

TRIP TO GRANDFATHER EDOARDO'S PLACES

When my parents asked me if I would like to take a vacation to the places where Grandpa Edoardo, my great-grandfather, was imprisoned, I immediately said yes.

I never knew him and the thought of seeing where he had lived the most tragic years of his life made me feel closer to him.

So, in the summer of 2024, between July and August, thanks to the research work done by my mother and the memories kept by my father, we took one of the most significant trips of our lives.

We started from the place of his capture, then moved to the camps where he was interned, passing through significant places and cities to understand the history of the Second World War.



THE CAPTURE

Grandfather Edoardo is in San Candido, Innichen in German, on September 8, 1943.

He is part of the 107th Company of the Morbegno Battalion, of the 5th Alpine Regiment returning from the Russian Campaign. San Candido is on the border between Italy and Austria, there is a train station. On September 9, 1943, the day after the Armistice of Cassibile, effectively siding against Hitler, grandpa is captured by the Nazis here and sent to Germany.

He becomes an Italian Military Internee, a prisoner of the Germans, but without enjoying the guarantees reserved for prisoners of war, guaranteed by the Geneva Convention.

Like him, 600 thousand Italian soldiers say no to Nazi-fascism, suffering the tragedy of deportation to Nazi concentration camps.

THE PLACE OF CAPTURE TODAY

More than 80 years after that fateful September 8, the Caserma Cantore, which housed the grandfather and his comrades, is being redeveloped, intended for the training of the Alpine troops and for the athletic preparation of the sportsmen of the force.

The imposing building dominates the town of San Candido, with a splendid and peaceful view of the Dolomites.

A peace that did not exist in that September 1943, when hundreds of Alpine troops were rounded up here, taken to the station and loaded onto the train that would take them beyond the Alps, to a Germany steeped in hatred.



Grandpa Edoardo on a train – Caserma Cantore in San Candido

THE FUHRER'S KINGDOM

At the southeastern tip of Germany, on the border with Austria and just a few kilometers from Salzburg, lies the town of Berchtesgaden, a renowned Alpine tourist destination.

In the 1930s, the Nazi leaders chose this location for their holidays and soon chased away all the locals to establish a real headquarters, far from the chaotic German capital.

Hitler built his summer residence, the Berghof, on Mount Obersalzberg, and for his fiftieth birthday, his personal secretary, Martin Bormann, had a high-altitude chalet built for him, which has gone down in history as the “Eagle's Nest”.

Today there is no trace of the Nazi headquarters, it was dismantled immediately after the war. But since 1999, the Obersalzberg Documentation Center has existed, with a modern and complete exhibition on the history of the town and the atrocities of Nazism.

Beneath the modern building, remains the archaeology of the bunker that wound its way underground. Where the hierarchs gave the bloodiest orders, where prisoners of war, including Italian Military Internees, worked tirelessly to equip these places with the most complex technologies, at the service of the Regime.



Old picture of Berchtesgaden

FROM BERCHTESGADEN TO DRESDEN

After leaving Berchtesgaden, we went up Germany to Dresden, crossing a boundless countryside, incredibly green and incredibly yellow, among very colorful villages.

Dresden is incredibly golden, incredibly black and incredibly yellow.

We were attracted by its calm and by the music that echoes around every corner.

We imagine that our grandfather travelled up Germany through these places to reach the place of his internment, Stalag III-C, in Küstrin, Poland.



Golden Dresda

THE CAMP

We reached Küstrin, Kostrzyn nad Odra, Alt Drewitz, a Polish town on the Odra/Oder River, not far from Berlin.

Here, during the Second World War, one of the largest prisoners of war camps in Germany extended. French, Polish, English, Russian and, after September 8, 1943, Italians.

Today there are no visible remains of the camp: you enter a vast, dense pine forest, on sandy ground, with an undergrowth ordered by a homogeneous carpet of moss.

Some signs direct you to the heart of the pine forest, where there is a memorial dedicated to the boys of Stalag III-C of Küstrin.

We were breathless. There was silence, two ladies taking some photos. A light coming and going of people.

Along the road that led to the memorial we picked some wildflowers and, tied together with a blade of grass, we left them there. In homage and in memory of those young and innocent boys, captured and made prisoners of a war that they, did not want to wage.



Me, leaving the wildflowers - Directions to the field

THE DISCOVERY

The Polish town of Küstrin, where Stalag III-C was located, was completely destroyed in February 1945, when the Russian Army began its offensive on Berlin from here.

The concentration camp was in the countryside outside the center. The town center was in a fortified citadel, where today there are only walls and bastions and lots of greenery.

In one of the bastions, there is the museum of the history of Küstrin, with a wonderful display.

At the ticket office we found an employee, a young archaeologist and historical reenactor, who told us many things and gave us information that we were unable to find anywhere before arriving here.

The land where the Memorial stands that we visited the previous day, corresponds to the newest part of the camp, built in 1944 to confine Russian prisoners. Across the road, in the old part, there were other nationalities, mainly Americans, French and Italians. Today it is a very thick forest.

The boy showed us an archaeological map on an app on his phone, where, based on the findings, they were able to place the positions of the barracks, the infirmary and other buildings.

He showed us where the Italians were presumably, because there they found dog tags, mess tins and other Italian objects.

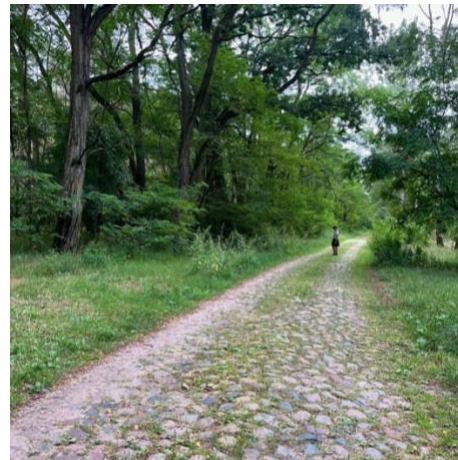
30 subcamps depended on Stalag III-C in Küstrin, which could have been farms, factories, construction sites, located in the surrounding area.

He told us that there are no maps of the camp from that time, but only sketches made by the prisoners, collected from diaries etc.

Most of the documentation they had was destroyed in 1945.

After the explanation, we went back "to the field" and went where he told us, where the Italians were probably.

We walked on the original pavement and glimpsed some structures... even imagining where grandfather Edoardo might have been during those terrible months of internment.



Küstrin station – The path to the camp

CIVILIAN WORKER

An agreement between Mussolini and Hitler in July 1944 changed the status of Italian prisoners from military internees to civilian workers.

This meant that many of them left the concentration camps, but were forced to work for the Wehrmacht, that is, for the Nazi regime.

Many men were employed on farms, others in factories, and still others in road construction.

All jobs that helped increase the German economy.

Their treatment did not change, the Gestapo continued to treat them like slaves.

Their salvation was the treatment that their employers reserved for them.

Grandpa became a civilian worker in October 1944, transferred from Küstrin to Stadtilm, a town in the heart of Germany, south of Erfurt and 200 km from Nuremberg, depending by Stalag IX-C.

He probably arrived here by train, there is a station.

Archive documents tell us exactly where he worked and the address of his home.

80 years later, we went in search of these two places.

The street name of his home is no longer there, but a bookseller in the village gave us information about the new name: Zum Hund ("To the dog"). We followed her directions and found it!

Now it is a ruined building, with the year it was built written on it: 1888.

It is on the river, it gives a sense of great tranquility, as does the village of Stadtilm itself. Who knows who he lived with!

From there we moved to the address of his factory, Rheinmetall Borsig AG.

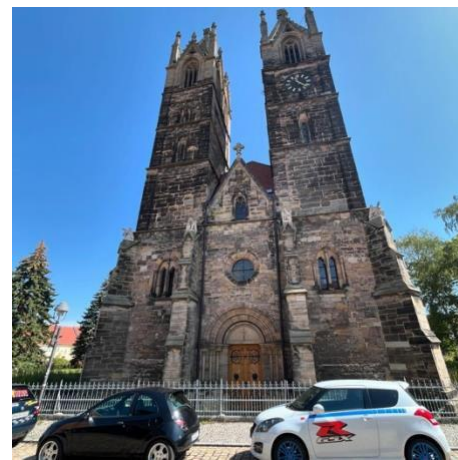
The factory was demolished, today absorbed by Gewes, which still produces car components today.

We also found the church, probably it was here that he came to place his hopes, for the end of that war that was keeping him away from his loved ones, with the inseparable holy card of Santa Teresa in his pocket.

On April 12, 1945, Stadtilm was liberated: Grandpa remained here for some time, waiting for his turn to be repatriated, to return to Italy, to his hometown Sandrà, near Lake Garda.



The documents with all the information – The house where probably he lived



The place where he worked and the church of the village

THE RETURN

After the liberation of Stadttilm, which took place on April 12, 1945 by the Americans, the grandfather waited his turn to be repatriated.

On official documents he states that he reached the Brenner Pass on “June 31, 1945” (!).

Today the boundary stone between Austria and Italy is sacrificed at a crossroads, between a shopping center, a multi-storey car park and a restaurant.

Forgetting the significance of that crucial monument.



Brenner Pass in an old picture – Me and my father at the Brenner Pass

After crossing the Brenner Pass, the convoys returning from the concentration camps passed through the Pescantina station, to be precise in the hamlet of Balconi.

Here a lodging center was set up to accommodate the veterans of the deportation, who after a visit and an interrogation to collect data on their imprisonment, could finally return home.



Pescantina station: an old carriage and the monument to the memory of the internees

On July 1, 1945, grandfather Edoardo finally returned home, to Piazza San Marco, to his Sandra. Today, a young family lives in this house, and they told us what they know about the history of this small courtyard.

We reached Grandpa's home where we met his son, my grandfather Massimo, the father of my dad. A special thanks to the mayor of Castelnuovo, who welcomed us in the hamlet of Sandra, at the end of this journey that brought home the story of the grandfather, and of the other over 600 thousand boys interned in the Nazi concentration camps.



Me, my father Mattia and my grandfather Massimo, in front of my great-grandfather Edoardo's home, in piazza S. Marco in Sandra, on Lake Garda