

Gherardo Del Nista

Dora: when life triumphs over death

Memoir of the concentration camp at Dora Mittelbau - Nordhausen

Introduction

The idea of writing this memoir arose not just from a desire to follow the example given to me by my ex-companions in misfortune in the Nazi camp, but also from fresh outbreaks of extreme mentalities, that are more and more regularly reported by the media. Those involved in these incidents almost seem to pride themselves on the clear cycle of violence reported with sadness by those of us from "that generation" who survived, and that the decades since have yet to erase. But this is not the only reason. In the summer of 2001, after 56 years, I returned for the first time to the concentration camp that I managed to survive simply out of pure luck. There is now little left of the camp, and what does remain offers poor testimony: it could even seem just an innocent ruin. It is hard for uninformed visitors to imagine the horror that people endured in those places, despite the efforts of a group of young researchers (including some Italian students) who are working hard and with speed inside the facility to reconstruct in minute detail the history and the events at the camp at Dora.

The pages of this memoir do not offer a day-by-day diary, but more a summary of the most relevant features of the tragic time I spent in the camp, aged twenty-five years old: my states of mind, my anguish, fear and the tears that other "men" made us endure, which they did certainly not out of some misplaced idealism, or simply because they "had to obey orders", but purely and simply out of a collective inbuilt sadism. The initial photographs offered here should not be understood as some sort of perverted narcissism, but serve to demonstrate the physical transformation that a few months imprisonment in the camp caused in the prisoners.

For all these reasons, but above all to reconstruct a piece of history through the words of eye-witnesses, I felt it necessary to add my voice to those who have already denounced the crimes and barbarities committed by Nazism to history: such that the next generation will not be deaf to such eye-witness accounts, and that by being taught cannot be repeated: first-hand sources that, even if written in minute detail, can never adequately describe the gratuitous violence, the torture, the hunger, the misery, and the way death came to appear as a moment of liberation, allowing us to reclaim the dignity of our previous existence and put an end to our suffering. People who read the history of ancient Rome, and believe the horrifying stories of the martyrdom of Christians in that period must also believe the facts related by people who survived the camps: the accounts offered here form a snapshot of things that really happened, a historical reality that is not embellished by personal involvement, nor lessened by unjustifiable retrospective justifications. Those who can accept the historical accounts of the martyrdom of Christians in Rome 2,000 years ago should also recognise that the murders in the Nazi camps occurred only around 70 years ago.

If reading these lines causes people to think twice before again starting down that political path, then we will have achieved our objective, and have honoured the memories of the millions of people who never returned from the camps.

Gherardo Del Nista

1. The start

It was the beginning of March 1940 when I received the postcard summoning me for national military service. I left on 10 March (I was not yet 20 years old), and was assigned to the 35th Artillery Regiment, in Livorno, my home town. I was very pleased with this, since I could stay close to home: but this turned out to be but a short-lived illusion.

Once Italy had entered the war alongside Nazi Germany (10 June 1940), we soon left Livorno: after a few months, I was transferred with the rest of my battalion to Piedmont, to Cavallermaggiore in the province of Cuneo, awaiting the order to march against the French Army, which was rapidly approaching Italy. But thankfully, the French surrendered before they reached Italy, and battle was avoided. After a few more months, Yugoslavia joined the war against Italy: this happened at a time when the other European countries had been at war for many months. The Yugoslav declaration of war meant that the troops in Piedmont were moved to the Veneto region, to San Pietro del Carso, ready to engage the enemy forces marching towards the Italian border.

It is worth briefly clarifying one unfortunate point: the army I was conscripted into was not adequately equipped to withstand any assault. I need only point out that we were still using the 75/13 howitzers, which had a maximum range of six kilometres. We were already mentally prepared for the worst, when some good news reached us, made even sweeter by being so unexpected: the exhausted Yugoslav army asked for an armistice, and so everything was over before it even started. After this, we carried on our march towards Zagreb, from where we had to return to Postumia (by now in Italian-held territory) on foot after only one day rest, even though we were exhausted.

As is this was not enough, we were then made to "set up base" at San Quirico d'Orcia, in the province of Siena, not far from Montepulciano. In this period, I had a spat with my commanding officer, a sergeant-major whom I can still remember: Giacomo Agricola, from Ispica, in the province of Ragusa. At that point, fed up with it all I decided to try and enrol in the auxiliary Carabinieri, with the requirement that I would have to stay in the corps for a further six months after the war was over. My request was accepted, and for three months I attended training school in Rome, assigned first to the 1st platoon of the 1st Company. Then later I was transferred to Massa Carrara, where I lead an "easy life" for just over two months, until I was called-up and transferred to Albania in December 1941.

My departure was on Christmas Eve: in three columns, we were about to enter the port at Bari when I left the convoy to go into a cake-shop near the Policlinico (which was then still being constructed) to get some panforte [a fruit, honey and nut cake, originally from Siena - English translator's note], which I hoped to enjoy on the boat, to celebrate Christmas. As the boat crossed the sea towards the Yugoslav coast, I thought that that would be the last delicacy that I would enjoy, as that could be the last time I could celebrate Christmas in that manner. Very nervous, and concerned that the boat would be attacked and sunk by the enemy, I stayed awake all night, constantly watching from the deck to the hold and back, climbing over other comrades who were sleeping. Finally, at dawn on 25 December 1941, we could just make out from a distance the Albanian coast. At 9am our dinghy, stuffed full of soldiers, supplies, weapons, horses and donkeys reached the port at Durazzo. I left a great relief when I once again stepped onto dry land, and even swore to myself that I would not return to Italy via the sea.

2. Albania

After a day's travel in a military truck, crossing valleys and snow-covered mountains in an indescribable cold, we reached the town of Prizren, where the Carabinieri had their battalion command post. I spent the night sleeping on the ground, on an improvised bed of straw, and the next day, we recommenced our march: this lasted for another two days until we reached the village of Delevo, in the middle of the Albanian country-side. Even if the area was less than agreeable, this was where we spent the next year and a half, living the easy life: it was peaceful, aside from the occasional skirmish between Albanian, Montenegren and Serb civilians, and the hell of the war, which by that point had engulfed the whole of Europe, seemed distant, like something from another world to us. At the end of that time, I was transferred again, this time to a checkpoint at Pec, on the Yugoslav border: this was another short stay, and again I can describe my military service there as tolerable.

It was in the middle of this monotony that we had the fateful events of 8 September 1943. Returning to the barracks at dinner-time, and while the other Carabinieri were having their evening meal, the news bulletin on the radio at 8pm announced that Italy had asked the Allies for an armistice: and so the war, at least for our country, seemed finally to be over. It is very hard to describe the joy that broke out, and suddenly engulfed everyone in the barracks. We had a big party, sure in the knowledge that we would shortly be returning to our homes: in fact, that would turn out to be a short-lived illusion. We did not yet know that the worst was still to come, since we had suddenly gone from being allies of the Germans to becoming another enemy for them to fight. In fact, the first orders that reached us from battalion command were to drop everything, and make our way to the command post immediately, which was in the vicinity of Gojakovici, about twenty kilometres away. We loaded as much as we could onto a truck, and set out for the command post. I still remember the particular mood that gripped me that day: there was a strange and ominous calm in the air, which was so unusual that it almost seemed to warn us of ill to come. We had travelled half way along the tortuous road, which was in the middle of a thick wood, when we suddenly found the way in front of us blocked by a squadron of German soldiers: they approached with their weapons pointed at us, and shouted "Stop!". Using the eloquent language of their machine-guns, they made us follow them. At that moment, having no way to react, we obeyed without offering any resistance. They marched us to the edge of the city, and closed us in a fenced-off area, which kept continually filling up with other soldiers who, like us, had been rounded up in other parts of Albania. Having taken all our weapons off us, we were kept there for some days without any food: we were told (the lie) that we would soon be sent back to Italy via the city of Fiume, since the war was over for us. It was a joyful moment when we heard this news, a joy born out of our desire to return home, but of course this is not how

the story unfolded.

3. Arrest

9 September 1943: from that day on, we were at the mercy of the Nazi vultures, without our weapons or freedom. The new Badoglio government had told us, via a radio broadcast, not "to disturb anyone who does not disturb us": even if we had wanted to, how could we have done so? After about twenty days, we were all brought together in a square, naturally well-enclosed with barbed-wire, and we were told: "the moment for your return to Italy has arrived; however, you will have to endure a long march on foot to reach the Bulgarian city of Skopje"; naturally, this cheered everyone up greatly. Without food, exhausted, with our heavy backpacks to carry on our shoulders, we finally reached the train station at Skopje. After some hours waiting there, a train made up entirely of cattle-trucks rolled in: the Germans made 70 of us climb up into each truck, crammed in so tightly we seemed like the proverbial "sardines in a can"; sometime later, the train left. All the trucks were completely exposed to the elements, no guards, no-one watching us, no restrictions of any type, so that at each stop, we calmly got down out of the trucks: but despite this apparent freedom, the journey seemed endless. But nonetheless, we thought, as long as the train keeps travelling, then we are getting closer and closer to the Italian border. During those short stops during the voyage, we traded what we had in our ruck-sacks for food from the local population: we swapped our personal belongings, or military items, for some food-stuffs: this exchange gave us both some food and lighter ruck-sacks. The journey towards Zagreb lasted some days, as the train could only move when the tracks were completely empty, since absolute priority was given to the military transports taking supplies to German troops fighting on the various fronts.

4. The Republic of Salò

Now it is time to take a brief detour to describe political developments in Italy during the period we were in Albania. After Badoglio's announcement of Italy's armistice with the Allies on 8 September 1943, the Republic of Salò was created in northern Italy, which meant that the remaining Italian fascists allied to Hitler and Mussolini were now fighting against their own Italian brothers of other political persuasions, those opposed to war and all types of dictatorship. This was the reason why the Germans hated us so much, considering us traitors who had betrayed them in allying with the Americans. We were also hated by the forces of Salò, who took no account of our shared nationality, but hated us for having political ideas different to theirs. In some cases, the Salò "Italian" militia turned out to be more cruel than the German forces. At the same time, the partisan formations sprang into life, to fight the Nazis and the Fascists. In this period, the Italian army, which by now was completely adrift, had been divided in two: one part had been detached and was under American control in southern Italy, after the Allied landing in Sicily. The other part was in the north. As the German army retreated steadily north towards the Reich, they massacred civilians, destroyed houses and entire villages, and deported as many people as they could lay their hands on to camps in Germany. Alongside the Germans operated the forces of Salò, carrying out arrests, tortures and mass shootings. Innocent people, women, children and the elderly became the target for the sadistic "entertainment" of the Axis troops: the decapitated heads of children would be used as footballs by the SS, pregnant women had their stomachs cut open and the foetuses removed, to be used as target practice. I can still remember today the places that witnessed such events, such as S. Anna di Stazzema, Marzabotto, the Ardentine Caves, just to mention the most notorious incidents, which will always be remembered for massacres carried out without pity or motive, out of simple evil.

Now I will allow myself a brief digression onto another issue, which recurs throughout my account but not in a systematic manner: the SS, initials of the SchutzStaffeln, or "protection squad". This was created in 1925 as the Nazi party internal police and personal guard unit for Hitler. It successively became a vast militarised formation that came to control large sections of the German governmental administration, the other state police forces, and a number of economic concerns (DAW, DEST, DWB, OSTI and others). The SS were closely involved in the running of the KZ (another terrible pair of initials), the concentration camps, as we will see later. Its head was Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945). Amongst its internal sub-divisions there were the SS Totenkopf ("Death's Head units" - responsible for the internal organisation of the camps), the Waffen-SS (the armed SS-divisions) and the Germanische-SS (which comprised non-German volunteers, including a detachment of Italians).

We would come to learn understand all this only on our return to Italy, as at that time we did not receive any news from our home country. But even if we had known these things, we would certainly not have imagined the considerably crueller fate that awaited us.

5. Deceit

After many days of travel (so it seemed to us anyway), we woke happy and contented in the belief that we were already on Italian territory: but looking out of the wagon, we saw a station name that hit us all very hard: Vienna. We were at the train station at Vienna! Italy was still far off, behind us in fact. Suddenly we were caught in a whirlwind of thoughts, memories, worries and images that swirled around our heads. By a cruel

twist of fate, even my mother was called Italia. It is not easy to describe the wistful nostalgia that the word "Italy" created in me at that moment. I felt like I was in a nightmare that I needed to wake up from, which was impossible since the nightmare was reality, and not a dream. Now it was the SS who marched up and down the platform, armed to the teeth. Now we were no longer allowed to get down from the wagons: the atmosphere was suddenly heavy and menacing, creating a collective sense of some dark threat, even if we did not yet know that worse was still to come. The SS became our "damn warders" from that moment: arrogantly, they would climb onto the wagons, bullying, stealing the few items that we still had with us, leaving us not even personal items. Cameras, razors, candles, watches, pictures and the small portraits of our relatives were all treated with the utmost contempt: the faces of our mothers, girlfriends, children became the butt of the worst and cruellest taunts you can imagine from the Germans, who even stole wedding and engagement rings.

The train left Vienna after one day: for the next few days, we continued our slow and melancholy journey towards an as yet unknown destination. We went through woods, and endless valleys, bustling with vegetation of every type.

6. The camps

After 16 days and 17 nights travelling, the convoy stopped in open countryside, in the middle of a dense wood. We looked at each other, astonished: we already looked like corpses, due to the lack of food. After a few minutes, we heard lots of shouting which we did not understand, since it was in German. They made us get off the wagons with what little luggage we still had left to us, and we started marching along a road. After a bend, we saw what we had been sentenced to: gate after gate, masses of barbed-wire, and dozens of wooden barracks, one after another, still empty, awaiting our arrival. It was nightfall. In the distance, we could hear machine-gun fire. Since we did not know what the firing was, we asked some of our comrades who had reached the area a few days earlier, and who were now also prisoners of the Germans. They told us that the gun-shots were the sounds of other Italian prisoners, and those of every other nationality you can think of, being killed. The Germans sent us into one of those damn barracks, and told us to sleep: our beds were hard-wood bunk-beds, each with five storeys. We had almost completely lost all sense of time, but according to our calculations, it was 28 October 1943.

The next day, we learnt that we were being held in concentration/prisoner sorting camp 11/B at Fallingbostal, between Bremen and Berlin. Over the next few days, the SS would come every morning, and take a few of us away for various work details outside the camp: we worked until evening. During the day we received nothing to eat, and we were constantly under surveillance, not just by armed guards, but also by vicious guard-dogs trained to prevent escapes. Escape was effectively impossible anyway: we would have been shot, or killed by the dogs, before we could even attempt to flee.

After around a month in this camp, we were all brought together, and made to line up in groups of five: one by one we were addressed by the SS, who asked us if we wanted to join up as volunteers, either for the Reich or for the Republic of Salò; those who said yes would be sent for a weapons training course. Some of us did accept the offer made by the SS. I cannot say if this was because they were German sympathisers, or they were persuaded by the promises of the SS, that they would send the volunteers back to Italy to carry out their new "service". The next day, these prisoners left the camp: I don't know where they went, and we never heard any more about them, or saw them again.

Those of us, like me, who had declined the German offer to collaborate (there were seventy-five of us in total), were then made to carry out various labour tasks for a few days. Then our group (which included a certain Gino Natalini, from Pistoia) was moved again, to an unknown destination. Our transfer took place early one morning: suddenly woken by the Germans, we were made to gather together in the court-yard, where there were three trucks waiting for us. We were made to get into the trucks, always under the watchful gaze of the armed guards. During the journey, we stopped briefly in open country, to answer the call of nature: all this took place under the vigilant and fixed stare of the Germans, who peremptorily warned us from wandering too far away (they would have opened fire immediately if we had).

And so our humiliations had begun.

7. Dora

Late one afternoon at the start of December, we reached the "KZ" concentration and political extermination camp at Dora-Mittelbau, near the city of Nordhausen in Thuringia. "KZ" stood for "Konzentrationslager", that is concentration camp.

Even today, I can still remember every detail of the long sequence of horrible, incredible images that greeted us on our arrival at the camp: the walking skeletons, who already carried the air of corpses about them, their eyes sunk deep in their skulls, their skin yellow as saffron. The next day, we were taken to a barracks that

housed the “barbers” and the showers: we did not know what the Germans had in store for us. Outside the barracks we were made to undress completely, and our Italian military uniform was taken away from us. It was early morning, it was snowing heavily and it was biting cold. They kept us like that for half an hour, before sending us into the barracks, which was at least moderately warm. As we entered, we could see the “barbers” - they were prisoners just like us - holding razors in their hands. All this took place, as ever, under the strict surveillance of the SS. My turn came: first I was shaved with a blade, that without doubt made a simple kitchen knife seem like the sharpest of razors by comparison: if he had simply pulled each hair out one by one with a pair of tweezers, he would definitely have caused me less pain. Having shaved every part of my body, he cut the shape of a cross into my hair, from ear to ear and from the forehead to the nape of the neck. Then, in a gesture of contempt, they called us “Badoglio's Italians”: we would carry this “hairstyle” for three months.

Shaving over, we entered the “bath room”, where there was a bathtub made of rough cement filled with putrid yellow water, apparently a “disinfectant”; thousands of prisoners had already used the tub without the water once having been changed. One by one, we had to get into this tub, and in one fell-swoop, immerse ourselves completely in the water, head included. For those who could not perform the operation, there was the omnipresent SS tormentor, who would hand out a swift lash with a whip to the unfortunate prisoner and so force him to duck himself into the water. After we had thus been “disinfected”, fifty of us at a time were sent to the “showers”, which only had ten shower-heads, and obviously no soap or towels. The flow of water was controlled by the guards, who would “amuse” themselves by suddenly changing the temperature: first it was normal temperature, then suddenly it would turn boiling hot and then it would be freezing cold, causing us a great deal of pain. In an effort to avoid this torture, we would try and run from the shower, but the Nazis drove us back under the water with a few lashes of their whips.

This was the first gesture of welcome that the Germans handed out to us.

Out of the showers, we were taken to another barracks, where we were given our new “zebra” prisoner uniforms, identical to those the existing prisoners were already wearing. Our new uniform, made up of blue and grey vertical stripes, comprised a jacket, trousers and a cap. Together with the uniform, there was a number stamped on a triangle of red cloth, that had been sewn onto the jacket around chest-height. I was assigned prisoner number 0342 - I.

For the Germans, we no longer had names or surnames: from that moment on, the life of any of the people imprisoned in there, like me, was worth less than a number.

8. Life in the camp

After a few days, the Italian prisoners were made to gather together in the camp's main square: there were around 800 of us, both civilian and military prisoners. The camp commandant greeted us in perfect Italian “Welcome: there are 800 of you Italians here: this is not sufficient payment for the mistake that Badoglio has made. You will have to pay for it, with iron discipline, exhausting work, and if necessary, with your lives. You will not be able to communicate with your family, but if there is anyone amongst you who would like to volunteer for the SS, then you still have the chance to get out onto the other side of that gate”, pointing to the main camp entrance with his finger.

Over the next few days, after the Germans had carried out their “checks” on each of us, and officially registered us as inmates, we were assigned to various back-breaking jobs. I was sent to a work-detail of around 20 inmates working for the “Ammoniak” company; I was given a job as a miner. I had never been a miner, but clearly I had no choice but to obey. The head of our work-detail was a German whose name I still remember, but whose surname I never learnt: Hans, a “green triangle”, a born criminal sentenced to forced labour by the German Civil Tribunal for various common offences. Hans was as ferocious as any wild beast: he would beat us as much as he could if we worked slowly: he would knock us about, he would hit us and give us reduced rations just for the pleasure of it, or to satisfy his own personal whims, which were as changeable as his devilish mood.

In the “official” punishments, which were held in public, there would be 25 lashes of the whip, if physical punishment was called for.

My job was as follows: since the tunnels had to be enlarged (in both height and length), we had to punch holes, three or four metres deep, in the walls and the face of the tunnel rock with a pneumatic hammer. Then the Germans would refill the holes we had made with explosives, we were made to withdraw, and the explosives would be detonated, adding another ten usable metres to the tunnel. We then had to carry the rubble and debris created by this process out of the tunnel in little narrow-gauge “wagonettes” towed by a small locomotive. Two of these machines, now covered in rust, are today to be found in the roll-call square, close to the camp entrance.

The debris would then be sold by the SS to private companies for use on other projects, and so the SS profited from the use of the prisoners as slave labour: so much for their patriotic ideal of a "great Germany".

As I have said, I did not know how to do this job, but we were instructed by an Italian worker who had emigrated to Germany before the war had broken out. He would stay with us all during our shift, but at the end, he was free to go home, outside the camp. Naturally, we could exchange a few words, but always very cautiously so as not to attract the attention of the SS. Since he was free to leave the tunnels and to travel around the city, I asked him if he was able to maintain contact with his family in Italy. He said that he could, even if it was a limited correspondence, since the Germans read all his post and would censure anything he wrote regarding the camp and what was happening inside it. The SS had the civilian population under tight control by this point in the war, and they had informers and spies operating in every city. While we were talking, we found ourselves on a wooden scaffold just a few feet from the tunnel roof: I took advantage of our situation to ask if he would write a simple postcard to my relatives (saying just "I am fine, yours, Gherardo", nothing else), if I gave him their address. In return, I would give him a gold ring that I wore on my finger, and that somehow I had managed to keep hold of in the face of the Germans' avarice. Unfortunately, despite my offer, he declined to write the postcard, saying that if he was found out, he would very quickly join us in the ranks of the prisoners in the tunnels, and be subjected to the same cruel treatment meted out to us. I later bartered the gold ring for a piece of bread.

And so, with the pneumatic hammer, I continued to punch holes in the hard surface of the mountain, to excavate the tunnels under which the machinery for the constructions of the murderous V1 and V2 rockets was located.

While our work was carried out in the depths of the Kohnstein hills, a small mountain not far from the camp, other unfortunate prisoners worked in the open air, outside the tunnels, on construction of our new housing: new wooden barracks for sleeping. We were transferred to these barracks as soon as they had been finished. Before they had been completed, the Germans forced us to sleep, and even answer the call of nature, always and only in that damn tunnel, where the air was unbreathable, humid and cold, and where it was very easy to contact tuberculosis or pneumonia, as happened to so many of the prisoners. In the tunnels, we slept in long five-storey wooden bunk-beds: each storey had sufficient space for 15 people to sleep, but they would force up to twenty of us onto each one, all crammed together. The tunnels extended for kilometres into the mountain, so we would never sleep in the same place. In quick time, we were all infected with all manner of parasites, lice, bedbugs, anything that could make its home on the human body. Since we had only been issued with the prisoner uniform, we would also wear empty cement bags to protect ourselves against the cold, which we wore against our skin under our jackets: we had to make sure that the Germans did not realise we were doing this, as it would have been classed as sabotage and destruction of German war-material: punishment (including possible execution) would have followed.

When finally the wooden barracks were completed, we were allocated to them for our sleep. In each barracks (called "Blocks"), there were around 300 people, all huddled together in the bunk-bed exactly as we had been inside the tunnel itself, bodies that were now more like skeletons all cramped up one next to another. My new "housing" was known as "Block 18".

I will now give you some details of my daily life from December 1943 onwards, when I was deported to the camp, the things that I personally saw and can bear witness to, and the things that happened to me. My daily "life" consisted of twelve (or more) consecutive hours of forced labour, from midnight to midday, or vice-versa. One inadequate "meal" at the end of our shift. The twelve hours that were supposed to be for rest actually included roll-call before and after the shift, which lasted between two, and two and a half hours. All this took place under the strict surveillance of the SS, who would often hand out resounding slaps, lashes of a whip and even blows with a shovel without any reason, for the simple pleasure of doing so, or just to pass the time. Many times, our shift would last longer than twelve hours, since we would have to wait for the next shift to arrive before we could finish ours. I was treated worse than an animal or a slave, as we all were: if all this was not enough, often we also had to do without our single "meal" of the day. It was impossible to wash ourselves: for three months, we remained like this: dirty, hungry, our clothes in tatters, emaciated and tormented in a manner that I would not wish on my worst enemy.

When we did get our daily meal, it was generally a litre of soup known as "sboba", a piece of black bread to be divided between four prisoners, 50 grams of margarine and 50 grams of a type of ham. That was all we were given to eat for twenty-four hours. We never managed to work out what that bread was actually made of, but there was so little of it that the real problem was dividing it equally in four pieces. To ensure that we each got the same amount, we created a sort of scales for bread-crumbs: we took a small wooden bar, we dug out a furrow, and tied to each end a length of cord: to each "end" we tied a small piece of roughly-sharpened wood,

like tooth-picks, onto which we could fix the piece of bread, and even individual crumbs. As long as the T-shaped bar was not balanced, we would continue to whittle the bread down, removing or adding tiny bits and moving them from one "tooth-pick" to the other. When the scales finally balanced, which would take numerous efforts, everyone would be satisfied that we had divided our meagre ration out equally.

Anyone who, fortunately, has never had to do such things, who has never endured genuine hunger, will struggle to fully understand the meaning of the word "bread", or to comprehend how a few crumbs more or less could have made the difference between life and death!

The toilet facilities had been hurriedly put together inside the tunnel when we worked: for the toilet, we had to use old empty petrol barrels that had been cut in half, with a plank of wood balanced across the top where we would sit. We were only allowed to stop working to answer the call of nature once a day, during the morning. Very often, those barrels were not emptied, and we were by now so thin that when we needed to use the toilet, we would slip off the plank and end up with our backside immersed in what had already been deposited in the barrel (this actually happened to me). The smell that rose from the barrel was enough to knock you sick. How many times, in the darkness of the tunnel, breathing that vile and humid atmosphere did I think of the sun and air of my home, of Italy!

One day I found myself outside the tunnel, as we had to build a small road through the countryside: under an apple-tree, there was one of these "toilet" facilities I have described. I asked (and got) permission to go to the toilet, not because I actually needed to, but simply to have a short breather and a break from the hard work. In the warm May air and the shade of the apple-tree, balanced precariously on the plank of the "toilet", I happened to nod off. I had never done that before. Two SS guards stood not far away with a guard-dog noticed: they let the dog loose on me, and the beast, carried away in his frenzy, jumped up on me, with its front paws on my shoulders. The shove that he gave me very nearly made me fall into the putrid liquid in the barrel. Fortunately, the dog was muzzled, otherwise it would have ripped my throat out. I managed to run off, and while I was running, I noticed that the two SS were laughing heartily at the practical joke they had played on me. The fear this incident provoked in me was such that subsequently, I would think twice about going to the toilet unless it was absolutely necessary. It is worth highlighting that these "toilet facilities" were clearly visible to everyone, without any screen or privacy, so that the SS could always watch our every movement in any moment.

How many times I thought that if my parents had seen me thus, reduced to such a state, that they would have difficulty even recognising me, but without doubt they would have been so upset. But our suffering, the struggle to survive, the egoism that became worse in each of us each day, left little time for sentimentality or family memories.

One day, when I was so tired that I was working somewhat slowly, I did not realise that a German engineer was watching me. I saw him come up to me at the last second, and without saying a word, gave me a violent slap as punishment for not working quickly enough. On another occasion, the head of our work-detail (who was always a German, but a civilian, not a soldier) aimed a vicious swipe at me with the sharp edge of a shovel: if I had not swayed out of the way in time to avoid the blow, he would have taken my arm clean off.

And so our life continued like this, day in, day out: back-breaking work, hunger, whippings until we were covered in blood, or sometimes even dead. The Germans would inflict the most incredible, atrocious punishments, like making us stand or kneel on the roof of a barracks while the snow came down. Sometimes I thought that human beings could not possibly hand out such punishments to their fellow men, which were increasingly difficult to survive. I also thought the Germans as cruel and blood-thirsty as any wild beast, or that their feelings and consciences had in fact never developed at all. On other occasions, it all seemed like that some sad unending nightmare, but the physical pain we endured confirmed that this was reality and no bad dream.

On one occasion, I awoke with an outbreak of St Anthony's fire on my nose, but I did not report to the infirmary for fear that they would kill me. While I was standing in line for roll-call, one of the SS noticed this swelling and infection, and he forced me to go to the infirmary. The doctor gave me eleven days off work, applying a cream to treat the problem: in order to lengthen my unexpected stay in the infirmary, I would remove all the cream from my nose when I was alone, put it to one side, and then re-apply it the next day before the doctor would come to see me. I had thought that the longer it took me to recover, the longer I would be off to work, and so I could try and recover my strength a little, even if the rations in the infirmary were the same as those given to the slave-labourers. But my stay in the ward did not last more than fifteen days: when I was released, I hoped to be allowed a few days in the barracks to recuperate, but it did not happen that way: instead, I was sent straight back to work!

Sometimes, we would take turns to work outside the camp (always under the close supervision of the SS), in a nearby town called Salza. Our duties varied: in winter, we cleared the snow, or we would repair damaged roads. While we working, worn out by cold and the hunger, little children (who seemed around 8-9 years old) would watch us, with their mothers nearby, calling out: "Italians, how hungry you are!", before spitting on us; none of the mothers would tell them off or shout at them for this. I remember only on one occasion when one of the mothers slapped her child as punishment for the humiliations they were heaping on us, maybe because she was moved to pity by the sight of us in those conditions.

Even in the camp itself, us Italians were hated: the Russians thought we were all Fascists, while the Germans considered us traitors who had aligned ourselves with the Americans.

9. Other unfortunate prisoners

During my sad and seemingly interminable stay in barracks (Block) 18, I got to know some Italians: Eugenio Canzutti, a fellow soldier from Trieste, who had been arrested with me in Albania, who died from hunger and exhaustion. Poor Canzutti: it fell to me to throw his emaciated body onto the pile of corpses in a small wagon to be taken to the crematorium. Gino Tonini, from Pistoia, met the same sad end, who died heart-broken by the memories of his wife and their two small children who he would never see again. I also got to know Mario Lamberti, from Pietrasanta in the province of Lucca, who managed to escape a firing-squad by pure luck, which I will describe now.

10. The criminals

Due to the extremely hard work we had to do, malnutrition, and the troubles we were forced to endure, we became weaker and weaker with each day, and so our work suffered too. For these same reasons, Lamberti's work-detail also started to produce less each day than the Germans wanted: one day, one of the SS slave-drivers, who had noticed the declining daily output of Lamberti's squad, started to threaten them. Lamberti answered him back, saying that they were producing less because they were exhausted: if they received another litre of the "sboba" soup and a little more bread, they would be able to work harder and more productively. That blood-thirsty SS responded to this suggestion by shouting at them all, threatening them with execution, saying that "anyone who does not work for great Germany has no right to live". The next day - this was probably around the middle of December 1944 - he gathered together all the Italian prisoners in the camp square: the work-detail involved in the incident and its head was called out, while the rest of us stood there watching, unaware of what was happening. The twenty men in the detail were placed in a line, and he chose seven to be shot, explaining to all the rest of us that these prisoners had complained about the limited rations they were receiving. In the perverse imaginations of the SS and the camp commander, the complaint was seen as an act of mutiny and sabotage, which merited the death penalty. If the Germans had chosen to kill eight prisoners instead of seven, my dear friend Lamberti would have died in Dora, as he was the eighth in line. We were all lined up in groups of five, and made to walk to the execution site, to watch these poor innocents being shot, guilty only of having begged for some extra bread.

All us Italian prisoners watched our seven countrymen being shot, still wearing the Italian military uniform as they had only arrived in the camp a few days earlier, rounded up in Italy by German troops as they retreated north. The murders were carried out by an SS platoon, led by an officer: there was also a military chaplain present, who heard the last confession of any prisoner who wanted to do so, before asking them if they had anything to say: no-one replied. Their deaths were made even more twisted by the way the Germans proceeded: the prisoners were not all shot at one, but in groups of three. The first group was blindfolded before being shot: in the centre of the second group - as I can still remember perfectly - was a young soldier who refused the blindfold. At the moment when the platoon opened fire, he pulled his jacket open to expose his chest, and shouted loudly "mother, I will never see you again!" (we all clearly heard what he said), just as the bullets hit him and he fell to the ground alongside the other two members of the group.

The seventh victim was killed on a stretcher, as he was suffering from typhus, and had a very high temperature. He was killed with two bullets fired from the front by the officer in charge of the platoon. I never learnt the names of these unfortunate victims, guilty only of being Italian and hungry, not at the end of the war, nor after liberation. His work complete, the German officer turned to the rest of us, standing there impotent, horrified and stunned, and said: "Let that serve as a lesson for all you Italians!"

In that same winter, which was as cold and harsh as the camp discipline itself, we were all made to watch two prisoners being hanged (I no longer remember their nationality, and I never did find out what they were supposed to have done). This execution was carried out in the middle of the camp square, where a set of gallows had been erected, not far from the entrance gates. Once again, as before, the German commandant repeated the same threat to all 14,000 prisoners of all different nationalities in the camp, via a loud-hailer: "let this be an example to anyone who engages in sabotage, or does not want to work for great Germany".

The Nazi attitude towards us was now clear: Germany would feed us and we had to earn our food by working for her. Those who did not work were considered traitors or saboteurs, and so would be killed without a moment's thought. As time passed, and Germany started to succumb, the Nazis decided to save all their war material, recognising the scarcity value of even their bullets. Thus, in order to kill their prisoners, or to finish off those who no longer had the strength to even get up off the ground, they would use sticks, shovels, whips or the gallows. Or they would send the condemned prisoners to the gas chambers. Our lives, human lives, counted for nothing to the SS.

11. The bodies

Prisoners who for whatever reason could no longer work, because they had simply reached the end of their strength and resistance, or because they were ill, were first sent to the gas chambers at the camp at Buchenwald, since Mittelbau-Dora was not equipped with this particular killing facility at that time - then their bodies would be burned in the camp crematorium ovens. These human zombies, by now little more than shadows of themselves, never returned to the camp once they left: they were rapidly transformed into ash and smoke that spewed from the crematorium chimneys.

I know that it is very hard to believe, but the crematorium ovens could not cope with all the corpses waiting to be burned, despite operating twenty-four hours a day at full capacity. Many times, to speed up the cremation of the bodies, two corpses would be loaded into the ovens at the same time; we must bear in mind that by now, due to the hunger and all the hard work we were forced to do, the average prisoner would weigh no more than 30-35 kilos. Some prisoners were even burnt alive. The bodies were stacked up here and there, just like so much rubbish: before cremation, they were stripped, and their clothes re-allocated to newly-arrived prisoners. Those who died in their miserable beds were collected by a special work-detail, who constantly made the rounds of the camp with iron carts to collect the bodies of prisoners, that were then dumped on the ever-growing pile of dead awaiting cremation.

In our camp, we had two crematorium ovens, located in a cement structure on a small hill. In a small room next to the ovens themselves, there were hooks fixed to the wall: from these, prisoners who were not yet dead would be hung up, like animals awaiting slaughter, and often they would be burned alive. The crematorium staff, those who had the task of keeping the fires stocked with corpses, were prisoners just like us. The corpses that the ovens had not been able to burn each day would be loaded onto a truck via a mechanical scoop and taken to a wood not far from the camp: there, they were dumped in a huge mass grave, doused in petrol and burned: whatever was left was then covered over with lime: this was the method used for burying the dead.

On rare occasions, when we had some "free" time to ourselves, but always inside the camp, we would gather together in groups, each made up of one particular nationality. As we talked amongst ourselves, we would scrape together something to feed ourselves with, as we talked of the day when this damn daily torture would be over, and when we could go home, we were suddenly covered in ash from the crematorium ovens, which the wind had whipped up and blown away. We looked at each other, horrified to see we were starting to look like corpses ourselves: it seemed that we should shortly meet the same fate of our unfortunate colleagues who had been already been cremated.

Our spirits, like our physical condition, was now at rock-bottom. Each day was the same: we would try in any way possible to find a little more strength with which to confront our cruel and hostile fate, to emerge victorious from the torture of the camp, hoping to return soon to Italy, to our homes. But seeing the ashes of our cremated colleagues fall on us from the sky crushed our spirits again, as we thought of the thousands, even millions of us who would never see their loved ones again.

12. My reflections

Sometimes, I would wake in the morning, or the night, to find that my neighbour in "bed" had died in his sleep: I am not ashamed to say it, but my first thought in those moments was to go and see if they had left something to eat in their "bowl" before they had died, maybe even just some crumbs left over from our miserable daily ration, always making sure that no-one saw what I was doing.

These actions should not be considered the result of a cynical inhumanity, but simply instinctive attempts to stay alive in the face of death through utter exhaustion. Even a few mouldy crumbs of bread could mean another day alive, another hope of surviving our ordeal to once again taste freedom. You have to endure such moments in order to create the unimaginable instinctive drive to survive.

Many times, in the light of the full-moon, I would look at the moon, hoping that at my parents would be looking at her at the same moment, and our gaze would meet at the same point, unknown to each other. These were moments of pure imagination, which were both joyful and moving.

One evening when my spirits were even lower than usual, I laid down on that filthy bedding, which was covered in earth, dirt and lice, feeling that I had now finally reached the end. I cried, as I remembered the faces of my mother and father. I so wanted to see them again just once before I died, just for a moment, before I gave myself over to death. But fate had ordained a different road for me: one of my neighbours in the barracks, seeing me in that state and running a high fever, gave me some of his still-warm rations. Even today, I have the feeling that there must have been some special magic ingredient in that soup. I feel asleep immediately after finishing it, waking the next morning with my fever gone, and with a new and reborn desire to live.

In total, I endured nearly two years in the camp, others stayed there less, for others again, much longer. Every evening, before falling asleep, I had the same thought: "I have made it through today. What about tomorrow? Who knows if I will see tomorrow day and evening". Between the tears, and some forced smiles, I managed to find the strength to not succumb completely to desperation, which otherwise would definitely have spelled my end; even on the many occasions when I was beaten and slapped, I tried to draw courage from the fact that a normal life of freedom was still going on beyond the camp gates and barbed-wire.

It hardly seemed possible that my quiet life had been so completely transformed into such suffering, caused purely by the inexplicable barbarities of others. How many times I wished for death to release me from my ordeal, how many times I asked myself "why?". It is incredible to find that you have been sentenced to live: to discover, in the daily struggle to survive that me and all the other prisoners were engaged in, an additional torture, the constant psychological torment to sit alongside the physical trauma. How can we identify that thin line that separates the will to survive from resignation to one's fate at the hand of others? What is it that makes us live when we already feel dead? Maybe a small piece of mouldy and dry bread, or some leftovers rejected by the camp dogs... or maybe the hope to live on, to believe in the impossible, the desire to see tomorrow, and then the day after and the day after that.

One day, when my spirits were very low indeed and I was not in good health, I felt extremely tired and my work was getting slower and slower. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath, just in time for a passing SS guard to notice. He started to shout and yell at me, even if I did not understand a word he was screaming: in fact, I even tried to explain myself to him in broken French, but he did not want to hear any explanations, and confined himself to shouting "shit badoglio Italian macaroni", repeating these words over and over as he wrote in a notebook. He took down my prisoner number, which each of us wore quite visibly on our jacket, and did not leave until I finished my work. When he finally went, without having laid a hand on me, I was so relieved that I seemed to regain all my old strength: I felt ten feet tall. But this lasted only a short time, because the matter did not end there. Sunday afternoons was the only time during the week when we did not work (as the electricity supply to the tunnels would be cut off) but it was also the day when public punishments would usually be meted out to anyone who had broken the camp rules. The accused had to gather in the square, in front of everyone else in the camp: they were made to kneel down, with their stomachs balanced on a stool, known as the "little horse", and their backs facing upwards. Then they would receive 25 lashes of the whip (for small amounts of work not completed): whenever the work was seriously short, the number of the lashes was increased, but not enough to actually kill the unfortunate prisoner.

The Sunday after the incident with the SS guard, we were all made to gather in the roll-call square. Then, via a loud-hailer, the Germans started calling out various prisoner numbers, and the nationality of each prisoner in question. That day, my number was included in the list. The amount of work that I had not completed, that had been reported by the SS guard, was considered a more minor offence: for this "slight" lack of production, I received 25 lashes on the back, delivered with such force that even the first blows seemed to split me in half. When it was over, I was little more than one big bruise, such that I was in considerable pain for days after, and made it difficult even to walk. As soon as I could, I would pause a while to relieve the pain somewhat, but this time I was very careful to make sure that the guards did not catch me doing it again. Had I been discovered and punished again in the same way, I would definitely have not survived. 56 years after that whipping, I still carry the scars on my back today.

We would carry out whatever small acts of sabotage and resistance we could manage, or try to make contact with the outside world, with the Red Cross, the Americans or anyone else who might have been able to help us. There were prisoners of every level of education and expertise, including engineers, doctors, teachers: some of them had been technical experts in civilian life, and they managed to build a crude radio transmitter, using materials stolen from the tunnel stores, in the hope of making contact with the Americans. Unfortunately the plan was never carried out, as the SS discovered the small transmitter, and massacred the prisoners involved. When this happened, I was set to work in a mill near Magdeburg.

13. Freedom

I spent nearly two years here in the camp: our hopes of returning home were by now very weak, particularly since we had no news from the outside world at all, since the Germans did not any information filter through to

us. However, we were still able to grasp by the beginning of 1945 that the fortunes of war had turned decisively against Germany. Out of nowhere, something incredible happened, the by-now un hoped-for miracle.

During the spring of 1945, I found myself near Magdeburg, with some other prisoners, where we were working in the fields and sleeping in an old water-driven mill. We were "guarded" by two SS, one of whom always shouted at us like a madman, pistol in hand: his Italian was broken, but still clear enough for us to grasp nonetheless: "I to have wife and two children. If Hitler loses war, I first kill wife, children and then I kill me!", waving his pistol around and using it to illustrate his point more clearly. But to be fair, that guard never once laid a finger on us. Who knows whether he carried out his threat, after the Americans had liberated the camp.

On the morning of 13 April 1945, we did not hear the usual shout of "Aufstehn!", that hated word barked out daily by the Germans who had come to wake us to take us to work. In fact, we did not hear any kind of noise coming from outside at all, not even the barking of the guard-dogs that the SS always had with them. There was a strange peace and quiet in the air, an unusual silence: after so much time in the camp, the littlest thing would scare us, but we were particularly bothered by anything unusual. The silence that day reminded me of the day the Germans had arrested us in Albania. But if silence on that occasion had been the precursor to misfortune, this time it brought the realisation of a dream: we did not immediately grasp what had happened, but in fact, we were finally free. The Germans had silently abandoned the camp during the night, once they had heard that the American army was already at the city gates: fortunately, they did not kill us all before leaving. We were finally free!

We headed in the direction of the American troops, still about four kilometres distance from the camp. In a split-second, as we realised that the entire area was free of the Germans, a wave of collective joy broke out amongst the prisoners. We did not know how to react: some ran here and there about the camp, some laughed, some cried, some jumped for joy despite their physical exhaustion. We seemed like a tribe of crazed skeletons, corpse-like zombies inexplicably filled with joy, inexplicable that is for anyone who may have seen this from the outside and without knowing what they had been through. Our long-sought liberation had finally started, for those of us who had survived. After four days of total chaos, the Americans arrived, and occupied the whole area: they could not believe their eyes at what they found in the camp. They were also deeply dismayed by sight of the prisoners, all skin and bones, barely able to stay on our feet. But the proof of what had happened in Dora was there for all to see, macabre evidence of the Germans' misdeeds: the crematorium ovens still smoking, the mounds of bodies piled up everywhere, all recorded in the dozens of pictures that the Americans took on entering the camp.

Slowly, we learnt what had happened in Dora: once the first air-raids had started to hit Nordhausen, and the Germans realised that the Americans were advancing, they initially decided to close all the prisoners inside the tunnel, set up dynamite charges and detonate them, so sealing all the remaining witnesses to their criminal behaviour inside the mountain. But the population of Nordhausen, which was not equipped with air-raid shelters for them to hide in, suddenly sought refuge from the Allied bombings in the tunnels. At that point, the Germans decided to simply abandon us to our fate and escaped, since they could not readily kill their own civilian population at the same time as the prisoners.

From that moment on, the sense of relief and respite that poured through us was suffused with the sweet smell of freedom: our slavery at the hands of the Germans was in fact a very recent event, but already it seemed light-years away to us. From 15 April until 9 September 1945, the American soldiers greeted us as we were their own, and treated us exactly as they treated their own soldiers. Having fed us, clothed us and given us medical treatment, they drew up a list of the prisoners, and then they transferred us to Osnabruck, nearly 200 kilometres from Dusseldorf, and set us up in a small villa that they had sequestered from its (evicted) occupants. There we stayed in complete freedom for nearly four months, until 9 September 1945, when they loaded us onto a number of transports headed for Italy. On 17 September 1945, with indescribable joy, I was reunited with my loved ones: all the dreams and hopes that I had kept me throughout my time in the camp, my nostalgia for home, had, incredibly, come true.

Gherardo Del Nista

prisoner at Dora Mittelbau (Nordhausen) November 1943-April 1945
registration number 0342- IMI, Barracks 18.