interesting, or even unique, but because I've lived through the darkest times of Italy's history, those of the fascist regime and of the Second World War. I was born in 1925, in Roncolo di Quattro Castella, in a large family of sharecroppers. I was the youngest in the family, coming after six brothers and a sister, and I was born three months after my father died. My mother was left a widow with eight children.

We have always been a very close-knit family. As a woman, the law didn't allow my mother to be the head of the family, so she couldn't hold parental authority over the children. The Court appointed a guardian who had to keep control over a poor sharecropping family like ours. He came to our home to count how many forks and spoons we had, the furniture and everything else, as he was supposed to make sure that this fortune remained untouched for us children until we came of age.

I started going to school in Roncolo. As the school was in an agricultural area, it only offered courses up to the third grade. I began to attend school with clogs on my feet, a cloth sack, two notebooks - one ruled and one squared - a nib in the shape of a little hand and a spelling-book which was quite worn-out, as it had been passed on by all my brothers before I got it. At school there was a large banner that had been badly painted by the students before me, that said: "The Duce is always right".

Everything was made so that people believed in these things: that the Duce was not to be opposed and that he was always right in what he said. In the morning we were given cod-liver oil: half a spoon to the girls, a full spoon to the boys. This wasn't a problem at all, since the oil was nasty and rancid, but it was already a sign of the discrimination existing towards women. We didn't take much math, but we spent a lot of time doing gymnastics, as we had to forge our physique. So, since we didn't have a gym, every day we spent two hours in the school courtyard doing physical education, even in the winter when it turned cold. We were all excited for the gymnastics display we were working on, which would have taken place in the main square, in front of our parents and all the others.

However, Mussolini wanted children to wear a uniform from our earliest childhood: the "Figli della Lupa", the "Balilla", the "Piccole Italiane", the "Avant-gardists". Mothers were enrolled in the "Massaie rurali" (rural housewives), and were given pamphlets for them to learn how to breed chickens and work the garden: the "war garden", as it was called then. The whole family was organized. The Duce had also decided that large families were to be awarded with a certificate, even more so for our family since there were six boys and two girls. This certificate had to be displayed at home, so that everybody could see that Mussolini had acknowledged these families who had generated manpower for the nation in order to prepare for war.

When I was seven I suffered my first humiliation. My mother didn't have enough money to buy me the uniform of the "Piccole Italiane", so I couldn't take part in the gymnastics event with all the other girls, as I had dreamed about. I never found out if we really didn't have any money or rather my mother didn't want me to wear that uniform. I realized that later however. After the display they handed out an Easter egg to all the participants. I had never seen one before, and to me it was amazing, with its shiny coloured paper. The teacher just walked by with the basket, handing out an egg to all the children while I was left out: I wasn't worth it. Can you imagine the despair of a seven-year-old girl, as she walked home thinking that she was different because of such a pointless motive? Because she didn't have a white shirt and a black skirt? I want to tell you this though. After I had a son and a family of my own, I told him what I had gone through when I was seven. So now every year, at Easter, he brings me a huge Easter egg.

CLIP 2

Another thing I have always remembered was the fact that when the landlord arrived in the courtyard my mother told us younger children to go inside. We couldn't stay because my mother sent us inside, although I was really curious to see the landlord woman, all dressed up and carrying a small sunshade. She was the countess Carbonieri of Parma. Later I understood why we had to go inside. My mother didn't want the landlord to see us kids who could not work yet. She didn't want her to count

how many cups of milk she would take out every morning in order to feed us. In the sharecropping contract, if four of us kids were not working, we were only more mouths to feed.

My school only went up to the third grade. In order to do the remaining two years one had to go further away, which would have meant adding three more kilometres to the three I was already doing every morning. This wouldn't have been the biggest problem though. The main issue was due to the fact that most families thought that if they were to make sacrifices it had to be for the boys, not for the girls.

It was customary, so I didn't even think about it. After I had finished the third grade I was supposed to stay at home, as there was no money for me to continue, at least until the fifth grade. It was something we were used to hear and also understand: traditionally, as you got married, you would have to carry what you learned as a woman at home into a new house, in a new family. However, all you were supposed to do was to be a good wife in your new life, know how to mend your husband's pants and how to make socks for him, this type of things. That was the current opinion at the time.

As I finished school I started to work in the fields. In the winter, when it was snowing, I would go to the nuns to learn how to sew and patch. They wouldn't teach us embroidering: that was something for the children of the wealthy. We simply learned to darn clothes, to put patches on the knees or on the bottom of the trousers, and so on.

CLIP 3

The preparation for the war in Africa was gaining momentum. Everything had to be geared to war. For example, Mussolini used to say that not one crumb of bread was to be wasted, as it could have served a soldier in Africa. However I was hearing different stories from my brothers and their friends. I looked at my brothers a lot since my father had died. I don't know why there were so many young men around; all I remember is what Strozzi said. He was very young, a neighbour of ours who later became the vice-president of the Riunite dairy. Referring to what Mussolini had said about farmers, that they needed to go to war, in order to create an empire and conquer new land to work, I remember Strozzi saying: "War has never brought anything good for the poor".

Around the same time, the landlord invited all the farmers to go over at her house and listen to Mussolini's speech about the beginning of the war in Africa. So my mother took me by the hand and we went in front of the landlord's living room. We couldn't go inside the house in order not to dirty it, but my mother had been told to call the farmers to listen to the Duce. I was very happy, as I was going to do something different and listen to a new thing. When I heard the radio I was dazed since I couldn't understand where that deep voice was coming from. And I obviously didn't understand what the voice was saying and the meaning behind those words, unlike my mother. I realized it had to be something terrible when I saw my mother crying as we were going back home. She was thinking about her six boys, who were almost all old enough to be enlisted for war. From that moment I wasn't happy having listened to the radio anymore.

CLIP 4

In the winter we used the cattle shed as our meeting place. We all waited for that moment because friends could finally spend some time together. Social and political activities took place in the cattle shed, as well as love affairs, since boys and girls met there. I was still young. I would sneak in and day by day my curiosity would grow. Maybe it was my disposition, but I really had so much fun there. That's where all the news could be heard.

I was hearing everyday news, but especially political discussions which were starting to take place at our house. I began to hear that a lot of people didn't agree with fascism. The tone was always rather timid and veiled though. Even a joke regarding the Duce could have got you in jail then. I remember a story regarding a young man who was beaten since he hadn't saluted a fascist with the fascist salute. I recall this perfectly because I was really shocked by the fact that a boy could be beaten for this. I began to find out that many of these young men didn't want to take part in the "fascist Saturday" activities taking place in the main squares, as they realised that they were also meant to prepare the youth for war.

We were passing around "Il padrone delle ferriere" (Le maître des forges) or "Le stelle ci stanno a guardare" (The stars look down), which I've read many times. The one which got me thinking the most though was "Il padrone delle ferriere". As farmers we worked hard, but at least we stayed under the

sun, in the open, under a tree. Nature was around us. Reading the book I imagined those people working several meters underground with no protection. If you didn't read the book you can't understand how the author explains that everything in town had turned black, the colour of coal. Even the kids' faces were black since the coal dust was everywhere. This book really shook me. I realized what the differences between the rich and the poor were. And I thought back at what these men were saying, that "It's always the sons of the poor who go to war, not those of the rich".

CLIP 5

I really flew into a rage in 1938, as my brother was arrested.

He was arrested for being a subversive. That's how the regime labelled those who didn't agree with the Duce.

The Communist party underground network was constantly growing, as these young subversives organized themselves house by house. The Communist leaders had already been arrested a long time before and sent to confinement. Therefore it might have seemed that there was no leadership left. But there was this network, as fragile as it could have been which was secretly growing thanks to the words and the work of these young men. If there were two people one day, there were three the following one, since they were finding more and more people who were tired of fascism.

In 1939 my mother died. She couldn't face the situation any longer when the landlord sent us a letter telling us that she could not maintain an antifascist family.

I was fourteen and both my parents were dead. Then we had to leave everything, all our friends and all we had, in order to move to Gazzata di San Martino in Rio. We were lucky enough to find a landlord who was willing to give us a piece of land to farm.

I guess they already knew we were antifascists, thanks to the network I was talking about. So they asked me if I wanted to help them out in a few tasks to support the Communist party, as they needed somebody who wouldn't be noticed much. After all I had gone through that was just what I was looking for. I wanted to do something, to help, but I didn't know how. They gave me a chance to do something for my family and to support the antifascist ideals I was starting to believe in. I started to collect the "soccorso rosso" (red aid), the little amount of money the antifascists could rely on in order to support those families whose parents or brothers had to flee from Italy after being persecuted by the regime. It was just natural to me. After all I had suffered, joining the Communist party meant doing something for the vision I had developed by then. I would also be doing something for my brother and to grant people a chance to live better. I was already sure. I became a communist day by day, little by little, taking in the atmosphere around me. At fifteen, I can't say I was aware of what was going on. Maybe I didn't even know what things meant. Given my life, however, joining the Communist party was the natural answer. That's just how it had to be: there was no other solution, no doubts of any sort.

CLIP 6

In 1941 we received a telegram informing us that my brother Mario had died. He had been sent to Greece. Another brother went to Ukraine directly from Albania. Another one was also recalled for military service and went to Mentone, in France, as Italy wanted to regain the area. The brother who was a victim of political persecution had not been recalled and was at home, along with the youngest one, who was not of age yet, the kids and the women. We had 20 acres of land to farm. As women we began to consider ourselves the head of the family, although the law didn't accept it. We had to find a way to farm the land. Many women, even among our neighbours, had gone to work in the factories, taking advantage of the wartime industry. Men had been sent to the front. You have to imagine that men were at war while women were left at home to look after the children and take care of the family. We were very happy. We felt like we were born again. I remember that together with two of my friends, those in the picture, we took an old flag. I really don't know where we found it, I can't recall, but we left on our bicycles. I was in the middle while they were on the sides, and we set off a parade in the country roads. Everybody was in the streets, so the parade grew more and more. From Castellazzo to Reggio there it are seven or eight km. A whole group of youths – since the older ones were at war – rode their bicycles all the way to the city.

Mussolini's writings were everywhere: "Credere, obbedire, combattere" (Believe, obey, fight), "L'aratro traccia il solco e la spada lo difende" (The plough cuts furrows, the sword protects them).

Some boys somehow managed to find paint and went up the ladders to cover them. They were also trying to pull down some of the monuments, the fasces or Mussolini's busts. Confusion was rather high at that moment.

As time went by, the situation seemed to turn more complex, since we still had a King. Then September 8th (1943) arrived. I remember that day we didn't listen to the radio, since nobody had one, but the news moved real fast, on our bicycles, and within an hour of the announcement the whole town knew that the King had signed the armistice.

We began to see soldiers wandering in the country, going back home. Since I had already developed a certain awareness regarding antifascism, I was very active, together with other women, in asking local families to offer hospitality and some clothes to these young men who were really disbanded. After the King had fled, the army had no leadership. Then the Germans occupied the area, right away, on that same day.

CLIP 7

We set up Women support groups. These groups were the first important women organizations, and we can say that it was the women themselves who spontaneously set them up. These groups had specific purposes. At the beginning there was something that drew us together, even those women who had believed in fascism in the '20s. We had all understood that fascism led to nothing positive. There were women whose sons had died in war, as well as women who had not been as lucky as I was to be raised in an antifascist family. However we were all convinced that something had to be done in order to change the situation. What was the goal that moved us all? Peace. Fighting for peace, to end the war as soon as possible. That's what moved us.

It was an organized activity. We were born in order to support the partisans; that was our duty. Women support groups primarily took care of supporting the partisan struggle. The struggle began after September 8th, as soon as men took off for the mountains. Partisans were an army with no uniforms and no supplies. They had nothing. That's why we started to get hold of small things for them. It might seem nothing to you now, but every time we went to ask families for a pair of pants, gloves, a shirt or a pair of shoes to send off to the partisans who were in the mountains, we risked our lives. It was extremely dangerous, because the fascists, assisted by the Germans, would arrest us and torture us. The women who worked in the women support groups in the lowlands faced danger everyday. We carried out our tasks open-faced, and we had no battle names.

For example, we handed out leaflets and circulated news. News went around in our bags, by bicycle. As for leaflets, if you were stopped, just like they did with me in front of the hospice, the time they took my bicycle, you would have been locked up for the rest of your life straight away.

We moved weapons around. I used to hide hand grenades in a bag with potatoes: hand grenades at the bottom, potatoes on top. You'll probably already know this, but I'll tell you anyway. Especially at the beginning, partisans assaulted fascist garrisons in order to get hold of weapons. Afterwards these weapons had to be carried around from one person to the other. It was also vital to circulate news. Those who were in the mountains had to know what was going on in the lowlands. Therefore we would go back and forth to pass on these small notes regarding the Germans' activities, if mop-ups were taking place, if our men were in danger. In the event of a mop-up we told each other by bicycle right away. Then four or five of us from around the hamlet would pass on the warning. In about half an hour the boys and men who were at home, who had deserted, knew that they had to leave and hide somewhere around the countryside.

CLIP 8

I used to ride my bicycle from Castellazzo to piazza Fontanesi in Reggio, to go tell the landlord if we were buying or selling, as he would not move. Since we were sharecroppers, we had to report to him everything that concerned the land. I had to do this journey many times, and I often had to jump in the ditch in order to hide from the airplanes. Then one day I felt so brave that I asked myself if they would fire at a bicycle. So I kept going on the road, as the airplane was bearing down on me. One time I was stopped at the checkpoint by the hospice. There was always one there, but that day a man had been killed. So there was a group of fascists walking from San Maurizio towards the hospice, where the local fascist headquarters were. They had laid a boy who was slaughtered on an improvised stretcher,

made of pieces of wood and fascines, and walked towards the hospice singing: "Allarme siam fascisti" (Call to arms, we're fascists)

The checkpoint at the hospice was right by the railway crossing. It was a rather unusual day, and they took my bicycle. That bicycle was everything to me. It was a young girl's Ferrari. They took it away and the problem was I was carrying a bag with some partisan stuff. I immediately held on to the bag real tight and then I started to scream and cry. It was all an act, although I was also a little bit afraid.

A fascist stared at me for a while, then took my bicycle and threw it at me. We both fell on the ground, the bicycle and I. I got back on my feet very quickly, and then he told me: "Do not ever come around here again". I can still remember that his boots were very tall and he seemed like a giant to me.

It wasn't true, obviously, but that's how it felt then.

CLIP 9

At Christmas 1944 we collected biscuits, sweets, cakes and the like. I stored some at my house, since I was the one in charge for that area and I preferred to keep dangerous things at my place rather than at someone else's. Participation in that case was really huge. From that moment women support groups became a much larger organization, compared to the three or four antifascist women we were before.

Women were sensational. I found myself with a pile of cases full of stuff. Then Valenti, a guy from Arceto, came over with his cart. He was the father of the one they called "Valenti the bandit".

He wanted to make amends for his son, so he came to my house at dawn and we loaded all these biscuits and everything else. Women had prepared things that would last, and we attached many small Christmas cards to them. Each woman wanted to send out a short note to the partisans, even to those we didn't know. We wanted to show them that we were real close, so that they wouldn't suffer as much from being away from their families.

We felt that women were silently behind us in our struggle for peace, waiting for the war to be over, so it wasn't hard. We went there and then shared the tasks house by house.

It was decided we would pass the word house by house and in small groups. We had to reach the Reggio Emilia prefecture, in corso Garibaldi, all together at 2 pm, but each had to move alone.

This meant you had to be really committed, because it wasn't an everyday thing for example for a mother living 10 km away to take her bicycle and go in front of the prefecture. However, people were really starving and tired of the war, and there had been too many people dying, so that day in front of the prefecture there were 2000 women.

We arrived at the prefecture and the majority of us entered the courtyard. Today the building is just the same, so you can imagine it easily. We had appointed three women to go talk with the podestà, but they were arrested immediately. As we found out, the women who were outside joined us inside the courtyard and we stood there. We started to shout that we wouldn't leave until they released them.

We stayed there a few hours, then we finally saw our comrades walking down the stairs, went outside and left. What were we asking for, that day? We were asking for salt and food for our children, especially for those living in the city. In the country we always managed to find something to eat, while in the city kids were dying of hunger. There was a ration card, they didn't even have a few salad leaves. That's what we were asking for. Why? Because our groups had found out that the Germans had specific plans for our region. Men were to be taken to Germany to work, while supplies for the German army on the Gothic front line had to come from the Po valley. That's why we realized that we could starve the German army by taking as many things as we could away from the pool.

We didn't want to organize a political meeting in somebody's house and put in danger the whole family, so we decided we would hold it under a tree. That tree should still exist today, down the road from Masone to Gavassa. I think it was called "al gublein" or something like that. So we agreed to meet under that tree. I didn't know how many women would show up, because we didn't ask many questions. All I knew is we had to go there. As I arrived, there were four or five of us. After a few minutes the political commissioner reached us too, and began to tell us what the situation was and how our partisan units in the mountains were coping. He told us that our work was very valuable and that we should carry on with it. Then he also added that women, with their work, were putting themselves in a strong position in order for their rights to be accepted. They were already talking about what would change after the Liberation, about the right to vote for women. The commissioner

explained to us that the right to vote was the most significant right women could have, since throughout history it had not been acknowledged. The right to vote for him was the first step towards women's liberation. We looked at each other and it felt strange to think about what it would be like after the war, about having the right to vote. That was the first time I heard somebody talk about these issues and about emancipation, such a great word.

CLIP 10

On the 23rd we started to notice a heavy fog over our heads, and everything seemed quiet, muffled. Then the German tanks began to withdraw. I can assure you that an army on the run is one of the saddest sights one can witness. There was a whole line of trucks that had been seized in Yugoslavia, and they were all full of wounded soldiers. It was terrible. The Germans were heading for the Po river, but there were a few groups of partisans in the lowlands, the SAPs, who were trying to disarm them, since they seemed really disbanded. However the Germans didn't give up until the very end. We were told to keep calm, as nobody knew what the situation was. I was at home when I heard a horse coming at full speed, at a gallop. The reins were loose, because he had probably unharnessed the horse from a cart and hadn't taken them off. I ran outside and it was a German soldier. He was really young. You probably know that Hitler had enlisted even those who were 15 or 16 years old.

As he saw me, he started to shout that the Americans were coming. He wanted me to take cover, because he didn't know I was a partisan. At that moment we were only a young boy and a young girl who wanted the war to come to an end. He was about to try to make it home, while I was there waiting for my country to be free again. At that moment I didn't feel like I could hate neither the Germans nor that young soldier. Maybe he could have harmed me before, but at that point all I wanted was the war to be over and things to change. That's what I did on the 24th. On the 25th all the joy I had inside burst open. War for me had started in 1935, with the campaign in Africa. I was ten then, and on April 25th 1945 I was twenty. The first thing I did was to go throw our windows open. For the previous five years we had covered them with a type of blue paper that was used to wrap sugar, in order not to let any light into our houses.

After that we found a flag and we all lined up to go to Reggio for a triumphant parade.

Along the Via Emilia there were American soldiers on both sides. It was really surprising for me to see blacks, as well as Indians with a turban around their head, for the first time. The infantry had come behind the tanks, who were leading the way, then they lined up along the Via Emilia, from Rubiera to Reggio. When we got there, the partisans had already arrived from the mountains too. As we reached the hospice, the partisan parade was stopped, since it was still dangerous inside the city, due to snipers shooting from the garrets. There were many sniper casualties in the following days.

So that time we simply turned around and went back home, but you can't count the parades we did afterwards.

CLIP 11

That night at home we started to count out those who were coming back. As soon as we saw soldiers returning from the front, I began to go to the train station in Reggio. I was hoping I would see my brother make it home too, but I never saw him again.

Of my six brothers, our numerous family that had been awarded by the Duce, three died, one was a victim of political persecution and one hostage. So we didn't really have too much to be happy about, in spite of the Liberation.

CLIP 12

I'm eighty now. Actually, eighty-one, as you've already counted. Regardless of all the battles I fought, before the Liberation as well as afterwards, with my biggest battle starting after the war, if I'm still here it's because I believe that victories are not everlasting. Things can always be changed. The younger generations in particular have been lucky that we haven't had any other wars in Italy in the last sixty years. We've taken part in some, but we weren't directly involved. I believe that this was also due to some of the actions that I got involved in, together with all the others and all the women who share the same feelings I have faith in. That is something I want to emphasize.

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