

ANITA MALAVASI (Italia)

CLIP 1

I was born in Roncolo di Quattro Castella on the 21st of May 1921. At that time we were a family of farmers, but our roots were different. My grandfather had studied to become a music teacher until he was twenty and had founded the band of Vezzano. My grandmother was the daughter of the town-clerk of Vezzano. He had been given that position after he was involved in the struggle for the unity of Italy, together with his brother, Baroni Radighieri. My grandparents had both studied a lot more than farmers would have normally done and had received a good education. For example, my grandmother used to read the newspaper everyday, although she was a woman. My father often reminded me about this, as an example of how important it was for women to have some education. They got married when they were very young, just a little over twenty, and since they weren't able to find employment, they got into farming. My father's generation, however, was the only one involved in farming but only until they were a little older and got involved in other things.

CLIP 2

The fascist regime didn't even spare us children. Our school organized a contest for the best drawing. I was really very good in drawing, and guess what, I had drawn some very nice fasces with a laurel wreath. It's not easy to colour that with crayons if you're not really good at it, if you're not careful. But it turned out really nice, and my drawing was chosen as the most beautiful one in the elementary school of Castelnuovo Sotto. We were then called at the Ausoni theatre for the award ceremony. The podestà was supposed to hand out the prizes and the whole fascist hierarchy was attending, as always case in public ceremonies. I was the last one who would have been awarded since I had won the first prize among all schools. They finally called me, I went up the steps and reached the stand. Mr. Ganassi was there. I have to say this because he was a friend of ours: every evening I used to bring him some milk of a cow I had raised. We all did, since he had a little child and he had been losing all his children when they were very young. However Mr. Ganassi told me: "So you don't belong to the Piccole Italiane?" And I answered: "No, my father didn't sign me up". "If that's the case we can't give you the award", said Mr. Ganassi, and sent me back. Now, how can a little girl who's ten or eleven years old understand that having a membership card is worth more than her skills and her studying ability? I went home crying. My mother was feeding the pigs and had to listen to me telling her that it was her fault, that I didn't receive my prize because they hadn't got me that card. So she slapped me and told me that at least I had something to cry about then. Maybe she didn't know how to explain things to me. Parents had to be really careful to talk with us kids, because children often repeat the things they hear at home, and if they said something bad about the fascists out of the house parents could be punished. That's why, even when they were talking in the cattle shed, they kept telling us not to talk about what we heard. So since we were kids we knew we had to keep quiet, in order not to get ourselves and our family in trouble.

Then our family moved to Reggio, because the kids were going to school. My brother had been going to high school at a boarding school in Parma, and by then there was a need to move closer to the city. They bought a house in Dalmazia street, where life changed dramatically for me too. We left farm life, based on conservatism, traditionalism, on having to be careful to what you say or do, otherwise who knows what people might say. Also, women would be considered nobody. I used to be told to shut up because I was a woman even at home: my mother, poor woman, thought this was right. In the city however I started meeting women who were going to work. The working class elite actually used to live in Dalmazia street. Reggiane factory technicians, those of the water and gas companies: they were a very bright, mature and well-prepared group of working class people. We moved there in 1938; I had just turned 17. We had a restaurant with a bar and a bowling lane. Although I was quite young I was very curious, I had always been like that, and the older men liked me, so they started to explain to me what I had known only in general terms. What fascism really was, the real reasons behind its existence, for it was only violence and ignorance to me at that time. These men, who were generally

Communists and Socialists, started to explain these things to me, and I began to understand and to see things from a different point of view that attracted me more.

I had made friends with the young men who came to our bar, since I was always there. When they left for war I became their communication point: they were writing from Africa, from France, from Russia, asking for news about each other. So I started to have a broader view of the war, compared to those who only had letters from their relatives.

CLIP 3

Torelli was an old antifascist living in our house. He was persecuted and had been in jail. One day he told me he wanted to talk to me about a few things. "The things you're doing – he said – are very important we were actually quite surprised by you". He was referring to what I had been doing with Maria Montanari and my cousin. We were in a rather strong and combative group of friends, who shared the same ideals, the same feelings towards life. At that point, however, the Germans had already officially announced that those who helped soldiers and draft dodgers to escape would be sentenced to confinement in concentration camps or executed. So what we were facing wasn't a joke. Torelli went on: "You must try to take out everything that a clandestine army might need, because we want to get people to fight in order to send away the Germans and the fascists who are lifting up their head again". So we started to take things out, but before I talk about how we did it, I'd rather talk to you about an episode which was really crucial for my decision to go on in this and take part in the Liberation struggle. Three or four days after September 8th the air-raid warning went off, so we fled away on our bicycles. After a while we went back home, since we didn't hear anything and the warning had stopped. As I arrived in Dalmazia street, right at the beginning of the street, as we always flee towards Codemondo or the Canalina, the SS were standing guard in front of the houses. In front of my house there was a space we called the "palace", where we used to put tables and chairs in the summer: as I got there, a German unit with a machine gun told me to stop. I replied: "It's my house! Mine! My house!" But the soldier just told me: "Halt, raus!". I didn't understand any German, but "raus" meant go away, leave, so I told him: "That's my house; I have to fix dinner for my brothers". Again, he replied: "Raus, schnell, schnell!" and pointed the gun at me. So I quietly went back with my bicycle and met Maria, who more or less had the same thing happening to her. It's not the fear of the gun, you see, it's realizing that you're absolutely nothing to them. That these men in uniform, who looked like cockroaches, who spoke a language you didn't know because they weren't even from your own country, not only could keep you from going inside your home, but also had the power to kill you. You were nothing to them; you were less than a bug. It's shocking. Maybe we weren't prepared for this, but it was the reaction of a young girl who by then had already suffered from bombings, from seeing soldiers being captured and taken prisoner. The older men, who had fought in the First World War, were talking about concentration camps, and my father used to tell us that we had to feed my brother otherwise these beasts would let him die of hunger. We had to help them, do you understand? As you suffer terribly from these things you're facing, because in the end they are just like you and you don't know what their future will be, you risk your own life in order to help them. We went on the street as we saw a soldier and we escorted him out of danger, since there were road blocks everywhere. Our old men even carried them on the crossbar of their bicycles for a while, so that they could rest a little (they were on foot) and stay out of trouble. It hits you. You realize immediately that it's something terrible and that the antifascists were right in what they were saying. Still, until then, we hadn't been helping people for political reasons. We were rather doing it for humanitarian principles: as a woman, you saved another woman's son, that's what got us to face danger, too. From that moment, however, I realized that it had to be something conscious, so I never pulled myself out anymore in regards to all the things I was asked to do.

CLIP 4

At home, my father took care of the problem of ammunition. Since he bottled wine, we had crates full of bottles in the cellar ready to be delivered. He had made holes in the crates where he would stuff the ammunition. Then he closed them. We'd put everything we had in those holes. Our kitchen was also right over the cellar. The cellar had a vaulted ceiling, and you know that there's an empty space between the vaults. So my father had taken off some tiles in the kitchen over one of these spaces, and

we would hide our weapons, guns and everything else there. Then we'd put the tile back and cover it with the chest of drawers we used to make bread. It was really hard to notice the hiding-place, so everything was hidden away there.

Torelli at a certain moment told me: "Laila, what you're doing is not enough. You do so much for the partisans and for us, but you need to think about what your future will be". I replied: "Well, let's just hope it will be a little bit better than now". He said: "If you agree, organize a meeting with all the women you work with and I'll get a communist leader to come". To us, communists and socialists were just the same, what did we know about politics? We had never got involved in it. With fascism, you could only read what they gave to you, and you didn't even have the right to make comments. So before we did this meeting I met Paolo Davoli, who explained to me how important it was for women to discuss their future. After the war, women would have to take part in elections and have the same rights as men. That was great for us. At that point we understood that we could change our future, that we had to be more than partisans, acquire consciousness about our role. The problem was that we were really so ignorant, it was sad. I set up two women support groups, we did two or three meetings, there was this worker coming, I think he was a mechanic of the factory Bloch.

CLIP 5

He was talking to me and he told me: "Listen, we need someone to bring what we need to the mountains, especially ammunition and weapons. Do you think you can do it?" I said yes, I would do it. The Ferrari brothers at the time had a butchery near the D'Alberto movie theatre. Two brothers were in the mountains with the partisans of the Don Pasquino detachment, another one was with the fascists, so I asked them what they'd do to this brother once the war was over. They replied: "Come on, he's with the fascists because we sent him. He was a fascist and they were glad to take him, so now he sends out some weapons for us. When we tell you where to go, you just go there and he'll hand you some stuff". At the time the meeting point was this hotel behind the Riunite pharmacy, now I think it's called "Reggio". I would go there, go inside and wait for him. He'd arrive, hand me a small package, we'd say goodbye and leave. Generally he'd bring handguns. If there were only two handguns, I'd carry them alone: I had a big breast and they would fit perfectly right in the middle... Then I'd strap them to my waist real tight and by bicycle I would get to Cerresola, to Currada, where I met Marco (Sergio Beretti's battle name), handing over the stuff to him and coming back. Sometimes I brought ammunition, other times salt, etc. One day Maria Montanari's cousin, who worked at the Reggiane plant, had managed to bring out an airplane radio-transmitter. It was this big and this tall, and it was at my house. It wasn't a normal radio-transmitter, like the ones we have now. I don't know the name, but it had a button you had to press, and during the war it was the one the armies had. So we had to bring it to the mountains. How could we manage to do it? Maria and I agreed on the following plan. I'd go to the mountains by train: I'd go get the Reggio-Ciano train at the station, put my bicycle on the coach and get on. Maria was supposed to arrive, look at where I was sitting, and come inside. We'd pretend we didn't know each other. Then she would put the package in front of me, at the end of the compartment, and leave. We knew that they often checked the suitcases, and figured that if they found the package, nobody could have told whose it was. Everything went alright until San Polo, where the train was surrounded and the fascist police started searching. They looked all over the place, under the seats, inside the packages and suitcases, everywhere. But they didn't notice my package, as it was covered with some newspapers. When I arrived in Ciano I left the bicycle at the station and followed the Enza river uphill, then I asked them to come pick up this damned radio, because it was almost a 5 km walk from Ciano to Cerresola, and it wasn't a very nice journey with that thing. I had no chance of getting through the police blocks, so I solved the problem that way.

CLIP 6

They came around a week after they had arrested them, we were still in August. I was questioned for a whole day. In the morning I was interrogated by the chief of OPI and by one of the commissioners, I think it was Dr. Cocconi. He was the cousin of the second-in-command of the Central headquarters of the partisans who were operating in the mountains. I was questioned very harshly, they were accusing me and I was denying, claiming that I had gone there only to get some eggs, that a man had asked me for my ID card and I didn't even know who he was. This went on for two or three hours, on

and on, question and answer. Then they said they were going to put me face to face with the man who had taken my ID card. They brought this man inside, he was in plain clothes but all dressed up, wearing a tie. I knew that partisans were tortured, and since he hadn't been tortured... So he began to tell what I had done, saying that my brother was a partisan and I had gone there to pick up a gun. At that point I just lost the light of reason, and that was my luck, since I reacted in a very aggressive way: "You're a scoundrel; I went to pick up a gun? When I got there you asked me for my ID card, you took note of my name and my ID card number, and as you saw I lived in Reggio, you said you knew my brother..." I had to say this, since my brother had already gone to the mountains, it could have saved me. "You said you knew my brother, you told me I had to bring a gun to him, but how could I say no to you? You had a gun; I only had a basket of eggs in my hand". I was really very mean. So he said I was right, and basically took back what he had stated. They asked me to sign the minutes, and I couldn't tell you what they wrote on it. My cousin and I signed. Then they told us we could go home, but that they wanted to speak to us again the following morning. So I said: "Listen, I'm afraid to stay at home. Every night I go to San Bartolomeo to my cousin's, she's the local fascist secretary, can I go there?" And my cousin, the one who was with me, said the same: "I usually go with her, or to my mother's, would you let us go there?" They told us we could. I got home and Mafaldo Chiessi, who was also an antifascist and who was in charge of communications between Reggio and Milan, told me: "Are you kidding me? You can't stay here, tomorrow morning they'll torture you. Today was only the beginning, but things will be different tomorrow, trust me. Don't think that they won't come to get you, after what happened – I had explained the whole thing to him – you must run away". My poor father at a certain point was saying: "Good God, I have four children, but I have to admit I don't know them, I had never thought that you were..." That's because we had been working in absolute secrecy: even my boyfriend didn't know what I was doing, and his mother or his brother-in-law never told him. Secrecy was vital in order to survive; there was no other value but this. Then my father went on: "So now you'll leave, too. I have a son who's been away for a year now, and I don't know where he is and if he's alive. As for the other one, I have had no news for the last three months: he came home for a while but I don't know where he is now", since there was no communication with the families from the mountains to the valley. "Now you're going away, too, and I'll stay home with your sister, a ten year old girl, but I think that you made the right choice. At least you'll have a chance to save yourself, to defend yourself, unlike us who will end up like mice trapped at home. Just remember that your father thinks a lot of you". That was what my father told me.

CLIP 7

After a while we were walking, a partisan patrol came towards us. They were from the Rosselli detachment, as Rosselli was already one of the local partisans. They came towards us and then we reached the detachment. As I got there, the commander started talking to us. He wanted to know why we went to the mountains, so we explained to him what had happened. And the situation revolved again, a different reality hit us. We didn't only have to learn to fight, as the commander told us: "From this moment you're not men or women anymore, you're partisans. You'll do what the others do, share things with us and sleep in the same rooms, share our meals and all the tasks we must carry out, like patrolling the area. Slowly you'll learn. In the meanwhile you should learn to handle weapons, know how to care for them, load them, and how to use them. You'll mount guard and take part in the patrols, and little by little you'll become combatants. However, here you have the same rights and obligations as everyone else: nobody should put you into trouble and you should behave so that nobody else ends up in trouble because of you". At night, at first they had given us a room which was full of bedbugs, and we had to run out of it as we couldn't sleep because of the bites. So the first night I slept with them I was between De Pietri, a partisan from Reggio I remained a friend with even after the war, and a young Sardinian carabinieri who had refused to follow the Germans' orders and took off with the partisans. We chatted all night long. They asked me about things in the city and I asked them how we should have behaved, etc. And I really became aware of the differences. At home, there was no way you could sleep next to a man!

Women were really vital to the partisans: they could go where men could not. Men had failed to report for military service, so everywhere they went, even if they were young, they were taken, searched and sent out to concentration camps at the least. As women, we did not have to be in the army or with the

fascists, and we could move in a way they weren't allowed to. We took care of things like printed materials, propaganda, weapons. And when a GAP or SAP unit had to move in the lowlands, for example if the Rosselli detachment, based in Cavandola, close to Canossa, had to go to Quattro Castella, or carry out an action on the Emilia road, it was a woman partisan who would lead the way for the group. We were called dispatch riders, but we would be leading the way in order to see what was ahead and then go back to report that the way was clear. This was really important. Otherwise we took care of carrying weapons around, etc.

CLIP 8

As a partisan I chose the battle name Laila. Although I was working in Reggio, I would be Anita for my friends, but I was only known as Laila with the partisans, at times with people I didn't know or whom I met for the first time. That was my battle name. The names we were given increased our chances of survival. If one was arrested and talked under torture, he would have been handing out the name he knew, but that wasn't your real name. Many saved themselves this way.

I had chosen the battle name Laila because I read a lot, and had found out about this princess in a book on the Aztecs. Her husband was an Aztec prince, the commander of a unit that was fighting the Spanish invaders, and as he was killed in battle she took his place. Laila was the first name of a woman fighter, so I thought it would be the right thing for me to choose that name. She was a combatant, and I chose a name that would reflect what I was doing.

CLIP 9

There were more and more women in the mountains by then, because some had been arrested and tortured. When they were in danger they took off and went to the mountains to the partisans. So the public opinion would start talking about what women would be doing there, ill-minded, and I had to clash with this idea too. I had been on the Barazzone with the detachment for a month when they told me to go to Cerresola, as my boyfriend Nanzio Corrada was waiting for me. He had left and was back. I went to meet him and as soon as I saw his face I understood that a real storm was brewing here. He told me right away that I had to leave with him. So I asked him why, since I had run away in order not to be executed. Did he think it was right for me to go back home? It wasn't right! So he continued, "We'll get married, then you'll come to Varese with me and nobody will look for you". "So you think that if we get married, hand out the information they need, they'd let me go to Varese? Would you be happier if I'm tortured? You're really joking". Then I added, "I took this decision, why should I leave now?" To which he replied: "If you stay here, you're not worthy of raising my children". That was really it, I couldn't take it anymore. In the past we had already argued over the role of the woman in the family. I couldn't tolerate being considered a nobody; I couldn't stand the fact that a man would marry me only to have a maid and someone who would give birth to his children, and that he would then be the one in charge, taking all the decisions. I couldn't stand this and therefore it was often a matter of discussion, even with my father, although he was a very democratic and open-minded person who understood certain issues. My boyfriend didn't, he just said that it was up to the man to decide. I told him: "Giving birth to a child for a man is just a matter of seconds. I share my life with him for nine months: he lives in me, I'm the one who feeds him, who looks after him and gives him a chance to live. And you pretend to tell me that I have no decisional power, that I can't say how he should grow up? Are you kidding me?" His reply was simply that it's up to the man to take decisions at home. So I told him he could go home and be the man of the house there, while I'd go back to the mountains, because that was the choice I had made. It wasn't an easy decision, after so many years of engagement. Staying with him was what I had envisioned for my future, and now I had to put an end to it. I also had to take into account that I might have no other chance to get married: after such a long engagement one was considered a widow, and it would have been difficult to find a young man willing to marry me. Although it wasn't easy. But I didn't feel like starting a family with a man who upheld such principles.

CLIP 10

As I recovered, they ordered me to go to the brigade command, where I was told that they would be grouping together all the women in a special unit called "information office". This unit would have to take care of communications within the brigade, with the other units and the outside, and also undertake surveillance, seek information, etc. So I went to Vetto and waited for the other women partisans to arrive.

The commissioner came to me and asked me: "Laila, would you be willing to take charge of the group? You'll be the one in charge for all the dispatch riders who are part of this unit". I accepted and we started to work. The problem was there was so much work to do that often we didn't even manage to get any sleep, as we weren't only taking care of communications, but we also led the way when units had a job to do. For example, when they blew up the Cerresola Bridge, which is three or four kilometres from Ciano, they asked me to lead the way for the unit: there were three units from three detachments, led by Gianni, the officer I knew, who told me to go ahead. Now, when I was moving around I was always armed. At night I carried a big gun, which could have easily killed somebody. If I was going in dangerous areas I'd carry a smaller gun, a Beretta six-something (I can't remember the exact caliber now), as it was very easy to hide. As he saw the gun, Gianni told me: "Laila, what's that for!" So I told him we should agree on a plan: "I'll go ahead and come back. If I don't feel like walking back all the way I'll whistle: that means the way is clear. If by any chance I see an enemy unit, though, and I can't make it back or alert you about the danger (I could have been stopped), I don't care if I have to shoot myself in the stomach (as I kept the gun around my waist), but I'll shoot. They won't see it the way I'm carrying it. At least I can warn you to be careful by firing a shot, that's the only reason I'm carrying the gun". He asked me if I was crazy, and I replied I wasn't: "Don't you realize I'm responsible for three units?" The reason I'm telling you this is to show how reliable we were in our duties, how responsible we felt. And I wasn't the only one: all the women who were taking care of these duties were also ready to face danger.

So we went on working like this. At a certain point there were even around thirty of us. Then they split us into two groups: one group took care of political campaigning with the population in order to have their support, while we went on doing our usual tasks. Then on the 25th of April I was at the brigade headquarters and I was told to get my unit ready to go back. We had all been waiting impatiently for that moment. I had been in the mountains for nine months, away from my family. I had taught a woman who worked in a restaurant in Vetto the way to my house, so once a week, when she went to Reggio to buy supplies, she'd bring me news about my family and give them mine. At that point I was at the end of my strength anyway. It was because of the way we lived, the shortage of food, the lack of vitamins in our diets. My legs hurt so much that before I went somewhere I had to warm up like horses do before they run. I also had a bad inflammation of the gums, they started dropping: since we didn't have anything else the doctor taught us to put a few milligrams of verdigris in the water and rinse our mouth with that to disinfect. After a while a medical student joined us, and he gave some vitamin injections to a few of us: I couldn't be given these shots at that time, but the poor girls who did were crying desperately because of the pain (he had to give the shots on their backs). That was the way we were living, and we were really looking forward to go back home. When they gave me the news I was in Gottano. I sat on a rock just outside town and I could see the mountains and woods all around. I recalled all my memories of the partisan struggle and I was suddenly hit by sadness. I wasn't sad because I was leaving that place, but because I had seen too many of my comrades die.

CLIP 11

I went back home, and I knew I would find the same situation I had left behind. In the mountains I had become another person: I was respected and highly esteemed, not only because of my stripes, but because of the way I took care of difficult operations. I didn't want to go back home having to ask what I could do, constantly having to listen to what my father or my brother said. That's why as soon as I got home I told my father I didn't want to work at home anymore: I wanted to shape my own life, find a job where I could do my best and become self-sufficient. At home I felt repressed. My father agreed, so I started working, setting up women sections and the feminist movement. Then I studied in a party school and I was sent to take care of trade-unions. That's when I started to get involved in the movement for the protection of women's rights.

By then I had decided I would work for all those who had died, in order to accomplish what they had hoped for. Their dreams were also mine. We wanted a few simple things: a job, a chance to support our families properly, the right to send our children to school, to live in a democratic society where we could express our ideas and discuss them with others, maintain our individual values and at the same time defend the rights of the community. That's why as soon as I started working for the party I set up women sections, even if I wasn't particularly skilled. Women were all coming from the same background I came from, so we had to discuss together about our own issues, learn to vote, identify our problems and develop our demands. If we were to discuss together with men, women would not speak out. Having a women-only group allowed us to develop those issues and build up our claims. Also, after the war there was dramatic poverty all around. The children were on the street, so the first thing I recommended was to set up a nursery school. We had one, but it was too small for all the children. In Bainsizza street, where there was all the working-class housing, there was a multitude of kids who spent the whole day on the streets waiting for their mother to come back from work, and ate only at breakfast and dinner, hardly at lunch, since their families didn't have enough money for another meal. We wanted to set up the day-care centre, group together the kids who didn't go to school and get them off the streets. We wanted to talk to them, grant them some security and possibly feed them, too. The Communist Party offered us one of their offices, a small apartment in the working-class housing area, so we started discussing on how to set up the nursery. The campaign for nurseries was the first major issue together with the right to vote for women and equal payment ecc.

CLIP 12

I care about these stories. Not so much for myself, rather for the benefit they convey to those who listen and want to think about them. It was real life. And you see that I'm not exaggerating things, even those episodes that are quite sensational. I'd rather focus on reflecting on them. It's all about the 20th century, about the way we lived through it.

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