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How my father became a wartime internee and learned to play the piano

LEBOURG DAILY STAR ?

REMEMBRANCE DAY NOV 7/08

Feb. 5, 1929

On my ninth birthday, my father, born in Edinburgh, Scotland, of Italian parents, said, "Happy birthday, Leonardo, I have a great present for you... You are going to Italy!"

"Thanks, Dad, are you going with me?"

"No," said my dad.

"But I don't speak Italian; I'll be lost."

"The Italian government has a scheme for young Italian boys to attend a

special holiday camp at Cattolica, near Rimini. They're like the Boy Scouts."

"We can't afford it," said my mother.

"Ha! ha! it only costs five pounds, including the fare. What a bargain."

Later, he was to find out the real cost.

At Cattolica, very early in the morning the sound of a mournful bugle called us to the showers. In a neat pile we each found a shirt, short pants and a small scarf, all black. For three weeks we learned to march with wooden rifles, watched films with lots of uniforms (I found out later they were called propaganda films) and swim in the warm Adriatic



Guy D'Agostino in World War II

Sea where I nearly drowned.

Father's five pounds were well spent, but I was glad to get back to Scotland again.

Sept. 3, 1939

On a Sunday morning, Mrs. Ferri, mother of my best friends, took us to the Presbyterian Church in Newtonmore, where we joined other evacuees and townspeople who didn't have a wireless set. The speaker crackled for a few seconds then BBC Home Service switched to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's short but well-known speech in which he told us "This country is at war with Germany." Some of the evacuees and mothers started to cry. I felt a lump in my throat.

In January I heard about rationing and going home. I couldn't have cared less about the first, but I was glad to be home with my father and mother.

"Things have changed in Edinburgh," my father said when he met us at the station. "They call us Dirty Tallys now."

He seldom went to the Casa d'Italia anymore.

June 10, 1940

I was awakened by a knock on the door. Dad put his light on, "Who is it?" he asked, fumbling with his dressing gown.

"Open up, it's the police," a voice shouted.

"But it's 3 o'clock in the morning."

He unlocked the door and three policemen rushed into the room.

"Mr. Guy D'Agostino, you will have to come with us." I recognized the sergeant as one who came into my father's shop from time to time for a free coffee. He took a notebook out of his pocket.

"Get dressed, sir, I'm afraid Italy has declared war on Britain. We have to round up all Italian nationals and take them to Picardy Place police station. This is all I know. I'm sure we'll get you back home soon, sir."

"But I'm not an Italian national. I was born here," said my father.

The younger constable grabbed Dad's arm and tried to put handcuffs on him. I didn't see my dad for four days. Mother told me he was in Saughton Jail.

The centre of Edinburgh looked like a battle ground. Pieces of broken glass were strewn everywhere, there was

looting. I saw men walking home with tables on their heads. One woman carried four chairs and calmly crossed the street to a bus to take her prize home.

I asked my father's best friend, Jock Mclean, why there were riots and internment of Italians. He said the government had panicked. It was war hysteria. He said the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, didn't want to take any chances so he told police to "collar the lot."

Later, I found out the police had rounded up all Italians, even those who were British born, and old men who had lived and worked most of their lives in Britain, fearing they might be spies. Families were divided. Many prisoners suffered in camps, enduring miserable conditions. Dad spent almost two years in the York and Huyton camps. We never saw him all that time.

Later, he was given a chance to join the British Army. Mother wrote to me at boarding school to say he was in the Catering Corps. "Don't worry about him," she wrote, "he's doing what he likes, and he's cooking."

I had a chance later to see my dad in Slough where his regiment was preparing to take part in the invasion of France. We were both overjoyed.

My dad sat at the piano with a cigar in the corner of his mouth and to my amusement, he started to play.

"But, Dad, you never told me you could play."

He winked at me, "I learned lots of things in the internment camps — even to play the piano!"

— Leonard D'Agostino / Cramahe Township



Leonard D'Agostino