

Alfredo's Holy Orders

You may wonder how Latin got me into a very dangerous mission in the later stages of the Resistance, as a young partisan in 1945?

It all started with my family troubles. I was born in Pavia, just south of Milan, in 1926. My parents ran a public house on the canal. Unfortunately, they didn't get on well together, so before we were 16, my sister and I were taken from them and placed in two different industrial schools, on the order of a judge.

I ended up in an institution called "Artigianelli", where I went to school, learned skills and served as an altar boy. And that's how I learned my Latin.

When the war came, and as I turned 18, I was faced with a very tough decision: enlist in Mussolini's fascist army, or face deportation to Nazi Germany.

I chose the first option, as I wasn't really keen on travelling — while I longed to have a gun to take with me to the nearest rebel camp.

That's how, in January 1944, I grabbed my army issue rifle, bayonet and dagger, went AWOL, and joined the 52nd Garibaldi Assault Brigade on the mountains above Lake Como. (The 52nd is the partisan brigade that captured Mussolini as he tried to escape to Switzerland. But all that happened after I'd been dispatched to a new destination.)

I spent 12 months there. There was fighting, acts of bravery and fear. But above all there was cold, and hunger. Real hunger. We lived for months on end on acorn broth: That's all we had to keep us poor anti-fascist rebels (barely) alive. When our brave messenger Armida managed to find us some *polenta*, she would bring it to us — and that was a real feast. At some stage, we had to set up camp as high as 1,800 meters to avoid the enemy raiding parties, so Armida had to climb all the way there, hoping the guards would believe the story that the big round lump under her dress was just a sign of her pregnancy.

Apart from the usual ambushes and gun fights, and the raids to town to pick up whatever we needed — like that time I was sent to "borrow" a typewriter from the Town hall, and had to go back the following night, as I'd forgotten to take the ink ribbons — we captured a senior SS officer once.

He was a nice man. He had fought in Stalingrad, and left an arm in the siege. He spent 42 days with us, and he was treated like a king. With all our difficulties, the best grub was always for him — as was customary whenever partisans held a prisoner. Fortunately, our request for a prisoner exchange was accepted, so the time came for goodbyes. He thanked us for the way he was treated, and added he loved Italy, and that he wished to come back when all this ended. One of us replied, "Sir, you will be welcome anytime — but not in that uniform."

But where was I? Oh, yes, Latin! So, 1945 came, and our commander said the Garibaldi HQ wanted 2 men to set up a G.A.P. cell in a small city near Alessandria.

The G.A.P.'s were urban warfare units, very small and secretive, that were tasked with very delicate missions: sabotage — often involving the use of explosives — freeing prisoners from jails, assassinating senior Fascist and Nazi officers, and suchlike.

“Does anyone here have Latin?” — commander “Pedro” asked. Erasmo, who had trained to become a priest, was the obvious candidate. Then I said, “I was an altar boy for six years.” So he asked me to recite some prayers, and after a few lines he said, “Stop! You know more than a bloody bishop.”

So Erasmo and I set off towards our destination, and there we found out why Latin was such an important requirement: We were given priest robes, and sent on our missions equipped with — apart from the necessary “unholy” tools — all that was needed for a final anointment. A family was ready, in some house along the way, with an old one lying in bed, looking as much as possible at the end of her or his days. In the event the two of us were stopped, we would explain that we had been called to a parishioner’s dying bed, and show up at the address we had been given, to assuage our suspicious escort.

That’s how I spent the last 3 months of my Resistance war. Then came Liberation Day, and our war was over, and we had won.

My father tracked me down, and came to fetch me on his bicycle. We cycled for days, and managed to cross the river Po and reach Milan. There I became a printer, then moved to Turin, fell in love and had two beautiful daughters. The love of my life sadly left me a few years ago. I’m now 94 and I still visit the schools to explain to the young ones how much it cost to win the freedom that most people today take for granted.

And I will do it for as long as I live.