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# Occupation, Hunger, and Disease.

## The Great War as Experienced by the Women of Revine Lago in Italy and America

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by

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the transnational experiences of the women of Revine Lago, Italy both at home and as emigrants living in the United States during the Great War. Although, it is hard to evaluate the impact of war on one family, the article focuses on the women of the Grava family, and the misery caused by war. The onset of war in Europe cut emigration. Families were separated by the conflict and unable to communicate. One Grava daughter was trapped by the Austrian military occupation of the Veneto while her parents, brothers and sisters remained in America. In the Veneto they suffered death from war, hunger and the military occupation. In America war brought the death of many in battle and of millions more from disease. Whether in the mountains of Italy or the seemingly peaceful hills of Massachusetts, the Great War exacted its human toll.

### Introduction

This work examines the transnational experiences of the women of Revine Lago, Italy both in their home town and as emigrants living in the United States during the Great War, with a special focus on the period of Austro-Hungarian and German occupation of the Veneto, October 1917 to November 1918. While many studies of this period focus on the experience of soldiers this work focuses on the experiences of women. During their year under the control of the Austro-Hungarian military the women of Revine Lago suffered the brutality of military occupation, forced labor, requisitioning of food supplies which led to hunger and even starvation, as well as disease. Families were separated and unable to communicate for the duration of the war. In America immigrants from Revine Lago were subject to the US military draft as well as the anxiety of separation from their

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relatives without the ability to communicate, and ultimately disease and hardship as well. In the aftermath of war a pandemic of influenza killed civilians and soldiers alike on both sides of the Atlantic.

When the Italian government chose to join the Allies and enter the war in April 1915 their key aim was to capture the *terra irredenta* or unredeemed territories that were Italian-speaking regions of Austria's Sud Tirol and the city of Trieste on the Istrian peninsula. In addition, Rome hoped to gain even more possessions along the Adriatic and the Mediterranean at the peace table. Yet, once they entered the war it was the Italians who lost territory as they fought Austria along Italy's northeastern border. After a tragic defeat of Caporetto in 1917 Austrian troops descended into the provinces of Friuli Venezia-Giulia and the Veneto. The Austro-Hungarians and their German allies routed the Italian forces, drove out one-third of the population and ruled the remaining million civilians under a harsh military occupation until the armistice was signed at Padova in November, 1918.

This work focuses on the experiences of women and children in the central Veneto region, by exploring the diary of Sister Elettra Veronesi, a nun teaching young girls in Revine Lago; and the experience of one family from that town which had migrated to central Massachusetts in the United States. The family's daughter was separated from the family for seven years and survived the Austrian occupation of Revine Lago. Firsthand accounts of the experiences of the women of Revine Lago and the neighboring towns of Tovenà and Vittorio Veneto reveal the hardships of their struggle to survive the war.

In addition, the American Red Cross sent investigators to document the condition of the Veneto civilians at the end of the war and to aid their recovery from hunger, food shortages, lack of medical care, and war-related disease like typhus and cholera. The war's impact on the civilians of Revine Lago was devastating, as their deaths were triple the number of Italian soldiers killed in the war. The Austrian military had not only isolated the Veneto civilians under their control, but they harshly enforced the requisitioning of food, clothing and bedding from them. An already stressed food production system collapsed under the demands of the civilians, the Austrians, and the thousands of Italian refugees who had streamed from Friuli-Venezia Giulia into the Veneto seeking an escape but finding none. The Piave river remained a dividing line between the Italian defenders and Austrian occupiers. For over a year a million civilians awaited liberation in a new *terra irredenta*.

This work focuses on the hardships suffered by Italian civilians in the Veneto as well as the sufferings of those Veneto émigrés living in the United States. Those living in the United States could not travel back to their home region, nor could they communicate with their relatives. In addition, Italian nationals in America suffered their own hardships. They were subjected to draft calls and the global pandemic of influenza which was one of the initial sites where the virus emerged in late 1918 took an especially deadly toll in Massachusetts. I have also used Alison Scardino Belzer's framework, *Four Models of Femininity 1900-1945*, to compare two models of femininity: the *donna italiana* and *donna nuova* and to examine how the challenges of living under military occupation and as refugees wrought changes in their lives initiated by their experience of war.

### The Sister Elettra Veronesi's Diary

The diary of Elettra Veronesi has been published, the original excerpts by Carlo Trabucco, as a chapter in *Gente d'oltre Piave e d'oltre Grappa 1917-1918*, in 1941, a time when Italians again faced war in the fascist era. The diary was republished in 2000 by the Gruppo di Alpini, as Suor Elettra Veronesi, *Lago 1917-1918 un anno di occupazione austriaca*. Her firsthand account of the suffering and devastation in Revine Lago remains an important testimony to the resilience of the women of the comune. The original diary cited by Trabucco in 1940 was located at the Museo di Battaglia a Vittorio Veneto (Museum of the Battle of Vittorio Veneto); but it is now located in the archive of the Biblioteca Civica in Vittorio Veneto<sup>1</sup>.

The people of the Veneto suffered a year of Austrian military occupation and martial law, from October 1917 to November 1918. Revine Lago is a small comune in the *prealpi* or alpine foothills in the province of Treviso, to the northwest of Venice. It was unified from the two *paese* of Revine and Lago. Although it is a small town, flanked by Tovenà to the west and Vittorio Veneto to the east, it was in a strategic spot. Revine Lago fell within a special military zone due to its proximity to the Austrian front line at the Piave. Neighboring Tovenà was the site of a major military access route, the Passo San Boldo, and guarded the western flank of the Austrian headquarters at Vittorio Veneto. Thus the area had great strategic value to the Austrian forces. To the north was the Austrian Sud Tyrol, whose border with Italy was a source of contention. One reason Italy entered the war was to regain control over the Italian-speaking population of what they regarded as *terra irredenta*, and push the international border north to a more defensible line on the alpine crest of the Dolomites.

When the Italian military suffered a severe defeat at the Battle of Caporetto, on October 24, 1917, their line broke, and the Austrian military swiftly moved into northeastern Italy all the way to the Piave. Homeless refugees fled ahead of a rapidly advancing foreign army along with retreating Italian soldiers. They carried very little with them and arrived over the mountain pass seeking food and shelter. Some moved further south but many refugees remained to stress the food supply beyond the normal privations of wartime. In addition, some Italian soldiers sought refuge within the civilian population and presented a formidable risk for those who chose to take them in. When the Austrian army came over the mountains and occupied Revine Lago and Tovenà the civilian population had no defenders. In the chaos of the retreat most of the Italian forces, which had stood between them and the Austrians, had simply broken down and some even had disappeared into the civilian population. About a million civilians remained trapped behind the Austrian lines, including Sister Elettra Veronesi. She was born Carolina Veronesi, the

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<sup>1</sup> Diary excerpts reproduced in Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave e d'oltre Grappa 1917-1918*, Editrice A.V.E., Roma 1941; also Gruppo Alpini di Lago (ed.), *Lago 1917-18: un anno di occupazione austriaca: testimonianze di pagine eroiche di Suor Elettra Veronesi*, Grafiche de Bastiani, Vittorio Veneto 2000. Regarding location of the original diary as of this writing, in Biblioteca Civica di Vittorio Veneto, source: author's correspondence with Cristina Scalet, director of Museo della Battaglia, Vittorio Veneto and Francesca Costaperaria, Musei Civici di Vittorio Veneto, June 2015.

daughter of a prominent Verona family, and joined the Sorelle di Misericordia or Sisters of Mercy, and was settled in Lago in 1910, to teach at a parish school for girls. Her biographer, journalist and historian Carlo Trabucco, described Veronesi as a woman of the race (“una donna di razza”), who was possessed of a certain dignity, (“una certa dignità”)<sup>2</sup>.

She took tremendous risks to continue recording events in her diary during the Austrian military occupation. Her dramatic descriptions of her daily life as she struggled to care for the young women of her school and the people of her parish, give it special significance. She had a role in leading her girls and protecting them while she maintained her parochial duties. Her writings document the sufferings of women in war.

During the year of occupation Sister Elettra remained one of the *gente d'oltre Piave* or people beyond the Piave, trapped behind the Austrian lines as Austrian, German, Hungarian, Italian and American forces battled around them. The Austrians set up an airfield, zeppelins and airplanes hovered over the town, and they strung barbed wire, moved in heavy cannons, and constructed railways and tunnels to secure their control. But by 1918 they were desperate for basic supplies and stripped the civilians of food, animals, equipment, bedding and even clothing.

Her most dramatic statement which described the hardships they endured in 1918 Veronesi wrote: hunger, hunger, hunger (“Fame, fame, fame”). Her school had been closed, her young female students and the remaining civilians were under the control of a foreign army that requisitioned their property, forced them into laboring for the military, and restricted their movements. Their captors rapidly stripped the countryside of food, then requisitioned everything from them or took it by force. She became a leader in the women’s resistance to the invasion.

Together the women of the Revine Lago resisted as best they could, and were models of the *donna italiana*, who, according to Belzer, “saw their work as civic work” and who “elevated their *italianità*”<sup>3</sup>. In her diary Elettra Veronesi described her role in facing the arrival of the Austrians as they took over the Chiesa di San Giorgio, closed her school and smashed a portrait of the King as well as one of General Cadorna. Her work was to protect the community and especially its children.

Revine Lago first swelled with civilian refugees who fled ahead of the Italian military’s retreat, then came the broken Italian forces, and finally the pursuing Austrians, as they flooded the town to nearly three times its normal population. A farming community that relied upon cutting hay, gathering wood, and small farms to support itself did not have enough resources to feed the waves of refugees and soldiers who crowded into the town in 1918. The Austrian military began searching homes for Italian soldiers. Sister Elettra heard Austrian soldiers pounding on her door, in search of the retreating Italians, demanding “Soldato italiano?” She later watched Italian prisoners marched from the town and mourned all they had lost in a country reduced to slavery (“essere ridotti alla più desolante schiavitù”). The de-

<sup>2</sup> Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave* cit., pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Scardino Belzer, *Women and the Great War: Femininity Under Fire in Italy*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2010, pp.2-3.

mand for every Italian soldier hidden in the town to turn themselves in was especially frightening since some soldiers had been hidden with the help of the parish priest. Veronesi described the Austrians' shrill and guttural voices, ("stridule e gutturali") as well as watching through her window as the small shops in the town were robbed ("negozi svaligiati") and the Austrians with loaded backpacks ("zaini rigonfi") on their shoulders, moving along the streets as they stripped the town. The Austro-Hungarian military was composed of troops from throughout their empire, and Veronesi recorded the presence of Croats, Slavs, and Bosnians as they streamed over the earth like ants, ("sbuchino dalla terra come formiche"). She wrote the children were left without a crust of bread, like prisoners, while the women were in an agonizing dream ("sogno angoscioso") and in reality terrorized, ("realtà terrorizzante")<sup>4</sup>.

The quiet alpine villages, by the twin lakes, awakened to the sounds of church bells, roosters crowing, and farmers tending their cows. But in 1917 she recorded the roar of cannons ("rombo dei cannoni") as the women and girls prayed for deliverance. The Austrians sang songs in German and shouted they would break the Italian line at the Piave and march on Venice ("Sfondata linea Piave...si marchia su Venezia") which led to the tremor of her heart and the blood to freeze in her veins ("trema il cuore, il sangue gela nelle vene")<sup>5</sup>.

Yet worse developed as the Austria troops began to search the church property, appearing at the nuns' residence, demanding "Swester! Swester!" They searched the kitchen, dormitory, chapel and demanded two of the rooms for their officers. Soon a major and a captain were in residence and began to search the property more closely. They spoke German and demanded the five sisters do as well, however they could only manage to converse in French. One officer told the nuns they made a splendid campaign, and then held up a magazine he found with a portrait of General Cadorna, asking if the nuns knew him, ("Lo conoscete?") The Austrian announced Cadorna was dead, which was not true, then slashed the portrait with an X<sup>6</sup>. One of the Austrians' first actions was to take over the classrooms and close her school. They moved their troops into the classrooms on both floors. They also demanded detailed maps of the town and the province of Treviso which the school did not possess.

Throughout the town they requisitioned food, livestock, hay and every type of supplies, and the sisters feared their secret food supply, a dozen chickens, would be discovered. Sister Elettra fretted that their cackling would lead not only to the loss of the chickens, but to reprisals against the nuns. Once hidden in a small room in the school, the possibility of their discovery led Sisters Elettra and Argenide to take action. They stuffed the chickens into sacks and cargo dragged the chicken coop away from the school and up the hillside. They managed to hide a dozen chickens and a cow in mountains. Each morning she brought them small amounts of grain. The nuns slipped away to harvest a few eggs to feed the sick and elderly in the town, then hiked kilometers to secretly deliver them to the unfortunate ill ("poveri

<sup>4</sup> Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave*, cit., p. 14; 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, pp.15-16.

ammalati”). She knew the chickens would become more valuable later (“saranno preziose soprattutto più tardi”), as the poor of Revine Lago saw their food supply dwindle under the twin impact of the hungry refugees and the Austrian troops. She estimated that Lago, normally a town of 1,300 was struggling to feed and house 4,000 persons as the Austrian demands took everything else<sup>7</sup>.

Veronesi noted that although the nuns saved their chickens the parish priest, Don Bortoluzzi, lost his treasured supply of church candles. The priest he could not save them from the requisitions of the Austrians, (“non salva le sue candele”). A much larger loss soon befell them, while the parish struggled to finish construction on a new church, the Austrians commandeered the unfinished building to use as a stable<sup>8</sup>.

### Venetian Women, the War, and the Austrian occupation

A number of Revine Lago families had migrated to America and were separated when the war began. Before the war, migration from the Veneto escalated in the 1880s and peaked by 1910. The comune’s demographic figures just before the Great War reflect both the number of residents (*residenti*) 3,037; but also were calculated the number who were actually present (*presenti*) in the town 2,440; the difference being 597<sup>9</sup>. This reflected the reality of the hardships already present before the war. Malnutrition and severe underemployment had led to grave hardships in the agricultural communities of the Veneto. Beginning in the 1880s, with the impact of government sponsored *bonifica* projects, large scale investors had transformed small farms into large estates farming a single crop. This transformed independent farmers into day laborers (*braccianti*) who found only temporary work at low wages in the fields of the Po valley.

Worse yet, even independent small farmers (*contadini*) in the mountains found the market for the grain they raised undercut by massive imports of cheap American grain. The decades leading to the Great War were marked in the Veneto by labor unrest and strikes which raised the level of violence to the point where *La Boje*, or the boiling over of worker unrest, drove even the most committed residents to find work elsewhere. At first some tried seasonal work in Switzerland and Europe, but then recruiters offered new opportunities for permanent settlement in Brazil. The long distance erased any hope of return<sup>10</sup>. Others reluctantly sought less permanent migration: they crossed the Atlantic for seasonal work in America, especially in the industrial northeast, especially Massachusetts and New York, where

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p.19.

<sup>8</sup> Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave*, cit., pp. 17-19.

<sup>9</sup> Bruna Berti Saccon, with research by Claudio de Zan, Toni Gervasi and Giovanni Tomasi, *Il Comune di Revine Lago: traccia storico-economica dalle origini al 1945*, Grafiche Pienane, Preganziol 1997, p. 203.

<sup>10</sup> For an account of why Veneto families emigrated to Brazil, see Tamara and Marco Rech, *Scrivere pe non dimenticare l'emigrazione di fine 800 in Brasile nelle lettere della famiglia Rech Checonét*, Libreria Pilotto editrice, Feltre 1996. For an overview of Venetian emigration to South America, see: Emilio Franzina, *Merica! Merica! Emigrazione e colonizzazione delle lettere dei contadini veneti in America Latina 1876-1902*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1979.

public works projects, quarries and factories needed a constant flow of new labor. When winter blanketed Massachusetts and shut down construction projects and quarries, these reluctant migrants returned to winter in their Veneto mountain homes. After long months of separation it must have been a thrilling ride up the steep, railroad line into Vittorio Veneto and then walk up the mountainside to Revine Lago. In the next spring the cycle would begin anew.

Therefore, many Revine Lago families were accustomed to long separations as fathers, sons and daughters chose to seek work in America. Like migratory birds, these *uccelli d'passaggio*, built a transnational life on both sides of the Atlantic. But they were reluctant migrants who tried to maintain their connections to family and their home comune<sup>11</sup>.

But the onset of war many of these separations became permanent. Not only travel but communication links between America and those trapped behind the Austrian lines were cut. The Austrian military cut down the telephone and telegraph poles in Revine for bridge construction, thus also cutting off all civilian communication with the town. Throughout the war the Austrians maintained their own communications through the *Feldpost* or military mail service, but they halted all civilian mail deliveries into the occupied Veneto. Mail from America was forwarded to the Red Cross in Switzerland and then shipped to Vienna for delivery to occupied Italy; but in reality communication was severed for the duration. Fears of espionage halted any civilian communication with Italy and the Austrian strictures only tightened as the war drew to a close.

One Revine Lago family's experience illustrates the hardships and separation brought by the war. This family exemplifies the experience of many others: Angela managed their farm in Revine Lago and raised her children while her husband Giovanni repeatedly traveled to work in America. First he went in Chicago, then to Fitchburg, Massachusetts in a series of seasonal trips between 1901 and 1909. In 1910 most of the family left for America. But one daughter, we will call her Rita, then seven years old, remained behind with relatives in Revine Lago. It is not known why the parents left her behind. One member of her family recalled that their mother, Angela, feared the whole family might go down with the ship crossing the Atlantic. Another story was that the mother and daughter, Rita, did not get along. Rita remained behind as the others emigrated and went to the church school where Sister Elettra taught. She lived with her relatives throughout the war and occupation, while her parents, brothers and sisters were in America but could not help her. During their separation three sons were born to the family, although she had never seen or heard of her new brothers.

The military occupation must have been terrifying for a young child separated from her family. The town filled with not only Austrian soldiers but a linguistic and ethnic polyglot of allies. Germany sent reinforcements to the Austrians, and the Austro-Hungarian military included a variety of ethnic and religious groups. Don

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<sup>11</sup> Teresa Fava Thomas, *The Reluctant Migrants: Migration from the Italian Veneto to Central Massachusetts*, Teneo Press, Amherst 2015.

Bortoluzzi, in his *Memorie*, records the presence of Croats and a variety of soldiers from various ethnic groups within greater Austro-Hungarian empire<sup>12</sup>.

The Austrians needed a source of food for their soldiers and horses, which was requisitioned from the civilians. They also needed to establish transportation links to bring in military supplies. There was a rail link running from Conegliano north through Vittorio Veneto and further north towards Belluno but there was no east-west connection into Revine. Over time the Austrians channeled military reinforcements come down through the mountain passes on horseback and in mule-drawn wagons. Towns nearest the front on the Piave, like Revine Lago and Tovenà, fell under a particularly harsh form of military control. The Austrians held it under a special form of military control, labeling it “territorio sottoposto ad amministrazione militare”<sup>13</sup>.

Housing was also needed. Their occupation of the half-constructed church and the school caused particular distress, since it made teaching impossible. Construction on the church had been halted then the Austrians converted it to a stable, and billeted soldiers in Revinese homes. Already under the burden of Italian refugees, these additional raised the question of whether a civilian population already suffering malnutrition might soon face starvation.

Why did the Austrians hold such tight control over a string of small mountain towns? A narrow stretch of land on the northern side of Piave was the Austrian front line and this special military zone was where the Austrians exerted strong control over the population since it protected the western flank of their military headquarters at Vittorio Veneto. Revine Lago and Tovenà held a particular geostrategic value. They were situated on the *prealpi*, a line of steep foothills running west from the Austrian base in Vittorio Veneto, and sat at the bottom of a narrow ravine that was a key supply line for the Austrians. The Passo San Boldo became even more vital in 1918. To allow these towns to be taken by the Italian military would have opened a flanking attack on the Austrian headquarters from higher ground. Austrian forces brought in heavy cannon to secure control over the town. They had mapped the region during an earlier occupation in 1833 and began surveying anew in 1918. Vittorio Veneto developed into a key headquarters as well as a recovery center for their wounded. The town’s civilian hospitals were converted to Austrian military use, but this denied the civilians in Revine Lago access to the only medical care in the region<sup>14</sup>.

In Tovenà, to the west of Revine Lago, the Austrian army planned to build a road up the *Passo San Boldo* (San Boldo Pass). The Austrians needed to build the road, bridges and a tunnel up the mountain side. There was a rough road, but the Austrians wanted to send military supplies down the mountainside then through

<sup>12</sup> Don Bortoluzzi, *Memorie*, unpublished typescript, Museo della Battaglia di Vittorio Veneto, Vittorio Veneto, Italy.

<sup>13</sup> Gustavo Corni-Eugenio Buccioli-Angelo Schwarz, *Inediti della Grande Guerra. Immagini dell’invasione austro-germanica in Friuli Venezia Giulia e in Veneto*, Nuova dimensione, Portogruaro 2008. Original caption on map: “territorio sottoposto ad amministrazione militare” (*Ivi*, p. 56).

<sup>14</sup> Early Austrian military map published in 1833 and reprinted in 1856, scale 1:86,000 in Giovanni Tomasi, *La Comunità di Lago nei secoli*, Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana della Prealpi, Pordenone 1988, p. 253.

Revine Lago eastward to Vittorio Veneto. This involved massive bridge and tunneling work. But with their forces spread thin who would do the heavy labor of moving rock, felling trees, and excavating tunnels? Austrian engineers supervised the work but their troops were not to do the labor. They brought in Russian prisoners of war and then forced the women of Tovenà to work on the project. Soon they had 1400 laborers working in two shifts working day and night. Austrian photographs show their engineers on the mountains above the town, surrounded by barbed wire, operating a box-like camera used to measure distances. Tovenà's women were photographed holding picks and shovels working on the construction project. Tunneling was done by the Russian POWs. The military control of the region was well underway<sup>15</sup>.

The women of Tovenà were laboring on a project which promised to secure their continued oppression. They cut down trees for the road and bridges, shoveled dirt and moved rocks to clear a pass up the steep 10% grade. Local people still refer to the structures as the Bridges of the Women (*il Ponte delle Donne*). It is also called the Road of 100 Days (*Strada dei Centi Giorni*) since much of it was built in little more than three months. Photographs taken while the work was underway show the five switchbacks cut into the narrow rocky pass which rises steeply towards the top of the alp<sup>16</sup>.

In January of 1918 the Austrians began another forced labor project to build an east-west rail link between Sacile and Costa which was to be used, according to historian Walter Menegon, "to transport ammunition, supplies and other necessary material to the troops at the front." The pressure used on the workers and their inability to find enough food led to it being called, "the railway of the dead."<sup>17</sup> By April 1918 the Austrians had converted another church in Cison, near Tovenà, into an ammunition depot, then linked together the roads and rail to funnel military supplies down the mountain sides into Vittorio Veneto.

In a display of captured Austrian military equipment the Italian Guardia di Finanza documented how the soldier's gear included two varieties of what was called a *mazza ferrata* or iron mace. The display noted this was a "mace with iron used by Austrians against prisoners" and included four rows of sharp teeth and a pointed cap mounted on a heavy wooden baton<sup>18</sup>. It might be assumed that such implements were used on the laborers as well, since prisoners and forced laborers worked together on these construction projects. The exhibit also displayed uniforms with "Sturmtrupp" deaths' head badges and armed with 8mm revolvers. One

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Menegon, *Il Vittorioso nella Grande Guerra: documenti postali, immagini di Vittorio e paesi limitrofi dal 1915 al 1918: con particolare riferimento all'anno di invasione*, Momenti AICS, Belluno 2008, p. 111 and "Sacile Costa Railway," (*Ivi*, p. 200).

<sup>16</sup> "Il Passo San Boldo e la strada dei 100 giorni," Il Museo Diffuso del Grappa dal Brenta al Piave (The Open Air Museum of Mount Grappa from Brenta to Piave), web page <http://m0269useodiffuso.feltrino.bl.it> accessed October 29, 2014. For images of "Tovenà - St. Boldo the "100 days" road, see: Menegon, *Il Vittorioso nella Grande Guerra* cit., pp. 269-270.

<sup>17</sup> Menegon, *Il Vittorioso nella Grande Guerra* cit., p. 209.

<sup>18</sup> Exhibit at Palazzo Ducale, Venezia, Italia, June 2015, *La Guardia di Finanza nella Grande Guerra*, text as in display.

can only imagine the fear that such troops struck in the hearts of women trapped under the occupation then put under their control on forced labor projects.

From the start the Austrians stripped food supplies from homes and barns of the Veneto then requisitioned clothing, bedding, blankets and even iron and glass from the local populace. Ironically, they photographed their soldiers' confiscations and reproduced the images in postcards which they encouraged the soldiers to send home as evidence of the bounty they had captured. These images show the center of Vittorio Veneto filled with cattle and swine collected for slaughter by uniformed Austrians. One postcard, dated November 1917, shows four soldiers hoisting a pig's carcass up to drain with the German caption "Im befetzten Vittorio" and describing they were preparing to slaughter and butcher. Beside the image is the word "schlachtfest" or sausage festa. Others show soldiers sitting around a kitchen hearth in a home. The caption notes it was January of 1918 and the roaring fire must have warmed them as the homeowners' remain unseen to the viewer, denied the warmth of their own hearth in the coldest months of an alpine winter<sup>19</sup>. Other images show the women of Revine Lago kneeling on the shore washing the Austrians' uniforms as the soldiers stand over them smoking cigarettes. Similar images taken in nearby Fregona show two armed officers standing atop a small wooden bridge watching over five women kneeling in laboring in a stream laboring. The caption leaves no doubt as to their humiliation by the invaders: "Soldiers control the laundresses, January 1918"<sup>20</sup>.

Images of Venetian women were used by the Austrians at home as well. The propaganda after the occupation tried to portray the women as happy and friendly towards the Austrians. An illustrated newspaper, *Illustriete Zeitung* of Vienna, used an image of Veneto women appearing to chat casually with a soldier as she drew water, with the caption, "By a Venetian well" in of May 5, 1918. Historian Gustavo Corni has shown that the original photograph was originally taken in a larger format by the Austrian military in February 19, 1918. That image showed three women and a child standing in line at the well waiting to gather water; but with some cropping the result was a more intimate photo of the soldier and the "italienischen Frauen". Corni noted this marked an effort of: "The making of Austrian propaganda of relations between women and soldiers of the occupation", the May 1918 paper carried an Austrian caption "An einer veneziaschen zisterne" or "at a Venetian well"<sup>21</sup>.

Sister Elettra Veronesi also recorded how Austrian soldiers ordered the citizens about and how at least one of them responded. After a young soldier ordered an elderly veteran, Luigi Carrer, to fetch a pail of water from the lake, Carrer, responded, "Me, a *bersagliere*, serve you? You are crazy. The lake is there, serve your-

<sup>19</sup> Menegon, *Il Vittoriese nella Grande Guerra* cit., p. 103; 249.

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, p. 268; 249.

<sup>21</sup> Gustavo Corni-Eugenio Buccioli-Angelo Schwartz, *Inediti della Grande Guerra*, cit., two pages showing the Austrian illustrated's cover and the original image: "rappresenta quasi un tableau vivant per l'oleografico incontro del militare di pattuglia dell'imperial regio esercito con le semplici donne del popolo. 'Pattugliatore austroungarico si intrattiene a colloquio con donne italiane presso un pozzo'. Per la copertina dell'Osterreichs Illustrierte Zeitung si sceglie un "inquadratura ridotta della foto del Kriegspressquartier con la didascalia "Pozzo Veneto", *Ivi*, pp. 266-267.

self<sup>22</sup>. Women of the town worked to gather any food that had not already been requisitioned. Chestnuts could provide food that would replace the stores of food that had already been requisitioned. They could be gathered in the woods, then either roasted and eaten, or dried and ground for use as flour. For the poor it is a means to make bread when no alternative existed. A people who lived by growing their own food and who earned their income from cutting hay, found themselves gathering wild greens (*radici*) from the fields.

The Austrian military began issuing identity cards (*carta d'identità*) to every person in the town. These cards were printed on both sides, one side in German the other in Italian, and specified the command area as well as the district of the person's residence, their name and marital condition, occupation, citizenship, religion, age of domicile, place of work and specific skills. The cards included a physical description with date of birth, height, eye and hair color, particular marks, and languages spoken and the person's signature<sup>23</sup>. The residents and the refugees were under a curfew and lights had to be out at 5 p.m. The Austrian soldiers who were living in civilian homes also had to be fed by the local women. The army also took women from their homes to do forced labor for the Austrian army as laundresses and on the road projects.

One woman in Revine Lago was approached by the parish priest, Don Bortoluzzi, to hide an Italian soldier, Gianni Melandri, in her home. Because the soldier bore a close resemblance to her son they planned to use her son's identity card to help hide the Italian. In a dramatic discussion the priest proposed the plan to Angela Da Riva, who was well aware of the retribution she might suffer, but responded she would do it to save a brave young man from the hands of the Austrians: ("C'è da salvare un bravo ragazzo che è fuggito dalle mani degli austriaci"). The physical resemblance between her son and the soldier allowed him to carry the son's identity card and evade capture<sup>24</sup>. As the occupation dragged on the population of Revine Lago was left with their fields stripped bare and their families in emaciated condition. Medical supplies were not shared by the Austrians with the civilian population and access to even the most basic care evaporated. In Vittorio Veneto one of Sister Elettra's compatriots in the Sorelle di Misericordia, Suor Pasqua Cappelozza, a nurse, chose to remain in the town's hospital to tend injured Italian soldiers when the military retreated after Caporetto. In desperation, she took opened a valise of medical equipment and took on the role of surgeon. She was later decorated by the king with a medal for valor for saving eleven lives<sup>25</sup>. Meanwhile in Revine Lago the remaining Misericordia nuns continued to secretly distribute eggs to the elderly and sick in hopes of keeping them alive.

<sup>22</sup> Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave* cit., p. 23. ("Io, un bersagliere, de La Marmora servire te? Sei impazzito. Il lago è là serviti".)

<sup>23</sup> Menegon, *Il Vittoriese nella Grande Guerra* cit., p.110.

<sup>24</sup> Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave* cit., pp. 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> Giuseppe Grazzini, *La Canzone del Piave, La piccola suora che vinse una battaglia*, "Epoca", 1968; also discussion of Suor Pasqua (Giuditta Cappelozza) which notes she received the medaglia d'oro al valor civile and was nominated for the cavaliere dell'ordine militare di Vittorio Veneto, see: Patrizia Dal Zotto, *La Grande Guerra e la Memoria nel museo della battaglia di Vittorio Veneto*, Regione del Veneto, Vittorio Veneto 2008, p. 26.

Hunting and fishing were key strategies for putting food on the table in the Veneto's mountains. Small game and birds could be netted or shot and it was a source of pride<sup>26</sup>. A key point of conflict with the Austrians was their decision to ban local families from fishing in the two massive lakes, Lago di Lago and Lago Santa Maria di Lago, just below the town. They total more than 2200 meters in lengths and ten to fourteen meters in depth with marshy shores, perfect for hunting ducks and other waterfowl<sup>27</sup>. Photographs taken by the Austrians show soldiers rowing on the lakes but the people of the town, who had fished the lakes and hunted along its shores, could only watch. Don Bortoluzzi, interceded in the hopes of gaining approval for fishermen to work but had a very difficult negotiations with the Austrian military. By May of 1918 the fighting across the Piave had intensified. In America the family of young Rita would have seen the local newspaper with headlines dramatically highlighting the struggle. The Fitchburg *Sentinel* used large black type to headline the desperate battle over the Piave: "ITALIAN FRONT IS AFLAME". The news that the struggle, literally so close to home, must have sent fear into the immigrant Veneto family, which still had no way to rescue or even communicate with their daughter<sup>28</sup>.

In May of 1918 the Austrians announced to Don Bortoluzzi and the nuns that they would take the church bells. Sister Elettra recorded sadness so great that she did not have words nor tears, ("I grandi dolori non hanno parole nè lacrime.") The bronze bells were brought down to be melted for use in making cannons. Throughout the Veneto every bell, save those cast before 1400, was requisitioned. The people who had heard the bells every morning and evening to mark the hours lost one of the last vestiges of their former life. Veronesi wrote they were left within a forced silence ("forzato silenzio")<sup>29</sup>. Then in mid-1918 she recorded the ever-worsening conditions: "Fame, fame, fame". Hunger ensued as crops were confiscated by the Austrians as soon as they were harvested. Her diary records: "It is more than six months that we live without being given anything. Shops do not exist anymore. Without bread, without polenta, deprived of oil, of lard, of butter, of doctors and medicine". ("Senza pane, senza polenta, privi di olio, di lardo, di burro, di medici e di medicine"). Her church was filled with cavalry horses. Pigs, calves and cows were absent, having already been confiscated and slaughtered by the occupiers. The troops took doors from the church to break up for firewood and cooked the animals they slaughtered. She concluded that death by starvation was inevitable, ("morir d'inedia")<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> For a description of the pride involved in the hunt see: Sergio Dalla Bernardina, *L'Innocente Piacer'. La Caccia e le sue rappresentazioni nelle prealpi del Veneto orientale*, Comunità Montana Feltrina - Centro per la documentazione della cultura popolare, Feltre 1991.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.comune.revine-lago.tv.it> page on "I Laghi", ambiente and turismo.

<sup>28</sup> Fitchburg Sentinel, Fitchburg, Massachusetts, May 4, 1918.

<sup>29</sup> Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave* cit., p. 26. For photographs of the removal and destruction of bells, which were often dropped from the belltowers, see: Gustavi Corni-Eugenio Buccioli-Angelo Schwartz, *Inediti della Grande Guerra*, cit, p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave* cit., p. 25.

She despaired of being freed: “If we cannot soon liberate ourselves, our destiny is fixed. Death by starvation.” She recorded that when they planted seed potatoes the Austrian soldiers who were starving, went into people’s yards, dug up the seed potatoes and ate them. The women tried to make bread from hay but no one could eat it<sup>31</sup>. Sister Elettra shared her food rations with the young *fanciulle* of the school, like Rita. In June of 1918 Sister Elettra sat with the girls of Lago and listened to their fears. She recorded in Venetian dialect their fears: would the enemy reach Venice? Another wanted to leave the town and go to Rome at once (“Voleo provar andar a Roma dès”). Sister Elettra read a poem to them, *La Madonina blu*, and recalled their eyes filled with tears<sup>32</sup>.

One resident of Travagola, to the north, wrote a poem mourning the death of a friend. Vittore Zanella recorded how his friend died waiting to find some polenta. As the war dragged on into the fall desperation only increased, as Zanella wrote: “Life continues - we need polenta...”<sup>33</sup>. Sister Elettra wrote of her hopes for liberation, hopes for the Italian army offensive, but it did not come. Hunger worsened and she recalled “You line up the elderly and the little ones and the women whose eyes cannot cry”<sup>34</sup>. The air war and the shelling intensified as the Italian military began to move onto the offensive in the fall of 1918. Austrian forces used artillery to shell the Italians across the Piave river as Sister Elettra recorded the endless booming of cannons, as the women of Revine Lago realized the lingering extension of the war meant they faced not malnutrition, but starvation.

In late 1918 the Italian Air Force flew over Revine Lago and dropped leaflets to inform people the offensive was imminent. There was no communication because the telephone and electrical poles had been cut down. After a year, in October 1918, the occupation was broken when the Italian military finally drove the Austrians out of Vittorio Veneto and released the Revinese from their captivity. Planning for the offensive relied upon espionage. The spy who provided information to the Italian command on the situation across the Piave was Alessandro Tandura, a military officer born in Vittorio Veneto. He was dropped by parachute behind the Austrian lines in August 1918 and sent coded messages via homing pigeon to the Italian command for three months. He reported on the construction of railways, *teleferica*, and work on the Passo San Boldo. As the Italian military prepared to retake the Veneto his reports showed that Revine Lago and the Passo San Boldo were vitally important to the Austrians. This was the key route for reinforcements and the command in Vittorio Veneto was deeply worried that the residents might be using their knowledge of birds, especially pigeons, to send information to the Italian mili-

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave*, cit., p. 36; 41-42.

<sup>33</sup> Vittore Zanella, “La Polenta,” quoted in Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave*, cit., p. 77 (author’s translation of text).

<sup>34</sup> Elettra Veronesi, *Lago 1917/1918 un anno di occupazione austriaca testimonianze di pagine eroiche di Suor Elettra Veronesi*, reproduced in *Lago Ricordi*, p. 177. (author’s translation of text). Sister Elettra Veronesi, text of diary in Carlo Trabucco, *Gente d'oltre Piave*, cit., pp. 11-46. Regarding school girls, *Ivi*, p. 24 and rationing *Ivi*, p. 32.

tary. The Austrians issued orders that any civilian found in possession of pigeons would be shot on sight<sup>35</sup>.

### American forces in Veneto in 1918

American forces, the 332nd Expeditionary Force, arrived at Treviso in the fall of 1918 to support the Italians and assist in the transition to peace. Once they arrived, they were dispersed behind the Italian lines and assigned to constantly march around the countryside. These long daily maneuvers had a purpose. Austrian forces were using aerial observations to calculate the buildup of Italian forces in the closing months of the war. Such constant movement allowed the small group of Americans to appear more numerous to aerial observers. After the war the Americans found Austrian Air Intelligence had reported “over 100,000 Americans on the Italian front” instead of the 332nd American Lions 4,000. A captured Austrian confidently told interrogators he knew there were 300,000 Americans south of the Piave<sup>36</sup>.

As the offensive began the 332nd moved across the Piave in support of the Italian offensive, then remained until 1920 scattered across the Veneto. They published a unit newspaper which recorded their experiences, including their interaction with women in the Veneto. Private Reinert, the illustrator, made a series of sketches documenting their experiences. He depicts women doing laundry on small platforms beside a stream and even drew a full face portrait of one woman; and recorded the Americans eating chestnuts, hiking through Venice, and admiring the scenery, both architectural and feminine<sup>37</sup>.

The Americans were playing the role of liberators, and their memoir reflects a very different relationship between the soldiers and women of the Veneto. Rather than controlling and dominating the civilians the Americans are portrayed greeting people in their own version of phonetic Italian: “Bon Jorno Seenoreena”, and a smiling Veneto woman responding: “Bon Giorno Americano”. Below the sketch is the caption “It didn’t take the boys but a short time to get on to a few useful words.” The only miscreant portrayed was a hungry private who was posted “where the grapes were the thickest” and ate his fill. The “grape expedition,” as it became known, led to cash compensation being paid to the Veneto farmer for the grapes<sup>38</sup>. One sketch portrays the difference between the stereotype of Italians which the Americans had brought from the USA and what they discovered in the Veneto: “What we expected and didn’t see in northern Italy” with a crude sketch of

<sup>35</sup> Alessandro Tandura, *Tre Mesi di Spionaggio Oltre Piave. Agosto-Ottobre 1918*, Longo & Zoppelli, Treviso 1934, pp. 95-96. The Italian military maintained developed it Pigeon Service, il servizio colombi viaggiatori, with 65 dovecotes, 9,000 trained pigeons, each carrying the penne remiganti or wing markings, Exhibit at Palazzo Ducale, Venezia, *La Guardia di Finanza nella Grande Guerra*, June 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Dalessandro-Rebecca Dalessandro, *American Lions: The 332nd Infantry Regiment in Italy in World War I*, Schiffer Publishing, Atglen 2010, p. 117.

<sup>37</sup> *Ivi*, p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, p. 215.

a fat banana vendor. Beneath it is double panel showing a woman selling eggs to the soldiers and then the soldiers in a restaurant having their cache of eggs fried up. Another sketch of two soldiers chatting in their own American dialect: “You should see the peech of ah seenoreena that’s doing my washing - her name is Rosa” and the second panel showing smiles all around as five soldiers deliver their laundry with the caption “bona sera Rosa” as they hand over their laundry to a smiling woman standing at her front door<sup>39</sup>.

The relationship is very different from the Austrian military photographs of soldiers dominating women laundresses. The women in Reinhert’s illustrations are not on their knees but on their feet, and interacting in a friendly, formal manner. The Americans enjoyed their Veneto service so much they adopted a new unit name in 1919, “American Lions”, and applied for permission to add the Lion of Saint Mark, the symbol of Venice, to their uniforms<sup>40</sup>.

But the most important arrival at the end of hostilities was the Red Cross who struggled to feed and clothe the population. The Italian Red Cross struggled with nearly a half million refugees living outside the Veneto and a million persons in northeast Italy released from the Austrian occupation. A million persons wanted to return to their homes, or what remained of them, in an area that had been devastated. One estimate of houses demolished in the province of Treviso alone reveals 9,375 houses had been destroyed<sup>41</sup>. The American Red Cross in northeast Italy was led by Homer Folks, who had been assigned to document the humanitarian crisis. He was appointed Special Commissioner to Southeastern Europe and was accompanied by photographer Lewis W. Hine on what was called the Special Survey Mission. He later presented his findings in a book which documented the suffering, *The Human Costs of War*. Folks recalled “I left Paris for Italy and the Balkans on a unique mission. It was to find out at the end of a great war how much suffering there was, and of what kinds...calls for relief from eastern and southern Europe became more and more urgent”<sup>42</sup>.

He found emaciated women and children stranded in areas where roads, bridges and communications systems had been destroyed. He found the Austrians had confiscated not only food, but clothing, blankets, bedding and even underwear. Folks discovered the occupiers had removed the glass from the windows of homes and shipped it Austria, leaving homes and businesses open to the winter weather. Folks estimated 200,000 people in the Veneto were homeless, and concluded two cities had suffered immensely: Conegliano and Vittorio Veneto had been, in his words, “completely stripped”<sup>43</sup>. The damage was especially intense along the banks of the Piave as much of the fighting, especially the air war, had been concentrated there. Conegliano had been bombed and burned. The city of Venice suffered bomb damage in all six *sestieres*, but he four horse statues crowning the Basilica San Marco

<sup>39</sup> *Ivi*, p. 115.

<sup>40</sup> Dalessandro-Dalessandro, *American Lions*, cit., p. 180 and 186.

<sup>41</sup> Gustavo Corni-Eugenio Buccioli-Angelo Schwarz, *Inediti della Grande Guerra*, cit., 172.

<sup>42</sup> Homer Folks, *The Human Costs of the War*, Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York 1920, pp.1-2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ivi*, p. 176.

were moved out of the city, as sandbags and support beams were installed around the façade and roof of the church.

Roads and bridges had been destroyed in the Austrian retreat, so the Red Cross had great difficulty shipping in food and clothing. Just south of Revine, in Conegliano, the Red Cross found only 3,000 persons remained from the prewar population of 13,000. In Vittorio Veneto those who remained of its prewar population were in extremely bad shape since, Folks noted, the Austrians had severely limited what rations were allowed to them to “thirty grams of foodstuffs per person, per day, about one-tenth of the bread ration in France.” After a truck loaded with food arrived the mayor told Folks, “Thanks to God and to the American Red Cross, we have been able to live throughout this week”<sup>44</sup>.

Women had harvested *radici* and dandelions to survive. They suffered for so long from malnutrition they were classified by the Red Cross as “emaciated” and the worst as “extremely emaciated.” In the devastation there were no records, but after conversing with officials, Folks estimated that 20% of Veneto civilians had died under the occupation<sup>45</sup>. One of the most tragic events victimized soldiers and civilians alike around the globe, in September and October, a pandemic of influenza, known in Europe as the Spanish Flu or *la grippe*, swept through Italy. One of the first areas struck by the disease in America was near Fitchburg, Massachusetts close to Camp Devens. The outbreak overwhelmed the region. At the start over 5,000 people fell ill and 45 people died in Fitchburg. As thousands more fell ill, public events including funerals were banned and the city's record-keeping system collapsed as the disease killed doctors, nurses and city officials. No one has been able to determine exactly how many people died in the town by November of 1918.

### **The Grava family in the United States**

What of the Veneto family living in America? In America the family seemed to have escaped the hardships of war. Both Angela's husband, Giovanni, and her eldest son were called to register for the draft but neither served as the war ended (Giovanni would be exempted as the 45-year old father of six children and her son was called up weeks before the armistice). It appeared the family in America had escaped the risk of death. The war would only last a few weeks more. The oldest son found a job in a foundry, then he was joined by his sister and her husband. Together they rented a small house, but in November 1918 as she was pregnant with her third child, influenza struck, killing both the woman's husband and brother. The following spring her third child was born, but she was a widow with three children and no income. Impoverished, she returned to live with her parents. The family struggled as her father and mother, five children and three grandchildren crowded into a cold flat. Angela, grieved by the losses, was stricken with influenza but survived. The fate of Rita, still trapped in Revine, was unknown. Separated

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<sup>44</sup> Homer Folks, *The Human Costs of the War*, cit., p.176.

<sup>45</sup> *Ivi*, p. 177.

from one daughter, and having endured the death of a son and a son-in-law, and only in her forties, her hair turn white from the stress<sup>46</sup>.

The influenza death rate for Italians in America was extraordinarily high. In a 1920 study of the epidemic three factors found: worst hit towns were industrial areas, urbanized, and had railroad service. Proximity to Camp Devens was a key factor since it was one of the first areas where Spanish Flu emerged in America. The ethnic group most impacted in America was Italians, according to epidemiologists Winslow and Rogers. Italians they studied were 13.5% of the local cases and children of Italian parents represented 24.9% of the cases, much higher than their portion of the general population<sup>47</sup>. The death rate for Italians in Europe was the third highest, at 10.7 dead per 1,000. Only Spain and Hungary had higher rates<sup>48</sup>.

Historian Alison Kraut noted ethnic communities in American were feared to be the sources of the disease. She also observes Italians in America were accused of bring the disease to the USA, although by most epidemiologists believe it began among soldiers in military camps in Kansas and central Massachusetts at Camp Devens. In October 1919 Giovanni booked passage on a steamship to Italy, found Rita, who was by then seventeen years old, and brought her to America and along with two of her cousins. When the young woman arrived she found her eldest brother and a brother-in-law had died, and met her three youngest brothers for the first time. Her closest sister was now a widow with three children living together with Rita and her parents in a small apartment. The family struggled in low-wage factory jobs, as ten adults and children crowded together in an unheated flat. In later years she would not talk about what had happened in the Veneto during the war. Her sister-in-law recalled that when the war was mentioned, even decades later, she turned away and wept.

Rita took on a new life and became, to use Scardino-Belzer's model, *una donna nuova*, a modern woman, as she adopted to her new home. Her father gave her a nickname, *La Americana*, the American girl. In the 1920s she learned English, applied for US citizenship, although her parents never did, and bought American-style clothing. She found a job in a cotton mill, was promoted to an inspector, and later married. Although she was the last of her family to emigrate she became, in some ways, the most American. Over the decades her father remained a reluctant migrant, making another trip back to Revine Lago to visit his family, and continued to speak of returning. He remained an Italian citizen until his death while his daughter adapted to and adopted her new home as her own.

Was it worse to endure the hardships of the war in the Veneto, with hunger and military occupation by the Austrians or to live in relative peace in America but lose family to the influenza? Members of their extended family in Italy died in the war.

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<sup>46</sup> Confidential interview with Bianca M. 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Winslow and Rogers cited Camp Devens in central Massachusetts as the source of the spread into Connecticut, 185; and on proportion of deaths page 198, in C.E.A. Winslow - J. F. Rogers, *Statistics of the 1918 Epidemic of Influenza in Connecticut with a consideration of the factors which influenced the prevalence of this disease in various communities*, in "Journal of Infectious Diseases", 26, 3, 1920, pp. 185-216.

<sup>48</sup> "Estimated numbers of deaths and death rate (per 1,000) from the Spanish influenza," source web page <[www.cairn-int.info/article-EPOPU\\_402\\_0269](http://www.cairn-int.info/article-EPOPU_402_0269)> accessed Oct 29, 2015.

The military death toll in Lago was 47 dead, while an additional 115 civilians died of starvation and war-related causes. The civilian death toll was nearly triple the number of soldiers killed in action. Influenza also took an unmeasurable toll on the Veneto's population who were deprived of food and shelter. The pestilence of war took hold, as Homer Folks of the American Red Cross reported, with outbreaks of typhoid, cholera, influenza and even malaria in Italy. Food was distributed but the Red Cross but they had great difficulty getting it into remote areas of the Veneto. Austrian troops had blown up bridges and rail lines to slow the Italian advance. Birth rates plummeted. Folks estimated the total deficit in Italian births may have reached 1,435,000<sup>49</sup>.

Italian nationals living in America faced their own difficulties. They were subject to military conscription, and often lived and worked under more dangerous and difficult conditions. They were more likely to fall victim to urban diseases like influenza or tuberculosis because they often lived in crowded tenements. The influenza death rate, for Italians in America, in 1918 was much higher than any other ethnic group, and double what would have been expected.

In Fitchburg influenza caused so many deaths in so short a time that city officials could no longer track the burials. City officials opened orphanages to care for children who had lost both parents. Doctors who studied influenza in Massachusetts found that mortality among Italians and Italian Americans was especially high; and attributed it to the fact they lived in urban areas and had little money to pay for doctors. When ill they went to work rather than rested so the impact of influenza was much more deadly. Also, Italians often worked in Fitchburg's quarries and foundries, thus they often had lung problems related to dust and a foundry workers' disease called bronze chills. Therefore, some Italians working in America were predisposed to pulmonary difficulties at a time when the influenza pandemic swept into the region. Researchers Winslow and Rogers documented the deadly impact of Spanish flu on the Italian population in the United States and concluded "unfavorable economic conditions" played a role<sup>50</sup>.

After the war the Italian government calculated the sharp rise in mortality in this year of war and occupation in northeast Italy. The occupation led to two specific impacts that were especially lethal: the reduction of nutrition and especially the impact of malnutrition and ultimately starvation; and, secondly, the rise of cholera and typhus due to lack of medical care, especially the removal of public health facilities for Austro-Hungarian military use. The study noted the problems began during the occupation, "By the end of summer (1918) the bad hygienic conditions and environment with insufficient diet led to epidemics of typhus and cholera which notably alarmed the (Austro-Hungarian) military authorities"<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Homer Folks, *The Human Costs of the War*, cit., p.194.

<sup>50</sup> Wilson Rogers, *Statistics of the 1918 Epidemic of Influenza in Connecticut*, pp. 215-16.

<sup>51</sup> "Sul finire dell'estate le pessime condizioni igienico-ambientali e l'insufficienza della dieta fecero scoppiare un po' dovunque epidemie di tifo e di colera, la cui diffusione allarmò notevolmente le autorità militari": Gustavo Corni-Eugenio Bucciol-Angelo Schwarz, *Inediti della Grande Guerra*, cit., pp. 97-98.

In the Veneto the cities where death rates were highest were Portogruaro, followed by San Polo di Piave, Quero, Vittorio Veneto, Farra di Soligo and Revine Lago, all in the central Veneto. Portogruaro recorded a mortality rate of 490 per thousand and Revine 145 per thousand in 1918. What would have been normal? Before the war the Veneto's average was 20 deaths per thousand. The study concluded rise of deaths came from two factors: insufficient nutrition and the outbreak of diseases in a weakened population<sup>52</sup>.

### The Memory of War

How was the war memorialized and what use was made of those memories? On the twentieth anniversary of the armistice Benito Mussolini arrived in Vittorio Veneto. The shadow of the Second World War loomed. Mussolini gave the fascist salute to the crowd upon his arrival in Vittorio Veneto on September 24, 1938. The image of the victory at Vittorio Veneto had always been useful to the fascists. On his visit to the city Mussolini told the crowd, "I feel strongly this salute to our ardent fascist spirit and not the less our ardent love of country. We salute you on the twentieth anniversary of the victory in your city when has made its name immortal"<sup>53</sup>. The fascist government published a memorial booklet including illustrations of the King and royal family, Mussolini, Italian generals, but no photographic evidence of the sufferings of the people of Vittorio Veneto.

A month after Il Duce appeared in Vittorio Veneto the Bishop of the city, who led the resistance while Austrian troops controlled his residence and accused him of espionage, addressed the citizens:

Vittorio Veneto, twenty years ago – oh how we remember it! ...days of anxiety, of trepidation, of hopes, was the luminous center and suggest towards which convergence of hopes, efforts, and beating of millions of hearts of all the sons of Italy: the objective of the strategies of the soldiers, to bring liberation to their brothers. And God has...blessed our army, has accepted the sacrifice of many young lives, and has given us liberty and peace. We cannot possibly forget, for given of years, these glorious gestures (Eugenio, Bishop, 30 October 1938)<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> "L'esito combinato di tutti questi fattori, su cui predominava l'alimentazione insufficiente, determinò un notevole incremento della mortalità". Regarding the prewar conditions: "Le statistiche italiane, prima della guerra la mortalità in Veneto si aggirava sul 20-21 per mille": Corni - Bucciol - Schwarz, *Inediti della Grande Guerra*, cit., p. 98.

<sup>53</sup> Text in original: "Sento fremere in questo saluto il vostro ardente spirito fascista ed il vostro non meno ardente amor di patria. Sono lieto di salutarvi nel ventennale della vittoria alla quale la vostra città ha dato il suo nome immortale," 65.

<sup>54</sup> Original text in Alessandro Zaltron, *1918-2008 Piccole memorie, S.E. Mons. Eugenio Beccegato, vescovo di Ceneda nel periodo della guerra, dell'invasione e della vittoria*, Canova, Treviso 2008: "Vittorio Veneto venti anni fa – oh lo ricordiamo! – in questi stessi giorni, giorni di ansie, di trepidazioni, di speranze, era divenuto il centro luminoso e suggestivo verso cui convergevano I sospiri I voti I palpiti di milioni di cuori, di tutti I figli d'Italia: l'obbiettivo degli strateghi e dei soldati, che qui avevano giurato di arrivare liberatori di noi loro fratelli. E Dio ha esaudito I voti comuni, ha benedetto le nostre armi, ha accettato il sacrificio de tante giovani vite, e ci ha donato la liberta e la pace. Non si possono dimenticare, per volgere di anni, queste gesta gloriose (30 ottobre 1938, Eugenio vescovo)", p. 33.

In 1940 Carlo Trabucco, a journalist and religious historian, wrote *Gente d'Oltre Piave*, to document the struggle of civilians under the occupation. He devoted a chapter to the role of Sister Elettra Veronesi. Just as Italy neared another global war, this time allied with Germany and Austria, Trabucco detailed the sufferings of the Veneto's people in the battle against the occupation by Austro-Hungarian and German forces. Other accounts seem to have forgotten the full impact of the occupation, especially upon women. In a photographic study of the war a caption beneath a photo of the Passo San Boldo notes the road and bridges were constructed by Austrian troops in three months ("*costruita dalle truppe austriache*") while it was the forced labor of the women of Tovenà and Russian POWs which achieved that goal in three brutal months<sup>55</sup>. War brought the deaths of millions in battle and millions more of starvation and disease. Whether in the mountains of Italy or the seemingly peaceful hills of Massachusetts the Great War exacted its human toll by turning the people of the Veneto into exiles and refugees who struggled to survive as war brought only hunger, destruction and privation. Sister Elettra Veronesi and Rita both lived war but hoped for peace, "*vissero la guerra, ma sperarono la pace*".

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<sup>55</sup> Zaltron, *1918-2008 Piccole memorie dalla Grande guerra*, cit., p. 47.