

## LETTERS BY MEN CONDEMNED TO DEATH IN THE ITALIAN RESISTANCE

Interview with Fausto Fornari

Conducted on the occasion of the screening of the short film at Teatro Europa  
Monday, 22 April 2002

Interviewed and Edited by Giampaolo Parmigiani

This interview is part of a project of rediscovery and re-evaluation of the documentary film, *Letters by Men Condemned to Death in the Italian Resistance*, fifty years after its production, conceived by the Argonaut Cooperative as part of 25 April celebrations organized by the City of Parma.

The present publication accompanies the showing of the film at Teatro Europa on Monday, 22 April and at Cinema D'Azeglio on Thursday, 2 May 2002.

PARMIGIANI: *You filmed Letters by Men Condemned to Death in the Italian Resistance between 1952 and 1953. Ferruccio Parri wrote that it was the first antifascist documentary, the first also spiritually. But why the first chronologically, only in 1952?*

FORNARI: It's not the first. Some films were made, very few, during the German occupation and in the days immediately following the liberation.

But the material was not always well utilized. For excessive rhetoric, for strained ideological positions, for lack of culture.

One exception is a masterpiece made in 1945, *Days of Glory*.

Filed by various cameramen, some of whom were only amateurs.

It is a dramatic live chronicle of bloody events. There is the massacre of Fosse Ardeatine, the hunt in post-war Rome for those responsible for the slaughter. There are the trials, that of Carretta, that of Caruso, filmed by Luchino Visconti, the executions, Piazzale Loreto. But we are still in 1945. After that, practically nothing else.

P: *Until 1952. Until your short film. Why this seven-year silence?*

F: There are many reasons. I have to generalize and simplify. After the war ended, the resumption of Soviet expansionism brought on the Cold War.

The northern Italians -- in part having become antifascists under the aerial bombardments or on the battle fronts, or in disgust and terror of the Nazi violence which took place on their doorsteps, in deprivation and in mourning -- divided up into those who declared themselves friends of the Soviet Union and sided with them and others who opposed the real possibility of the former's coming to power, fearing the loss not only of their material possessions but also of their newly regained liberty.

The resistance is no longer seen, with unanimous approval, as the expression of an entire population anxious for peace and freedom because, among other reasons, the left of the time gave it an overly factionalized interpretation, and even the ANPI did not hesitate to express pro-Soviet sympathy.

Togliatti, who did not participate in the Resistance, got wind of the situation and told the ex-Partisans to be quiet, that the Resistance had been an intermission -- exciting, yes, but ephemeral.

In the South, where there was virtually no interruption between the war abroad and the Allied landings, the population passed, in its endemic situation of misery and subculture, from the euphoria of warmongering to the euphoria of Pax Americana. The dramatic days of Naples were not enough to change a long-established reality.

In the South, at the time monarchic and conservative, the Resistance, unknown, was a mistake of the North to be forgotten.

The Romans had suffered terribly, but the liberated city continued to be ruled by the usual hierarchy of bureaucrats, immobile like statues between nostalgia for the recent past and fear of an uncertain future.

All over Italy, with the decision not to hold trials for purging and for expropriation of illicitly accumulated assets, the manager classes remained the same as always.

The society, as Parri wrote, "remained lazily anchored, in many ways, to the legacy of the past."

P: And filmmaking?

F: The Roman Ministerial offices responsible for financing cinematographic works were still staffed by the same people who owed their careers to fascist friendships and to clearly expressed fascist sentiments. Short films did not benefit from the takings in the cinema halls where they were shown; they depended solely on State subsidies.

You can imagine in what spirit antifascist short films might have been regarded for access to subsidies!

P: *How was it, then, that you, with Letters by Men Condemned to Death, broke this silence in 1952?*

F: I came from a political upbringing and antifascist morality. From a liberal humanitarian upbringing or liberal democratic or social liberal – I wouldn't know what to call it – instilled in me day by day, lightly, gently, with words and by example, by that marvelous man, that extraordinary friend, who was my father.

The war began for me with tears and ended with more tears.

It began on 10 June, 1940 with my father's tears of pain and disdain as he listened to the radio announcement of the war declaration by France and Great Britain. It ended, in the festive days of the Liberation, with the tears of my father -- and of all of us -- at the news, which arrived just then, of the death by shooting, in November 1944 at Modena, of Giacomo Ulivi, my father's godson, my chosen brother, friend, and dear cousin.

Those tears, after the war, remained in my memory for many years.

Due to my young age, but especially because of the tight daily control exerted on us by the Black Brigades, I had not been able to contribute as much as I would have wanted to the struggle against the armed barbarity.

Perhaps for this reason, among others, I felt I owed something more than gratitude and commiseration to the friends and all the others who had not returned. I felt an obligation to express a more personal, more heartfelt, more throbbing statement of gratitude, than a bronze commemorative monument.

And since I had worked, even if only modestly, in film and I wanted to make films, it was with film that I had to try.

The publication in 1952 by Einaudi, of the collection edited by Pirelli and Malvezzini<sup>1</sup>, gave me the decisive push to take on a challenge that I found inspiring as well as moral and rational.

It was a difficult trial in cinematographic and ethical terms But it was not the technique that interested me.

P: *What other difficulties did you encounter then, after you had initiated the project?*

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters by Men Condemned to Death in the Italian Resistance: 8 September 1943-25 aprile 1945 (Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza italiana: 8 settembre 1943 - 25 aprile 1945)*; edited by Piero Malvezzini and Giovanni Pirelli; Turin; Einaudi; 1952

F: It was not easy for me, at first, to convince Pirelli and Malvezzi to give me the rights. They were unable to understand how a documentary could be produced on the basis of only letters, and they asked me if I meant to film the manuscripts.

They were right to ask the question.

Until then, in fact, documentaries generally consisted of a series of images, more or less in movement, which reproduced the facades and interiors of churches, factories, schools, hospitals... or else work processes, the manufacturing of products.

I repeat, in general, they were cold, boring photo albums.

Then I had to convince Giulia Einaudi, an intelligent, courageous publisher but cold as the coldest of the Piedmontese.

In the end, he granted me the rights only after imposing strict conditions, not the least of which was the requirement of Cesare Zavattini's imprimatur on the completed work, music included. A "no" from Zavattini and I would have had to destroy, by signed commitment, script, samples, and negatives.

Convincing Zavattini was easier, because he had a nose for cinematic ideas. And he had also known me for some time and held me in high regard.

At the end of the work, Zavattini was so enthusiastic that he agreed to appear with his name in the credits, as screenwriter, even if his participation had really been that of feared censor, fortunately with his thumb turned up.

Then, during the shooting, I had to confront a thousand obstacles imposed by the never-ending government bureaucrats.

In a hostile climate.

Just to give an example of the prevailing mood: I recall the imprisonment, the trial, and the condemnation for contempt of the Armed Forces of Renzo Renzi and Guido Aristarco, in 1953 -- guilty for having written and published a draft screenplay on the love conquests of Italian soldiers in Greece.

*P: Is it true that the film -- winner of many awards in Italy and abroad, praised by all the critics regardless of political persuasion, presented, then as now, in the programs of Cinema clubs and associations, preserved in national film libraries, considered to be a groundbreaking documentary by historians of Italian cinema -- was never given mass distribution in the cinemas?*

F: It's true.

The critical success obligated those responsible to provide the governmental prize of 5%. This was 5% of the takings earned in the cinemas which played the long film which each awarded short film accompanied.

The marriage combined two distributors -- that which handled short films and that which handled the long films. It was, therefore, necessary to find a distribution company that wanted to handle *Letters* in order to link it to a film.

But the political and moral climate was such that, in those times, no distributor wanted to take it on.

Not even the president of the most important short-film production and distribution company of the time.

I think it was the *Documento* film company, excuse me if I don't remember well. This man, strangely enough, was a gold medal holder, obviously living, of the Resistance.

Very kindly, he turned me away me like this: "You have a lot of talent. Make me a hundred films on whatever subject you choose, and I'll buy them all without even opening the box. But the Resistance, no. The subject is closed and no one wants to know any more about it."

*P: Who had financed the film? Who came up with the money?*

F: I financed it myself, but I was 25 and, naturally, my father helped me.

I never recuperated a single lira

The short film on the facades of Italian buildings, on the other hand, earned millions and millions for its producers.

*P: How did you gain your cinematographic training?*

F: The cinema had always fascinated me. From childhood, a film every Saturday evening and two on Sunday afternoon. With my parents.

Then, at home, for that cold chicken in gelatin that I, a callow youth, had obtained it became the Sunday evening tradition.

I liked to think about how I would tell those stories, portray those situations.

When I had no changes to propose, it meant that the film was good as it was; it was perfect.

As a boy, I began to screen silent films at home. The same few friends always came. Giacomo -- Giacomo Ulivi, I mean to say -- personally handled the relations with the distributors of Bologna.

I chose the musical accompaniment from among the records I owned.

At 14 years of age, together with a 16-year-old friend, I went to Venice for the Cinema Exhibition of 1941.

At my departure, my mother worried and sullen, a few words of advice from my father, a hug, and a lot of trust.

In high school, Attilio Bertolucci, who taught art history, spoke indifferently in the same hour of Mantenga and Pabst, of Murnau and Gaugin, of Renoir the father and Renoir the son.

We all listened to him with great attention and enjoyment. But every now and then I distracted myself with daydreams. I would, for example, pull the horses and warriors from a painting by Paolo Uccello and set them to battle, with an uproar of shouts and sounds, on a screen as large as the classroom wall in front of me.

In September of 1943, the Germans freed Mussolini from his detention on the Gran Sasso.

Giacomo and I decided to satirize the episode.

I didn't have a movie camera, so I used photographic equipment.

A very amusing story by frames (like a slide show or a comic book) resulted. Giacomo in the modest and tattered clothes of a Mussolini more pompous and rhetorical than ever. My brother, cousins, and the gardener in the roles of the parachutist-liberators, entangled in the cords of their parachutes.

*P: Your first experiences with a movie camera?*

F: At 19, a Paillard 16mm with which I filmed the slaughter of the pig one frigid and misty winter morning in Bassa, the life and work of the laborers at a kiln that belonged to my uncles, a voyage in subequatorial Africa, and other things.

All lost, including the Paillard, in a taxi in Rome.

In 1947, I worked with Marchi in the production of a pair of short films shot for Citadella Film, a production company which never received the praise it deserved, born and raised in Parma and gone too soon.

I also collaborated with Marchi in the publication of a periodical called "Cinematographic Criticism" which gathered writings by the most skillful Italian critics and eminent literary writers.

A very serious and graphically exquisite journal.

Begun in 1946, it ended its run in 1948.

*P: There is a curious particularity that I found in the reviews of your film at the time of its release. In Venice, it seems that when the showing began, part of the audience booed.*

*At the end of the projection, however, there was a long applause: "the longest applause of the Exhibition for the documentary of Fornari," wrote the magazine, Cinema Nuovo.*

*It seems that the film captured everyone, absolutely everyone, even those who initially would have wanted to demolish it.*

*Then, and thereafter, your film had the unanimous consensus of the critics and the public.*

*You won your personal bet.*

*Then, after this brief but dazzling experience, you withdrew from the cinematographic career.*

*May I ask you why?*

F: The success, even clamorous I must say, in effect opened a thousand paths for me to make it big time, as they say today. I had offers for long films, for a series of short films sponsored and financed by the Office of the Prime Minister, by RAI, later to organize and manage Tv 7. But I had to return to Parma and take care of the family business. For reasons of age and health, my father could no longer manage it. I was needed.

P: *After 50 years away from film, do you still have ideas that, so to speak, go against the trend?*

*Would you still like to produce films to externalize these ideas?*

*And would you do so if you had the possibility?*

F: But you know you're quite a character?  
Do you know that I'm already 75 years old?  
What do you want from me?  
Ideas that go against the trend?  
They're the domain of the very young.

P: *That's exactly why I'm asking you. I know you're hatching some.*

F: Do you have an opportunity to offer me?  
Shall we start?