

## **CARLO PORTA (ITALY)**

### **CLIP 1**

I was born in Gavasseto. I had three sisters, my mother and father were socialists. They worked for the Socialist Party and took part in its activities. Therefore, I was an antifascist since I was a kid, and I remember neatly the day when, in 1923 – I think I was five then – the consumer cooperative of Gavasseto was burned down. My mother and father had always been working to set up the cooperative. Then, that night, I remember that people came over to wake them up, shouting that “the coop was on fire”: that’s a moment I will never forget.

From that day, I’ve never been a member of the Fascist Party. There were also other reasons which kept me from taking up membership, such as the fact that the Fascist youth had to take part in military activities and all kinds of classes every Saturday, an environment which I did not want to be involved in.

I went to live in Villa Rivalta and I wasn’t even seventeen when I started working at Officine Reggiane. Even there, every day was a struggle. It was unpleasant to have to show a Fascist membership card for everything, and that’s another aspect which had me disagreeing with the fascists.

Anything you did, or whatever you might have needed, you were always expected to have your Fascist membership card with you. I did not believe in this and didn’t want the card, so I was forced to use alternative methods, those I had learned from my family, my parents and my two older sisters.

(...) During the first three months of school we did writing exercises and we learned to count up to fifty. Our teachers were not like the ones you might find today. I remember that my teacher was from Casalgrande and walked all the way to school and back, poor woman.

Going to school was not considered too important. Just take my case: as soon as I finished primary third grade, after I had failed second grade, I stopped attending school. It’s not like someone stopped me from going, it’s just that it was enough to learn the basics of reading and writing. Later, in the army, I used to write letters for a fellow soldier from Guastalla and two more who were from the mountains. They were my age but didn’t know how to write: I was not better than them, but I had gone to school until third grade and that was good enough.

### **CLIP 2**

There weren’t any real dangers, since they rather controlled those who were older than me. Even inside the Reggiane plant I was always an antifascist, just like many others who were less fortunate than I was. At Reggiane we used to manufacture airplanes. Colleagues like Ganassi, Bagnacani or Catellani were all sent to jail after being caught putting sand in the engine cylinders. But they were all thirty or so, were already married and often had children, and that’s the kind of people they hit harder on. They didn’t really insist with us, we were left somehow ignored. My boss always used to say that “when the soldiers would come back, they would have to become members of the Party if they wanted to work in the factory”.

(...) They were my teachers, they taught me how to take care of things. At the time we were collecting money for the so-called Red Relief, and I was the one in charge for Rivalta: we collected money and gave it to the Party. Those who were facing the worst situation were indeed those who had been combatants in Spain, but some of our comrades from Rivalta, like Fontanesi, had also been imprisoned, so the Party tried to help their families as much as possible. On Sundays we used to set up stalls in the square to sell things, or we organized lotteries: on one occasion, the first prize was a hen that a farmer had given to us to collect some of the money that was needed.

### **CLIP 3**

There was one rule back then. At Reggiane we manufactured airplanes – you can still see one of the airplanes we made, it’s at the Reggio Emilia airport – so the young workers of Reggiane who were called into the Army were entitled to serve in the Air Force, while those who worked at Lombardini Motori, manufacturing ship engines, usually served in the Navy. I was called up for military service, went to Bologna and then to Orvieto, where I completed the recruit training. After that, we were transferred to different places. I was sent to an airport near Rome, in a small village called Furbara. Our units were sent to mount guard in Rome, so we went to Palazzo Venezia. Throughout the week, every night a different unit was in charge of this: one night it was the Air Force, one night the artillerymen, and so on.

So we went to mount guard, and I remember that a new lieutenant came to pick us up with a van at eight in the morning, and told us we would be visiting Rome for a while since he had never been there before.

(...) I went back inside the airport. The mail had arrived and there were also some letters for me. I went to my sleeping quarter and was opening a letter when my lieutenant, a man from Ancona whose name was Santaroni, came over. He was a good man – he gave me a hug because of what was about to happen – who had come to tell me that “somebody needed to speak to me”. It was three policemen.

The first thing the sergeant did was take the letter I held in my hands. In the letter, my mother had written the

following words: "You're lucky to be in the Army, since in the past few days Pattaccini, Boiardi and others were arrested". They were all people I used to be implicated with in our activities, and my poor mother was telling me this openly because I was in Rome. But that's exactly where I was arrested.

I never managed to get that letter back. Wherever I was taken, the letter seemed to follow me. You see, we all used to deny knowing someone, but I couldn't, since the names were written on the letter.

(...) Then, one morning, we left from the train station. I had already been reduced to the ranks: they had taken everything from me and that day I was slightly shabby and hadn't shaved.

As we set off, those who were on the railcar with us were curious. On other occasions, such as the day I was interned, when there were eighteen of us, we had a whole railcar for ourselves, so there was no one else.

This time, however, the railcar was full, so people began to ask me what I had done, and I did what I could to have them do so. I became the star of the railcar, everybody handed me something, cigarettes and so on, and the Carabinieri didn't know what to say. Their problem was that they didn't have a place to hide me in, so they couldn't do anything if someone offered me a cigarette. Once we arrived in Florence, however, the Carabinieri decided to get off and change train. Later I understood that they did this to prevent me from talking to the people that were on the first train. The other one – from Bologna to Reggio Emilia – was a lot less crowded.

(...) When we arrived in Reggio Emilia I was immediately taken to the Police Station. There, I was confronted with a lot of stories, and I still had to deal with the issue of the letter. I would have never told anything to the authorities, but Pagliarello had my letter in his hands while he questioned me, and I did not know what to say. At a certain point, although I was handcuffed, I managed to see out of the corner of my eye that he was about to hit me from behind, so I protected myself: he ended up hitting the handcuffs, got angry and smacked me a couple of times.

We were all waiting in line. There were people like the guy who told on me, a baker whose name was Montermini. He was sentenced to fifteen years by the special court, and served quite a few of them. We were the last ones, and our sentences were lighter: as for myself, I was sentenced to four years of confinement. Nobody defended you, it was only up to you to stand up for yourself. In any case, when you got into the movement you were aware that there would not be much you could do: we all knew that if we got caught we would end up doing a couple of years. It came to no surprise.

(...) I spent two months in the San Tommaso prison, in Reggio Emilia, before they were forced to transfer us to make room for new inmates. We were 18 or 19, all fettered to the same chain. Our families had been told we would be at the station, so once we got there they had come to see us, and some of them were crying: we had to pretend everything was ok and force a smile in order to make it easier for them.

(...) When we arrived in Castelfranco, the warden came over and asked the sergeant, who was in charge of the guards, where they were supposed to put us, since the prison was also full. He asked where we came from, and when he was told we were from Reggio Emilia, he said: "If it was for me, I would just dump them in a cesspit". Very funny, isn't it? Although we had not done anything to be punished, they ended up putting us in confinement cells. The prison was full, but they had these special cells where they could fit one or two of us, and that's where they put us. There was only a small opening in the door, and a tiny window for some fresh air, so you never heard or saw anyone aside from the guard who came by to check on us every now and then. I spent more or less twenty days in Castelfranco.

#### **CLIP 4**

We were taken to a farming penal colony, called "Colonia Confinati di Pisticci", near Matera. It was a farming colony, so once we got there we began to work. If you want I can quickly tell you this story. The issue with this colony was that it was opened when they had to close down the island of Ponza. You see, in Ponza there were people like Terracini, Volponi, Cuccimarro and other guys of this kind, who were lawyers. As a consequence, everyone who was there, even the smallest farmer, would be schooled by the time he left the colony: they all studied!

Terracini was there, for example, and when it was time to eat – there were large tables for eight – he took that time to explain things to the others.

It was mostly for this reason that they decided to close down the island of Ponza. Some were sent to Ventotene, others were transferred to Pisticci with us, such as Bigi, the Member of Parliament, or Bonini. By the time I left the colony, there were almost three thousand people confined in Pisticci: not only political prisoners, but a bit of everything, including spies.

For three years I drove a tractor.

(...) We arrived at the offices of the colony, where we were divided in three sheds, since we were seventeen or eighteen. As I walked in, others were already inside. I started to explain to them how we were lucky that the number of socialist countries was growing, thanks to the Soviet Union – they had just occupied Sweden, Norway and Lithuania at that time – and how great the Russians were. Come morning, a tiny man called me over and asked me where I was from. I told him I was from Reggio Emilia, so he told me: "Are you really sure

about the things you were saying last night?”. I thought he was crazy. He was a professor from Milan, whose name was Lonato. We were in great terms after that. With us, there were also prisoners from Parma. I'm not saying I liked it there, because it was always confinement. However I was younger than the others, and I understood that this was an advantage. I was with a man called Bonini, from Villa Seta, who was around forty-five years old and had a wife at home, renting a small farm and taking care of the kids: that was a lot harder, but he always managed to take care of things rather easily.

(...) Then I finally came home from confinement. I had been given some documents which I was supposed to bring to the police headquarters. When I went there, I knocked on the door (we already knew how it worked) and the person inside asked me who I was. As I replied “Porta”, he told me to go out. I knocked again, and he sent me out again, for three times. Finally, he told me: “Don't you know that when you come here you must give the Roman salute?”. I replied that I had just come back from almost four years of confinement for a lot less, and that I would rather be sent back there than have to obey to him. He eventually told me to go home, but it gives you an idea of the things we had to bear.

## CLIP 5

When I got back home I went to work there, but within three months I was called up for the Army again, since I was in the military when I was arrested. I did my training for a second time, in Bari, and then I was sent to Albania. I did not want to go, so I went to speak to my lieutenant colonel. I explained to him how I knew that I was not entitled to use a weapon anymore, since I had lost all my rights by being arrested. He replied that he went to fight in Albania with the Blackshirts although he was in the Army, and that if he had to go, then I would definitely go too.

After I had been in Albania, in Durres, for four or five months, I received a letter from the Government stating that I immediately had to go back to Italy, since I was not supposed to be there. I was taken to the port and embarked on a ship whose name I will never forget – Disentine. We stayed there three days without setting sail, apparently because there were British u-boats.

Then one evening, from the ship, we saw that there were great celebrations in Durres, people hugging all around, and we decided to get off. It was the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, Badoglio had just declared the armistice. There were also fifty German soldiers in Durres: they took off their uniforms and celebrated with us, and got dressed as Germans again only eight days later.

From that day, nobody was able to correspond with Rome. Even those in charge of the different services or of the orderly room could not speak to anyone in Rome: nobody would answer. Maybe it was better this way. One day, our officers in charge, such as General Mondini, from Parma, who was the Commanding General of my division and of the Reggio, pulled the troops together and deliberately lied to us. I think they knew from the very start that what they were telling us was a lie, but they told us that they had reached an agreement with the Germans: they would take us to Trieste, where we would all be able to go our own way. I was quite skeptical, but we all got on the train. There were forty-two of us on each railcar.

(...) Just as I thought, when we reached the border the Germans locked the railcars, allegedly because of the Partisans. Come morning, I had a small booklet with a map and it turned out we were in Austria. I told the others that it didn't look good at all. I ended up in Neubrandenburg, 200 km to the north of Berlin. I was grateful that three or four years ago I was able to visit the camp I was imprisoned in sixty years before. We stayed there for a while, under constant air raids. The Germans who were in charge of the camp stayed in the first two shacks, then there were two shacks of female prisoners – Russian women who worked on the railroad tracks with smaller shovels – then the French, and finally us. I don't know how many thousands prisoners were in the camp.

I should not forget to say that, at that point, I was still accompanied by two non-commissioned officers who had kept my documents since the day we had embarked to leave Albania. One of them was from Cosenza, the other from Catanzaro, and I think they were supposed to go back to Italy on special leave. When everything changed I was slightly worried: the two were beginning to need something to drink, and I was aware of how the Germans were not particularly fond of communists.

One night, the Germans needed thirty people and came over to our shack. The two officers had been entitled to bunk beds, so they were sleeping in a corner of the shack. We slept on straw on the floor, and I managed to get into the group that was leaving. I never knew anything about them afterwards, and maybe I shouldn't have done this, but I was afraid they would hand my documents to a guard. The guards were brutal there. They used to come inside in the morning, screaming the word “Aufstehn”, the meaning of which I learned quickly. At first, we wondered what we were supposed to do – maybe get some coffee! – then four or five of them came inside and started acting rough. We immediately understood that we had to get up, even if we couldn't understand the word.

They were really mean there, so I left and went to this other camp, by a large river that had just been bombed, where we started to work. I lost all contact with the two officers afterwards, since that place was basically a marshalling camp, where 100-200 prisoners arrived by train every day.

(...) I've been in four different German internment camps. The last one I was in, where we were finally set free, was called Wickede and was in Westfalia, near Dortmund.

(...) Normally people used to go to sleep immediately. The camp I've been in for the longest period was in Hagen, again in Westfalia, near Dortmund, which was a very big city. In Wickede, I had to get up at 5 in the morning, walk 2 km to the station, travel by train for 70 km, then walk to the job I had, and sometimes I would end up getting back at nine in the evening. There were also nasty episodes, although not too often. They might come to check on us at, say, 10:30 at night, so we would have to gather in the hallway. One of us was sleeping in the corner, another one was ill, and they would send us all outside to do some exercise. We wore wooden shoes that could easily be lost while walking down the three steps that led to each shack. Then they would have us walk in circles for hours, sometimes under the rain. Episodes of this kind were not too frequent, but definitely happened.

(...) I was arrested, or, I should rather say, we were loaded on their trains on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, and made it home only two years later, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September. We were near the Ruhr area, where most armament factories were located, including the tank factories that the Americans used to attack with special bombs, in order to breach them. We were bombarded every night, so I didn't even think of running away, because it would have meant running under these same bombs. That's what we went through.

### **CLIP 6**

All they gave us to eat was one of those tall loaves of dark bread. It was a large loaf, but you had to split it in five pieces, so all you were left with was one slice. That's all you got until evening. Then at night we were given some slop, but no more bread.

That piece of bread was like gold for me: I used to eat it bit by bit, in order to savor it. We were terribly hungry and in the winter, when we went to work in Hagen, it was freezing: we spent the whole day close to a river and the air was unbearable.

At lunch they gave us some slop. That's where I've learned about margarine, chard, turnip, and this kind of stuff, all minced, cooked and seasoned with some of this margarine. Those who came last ended up eating it cold, and it was often my case, since I did not like to cram up with all the others.

When we were allowed to break ranks, the Germans used to enjoy watching us cram in line and get into disputes. Forage caps would typically be falling in the soup, something that would drive people out of their minds.

My Corporal, whose name was Mario Palazzeschi, from Arezzo, was incredibly healthy, a lot healthier than me. One day, however, he began to cry, sobbing "Carlo, I won't make it, I won't make it...". I told him everything would have been alright, but within three months he was dead.

You know what I've always said? That Mr. Benito Mussolini and Mr. Hitler were lucky to die before me: imagine what they would say if they were to find out that I'm still here, more than eighty years old now! I say this only to laugh a bit.

### **CLIP 7**

When we arrived there, the French asked us: "Since you come from the outside, what do people say? How long will the war last?". We always thought we knew everything, and we told them it would only last one or two more months, but they replied it would go on for another two years. They were right, the war went on for two more years.

There were women who had to work on the railroad with shovels and pickaxes. Sometimes they were even pregnant, and trust me, that's hard work. They didn't do a headcount at night, to see who was back and who wasn't, they didn't care if ten of us had died during the day. Similarly, they did not expect us to work too hard, but we had to be at work every day.

(...) In my camp, after we woke up at five, we were supposed to get up and leave with the others, but after that there was no control on what we did during the day. And in any case, there was nowhere we could go. You were simply expected to be at work, even if you didn't do anything all day.

It was very cold where we were. There were Russian women, as well as some men.

### **CLIP 8**

Some of the interpreters, even those who were Italian, kept telling us there was a chance that Mussolini and Hitler decided that there had to be no Italian prisoners in this country. We're talking about the famous IMIs (Internati Militari Italiani), Italian interned soldiers who were supposed to wear this acronym on the uniform. Four or five of us, including two Sardinian sergeants of the Italian financial police (the "Guardia di Finanza"), managed to convince all the others not to sign. We were 550 in my camp. They would tell us: "We'll send you back home and once you get to Italy there's the Monte Rosa division waiting for you". We could only imagine

what the Monte Rosa was, but this is what we would tell them: "Let's not sign anything. On the Russian front we're too weak, we're outnumbered, and that's exactly where we'll end up!".

So nobody signed. The "Lagerfuhrer", the boss of all bosses, was so furious one day that we were sanctioned to – I will tell you this in German – "Diese Leute morgen früh kein Brot": no bread for three days.

#### **CLIP 9**

At that point I was determined to come back home, I could not stand ending up like that anymore. I ate just as bad as the others, although my doctor tells me today that those two years in Germany were good for my health and helped me to stay alive. I didn't do much, but I was never scared of not being able to make it home one day. Only during the last three months did I let go: I could not remember my family anymore, it was as if that notion had vanished, and it's something I could not understand back then. I was exhausted, the food was terrible for all of us, but I did my best to survive even in those conditions.

(...) Regarding my weight, you hear people say they were thirty-eight or forty kilos, but I never did weigh myself. I might have weighed around fifty or fifty-five. I know I was skinny, but I just had to live with that. I saw some die in anguish, crying: many had a wife and kids, and those were different kinds of problems.

(...) Then the Americans arrived at my camp. They left some guards, but we were free to go wherever we wanted. Two of us were butchers – one of them was from Ravenna, his name was Belloni. They began to find calves, then slaughtered them and put the meat in those beer barrels that you can find in Germany. I'm not joking! We had fresh meat after 15 or 20 days, and every night they would go out to find something, so we were finally ok concerning food.

#### **CLIP 10**

I came home by train. We left one morning and arrived at Lake Constance, in Switzerland. As we got there, the train stopped working, so we had to wait two days before we found another one. It took us one and a half days to reach Como, because everything had been destroyed and there was only one railroad track working. Since there was no way to get to Milan, we had to spend two more days in Como. When we finally reached Milan we were told that the line headed to Emilia Romagna had left already. They were using old trucks, whatever was left, because the railroad bridge in Piacenza had been bombed. We stayed there two days, before someone suggested we should get on a train to Padova and then to Ponte Lagoscuro, since trains were able to pass the Po river there. That's what we did: we went to Padova, then to Ferrara, and finally made it to Bologna. In Bologna we were supposed to stay in a barrack for two days, but I went out with two or three comrades and we managed to find a SARSA bus. We asked the driver if he was heading towards Reggio and if we could hop up, and he happily consented. In Castelfranco, however, the ticket inspector kindly told us that we would have had to pay the ticket fare. We replied that we had no money at all, so he agreed not to make us get off, but once in Reggio (buses stopped in front of the Ariosto theatre, as they probably still do today) we would have had to go to the SARSA offices together. When we got in he said: "Boss, these men haven't paid the bus fare because they claim they're coming from Germany". The reply was: "You really are a moron, I told you they have every right to go back to their homes!". He really got scolded. At that point we started walking with two others from Correggio.

(...) We knew nothing at all, I had no news of my family, so we inquired with the director of SARSA.

We walked home, something that was still quite common back then. When I reached the point where today you find the ACM, I was tired and stopped to rest for a while. A woman came by on her bicycle, and asked me if I was the son of Mr. Porta. I told her I was, and she said: "You're late!". "Well, I have just got here". She offered to go tell my parents to come greet me, but before she left I asked her what the situation was, since she knew my family. "Everyone is alive", she said, "and your brother has just come back from Switzerland". Then she ran to my parents' home to give them the good news. I will never forget my mother running towards me in tears. She could not take it anymore, just like me, and that's the first time I cried. I usually shed tears every time I tell this story, so today I'm lucky: this morning I managed not to cry.

And that's the end of the story. I got back in touch with my old contacts and began looking for a job. I received many offers that I didn't accept, then I just went on with my new job, at Giglio, Latterie Cooperative Riunite (the United Dairy Cooperative). I've worked there for thirty-six years.

#### **CLIP 11**

ANPPIA is an association set up in 1948 in Reggio Emilia which still holds documents concerning more than two thousand antifascists. It's a mission we're really proud to carry out. ANNPIA is the National Association of Persecuted Italian Political Antifascists, and, whenever we can, we work to tell everyone about our stories.

[www.resistance-archive.org](http://www.resistance-archive.org)