

H.A. Barson Wanted

It all started with a post-war check for £10 made out to my great-grandfather, the signature of an English soldier and a dedication of thanks to the Constantini family. Before then I had never wondered how my grandfather had lived his childhood and experienced the War, but now I realized that the time had come to ask a few more questions, to capture the memories of a distant past, to collect them before they fall into the hands of old age and are forgotten in a dusty corner of the mind.

My grandfather Gabriele was only 4 years old at that time but has always loved telling his story. Every now and then he has some new anecdote to tell me and my cousins. And it's a bit like the Greek myths, passed down from person to person. Like the storytellers told them in the courts, he retells his mother's stories to us and now it's my job to put them in writing so as not to lose the memory of what happened.

He always says that at bed time his mother, *nonna Rosina*, would remind him and his little sister how lucky they were to still have a father with them. In fact *nonno Federico*, my great-grandfather, had health problems that would have prevented him from surviving on the front lines. On one hand, his illness had saved him from a gruesome death, but, on the other, his lung problem also made working in the fields more difficult.

Every now and then the sighs of the wind came, carrying with them whispers of stories of what was happening at the front. Every woman, forced to stay at home to take care of the fireplace and household chores, were always on the alert for something new and worried about receiving a letter from the army that could bring her ruin. All the able-bodied men of Farindola had been forced to serve in the Italian army which had now switched sides in the war. After the armistice of 1943, Italy had become an enemy of the Germans and was now fighting for its freedom.

Abruzzo, a seemingly insignificant region, became essential as it hosted the Gustav Line, which linked the Tyrrhenian to the Adriatic and thus divided Southern Italy from the German forces in the North. It was on this dangerous border line, where the Germans were hiding. They were even more alert and aggressive than ever, partly to oppose the Allies, partly because they were retreating. And it was precisely here that three English soldiers, escaping from a prison camp, sought shelter under the Gran Sasso.

The idea of hosting someone with such a big target on their back was not at all appealing, especially with children in the house. But my great-grandparents decided to take the risk. The country town where they were was strictly Christian, and no one abandons those who ask for help. So the small village of Farindola decided to hide the three in the cave where they usually took the sheep, and brought food and clothes to them throughout the winter so that they could survive.

My grandfather liked the English – “*gli Inglis*”-- as he called them, especially the corporal, H.A. Barson, who was nicknamed Jock by my family. He described him as an intelligent man, able to understand Italian because he had previously studied French as well. He remembered the soldier playing with his little, one year-old sister, Italia, and making her laugh.

Sometimes, when the English soldiers helped the villagers in the fields, the Germans paid a visit, and not a friendly visit. As soon as they heard the noise of the machines, the children ran away from the houses, went down to play in the river, and hid in the woods. Some of the younger women locked themselves in their rooms, others hid in the straw of the barn to prevent German soldiers from casting languid glances or looking up their skirts. The men and women who remained had throbbing hearts and resigned looks on their faces. Who knew what they would take away this time.

The Germans knocked on every door. Just one touch was enough for the villagers to open, unless they wanted to find themselves in a house without a door. My great-grandma Rosina remembers them, tall, blond men, in perfect uniform and with a smirk on their face. After they entered, just a wave of the hand was enough to make the women go into the kitchen. They would go into the pantries and choose the best piece of meat, maybe the one the family had been saving for a year for the big Christmas dinner. They would take the men aside, ask for their best wine and approach their women, leaving them standing there, watching. They would laugh and joke in their sharp language, which my grandfather, accustomed to the sweet sounds of a latin language, remembered with a mixture of fear and contempt.

Before leaving they didn't even thank the family. They checked the house, every room, every corner, looking for traces of the traitors. And when they were satisfied, they left, singing happily with their hands on their bellies, finally leaving the villagers free to breathe again and let their tears fall. Each time the tension became greater and greater, until one day, in the spring of 1944, the English soldiers had the opportunity to rejoin their regiment and embark to finally return home to their lives.

After almost 80 years my mother and I tried to contact the family of the corporal who had sent our grandparents a check, a letter in Italian, probably written by an interpreter and signed by his nickname Jock, and a certificate of recognition. We tried to reach the English military base, searching for any trace of him, but we were unfortunately unsuccessful.