

GIOVANNA QUADRERI (Italy)

CLIP 01

My father's name was Reino Quadreri. He was a foundling, who was adopted by my grandfather, Carlo Zebenini, when he was just a baby. My mother was born in Reggio, her name was Valentina Paterni. Should I go on? Then, there was my brother Gastone, who was born in 1917, and Giulio, born in 1925. My sister Laura was born in 1926, then it was my turn in 1928. Finally, Aldo in 1931 and Renzo in 1933. Luckily my mother was a dressmaker. We had a house and some land, however, with such a large family, my father had to work as a labourer. We didn't have anything even before the war, then everything got even worse. My brothers only attended school until the third grade, which was all that Marola offered. I was the only one who went on to the fifth grade, but in order to do so I had to go to Carpineti. We stayed at home; my brothers worked occasionally, often as farm-hands for other families. My older brother worked as a bricklayer in the seminary for ten years, before he was drafted into the army when he was 20.

My father worked whenever he could find work. He only had a regular job in the summer, when he left for almost two months to go thresh the fields. You can still see those machines around the villages during the threshing season, and he was very good with them, so they would go work for almost two months. My father worked for this family every summer for 42 years, and that was the only regular salary throughout the year. At times he would also manage to work for a couple of weeks, but that happened only once or twice a year.

We were doing fine because my mother worked as a dressmaker and was able to earn a little money. She was very good at her job and worked for a family who paid her well. Nevertheless, we were nine in our family, so my brothers went to work as soon as they could. My sister was ten when she left home and went to work in Parma for a lady who was living alone. I went to Switzerland and worked there with a family for ten years. I was the one who had to wake up my master at two in the morning, knocking on the door and shouting, "It's two o' clock". I was 19 or 20 years old then. He trusted me; he would go to bed at ten but had to get up to go work at the bakery. So I would go to bed at one and then get up to wake him up at two. He didn't ask his wife to do it. Then my master died, and I was left there with three children, his wife who was ill, the restaurant, the bakery and other things. All I knew was that I had to work. That was it. And I can tell you that you sure work hard under the Germans, isn't that true? Even in the rain, they wear a priest's hat and go to work in the fields.

CLIP 02

No, thank God! Not my father! He was already a partisan when he would go to meet the others in the drying-rooms in a forest called "trenta pere" (thirty pears). These drying-rooms in the mountains were empty in the winter, so they would hold meetings there. Before the fascist regime began, was it 1922? No, maybe in 1928 or 1930 then.

I was born in 1928 and even when I was very young I was already instructed, for example, to go see a family in Buco del Signore and then come back. I don't know how to explain this, but even if we were very young, we already knew how to move around, since in the mountains all these small trails easily led you to a house.

There was also the Miliari family, who lived close to us. The father was truly an antifascist, he didn't even have his children baptized. I think he had worked in America, so he was very close to my father. Then there was the father of Nello Nusoli, who later became a member of Parliament, although you probably don't know him. He would also join my father in these drying-rooms where they would all meet.

I don't know what they talked about, but even as a little child I had to go around and tell people that a meeting was scheduled, that my father would be there, so they'd know where they had to meet.

There were quite a few Jews in Marola. There was a very good man who would often come to our house, and there was also a younger boy. They were a very nice family who had built a beautiful house there, but we didn't have much to do with anybody. Later, when I was away for ten years, I did meet many Jews. I worked in a restaurant, and they would come to work in the fields in the summer and winter.

They were all great people to me. There was a family in Reggio who was often with my uncles in the house where I used to go collect information, and one day the father said they had to leave. They had a furniture store. I think they closed it and decided they had to go away. At the time I didn't know or understand why they fled like that. We didn't talk about it, especially in Marola, in the mountains, although I would often come to Reggio, since my mother was born in Reggio, in via Emilia San Pietro.

CLIP 03

My oldest brother had already left for the war in 1939. I was looking at some postcards the other night, and the first were sent in 1939 from Albania. He was in the Julia Alpini Brigade and had been in Udine for a while, before he was sent to Albania and then to Greece and Russia.

It was really rough for my brother, poor guy! He was sent to Albania, then to Greece and finally to Russia. When he came back from Russia he was ill. Actually, they thought he was dead. They were picking up bodies from the Don and they thought he was dead, but he was only frostbitten and suffering. I guess they slowly revived him and managed to bring him back to Italy, to Rimini. They kept him there for three months and we never even went to visit him, because there was no way for us to get there. I did go to Milan by foot, but Rimini seemed really too far.

From the teacher's radio at school, we found out that Italy had declared war: "The war has begun", she said. I remember my sister told my mother about this, and my mother started crying. I was younger then, and I recall asking my mother why she was crying. I didn't think it was something to cry about. I couldn't understand what war meant. Day by day things changed, though, and soon we could all witness and realize what war was really about.

Fortunately, my father was at home during the war. He would check to see if there were Germans around in order to tell the partisans. When he wasn't working he wouldn't sleep much, because he always had to go see if there was somebody around. Did you know that they burned down a whole village if a German was killed? They would destroy whatever they found, and kill ten of our people for each German who had been killed. That's why my father was very careful, and in the end they burned down only one house in Marola. I don't know if someone was wounded, since I was rarely at home at the time. I was always on the move between the mountains and Reggio.

CLIP 04

My sister joined the partisans after she had an argument with our mayor. She declared she would join the partisans from Carpineti because she wanted the war to end. She was furious. Did I tell you she was supposed to take my father's place in jail? One day, when she didn't see my father come back, she went to find out what was going on and discovered that my father had been sentenced to three days in jail. She said that my father had to go home because he had a family to support, and she would take his place. In the end they let them both go, after two days instead of three. My father had slapped the mayor, or I should say the *podestà*, that's how he was called then. When they came back home, my sister was really furious. My father could not work as he wasn't a member of the fascist party, and the only one who brought home any money at the time was one of my brothers, who had been working in the seminary for a long time then and was paid every two weeks.

My mother did whatever she could. She also tried to help the partisans and the people in our village. She would give injections and take care of things: in the mountains nobody had anything at that time. My mother, poor woman, was the only one who knew how to give injections, so she was always dashing about, even at night, summoned by many families in the village. Very few people knew how to give shots then, and since pneumonia was very frequent many would even die of it. Later with medicines everything was much easier, but at that time it was tough. We didn't have enough food or clothes, the weather was cold and there was often a lot of snow.

One day my parents told me to go look for my sister. As I got there I ended up in a mop-up. There was also a wounded man with a shattered leg, so my sister and others told me to go with them. We went to Quara di Toano, in the mountains, and then moved towards Modena. But the following day I decided to go back home, because I had to go tell my parents we were safe. There had been a big battle in Carpineti, and they had to retreat to the castle at first, but then they had to escape. So I went back home, but my sister didn't return home until the war was over, a year later. I would be going back and forth. I went to the mountains a couple of times, since my parents were worried and wanted me to go

see if my sister was safe. She was only 18 then. When she was in Parma they knew she was with a family, but they were definitely worried about her in the mountains with the partisans. I would leave early in the morning and run towards the mountains, stopping every now and then to ask people if they had seen a partisan unit with a woman. Actually there were two women in the unit then. Somebody finally knew where they were, taking me to Gova, towards Mt. Penna, very far away. They had run away there because the Germans were looking for them. She would always walk behind the rest of the group because she would take care of the wounded. She wouldn't carry them, there were others who would help her, but they didn't have vehicles or horses, nothing at all, so they would often improvise a stretcher – they called it a ladder – and put a cloth over it, if they had one. That's how four men would carry the wounded.

CLIP 05

As for myself, I was a dispatch-carrier. I would always move around, from Reggio to Secchio. My parents often asked me to go to the mountains, so some boys eventually told me: "If you go to the mountains, you could take us there with you". Every now and then I would take some of them first to one place, then to another, until they would join a partisan unit. I would often go to Don Carlo, who was also a partisan, and would leave these boys with him. Then there were the Davoli brothers. Kiss was the commander of the dispatch-carriers. He was from Reggio, and he was the landlord of the house where my mother was born. Then one day he told my mother he had to go to the mountains. He told her he would come to our house and then from there he would head uphill, so my mother replied that I could take him.

He came from a family with money, lots of it. We went to the mountains together and then he reached the Central Headquarters. There he met Gordon and some other "special" boys, so Don Carlo suggested they could join the English unit. At that time paratroopers were starting to be dropped in the area, and they had set up the English command with radio transmitters in Secchio. They asked the Central Headquarters to provide them with around 25 skilled partisans, who had been there for a while and were well trained. You have to realise that at the beginning there were all sorts of people in the mountains, but the English only wanted experienced men, so 25 partisans were chosen to join them. Then they had to set up a dispatch-carriers unit, and I was the only one assigned to Reggio, at the local headquarters. I was told to go see a group of men I already knew. There was Grandi, a lawyer, Piccinini, an architect, and the Count Calvi. They were six initially, then Mattia told me that one was killed; I don't even know what happened to another one. Still, at the beginning there were these six antifascists who were in charge of things in Reggio. I had to go home to my mother's and uncles' house. They were staying in Davoli's house, or I should rather say Kiss, the one in charge of the dispatch-riders, who had set up quite a few things. However I was the only one who would go to Reggio. They realised I would remember things and take care of everything properly. I often didn't write things down, although sometimes I did, in order to remember the names of the Germans for example. I would have eaten the slips of paper if I was caught. To give you an example, when they told me to go and inform the others that a mop-up was scheduled, lead by Dolmann or Surmann, who were in charge of these things, I would write down the most important names and information.

At first they had given me the battle name Libertà (Freedom). Later I was called Giorgio, but at the beginning it was Libertà, or maybe Volontà. I didn't even know they had written that name down. Maybe it was at the time of the wounded man, when they wrote that I had gone back home. I was given that card in Busana, then they took it away from me in Albinea, and it's still there. I don't have that card now: it was given to me when we had to go to the mountains with the wounded man, all the way into the province of Modena, before I came home alone and my sister stayed there. I left after no more than two days, I had to go see my parents. So I really can't recall if my first battle name was Libertà or Volontà. My sister's battle name was Foresta, and she was given that name right away, just like me, but I didn't keep it long enough to bother knowing it. There was also this other boy from Parma who was in Busana, in Castelnuovo, and that's where we were handed these documents that I don't have anymore. Later I went on working with Kiss. Since we were all women, he suggested I could choose a man's name, so I was given the battle name Giorgio and that's the name I always used.

CLIP 06

Often, while I was walking, I had to think about the information I was given, so sometimes I had to go back. At that time there were a lot of hedges, high hedges, and you would have to walk for miles and miles in the fields. There was no asphalt then, now a lot of small roads lead to the houses. There were only some narrow paths where only ox carts would go up to the mountains and back. Around Poiano, where Don Carlo and the others used to stay, since they didn't have roads where wheels could be used and in order to move hay they used to tie the cows they had to a sort of sledge, then load it with hay and wood. In Marola we did have a cart, but they didn't up there.

I guess it was because I thought the war would be over soon. Then once I started doing this it became something I had to do, some sort of duty, just like taking care of house chores. It was something I really liked to do. I did it with such enthusiasm that I wouldn't even feel the distance I would cover by foot, from the Via Emilia, leaving San Pietro in the morning, all the way to Secchia, where I arrived at night with bloody feet. I was wearing English boots that the shoemaker had adapted to my feet. Even so, once I got there, I couldn't take it anymore because my feet were hurting badly. After I completed my task, he would hand me a pair of scissors, telling me that my nails were probably too long, and he suggested that I soak my feet to feel better.

I would then go to a house where two elderly women used to live, and I would finally sleep there in a real bed. The following day they cooked polenta twice, for lunch and dinner. One was made with chestnuts, the other one with cornmeal. I really felt well there. Sometimes other girls would come, but he always wanted me to stay there and I was happy about it. But my poor sister had to sleep in huts and sheds the whole time, wherever she could.

At first I asked why they asked me to do this or that, but then I realized that it was necessary, that it was my duty to do something. For example, when we were kids, if a farmer was making hay my father would tell us to go help him. "It might start raining", he would say, and then he would go pick up some rope, while we all went to help the farmer.

CLIP 07

Gordon was in charge of organizing things. They had captured a German, so he told us we had to go and attack the train that took ammunition to the front line. We decided to go and left with two big bombs and a donkey, heading to Baiso. The donkey was really slow, so by the time we got there we had already walked for seven or eight hours. There was also this boy with us who was from Baiso, his name was Barozzi, who died very young. I guess Gordon told him that it would have been impossible to carry weapons and ammunition far away, so they went to a garage and they gave us a "millecento" car. They worked day and night to get the car ready and only left the following day, while I had to leave before, by foot. They arrived the day after. I had to get there earlier to tell everybody that a German car was arriving, but that the three men in it were partisans. I had a document.

I don't know if you noticed that there's a copy of it in Gordon's book. The English had written that whatever happened they would have rewarded us. So I had this letter and I told them not to shoot at the car since the men in it were three partisans who were coming to blow up the bridge. Everything went well that day and I stayed there even the day after, because it took me more than a full day to go back down from Baiso to Soliera.

I wrote it in a book in order to remember where it was: Cortile, near Campogalliano. I walked through the ditches, following the canal as it went down, after Modena, around Rubiera, and managed to deliver the letter. The following day they arrived with the car. If three Germans had arrived at this farmhouse, a small house right in the open, they would have been immediately killed by the partisans. They would have thought: "What are they doing here? They came for us", and they would have shot at them. But everything went well, they waited for night to fall, placed the bombs, and succeeded in derailing the train. They stayed near the bridge the whole night, since the partisans had taken us to the right places. If they weren't covered properly they couldn't have done anything. Maybe they could have managed anyway, but they would have been in danger. That time they were taken to the right bridge to set the mines. The train arrived at five in the morning and at that point they said they killed a lot of people, having derailed six or seven railway wagons full of ammunition.

The mission went well, and after two days they made it back to Secchio, pleased with their brilliant action.

CLIP 08

They decided to come to Albinea so I had to take care of a lot of things, because they always had something to set up. The partisans of Modena were a very large group, and they also had to coordinate the Russians who were with them. So there were many of us when we arrived at Lupo. We left Secchio at night and made it to Valestra at dawn. We stayed there the whole day and left again in the evening, arriving at Lupo at two thirty in the morning. Leaving Valestra, as we were on the road that goes from Casina to Albinea, you could still see the long line behind. There were so many people: the English, the paratroopers, the Gufi Neri, all the partisans from the Central Headquarters. We stayed there the whole day and then the following night, at around midnight, they went down for the attack. Soon you could hear shots, as well as the sound of bagpipes, since the English were used to going to battle playing bagpipes.

I can't recall how many women we were, myself and another skinny girl from Villa Minozzo, but later Kiss told us that our task for the next day would be to search for any wounded, since anyone wounded had to be retrieved. The following day, as soon as it was light enough, we were asking ourselves what we had to do. Nobody was around and no partisans had returned. They must have dispersed in all directions. We wondered if there were any wounded men or not. We looked around the house, and there was an English soldier with a bullet in his knee who was hiding in a wagon. He was waiting for the dark in order to move or for somebody to go look for him. They put him and Gordon, who were wounded, in the house of a blacksmith, a sort of shop, and began taking them away at night. They finally got them to Palanzano, in the province of Parma, from where they were taken to Florence by helicopter. Then we had found this man in the house of a family nearby, hidden in a wagon.

He had been put there by some partisans, who had left him there. We told the family we were looking for wounded men, and they told us they had one. In the evening they offered to take us to Casola, on the road from Casina to Albinea. There was a ditch there, where the crest of the mountain ended. You could go down the ditch, then back up to Valestra, but it was a very long way. He had two cows pulling the wagon, and we started to head uphill. As we reached the road, the Germans who were involved in the roundup in Baiso started shooting at us. There were bullets flying all around us. The farmer took off the piece of wood that held the wagon and left it on the ground, running away with the cows. We were left there with this man with a bullet in his knee, who later told us he was screaming because of the pain he felt. We waited there and somebody came looking for us in the evening. I can't remember well, but I think we went to sleep in the ditch until somebody came to bring us back. That was the only wounded man we found. The two other wounded were two of our leaders, Captain Ulisse and Gordon, and they had already been taken away.

CLIP 09

Then it was September of 1944 when I went to Como. I left for Milan by foot with a friend. We made it to Piacenza on the first day, then to Milan the day after. We were going to visit my brother, since we didn't have any news about him anymore. Mail wasn't delivered to Marola anymore, although at times when I went to Reggio for my tasks I would take care of it. My parents said that it was too far, but we left Marola and arrived in Milan in two days. From there we took the train to Como. In Como a man asked us where we were going, and we replied that we were going to visit our brothers since they hadn't sent any news for a long time. To tell you the truth, we were also going to tell them that they had to run away, because the Germans were sending all sorts of people who were caught during roundups to Germany, especially young men, as well as the Jews. Then the man asked us where we had slept, and we told him we slept in the train station. "But the station is closed at night", he said. "I guess we'll sleep in a shelter then", we replied. "There are no shelters in Como, it's a free city and we don't get bombed". What could we say? We wouldn't have said anything else, but at that point he told us to go with him and bought us the ticket for the ferry that would have taken us all the way to the other side of the lake from Como, to Pizzo di Trona. He was truly an angel.

Then he took us in front of a nice gate and rang the bell. He told the nun who came out that they should offer us a place to sleep, since we were there to visit our brothers who were in the army. He also told them that we had to catch the ferry at eight. They were really nice, they gave us a place to sleep and got us on the ferry at eight. We only made it to our destination at noon, as the ferry was

quite slow and stopped in all those small villages. When we got there the soldiers were coming back from a mop-up. What do you call them, fascists? Or should I say “repubblichini” (supporters of the Republic of Salò), as we called them then? Anyway, they were all there apart from my brother. I was desperate, I immediately thought he had been killed in the mountains. But it wasn't true, he simply didn't take part in the mop-ups. He worked as a shoemaker or as a warehouseman, any type of job, whatever he could find so as not to go out on missions with the other soldiers. I finally found him and he was doing fine. Then I told him that they had to come back home, otherwise the partisans would kill them. Either they would be killed here or back home, because afterwards they would be considered responsible of terrible deeds. They were really scared, I guess they were brainwashed in order for them to be cruel, to imprison or kill people. Whatever they had to do, they were frightened. He told me that they couldn't run away, that there was no way for them to do so. That was it, and we went back home. Later fortunately they were taken to Cento, near Ferrara. They probably needed soldiers there more than in Como, so they moved them there. I took my bicycle and brought him some clothes, and he was finally able to escape. There were six men from Marola and they all managed to escape, two at a time, and make it home. They wore plain clothes and ran away at night, just like everybody else, in order not to be caught by the Germans or the fascists.

CLIP 10

On the 25th of April we came down from Baiso and stopped to eat at Grandi's house. Grandi, a lawyer, was our great accomplice in Viano. He had prepared a wonderful lunch for our whole “Gufo Nero” unit and also for the English who were with us. We were a very large group of people. Before we finished eating they asked me to go find out if we could move forward. You could still hear many shots, the Germans and the fascists were still around armed and were trying to resist. We were quite worried. We had lunch there, then I left. That's why I'm not in the picture the boys took when they arrived in Scandiano. I was walking ahead in order to see if there were any dangers and eventually go back to inform the others. But there were no problems at all, so I went on and they did the same, all the way down. When we made it to Reggio it was early evening. We had passed by Buco del Signore and arrived in Reggio in high spirits.

When we arrived in Reggio it was incredible, wonderful. I don't know if people thought that the war was over or if they still feared that it would go on, but I'm sure that everybody was just as happy as I was. The following day my sister and I went back home right away, since she had not seen our parents for a year. Together with my older brother we had gone to see our sister often, although one time we had to go 10 km away since she was afraid to come back home. Everybody knew she was involved in the Resistance, so she was afraid to come back and be arrested. That's why we went home as soon as the war was over, and that was it for us. We stopped moving around and immediately got back to work at home. Then in May we went to work together in the rice-fields in Piedmont, and by the end of the year she got married. After the war was over we weren't involved in the Resistance anymore. Maybe I did have a card, you see, but I don't know anymore. Our family was at home then, and we were rather happy, although we didn't have any money or anything at all. We really had to get to work and do something. My sister was about to get married and we didn't even have anything for her trousseau.

CLIP 11

Maybe my sister had a harder time than I did, as she was always in the mountains with all the boys, but they all truly loved her. I know that when she came back to Maro during the summer they would all come to visit her. She got married with the commander of her unit and they moved to Genoa, but they still had a house in Maro, and when they came back a lot of people would go and see them. Women were so respected at that time. When I went to the mountains, all the boys from Reggio would come and ask me if I had seen their parents. They listened to whatever news I had. You could say I brought life back to them, small as I was, looking like a gipsy and always dirty. Honestly, you washed yourself in a ditch when you stopped, and at times you even ended up drinking from the same ditch. You were so thirsty that you would drink water wherever you found it, even from a hole in the ground. As long as you could find water, it didn't matter.

I always say that we were born old, but we also grew day by day. You might have forgot about the things of today, but then you'd start thinking about what the future held for you, and at the same time you couldn't forget the things you had to report. My head was spinning the whole time, thinking. I would leave Reggio and I would start thinking, remembering all the things that I had not written down. As I made it to Albinea I would be thinking again, then in Casina, in order not to forget, until I finally made it up there after a full day.

I think that women helped a lot during the war. Otherwise, how could all these men know when things were happening? Sometimes we would even use children, getting them to run somewhere and tell the partisans to run away because the Germans were coming. We did whatever we had to do then. But women were really important. I'm not saying this for myself: as soon as the war was over that was it, both for me and my sister. Even my husband was a partisan, but he joined the Resistance in his village. He was with Casoli, the one from Berzana. When the war was over he went back home too, actually he was already there, doing whatever they could as partisans, running away when they had to. In order to carry important documents, however, you really needed people who were willing to run. We didn't even have bicycles, so we would just walk along the road every time we had to bring people to the mountains, depending on where we picked them up.

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