

Foreword

by Antonia Arslan

“Our memories are our future”, Pietro Kuciukian wisely stated at a convention in Padova entitled “*Si può sempre dire un sì o un no* (One can always choose to say yes or no). *The Righteous against the Genocide of the Armenians and the Jews*”, presenting the international committee for the Righteous for the Armenians, founded to ensure the memory of the first ethnic cleansing of the twentieth century would not be lost.

It is with this phrase that I would like to introduce the reader to this short but important work by Luigi Massignan, a “fragment of memory” that describes one of the “extreme conditions” of the recently ended century, the concentration camp at Mauthausen, where the young Massignan, captured in the small town of Montecchio, Italy in the fall of 1944, passed the final period of the war from January 1945 until the Liberation.

It is a profound and gripping personal testimony meant for young people (above all for his own grandchildren, to whom he dedicated the book), so that they would be aware of tragedies that took place during the Second World War, hearing them firsthand through the engaging tale of a man like many others and the ordeal that tested his courage in exceptional circumstances.

This, however, is not a tale told in the heat of the moment. It is the work of a man from the Italian Northeastern Veneto region, and therefore one that comes from background with which many Italians can identify, but written over a half century after the fact without having lost its significance over time. Massignan preserves the clarity of the memories carved into his mind by the harsh conditions in defense of the essential dignity of man, reliving them with incredible intensity like a primal urge.

It is now well known that those who survive inhuman situations such as a Nazi *lager* or a Russian *gulag* forever carry a kind of guilt: first, because they are still alive, and second, due to the unending fear that they might not have done everything possible to help others that were in the same situation. This sense of guilt that torments survivors can make them into broken men and women, often leading them to suicide or madness, as in the cases of Primo Levi and the German Hebrew poet Paul Celan, if they are not sustained by their faith or another basis of strong emotional support.

To be able to survive requires two kinds of courage: first, the ability to endure the inhuman conditions of the concentration camp, and not less important, to be able to continue living after the fact often with people who are not at all interested in those stories, who have no desire to hear about how you had to fight for the last scrap of potato peel or how you suffered lying on a mat in your own excrement because of your incessant diarrhea.

Many *lager* survivors find themselves in a situation where they are not able to discuss their experiences except within small groups of other survivors. But it is of utmost importance that the horrors of the twentieth century not be forgotten. Testimony is the only weapon the common man wields against deception, against the repetition of monstrosities. In these pages, Massignan succeeds in taking the reader with him on his descent into hell while nevertheless maintaining his humanity. He is instinctively an “objective narrator of his own story”, as was said of the narrative writers of the 1800s; one who recounts his

story with the sober realism typical of natives of the Veneto region, without embellishment or modification.

He possesses a quiet courage that allows him to face things as they are: without hiding or obscuring facts, confronting events head on. It is this same quiet courage that gives him a deep faith, his simple faith in the Madonna of Monte Berico who protected him and, in the end, brought him back home. We see this faith emanating from some of the most painful passages, when his profound religion and trust in providence shine through.

It is also intriguing how he describes not only the physical but also the psychological torture, meant to destroy the prisoners' very character. For example, when they are ordered repeatedly to put on and remove their caps only to exhaust and humiliate them with absurd commands. And the dire necessity of recognizing the *Kapò* and the SS as superiors, as the unquestionable authorities. Massignan suggests that in any extreme situation there is a great deal of cowardice, such as those who betray their comrades to save their own life, or for an extra ration of bread, but also submits that no one has the right to either judge or justify. They are at any rate facts that must not be forgotten: one may think of the sober austerity with which he describes the episodes of cannibalism.

Massignan's book is dedicated to his grandchildren, a book which is written for the future, and which has a future. It is not the sterile fruit of an egocentric memory, folded in upon itself; it is above all a book about faith and hope. Sometimes it seems as if the whiners reign and everyone complains about everything. Perhaps having to occasionally "bite the bullet" could be good for us.

It would be fitting to end on a hopeful note, as the author does in one of the most touching scenes of his book; remembering an Easter service celebrated by a dying French priest lying on his straw mat, with only a few crusts of bread on a tin plate. Kneeling around him,

the prisoners pray, thus delivered from their physical humiliation, fear, and exhaustion. This victorious spirit (and a good dose of brazen Veneto humor) are the final impression his honest words leave upon the reader.