

FERNANDO CAVAZZINI (Italy)

CLIP 1

My name is Fernando Cavazzini, partisan Toni. I was born in Reggio Emilia, in the hamlet of Villa Cella, on the 23rd of September 1923. My father was a cobbler, just like his father. We are a family of cobblers. My mother was a housewife and at times a day-labourer. Then I had an older brother, who was born in 1915. He was also a cobbler. My sister Margherita worked as a day-labourer or in the rice-fields, and another sister was a dress-maker.

My father was an antifascist, although he wasn't really organized in the antifascist movement. Let's just say that nobody in my family was a fascist, but they weren't organized, apart from me, since I was in "Azione Cattolica" (Catholic Action). When I was twelve and I finished elementary school, don Luca Pallai, who was Villa Cella's parish priest and later also joined the Resistance, kept pressing my parents to send me to study to become a priest. He insisted quite a few times. I believed in God and lived by the church, just a hundred meters away. I was the only one of our family who went to church. Then when I was 13-14 years old I was a "delegate aspirant".

I finished elementary school and that was it. I went to work when I was twelve. However, when I was just a little older than 14, my father and the bailiff had a small dispute, so I got fired and was left unemployed. I went to the employment agency in order to get a job at the Reggiane mechanical plant, but they kept telling me to come back the following month because there was no need there at the time. So every morning, for the following forty days, I turned up at the employment agency before they opened. I guess I wore them out, because one morning they finally told me to come inside and that they were going to let me work at the Reggiane. The Reggiane mechanical plant at the time was the most important weapon factory in the whole region.

Quite frankly, I was a catholic and went to church. For me it was all about this, work and church, and I've never been interested in politics. Even at the time of the laws against the Jews I didn't follow the issue much. I was a very passionate worker, so much that I was even doing research in order to increase production.

CLIP 2

Fascist propaganda was telling us that the communists in Spain had raped and stabbed to death some nuns and other things like this, so I really didn't like communism much when people talked about it. Then what happened? It was 1943, the war was starting, people were talking about our retreats in Russia and in Northern Africa, the bombings, etc. In spring, strikes began at the Reggiane plant, but not in my department, or in the tooling department, where some of my friends were actually arrested. From then on I started to think, I did some soul-searching: what was I really doing? I was there working day and night to boost production for the war, while war killed people. I was shocked. From that moment on I tried to get in contact with the antifascists, but it was impossible. It was already the summer of '43 when I went to Sassuolo to visit a friend who was ill and whom I knew as an antifascist, hoping he could help me out in order to become part of the movement. He told me he couldn't, since he was indeed an antifascist but he wasn't organized. Then there was another comrade in my department who I was friend with, his name was Armando Grassi from Gattaglio, so I told him I wanted to be involved and I finally convinced him. He put me in touch with a guy called Corradini, whose name I actually found out only after the war, just like the fact that he was from Cavazzoli. From then on I started to become active in the underground movement.

At the beginning I didn't do much. I really started after the fall of Mussolini, on the 8th of September. After that we really began to go look for weapons. I lived 500 meters away from the rail tracks, and from that day nearly our whole Azione Cattolica group started to go there to slow the trains down before they arrived in Reggio. The soldiers who were on the train got off before the train left again, then we took them to the rectory. We dressed some in plain clothes, others as priests. I dressed as an acolyte, since I was 19 but looked younger. I took them to Rivalta, in those areas, then they could move on alone: I remember bringing all the way home in Sesso a guy called Catellani, who was working at the Reggiane, and many others.

I had an exemption from the military and went on working at the Reggiane until December, when I received another call-up card and my exemption was called off. I know the Germans immediately occupied the most relevant spots in the city, the city hall, the Zucchi barracks, the Cialdini barracks, where we have the police headquarters now, and they also plundered the city. I remember that my wife lived in Coviolo. Some Germans arrived in her courtyard with hens, rabbits, and were laughing when they arrested the soldiers who had surrendered. You have to remember that the Germans arrested and sent to Germany more than 600,000 soldiers on the 8th of September.

CLIP 3

It's quite normal that after these episodes (*the Reggiane martyrs*) I decided to become involved in the Resistance. I actually lied a little bit to my comrades, with the antifascists, since I told them I couldn't stay at home anymore and I wanted to go to the mountains. I insisted heavily, until I finally left. It was the beginning of March, we knew that there was a partisan unit in the mountains, and I wanted to go. My friend Cocchi and I were the ones in charge, Ugo Veronesi, then we gathered a few more comrades, leaving in a group of seven.

Fascism was responsible for this. It was fascism that had set up an alliance with the Germans and had wanted war by all means: the war in Spain, the war in Ethiopia, the occupation of Albania, the last war, it was them. To put it simple, we despised the fascists more than the Germans. Although the Germans were responsible for brutalities, the fascists weren't any better.

It was time to stop, to end this war. I also started feeling this, searching my conscience. I might have even seemed responsible, and somehow I was, given my job, given the fact that I was producing weapons, so I felt a little bit guilty, an accomplice in all this. That's why, together with some friends, we were trying to go to the mountains to fight the Germans and the fascists, with such a drive you couldn't even imagine.

CLIP 4

Partisans were dressed in normal clothes, wore a little bit of everything. Some had a topcoat of the army at times. They were sort of ragged, because there really wasn't any organization yet, they were the first ones. They had already fought in the area of Modena and Reggio, they had already disarmed a few garrisons, but they didn't have spare clothes stored somewhere, or supplies: they were carrying everything they had on their shoulders. But no uniforms. One might have had a pair of pants, another one an army jacket... As an example, I was wearing civilian clothes when I left for the mountains, just like I am now. I had on this black coat my sister had made for me: later I left it in a shed in Cerrè Sologno and never took it back, because it was snowing, it wasn't good for me, you could be spotted from miles away. So I left it there.

We used battle names and nothing else. The real names were collected and then taken to Carpineti, where one of our comrades kept them hidden. He had all the names of our brigade, and later also of the 26th brigade lead by Luigi. Him and his wife had been ordered not to expose themselves too much, since he was in charge of this database with all our names. For example, I was known as Toni, but he had my full name, my address, and if the Germans took control of this it would have been a disaster. They had made a cave, they had found a cave with many hollows and we hid our names there, and nobody found them. "What battle name would you like?" "Any name you want is alright for me" "Is Toni ok?" "Yes, Toni is good". And that was it. Many comrades opted for battle names like Lupo (wolf), Polvere (dust), others used their girlfriends' names. A friend of mine had a girlfriend whose name was Leda, so he chose Ledo for himself.

CLIP 5

Luigi was supposed to go with 30 men to blow up the Gatta bridge and disarm the garrison that was guarding it. The rest of the group had to go to Ligonchio and neutralize the garrison which was counting something like 20 or 25 fascists. So we left. We didn't even have dinner because we had marched for a long time in order to make it to Santonio, and we didn't stop. They lined us up with the others, and half way between Santonio and Ligonchio, in Cerrè Sologno, at seven in the morning, we couldn't move any further during the day because the German reconnaissance airplanes were flying over the area and would have spotted us. So we stopped in Cerrè to rest, planning to get moving

again in the evening and reach Ligonchio. It was seven in the morning, then at eight one of our sentinels fired a shot and the Germans were there. We were at south east, taking control of the first houses. The Germans were coming from the west, and lined up to the west and north. However, in some cases fascists, Germans and partisans were mixed up in the same house. I remember this partisan who was in a house when the door opened and in came a German with his rifle, and they were both aiming their gun at each other, until the German walked back without shooting. If he had, they both would have died, so he just walked out like that. That's only to explain how things were going. Then what happened? The battle had started 15-20 minutes before and our commander **Miro** was hurt badly, and Barbolini too, who was the commander of those from Modena. After that Eros took charge, but one of the machine guns we had, the French St.Etienne, had the wrong ammunition, and didn't fire one shot. The other one, a Breda, was working properly, but had been placed in an open spot, you know, since we had to do everything in a hurry. So after the first shot was fired, a German with a rifle and binoculars – which we found later – shot him in the middle of the head and killed him. So that machine gun was useless. We were badly equipped, while they were really highly armed, with machine guns. Around 10:30 or 11, I was in the highest position in Cerrè Sologno, right in front of the spot where today you can find the monument of our fallen, in that house which has been rebuilt after it was bombed. I was with Viktor, a Russian who had a machine gun that had been taken from a fascist by the women in Montecavolo. That was the only machine gun we had. Then there was also one of my comrades from Cella. It was four of us there, and I could overlook the whole main street of Cerrè Sologno. This young man was walking towards us with a gun, but as he realized he had 3 or 4 guns aimed at him he raised his hands and dropped his gun. We told him to come forward with the gun in his hands, then we arrested him, questioned him for some news, and took him to the command. There we saw Barbolini's sister, Sonia, who was desperate: our wounded men had already been taken there. She told us that a German unit from Cinque Cerri was on its way. If that company made it over there, it would have been a slaughtering for us: we didn't have enough cover to draw back since the mountain behind us had more than a meter of snow. If we withdrew like that they would have shot us, there was nothing we could do. It was almost noon at that point, and it wasn't clear if we were winning or losing the battle. Then the fascists started singing "Battaglione". "Battaglioni" (battalions) was a song which read: "Battalions of the Duce, death squads, created for life, in spring we'll take part in the battle of Mussolini, brave troops..." or something like that. They sang for 5 or 10 minutes. After a while our side was singing "Bandiera rossa" (red flag): "Bandiera rossa, let's go, at arms, etc." that's how the song went. I was really surprised because I didn't even know these songs, not even "Bandiera rossa". What happened next? The fascists had found out that there was a column of people coming: they thought it was Germans or fascists on their way to support them, but it was our own people. It was Luigi, who had been informed about the battle in Cerrè after he had disarmed the fascists in Gatta, and had decided to make an effort, since they were very far away, in order to sneak behind the Germans. After he arrived we took control to the north, south and east. The Germans could only make it towards the west, but at that point they disbanded: some ran away, 22 surrendered, and the battle ended at around two in the afternoon. Ten Germans had died, along with many wounded, and we had 22 prisoners who had surrendered. On our side there were seven casualties and eleven wounded. It was one of the heaviest battles during the whole Resistance.

CLIP 6

Quite frankly, I didn't feel in danger because I hadn't been in the military. I also had a lot of trust in the partisans, and found myself in that house with this Russian, who was a captain by the way, who was smoking cigarettes with ease, so I was rather serene and in no doubt that things would go well. I didn't even think I could be killed, that was the problem: I trusted the partisans and was really calm. Afterwards, by the time things had changed and I also had military functions, I would have been more prepared in assessing danger. In that case, we were in that house and that was it. We were there because it was a strategic spot and we could not give it up.

CLIP 7

We heard there was an airplane flying back and forth, so we made a triangle with three stacks of fascines. We knew that we had to do a triangle, that was the code word, and we set in on fire. The airplane was flying in a very large circle of quite a few kilometres, and then when they noticed the triangle they launched the parachute. It was a remarkable air-drop. Afterwards the comrades from Modena came to us saying they wanted the weapons. We shared the guns with them, since there were 130-140 machine guns and we were only around forty or fifty at the time, so we had more than we needed. Then, from that day, the air-drops continued.

CLIP 8

I attended a course for saboteurs. I think we were five, since the Allies were air-dropping explosives the whole time and nobody knew how to use them. Then one day they also parachuted a saboteur to teach us. Our duty was to blow up bridges, railway tracks and the like. He taught us how to handle explosives, how to make mines, how to blow up railway tracks, how to blow up a road, or a military column, this type of things. To be honest, after we practiced a bit I think we were much better than our instructor. I think they were trained recklessly; they were taught the most important things and then dropped in the partisan areas. On the other hand, we started from scratch but we were also trying to improve our military expertise. As an example, it took us one and a half hours to blow up a bridge on road 63, as it was made of stones. Afterwards we changed method and we were able to do it in fifteen minutes.

In July, when the great mop-up took place, there were just two or three of us sappers, but we were scattered around because the battle started at four in the morning, and by the evening the whole partisan area had been occupied by the Germans. We were in Carpineti and we reached Costabona, where the whole village was on fire: the Germans had set the village on fire as well as the crop and the wheat on the fields. They burned that too and it was really a depressing view. There were around thirty of us of the Bedeschi detachment, yet unhurt, and there was also one of the detachments from Modena who had been joining forces with us at the beginning. We gathered together in Costabona determined to fight the Germans, who by that time had occupied the whole area (I was looking at the map the other day). On the other hand it was difficult for us, too, to get moving during the night: "Let's stay here, we'll carry out our resistance tomorrow". We also had a mortar, but before we could do anything we had to blow up the Secchiello bridge. I went down on one side in order to be safe and then made it under the bridge, but it was already under German control. The Germans were already on the Secchiello bridge, and it was also quite a hard bridge to blow up, but I took advantage of the confusion, went under the bridge and set the mines. The bridge was made of iron, but there was a rock right before it which was as high as this floor. I lit the fuse, jumped off and it was a question of seconds. However I guess the Germans heard some noise when I lit the fuse, so they shot some rockets, some bengalas. I had jumped right away, as soon as the bengalas were shot in the air, and hid behind the rock. My comrades already knew that they would have had to shoot when the Germans fired, in order to give me a chance to draw back, and there was really a significant gunfight between us and them, while I slowly drew away, unhurt. The following morning the Germans tried to reach Costabona twice, but we pushed them back: there were trees, oak-trees, and we stood there with our machine guns, forcing them to retreat. They had machine guns, armoured cars. We had blown up the bridge so that they couldn't get through with armoured vehicles: if it was a question of energy we could have succeeded, but there was nothing we could have done against heavy artillery, as we didn't have any. So that time we blew up the bridge and carried out our Resistance. Then at night we moved and slowly reached the saw-mill over Civago, in the woods, and stayed there the whole day. We got there before dawn and stayed during the day. The following night we walked through the Passone, next to the Cusna, and made it to the area of the Cesare Battisti refuge, which had already been completely burnt down. We stayed in that area for twelve days: it was raining often and we had nothing to cover ourselves with. I had been lucky, though, since I was assigned to go to Ligonchio with another comrade to gather information on the Germans' movements, that type of things, and get some supplies to carry back up. I would head up every night with bread, cheese, anything I could find, carrying the news too. Until finally, after a few days, the Germans left and I could tell them that the area was free.

CLIP 9

From the day of the first air-drop to the end of July we increased from around fifty to more than a thousand men, and there just wasn't enough time to organize ourselves. For example they set up a detachment and position it in the same area of another group, without knowing who these partisans were. And that was a problem.

They decided to set up a unit called "Fiamme Verdi" (green flames), and went around the detachments asking for people to join them. They asked me too, since I was a catholic, but I didn't go since I liked being with the "Garibaldini". Nevertheless that day the Fiamme Verdi brigade was formed, with Don Carlo as commander and, later on, my dear friend Aldo Dall'Aglio second-in-command. He died on the Prampa on the 10th of January after the mop-up of the 7th, and he had also asked me to join them. Guess what, maybe it was a good thing I didn't go, since all those who were second-in-command or in other positions in the "Fiamme Verdi" died in battle.

CLIP 10

The problem was that the ones I was working with weren't trained. Once, when they were on guard duty there was an accidental burst of fire and they fled, leaving me alone. That's when I told myself I had to form a group of sappers under my command. So I went to put forward my idea at the headquarters of the 26th Brigade, and I told Luigi: "Listen, I want to set up a team of sappers, I can train them". We would have been under direct orders of the Brigade. The headquarters agreed, so I trained this group, and then we went on working, and we were able to take care of three or four actions at a time in a group of 12 men. At the same time we reduced the chance of not having sappers left, because unfortunately some of us were killed at times, and if I was killed there would have been nobody left. We did the course and it was successful.

CLIP 11

We were all between 15 and 28 years old. A boy called Francia wasn't even fifteen. Another one from Guastalla, who's still alive, was seventeen, the others were around 20-21 years old. Around that age anyway. There was one of us who was 28, who was married and father of a one-year old child: they arrested his wife, then they tortured her and raped her, and from this story one can understand what happened after the war. That's the problem: some felt they had to get vengeance for all the brutality of the fascists and the Germans. I've never agreed with retaliation, even on our side: once the war is over everything is over, that's it. On the other hand, we have to put ourselves in the shoes of those partisans, or even civilians, who had to bear these episodes: it's hard to caress your torturer's cheek when you meet him after the war.

Before we start talking about the post-war period we must understand what happened during the war. These brutalities affected us too, that's the problem. These slaughters and the violence were something terrible for us as well. It was hard for me too, although I was a member of Azione Cattolica, who believed in the values of forgiveness and of similar principles, and I hadn't been a victim of any retaliation.

CLIP 12

After we had blown up the bridges we were supposed to go to Reggio with our unit, to the "Buco del Signore" district, to find out what the situation was. Then at 8 the 26th Brigade would arrive to enter the city. My duty was to blow up the bridges to stop the Germans, then leave on the 24th and reach Buco del Signore. We blew up all the bridges, and at 5 in the evening I was there with my unit. I had left the mountains, a lovely family, and we were all crying for our separation... The brigade arrived at 8. At 10 we headed out and Luigi ordered me to place myself at the head of the brigade in order to monitor the situation and to proceed slowly to avoid possible mines or traps. We did enter the city very slowly and we arrived at the San Pietro gate. We crossed the ring road and there was an Allied column on the road: they were eating chewing-gum - we didn't know what that was - and you couldn't hear them walking by as they had rubber under their shoes, while we made so much noise. We went in from San Pietro and reached the centre, then we set up some outposts. I remember I went to eat with my unit and others in a restaurant in Prampolini Square, on the right heading towards the town hall, where we had... a thin soup. We were poisoned by all the cheese we had been eating. We had eaten cheese

and bread or bread and butter for months, even though I was luckier since I was always moving around, on the hills, in the lowlands. We would be eating with the families then, and that meant enjoying a totally different meal, to make it short. During the night we set up an outpost in Santo Stefano, with our headquarters at Pecorari's, a bicycle producer whom I knew. The following morning I told the others to stay there while I had to leave for a couple of hours to go to the central headquarters. It was a lie. I went to visit an uncle who lived close by, borrowed a bicycle and went home. Near the Via Emilia, they had known about the Liberation before. When I arrived at home, in Cella, where I lived, it was 9:30 or 10, and they had just found out. I was one of the first partisans who had gone back, and it was a disaster. They were kissing me, hugging me, and I was crying. I couldn't stop crying since I had always been very sensitive. My father was telling people to let me go: "He didn't die in the mountains, do you want him to die here?". Afterwards I went to the well, washed my face with some cold water and straightened up myself, then went back to Reggio. By then all the young girls in Cella had formed a column and were walking towards Reggio to march into town. As they arrived in Reggio, together with those from Pieve Modolena, Cavazzoli, etc., they had formed an endless column. Then they reached Santo Stefano, where the order was not to go into town since there were snipers shooting.

At the time of the Liberation, the partisans changed the road signs on the Via Emilia, so that the Germans headed towards the lowlands instead of Milan. There they found all the bridges blown up, and it was a nightmare for them, until they made it to Boretto, where with difficulty they had to leave thousands of tanks, horses, other things, an incredible haul. Few or none of the Germans made it across the Po river.

The Resistance for me was just like going to university. I learned to feel confident throughout my whole life, and never felt uncomfortable again. That's why I set up the cooperative although everybody was against the idea. Consorzio, Federcoop laughed at me, telling me: "What are you setting up the cooperative for? The economy is depressed and you don't have any experience. You wouldn't be able to lead a cooperative even if the times were different". I replied: "You don't understand. I took part in the Resistance and I learned a lot from it. It's been my university and we did things you wouldn't even imagine". In the end I did set up the cooperative.

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