

**“Grandparents. Grand stories. The closest stories from World War II” Written work – a memoir of my family and local history related to World War II, written in English, a written record of a conversation with a living witness.**

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## **GRANDPARENTS, GRAND STORIES: A STORY FROM WORLD WAR II**

My great-grandmother was not a soldier or directly involved in the battles of the WW2, but she has vivid memories of how the war changed and shaped her life and that of her family in a small town in southern Italy.

She was a teenager at the time, and today she is very old, but she retains a sharp mind and a strong memory of past events. I decided to interview her not only out of curiosity, to learn more about her experiences during World War II, but also because, as I approach the end of my school years, I realize that her family story should not remain hidden. I want to write down her authentic account to preserve it, in her own words.

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### **When the war broke out, how old were you, Grandma? Where did you live?**

When the war broke out, I was about 15 years old. I was born on January 6, 1927, in Lizzanello, and despite of my young age, I had to help my family financially by working in a factory that selected tobacco leaves. I lived in Lizzanello, in the province of Lecce, in a house in town with my family.

### **What was life like during that time?**

I remember that life during the war was very difficult. My father was a mason and did not live with me and my brother Pietro; he was always away from home. My mother did small tailoring jobs, often sewing shirts for the wealthier men in town, but she earned very little. During the war years, even basic food was hard to come by—we went hungry. At the beginning of each month in Lizzanello, there were long lines for the distribution of bread and pasta, but rations were scarce. There was what we called *contrabbando*—smuggling—where the wealthier families of the town could afford to pay those distributing the bread to get a larger quantity and then resell it to the poorer ones.

There was no work in Lizzanello, so I had to travel to Lecce. The journey was long—more than two hours to get there and just as long to return. We couldn't afford transportation, so we walked every day.

Planes were constantly flying overhead, and we all lived in fear. At night, we had to keep the lights off or close all the shutters. We had to stay indoors due to the curfew.

### **Do you remember any particular events from that time?**

Yes, of course. There is one story I often tell because of the strong emotions I felt. It was afternoon, still sunny, and I was with some friends of mine, walking through the countryside of Lizzanello. We used to see American planes flying over our heads, but by then, it had become normal.

That day, however, we saw a plane behaving strangely—it was descending. Soon after, we heard a loud explosion and decided to go and see what had happened. When we arrived, we saw the wreckage of the aircraft in the field, with countless cans of food scattered all over. It was like a gold mine for us—we were starving, and seeing all those tins of meat and fish made our eyes light up. Despite this, none of us dared take anything, afraid that they might be poisoned.

As we were about to head back, we saw something caught in the branches of a tree. We moved closer... it was the corpse of an American soldier. Later, we were told that when a plane was going down, the soldiers inside would parachute out to avoid the crash. The man we saw was probably one of the many soldiers from that aircraft.

I also remember another moment, perhaps the happiest one since the war had begun. It was a day like any other; my friends and I were returning from work in Lecce, walking back to Lizzanello. As we approached the town, we heard all the church bells ringing. We had never heard them before—they had always been silent.

When we entered the town, we asked the people why everyone was celebrating. Some answered us, cheering: *"The war is over! The war is over!"* It was April 25th, 1945.

### **Was the factory job the only one you had?**

That was my first job during the war, but there were others. During the grape harvest season, around September, I and other women went to work in Brindisi and were hosted by the Caiulo family. They were 15 in total—two parents and 13 children.

During the entire harvest season, we did not return home. We slept on straw sacks. Our job was also to take care of the household and assist the wounded relatives of the Caiulo family who had been injured in the bombings in Brindisi.

It was during my stay in Brindisi that I met the man who would become my husband—Antonio Pietro Caiulo.

### **Tell me more about Antonio...**

I saw him on my first day at the Caiulo house. I was at the door, and he was about to leave. Our eyes met. He was a tall young man with dark hair, and he fell in love with me immediately.

Over time, we got to know each other better. He worked for an important company at the time, SACA. Shortly after, he was drafted into the Engineering Corps (*Genio Guastatori*).

During the war, we officially married in a simple church ceremony. We were very young, and soon I became pregnant. But shortly after, Antonio had to leave again. So, I returned to Lizzanello to stay with my mother for the duration of my pregnancy. Then, my daughter Maria was born.

Antonio saw her for the first and only time when she was a month old. He was overjoyed and proud of his little girl. But just a few days later, he had to leave again—this time for Civitavecchia.

I remember this date perfectly. I will never forget it: May 14th, 1943, the day the port and city of Civitavecchia were bombed by the Americans.

From that day, Antonio never returned home. He was declared missing in action, and his body was never found. We never knew if he was on land at the port or aboard one of the sunken ships.

I became a widow at 16, with my daughter Maria, who grew up as a war orphan. She never met her father. We only had a photograph of him. But she—your grandmother Maria—always spoke of him and told his story with pride.

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Today, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to connect with my mother's family's past.

I thank my great-grandmother Immacolata for answering these simple questions and for sharing those terrible events with such honesty. I am happy that she was willing to open up to me because remembering war is painful, but it is important to share these stories so that more people can learn about them and keep their memory alive.

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