

LIDIA VALERIANI (ITALY)

CLIP 01

My name is Lidia Valeriani. I was born on the 23rd of January 1923 in Montecavolo di Quattro Castella, in a small hamlet called Scampate. Awful fascist times, I guess, since my father was already a victim of political persecution. I had two brothers older than I, and six more followed, making us a family of nine brothers.

As soon as we started to go to school at the age of six, we could already understand that things were different for us who were children of antifascists, compared to those of the fascists, who were enrolled in the "Balilla", in the "Piccole Italiane" - the fascist youth organizations. These things were already going on at school. I noticed and realized this when I was six, and I started asking my father why we were considered differently from the others. And my father tried to explain it to me, as best he could since I was still a little girl.

He would have never enlisted us in the "Piccole Italiane", or the boys in the "Balilla". As we got older we began to understand how things were going, that those who were antifascists had to go underground. I was ten, it was obvious by then. In 1933, when they started arresting a lot of people (they arrested and beat people even before that), I realized the situation, and some of our neighbours were arrested that year.

CLIP 02

The older comrades saw that I was interested in this situation, eager to learn and know what to do, and started handing me some books. I believe the one we remembered the most was Maxim Gorkij's "The mothers".

I was 15 or 16 years old when they started talking to us openly about the Communist Party, which was the opposite of fascism, and about having to get involved in the clandestine struggle, organizing people against this dictatorship, since it really was a dictatorship then.

By the time I left San Bartolomeo I was already part of the clandestine Communist Party.

I had a cousin who had been incarcerated, his name was Nello Strozzi. And then also my boyfriend's brother. Me and my boyfriend had started dating when I was eighteen, he was of the Viani family, his name was Alfeo. And many more friends and neighbours, around the villages...

CLIP 03

We went to Guardazzone, which is a mountain near San Polo. We had lunch there, some sandwiches. As it was close to the first of May we decided to take a piece of paper and made a flag with the lipsticks we had. Then we found a stick, a piece of wood, and we secured this flag to it and there we went, climbed on a pine tree and tied it there... Then we left, we went away, since there were people who were informers and would go see if they found us there.

You could sign up even if you weren't 18 yet. From that moment they taught us songs like "Bandiera Rossa" and other things, other songs that people used to sing even after the war.

CLIP 04

Before he married my mother, my father was with a family of peasants who were working for my mother's family, who were called "servants" at the time.

With other co-workers from Montecavolo they set up a sort of business; they had the machinery for threshing and ploughing the land, so 4 or 5 of them got together and started this activity. After that he always did that job, he was always a thresher: they went out to plough, to thresh, these type of things. When I was 10 I started to work as a seamstress, or I should say to learn how to be a seamstress. I helped my mother out a little, because we also had about 20.000 square meters of land, we had a cow or two for milk, in order to go to the dairy to get some cheese, butter, etc. In the winter, since you couldn't do much in the fields, my father would help us more with these things, while in the summer he was always working.

CLIP 05

From the 8th of September I began to know where the comrades were, first of all in order to go and warn them that they were going to be arrested again. For example, Felice from Puianello, they sent somebody for me to go inform Alfeo Viani that they were already, let's say, on the list of those who would be arrested again; and also Didoni, from Scampate, and more or less all of them.

I would go and warn these comrades, then they all met in Scampate at Chicco's, at Castellani's home.

Can you tell us something about this meeting?

Well, actually I didn't really attend the meetings. They did call me there, but then they met to assign the various functions, since they were all "leaders", while they sent me in town to go shopping, buy the glasses, the hats, things that would allow them to disguise themselves and get away, even if they moved about at night. Then each was given his assignment. From then on, some started to go to the mountains, but there was absolutely nothing ready there.

We would go visit families who we knew were antifascist, who were against the war... First of all, there were already some soldiers who had succeeded in deserting, and we told them to go to the mountains. Then we collected stuff like clothes and supplies. I took them to Roncolo and handed them to Torreggiani, who would take care of getting them to the mountains. That's more or less what we did during the winter, collecting things, preparing people, preparing women in order to have some homes ready to hide in for one night for those who didn't know where to stay before they left for the mountains. That's more or less what we did. At that point some were already properly organized. We delivered orders... Some were organized to do other things too, but my military duties, I carried them out supporting the comrades who were in the mountains and those who had to hide, these matters. Propaganda, handing out leaflets, secretly bringing them all over the place at night, and then the strikes slowly began. The strikes against the war had started, and we got ready for the strike of the 1st of March.

CLIP 06

Then we organized the strike on 1st of March. There had already been some in other places. I was a member of the committee who prepared the strike, we got together quite a few times, then in the evening we did the last meeting at my house. My father agreed, so we had the meeting and assigned the tasks. Alberta and I got together early in the morning (we had already handed out all the leaflets) and went to Montecavolo, stopping by all the farmers' homes, who were milking the cows, and telling them "remember that there's a strike later, after you take the milk to the dairy don't go to the fields, join in". "Alright, yes, we'll be there", they replied. And we gathered together. The strike went well. The farmers (in Montecavolo there were mostly farmers) and some factory workers, those who were on our side, went on strike, so the strike in Montecavolo was a success.

What were you on strike for?

Against the war, against all the things they were doing to us, against hunger too, because we were hungry. They were taking everything from us, we pooled wheat, everything. Farmers had to bring wine, grapes, everything, they were taking everything. That's why afterwards there were even some casualties when we went to these stockpiles to take back all the stuff they had taken from us.

I've said many times that my father that morning of the 1st of March told me: "Lidia, you're doing the right thing because it's important, but you must remember that your life is going to change after this". I wasn't thinking about this at 7 in the morning, about my life being different at noon, but my life did change, I felt more responsible... I felt like this even before, I had been responsible in all the things I had done. But after this it was different, responsibilities were different, and everything changed. I was still Lidia, but let's say that I had a very positive experience and probably I also felt proud for doing this.

A bus was coming down from San Polo, from that area, and we stopped it, telling them there was a strike, that they had to go back. Some soldiers were on the bus, we got them to get off and disarmed them: they gave us their weapons without resisting and then they didn't get back on the bus. They began to walk, maybe they were heading home on foot. This didn't cause any trouble. Then a fascist who had been evacuated to Montecavolo came out of a house in another street (we were in the main road, by the square, with the strike, our posters, etc.) and started shooting with a machine-gun, into

the air at first, I think. And I think he also had a gun. Many of us ran after him, then we finally caught him and disarmed him. A few of us maybe cuffed him, but we didn't really hurt him, let's say that nobody did anything that would have got him killed. We simply disarmed him, then somebody might have kicked him, but everything was ok. The strike was over, we kept the weapons and sent them to the mountains and broke up the strike. After half an hour, it was noon, in Montecavolo there was already a curfew, people couldn't go out of their homes. At that point we were already at home, since we were on our bicycles, and there were about 3 or 4 km between Montecavolo and Scampate.

CLIP 07

At that point I see a fascist, a German van driving up the hill. Since there were all peasants at the strike... the van proceeds further up... they went to Aleotti's house instead and set it on fire (the Aleotti family was at the strike). Somebody had betrayed us immediately, since in Montecavolo there were many fascists, we weren't all... They betrayed so that the strike went well in Montecavolo and not in the other towns around Reggio because, if this had happened in the whole Province, fascists and Germans would have had a lot to do! This way they focused on Montecavolo, while in Rivalta the strike didn't work out because somebody was telling people "not to go in order not to get killed". It could have been so, it's true, but these battles had to be done, they were part of the clandestine approach we had, what we were fighting for. We had to fight in order to get rid of all this.

At my home they arrested Antinea, Liliana and Narciso, the only ones they found. Narciso was ten, he would turn eleven in September and we were in March at the time. Later on they brought him back home, keeping Antinea and Liliana under arrest. My mother had stayed at home with the younger ones, as Beatrice who was 5 (she was born in 1939), and they had bagged some things in order to save them if they came to burn the house. Then they arrested everybody. They hadn't found my father, they only caught him 7 or 8 days later, and sent him to a concentration camp in Germany. They also went to the Aleotti family and arrested the youngest one, who was a friend of Chicco Catellani, and the oldest one – they only found those two – and sent them to Germany as well. The youngest one was like 16-17 years old. That night from the Ghiardo we could see the fire, because there was some sort of a hill there, the fire in Scampate, since they were burning down all the houses like that.

CLIP 08

They called me Aurora, and told me: "Aurora, here we need someone who stays on duty the whole time" because I worked, I was available night and day, unlike those who stayed at home and did their household chores for hours. There we needed someone who was always available. So I decided and said alright, I'll learn. I took typewriting classes, we got a typewriter, I learned to use it and began my full daily life. I was a dispatch rider, I was a secretary, I did everything that needed to be done. In the beginning I went to Bologna twice a week, picking up weapons and ammunitions if needed, but mostly new orders coming from the central headquarters, which we depended on. There were the central headquarters and then other headquarters all the way down to the brigades.

I worked without pause taking part in actions when it was needed, shadowing and other things, other actions of our brigade. We had places we went to, we called them "recapiti" (addresses), where I brought things for everybody: in Carpi, in Fossoli, in the lowlands where we had all our partisans. I carried the stuff there and the dispatch riders then carried it to the "recapiti". There were actually various dispatch riders. As an example, at the local headquarters I was a secretary but I also had two dispatch riders there. One was Carmen (battle name) and the other Vera, who was from Yugoslavia. They were assigned to the headquarters of the brigade.

That's what the partisan struggle was about. Fourteen months of actions. If it wasn't everyday, there was something one night, something else the following and the one after too. I did this the whole time, continuously. If I wasn't typewriting, I was riding my bicycle going all over the place, to Bologna or other towns. These things, more or less, constantly: these actions, these deaths. Because there were battles too, there were casualties too. It was fourteen months of battle.

CLIP 09

We had drawn together most of our forces in the lowlands around Reggio, around Limiti, Soliera, Carpi. Over there all the houses were with us. There was actually a time when that area was called "free zone", because nobody could get in. However I guess the Nazi fascists had also been looking at that area, just like us. So at a certain point they decided to do a mop-up in order to free the area, and they were going to do it with such forces, machine guns, heavy ammunition, that they would have more or less destroyed our whole organization. So we met at the headquarters and decided we had to leave. As usual it was the dispatch-rider who had to face this battle (that was a true battle), in order to go and inform all our comrades, otherwise they would have been slaughtered if they weren't ready to face this mop-up. And if they couldn't be ready, then they could at least withdraw before they all got killed.

At a certain point I declared I would go. I already knew the area because I had gone there often. We had many families of peasants there, wonderful families, so I said: "I'm going, give me the gun and I'll head over there". I was given the orders, essentially those that could be remembered and passed on when it was time to, and I left.

Then I met this patrol, and what could I do? They ordered me to stop. I pulled my gun and started to shoot. I shot while I was riding the bicycle, I shot as long as I could go on, carry on until I reached the right place to stop and inform all the others. After that we spread the news quite quickly. That was it. I managed to get through all these shots, all these bullets, this mess because when it was them shooting they didn't need to save ammunition and keep it for later. We had to do it, but they had plenty. But I made it, then the battle went well, everything went well and they survived.

That episode went well. If we think about it we might laugh about it now, but can you figure out how many comrades survived when they all could have died, being attacked at that time? I didn't even know that this episode was known, until one day the Carabinieri came knocking at my door telling me that I would be awarded by the army, by the government, that I would be awarded a silver medal for military valour. I wasn't even proud of this, since I didn't know that from such a story one could obtain this medal.

CLIP 10

We went to Carmen Zanti's home in Puianello. She was one of the leaders and had been in the party for years, together with her father, who had been in France, etc. (that famous Zanti who was shot at the Zucchi barracks). The party had given her that duty; she was organized and already had contacts in Modena, and she did move weapons around by that time, together with my sister-in-law Iside Viani. We went there and I found an agreement with her. In the morning we went by my house, while nobody was there, not even my mother, because they were all meeting in a cattle-shed. I picked up my bicycle and some stuff and went back to San Bartolomeo, because I didn't dare staying there, if somebody betrayed me. So I left in the morning, I went to pick Zanti up and we went to Modena by bicycle. She took me to Alfeo Corassoli, where I met the famous lawyer Poppi, and that's when I started to be involved in the authentic partisan struggle, when I began to really take part in it.

I was like a sister to the partisans. They all loved me and respected me. It was amazing. Staying with the families, particularly with a family of peasants living in Saliceto San Giuliano, where I stayed 5 or 6 months, I felt like I was at home. And they didn't even know where I was from. They actually thought I was coming from the mountains near Bologna, and only after the war did they find out that I came from Reggio.

CLIP 11

On the 25th of April, in Modena, we were free since we had already liberated ourselves on the 23rd or the 22nd. And here I want to mention the only thing that I didn't manage to do, as the liberation came right after. We stayed up all night to prepare a map, illustrating where the units had to leave from, the squads in our area, where the various GAPs were. We did this for our GAPs, the SAPs did the same for their SAPs, we prepared everything and then found an agreement. Others came down from the mountains, and they also had places to liberate. We stayed up all night to prepare this, this advance

strategy set to throw out of Modena the Germans and the fascists, all the soldiers and armed men who were in town.

I had to go to Paganine to transmit the orders, since it was always dispatch-riders, whether men or women, who had to go do this. There was no other way. Maybe somebody had a telephone, but we didn't. So I left with my orders. I had to go because we could already hear bombing in Bologna for example, they could hear the sound of the bombs, and then some bombed around us too. In Modena this didn't happen because we told them, but they bombed Reggio, and Cavriago, where there were German headquarters.

So I left and headed down Morane street on the way to Paganine, a town towards Bologna, towards the mountains in short.

When I got there, I went on for a kilometre and I already found the Germans retreating. Cows, carts, horses, bicycles, they had a bit of everything. And I couldn't get through. They stopped me, and I couldn't move on. "I have to go", I told them. We always found an excuse, an ill brother or other stories, or telling them we lived there and had to get back. But there was no way. They wanted to take my bicycle and forced me to go back.

I had to wait for the time we had agreed to meet with the other comrades, where we all got together, all those who had left to go transmit the orders. We met over there and then helped those who had to defend the city and those arriving. That was the only mission I didn't complete.

It was amazing. After that I stayed in Modena for a while, where we set up the ANPI (National Italian Partisans Association).

CLIP 12

My family was, let's say, fortunate. I made it back home, my father came back from Germany, Avvenire came back from Germany, Davide was in the mountains too: he was one of the leaders and later became deputy police prefect here. We were all alive, all nine of us and our parents. After that we always worked for peace, freedom and equality... and we're still working for this!

Sixty years ago, we thought that things would be better for you, our nephews, that life would be a little more peaceful. Not too much, only a little bit, because you too are not peaceful yet. We did everything for our sons and nephews, for them to have a better world: not only our sons, but the whole world, freed from wars, hardship, all these terrible things, because we still have terrible things going on. Many say: "we fought for nothing". No! We fought in order to have a prosperous future. Our struggle was valuable because we were really living a life of sacrifice. And we had a lot, but we were also wishing that there would have been just as much for others today. Compared to what we had before, after the war we really had so much: we worked, we fought even afterwards, we built things, we worked day and night... and we also had many positive outcomes.

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