

Remembering Bosco Salice

A recent book on Fascist internment camps in Italy during World War II prompts NIAF member Paul Minolfo to divulge his wartime experiences to friends and family.

by Maria Garcia

Photos courtesy of Paul Minolfo

During the early years of the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, Italian citizens deemed hostile to the state were tried and, if found guilty, sentenced to serve time in prison. Political opponents were simply confined to remote villages in southern or central Italy. Then, in June of 1940, Italy entered the war on the side of the Axis powers, and began conducting mass arrests of Jews who had defied earlier expulsion orders. By the end of that summer, in September of 1940, Italy established its first internment camps to house enemy aliens, subversives and thousands of Jews who were foreign nationals or stateless persons.

Italy's forty-three internment camps, mostly in the south and central regions of the country, were not at all like the concentration camps in which millions of Jews and political prisoners were put to hard labor and killed. The Italian camps resembled those established in the United States during World War II to confine Japanese-Americans, Italian-Americans and German-Americans, among others. Families lived together, children attended camp schools, and there were social and cultural activities. In Italy, some labor was required of able-bodied prisoners, such as farming, but only to provide goods or services to the camp.

Italy later established other internment camps for prisoners of war. Stories about the camps began to appear in American newspapers in 1942, after a journalist, Larry Allen, who later won a Pulitzer Prize for his wartime reporting, was arrested and placed in an Italian internment camp. There is little written about the camps now, in English-language sources, and as the generation that grew up during World War II reaches senescence, the thousands of Italians with living memories of the camps are disappearing, too.

NIAF Council Member Paul Minolfo, born in Catania, Sicily, has long remembered the four years he spent with his father at such a camp - Bosco Salice, an internment camp in Marconia, in the province of Matera. Yet despite his memories, Minolfo never spoke of his experiences to friends and family.

That changed recently, when Giuseppe Coniglio, a professor at the University of Matera, sent Minolfo



Paul Minolfo with wife Anne Brizzo on their wedding day in 1953.

a book he published in 1999 entitled “la Colonia Confinaria di Pisticci.” To Minolfo’s surprise, the author devoted several pages to the wartime plight of his family at Bosco Salice. That spurred Minolfo to tell his four children, and his 26-year-old grandchild, about his time as a prisoner of the Fascists.

“Our life before the Fascists was a very comfortable life,” Minolfo says, “because my maternal grandfather was an industrialist in Catania.” Minolfo’s father, who was an engineer, moved the family from Catania to Torino in 1936 when he began working for Fiat. “My father was an anti-Fascist because he was pro-monarchy,” Minolfo explains. The head of Italy’s government before Mussolini was King Victor Emmanuel. “He was very against Mussolini taking over in 1922.”

Later, the elder Minolfo was sent by Fiat to work in France and returned to Catania in late 1938. In 1939, the Fascists arrested him. The fact that Francesco Minolfo was a monarchist, and that he had worked in France—which was at that point mobilizing to resist Germany’s incursion—made him, in the eyes of the Fascists who were aligning themselves with the Axis powers, an enemy of the state. “We were awakened by carabinieri,” Minolfo says, “and they were asking for the engineer Francesco Minolfo. My father, in his pajamas, and in slippers, was handcuffed and taken away.” Minolfo’s father was placed in a local jail, and then in a Roman jail for several months, after which he was tried and found guilty. He was then transferred to Bosco Salice. “My mother was disconsolate,” Minolfo says. “Grandfather, too. He appealed to the Red Cross and to the Vatican.”

The appeals did not reunite the family, but Paul Minolfo was allowed to visit his father during his school vacation in 1939. “My mother did not get permission to go there because they said they didn’t have room,” Minolfo explains, “but I was put on a train when I was 11, and went to the camp. We had a farmer’s house, a cottage. By the end of 1939, the situation with the war had gotten very bad and there was no way I could get back to Sicily.” Minolfo remained at Bosco Salice, and was tutored by his ➤



After liberation from Bosco Salice, Minolfo served the Allied forces.



Minolfo, center, attends a recent NIAF gala.

father and by Frank Fracassi, a New Yorker, who taught him to speak and write in English. They were lessons that would later serve him well. Giovanna Minolfo and her other three children stayed in Catania and weathered the Allied invasion, although her mother died in a bombing raid of a commuter railroad near their home.

The inmates at Bosco Salice, according to Minolfo, were mostly political prisoners, dissidents and Americans and other foreign nationals who were trapped in Italy when war broke out. “Frank worked in the fields, as I did,” Minolfo remembers. Fracassi, a first generation Italian-American, told the Minolfos he had been one of those Americans unable to get home. After the war, Minolfo learned that Fracassi was actually an underground officer for the Office of Strategic Services, America’s wartime intelligence service and the forerunner of the CIA. Some relief from Bosco Salice came when Francesco Minolfo received an assignment from the Fascists to teach at a local school in the town of Pisticci. Father and son were given an apartment, and their living conditions improved, but by 1943, they were back at the internment camp.

Liberation for the inmates of Bosco Salice came in the summer of 1943, as it did for all of Southern Italy, following the Allied invasion. Jews in the internment camps in the south were also freed, but those in German-occupied Italy, in the North, did not fare as well. The Nazis conducted raids on Jewish homes and sent thousands of Jews to Fossoli di Carpi (in the town of Carpi, just north of Modena), an internment camp originally established by the Italian Fascists for Allied prisoners of war. These Jews and those sent to a larger camp in Bolzano—the two camps were later merged—were deported to Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz. Italians who refused to serve in the armed forces under the German-occupied territories were also held at the Fossoli camp. While the Italians survived, nearly 8,000 Italian Jews perished during World War II.

Minolfo was 15 when Bosco Salice was liberated. “The soldiers needed a translator because these guys didn’t speak Italian,” he says. The liberators were units from Canada and Australia, accompanied by a small band of Italian Liberation Army soldiers. “A major

asked me how old I was, and I said 17,” Minolfo recalls. “He responded that the papers said I was born in 1928. I said it was a mistake and that I was born in 1927.” Minolfo, who also spoke French, was then recruited into the Italian Liberation Army as a translator. Later, he was sent to Algeria for paratrooper training and served in the Allied liberation of Belgium. Right after the war, Minolfo worked as a translator for the Allied Military Government for Occupied Territories, and later joined the French Foreign Legion when he could find no other employment in Italy.

After a medical discharge from the Foreign Legion, Minolfo went to work for Pan Am. “I’m a war bride,” he jokes. “I met my wife, Anne Brizzo, when I worked for the airline. She was the secretary to the American ambassador, James Dunn.” Mrs. Minolfo, an American citizen, had gone to the Pan Am office where Minolfo worked to pick up tickets for her boss. “When we met, my wife was shocked when I said I knew the area where she was born,” Minolfo remembers. “I told her I was in an internment camp. I had a hard time, after we got married, visiting her relatives. That area was a place it was painful to remember.” It was when Minolfo was dating his wife that he found out Frank Fracassi’s real identity. “I was waiting for Anne,” he says, “and Frank Fracassi walked out of the embassy.” She told Minolfo that Fracassi had been an OSS officer and was there to pay his respects to the ambassador.

The Minolfos were married in 1953 and came to the U.S. in 1954. “My wife is my idol,” Minolfo says. After the war, Anne Minolfo worked for Nobel Peace Prize-winner Ralph Bunche, and her husband went to work for Swiss Air. “We have been married for 55 years,” Minolfo says. “She was always very understanding. I had a few years when I didn’t feel secure and that I could discipline myself.” Minolfo, who in 1995 helped NIAF found its first Heritage Travel Program, is still an active volunteer. If the painful memories of internment at Bosco Salice returned when he received Professor Coniglio’s book, Minolfo found comfort in his family, and in the knowledge that at least his story had finally been told. “There were so many families destroyed by Mussolini,” Minolfo says. “I want people to know.” ▲