

## **The other side of the wall. The help from the people of Treviso**

Fascism tended to isolate and hide the concentration camps of Slavic civilians, exploiting the filter of military secrecy. Nevertheless, even though many people ignored their existence, others became aware of those sad realities and some of them started to help.

In Italy it was a matter of individual initiatives, both Catholic and secular, triggered by some kind of personal ethics; a real organization was not created, also because this would have been an illegal act.

Let's start with the Catholic church. Bishop Antonio Mantiero had been informed of the existence of the camp by the bishop of Ljubljana, who had sent Father Engelardo Štucin, magister clericorum of Ljubljana, to Monigo in order to provide religious assistance for adults and catechesis for children. Probably the parish priest of Monigo had also informed him, but, unlike other Italian bishops, he did not go to visit the camp, nor did he openly expose himself in defence of the prisoners. On the other hand, the bishop was not a supporter of fascism, and was generally very cautious, so the idea that he had acted secretly should not be excluded. Certainly, in a different context, once fascism and war were over, he would not fail to show his generosity towards the refugees, especially Slovenian, who had come to Monigo, the same place, but in the different context of a DP camp.

The person who exposed himself was the chaplain don Antonio Serafin, from Castello di Godego (1910), appointed to Monigo parish in 1936, who acted with the help of some local peasant families. It should be remembered that the parish priest Ugo d'Alessi was of advanced age (from 1941 he was dispensed from the Divine Office and in 1944 he died).

At the current state of knowledge, we can say that the aid system operated by the chaplain worked in this way: the money came from the Slovenian Lenarčič, resident in Preganziol, through his niece Breda Rus, the "woman from Ljubljana". With this money, food purchases were made. The bread was bought in the nearby village of Castagnole (or Paese) where there was an oven, since Monigo did not have one.

But it wasn't just bread. Professor Menenio Bortolozzi, the anatomopathologist who was shocked by the signs of malnutrition he had seen in many corpses, is said to have suggested the production of large-scale castagnaccio, a simple dish, but rich in sugar and proteins: it could make up for other deficiencies. Thus an organized production was set up, which had its heart in the home of Giuseppe Lucchetta and Giovanna Franceschini, his wife, in via Paludetti (Borgo Lucchetta). Chestnut flour, mixed with other ingredients such as water, but also oil, salt, sugar, raisins (goods that, apart from the black market, were difficult to find in wartime) was cooked in large pots. Then the mix was spread on a table or a metal tub used for butchery. In the evening, several people gathered, like Giuseppe Modesto, also from Via Paludetti, they cut the castagnaccio into pieces and packed them.

Then Don Antonio would come with his bike cart to collect the food and take it to the camp. Three girls helped him, especially in the collection of eggs: Rina Caldato, Adele Galiazzo and Maria Favaro, the most enterprising (but also his sister Sandra), who at the time lived at the end of Via del Morer, where it becomes Via Castellana.

Whenever possible, the food was delivered to the prisoners. Otherwise, if it was impossible to enter with the bike cart, the method of throwing food above the wall was used, at least for the loaves, which fact was reported by Vera Cimprič, a child prisoner in the camp, in a public speech held in the former church of Santa Croce, on the occasion of Memorial Day in 2013.

When research on Monigo camp started in the 1970s, Don Antonio, contacted by the scholar Ives Bizzi, underlined the poor physical condition of the Slavs on their arrival, so weak that "they could not climb the two steps that were in front of the barracks". He also stressed the difficulties of providing aid. "We had to wait for the right moment" when the commander of the Anceschi barracks was not present... It cannot be ruled out that Don Antonio had contacts with Antonio Adami, a "disobedient" officer

In 1980, on the occasion of the exhibition of Vlado Lamut's drawings, he was interviewed and said: "I had a humanitarian task: collecting the supplies that the farmers gave me to feed the poor people. Then I bought eggs and bread on the black market, with the little money that relatives sent from Slovenia. And to the journalist's question "Why didn't you publicly denounce the atrocities you witnessed?", according to other people's reports he replied something like: I was only a priest who did his duty. Believe me: we'd better forget. Why me? Many other people knew, and they hid these atrocities too.

When asked about his relationships with the authorities, Serafin replied that the relationships with the Carabinieri were good, "very bad with the Fascists who clearly said that the prisoners had no right to live and be helped". In fact, the Federal secretary Luigi Gatti had summoned the priest to the headquarters of the Fascist Party of Treviso to warn him not to help "those people" who did not deserve it. Shortly afterwards, in September 1943, the priest was transferred to another location.

We talked about a possible contact between Serafin and Antonio Adami, known to be the first in the list of those killed in the struggle for Liberation, which is found in the tombstone of the Palazzo dei Trecento in Treviso. Born in Mel (province of Belluno), on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1905 to Vittorio and Alberta Saccol, in 1930 he was registered in the conscription list of the municipality of S. Pietro di Barbozza. Although his family was modest, Antonio managed to obtain two degrees (in philosophy and law), acquiring, thanks to excellent professors, a high sense of justice, and the conviction that law and ethics should proceed together, because "as Hegel says, the idea of law is freedom ". However, the two degrees did not give him his daily bread, because Adami did not want to join the Fascist Party.

Perhaps to compensate for the lack of work, after his first degree, he joined the officer's training course. After six months, on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1930 he was assigned to the 58<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment until February 1931, when he was discharged and made available to Treviso District. His military career was tortuous and discontinuous, with periods in which he frequented taverns and young people from the Pedemontana, spreading anti-fascist ideas among them. In December 1942 he served in Treviso, at the concentration camp, where he remained less than four months and was struck by the injustice that reigned there which clashed with his personal values. According to some oral testimonies, whenever possible, perhaps when the camp commander was absent, Adami let some prisoners out, especially children, so that they could go begging to the surrounding peasant families.

Evidently, he was discovered. As shown in military document 34, on 23 March 1943 he was ordered, as a punishment, to serve in Vicenza, where he remained for fifteen days in solitary confinement; then he was sent to Verona, where he was on 8<sup>th</sup> September (the day of the Armistice). After avoiding capture by the Germans, he became part of the Mazzini Brigade, Mameli division, and in this way his unique non-violent partisan adventure began. Eventually he died, a righteous man, in circumstances that are not entirely clear, on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1945, a month before Liberation Day.

This summary of the aid provided to the prisoners can be completed by looking at the hospital, where, in the early months of 1943, Dr. Alfonso Cino Boccazzi worked and attracted the anger of the military authorities for denouncing the conditions of the prisoners. He also accepted the requests for help from two Slovenian people, Milan Lenarcic and Breda Rus, who are talked about here in another paragraph. Nor should we forget the anatomopathologist Menenio Bortolozzi who performed XY autopsies on the corpses of the Slav prisoners, who had died in hospital, documenting their conditions of extreme malnutrition. Bortolozzi was also the creator of the castagnaccio method: so he tried to help the survivors while dealing with the deceased.

However, lesser-known figures, mostly destined for anonymity, such as midwives, nuns, nurses and perhaps other doctors present in the hospital, should be remembered too. The whole medical facility played a humanitarian role. The many who were dying there could pass away at least with dignity, and those who were less seriously sick, such as the women in labour, were looked after for many days after childbirth, without suffering natal and perinatal casualties.