

Transcription from audio tapes made by Solomon Saltiel.

Carlo Monte

This was the best camp in Italy. Surrounded by barbwire but we could see people walking in the streets. The barracks were made from wood for 100 prisoners in each. The command post was across the street and was a 2 story building including a post with 2 sentinels who would watch us. Things were good for us here in the beginning . There was a big hanger that acted as a cafeteria to which we brought our own food from the kitchen and on Sunday mornings it served as a church. A Greek priest from Naples who was a tall man with a little beard and was a nice guy came every Sunday morning. In between the liturgy he would give us news of the war specifically the Russian front. He did this in this manner. I used to go there every Sunday at the end of the service to talk to the two interpreters Moa and Allo both from Rhodes. Every time the priest arrived the two interpreters would come to hear what the priest was telling us. When the priest was ready to start the news, I would walk over to Moa and Allo and start a conversation to distract them. When the mass was finished there was two boys who helped the priest take off his holy garments and it was at this time he would explain the news in detail to the two boys.

In Christmas of 1941, we received red cross parcels every other week which contained ham, corned beef, coffee and cigarettes. The cigarettes were like gold and the heavy smokers would trade their food for them or gamble them away. In the winter of 1943 an Italian General came and told us we would not be freed until the end of the war. HE blamed this on King George since he would not trade the 27,000 Italian POW's for the 1700 Greek POW's. When he finished his degradation o King George and his praise for Italy we yelled "Hurrah for King George". We told him we were proud that every Greek POW was worth 3 Italians. He became furious and we began yelling the war cry and he left quickly. A few weeks later Mussolini made a law that all POW's that did not work and all Italian soldiers who were non combatants would have their rations cut by one third. The Greek POW's would no go to work, saying that they would not work for Mussolini and that the war would not last much longer. The food given to us was only 5 grams of sugar, 3 grams of oil, 60 grams of bread and 14 pieces of cut macaroni for each man. Each day at meal time a few POW's would go to the kitchen and divided the

macaroni equally among the men. IN 1942 the Japanese were destroying allied boats and we were not getting red cross parcels. Times were bad with out the parcels and of course there were no cigarettes to an everyone was irritable and un approachable. At night one would hear a 45 year old man crying, "I'm hungry, I'm dying". To hear an old man crying form hunger and saying he would die and never see his children again was tragic. We would make scales from wood, 2 hooks, and 2 pieces of string to split a oaf of bread between two people evenly. The situation was getting bad and the priest was doing his best to give us courage. The representatives from the Geneva red cross arrived and we filed our complaints but he explained that he could not do much since there were no parcels to distribute. We asked to go to work because some people died in the camp from weakness and hunger. People went to work with no shoes and shirts. We didn't want to die in he camp. I used to read the news paper every day since I was the interpreter in the canteen and was friendly with the soldiers, one of which was a cousin of my teacher in Salonika. I used to read the paper out loud at night before we went to bed to the others and the next day the Greeks used to tell the Italians happily that the war was coming to an end. " the Russians are advancing and Stalingrad is falling into the hands of the Russians. The Italians asked how we knew an the POW's told them that they had radios. The next day they told us, "Everyone outside of the barracks and take all of you belongings with you." This lasted from early in the morning to the evening during which time a group of Italians would search our belongings. Others would search the barracks pulling boards off the walls and looking under the beds for a nonexistent radio. When they counted us the counts never came out right and the Italian officers would yell at the soldiers, "You don't know how to count, I had better send you to school." When someone's name was called we would say that he was here but he had just gone to the latrine so the counts would be off. We would laugh at the Italians and say, " Hey you know five prisoners had babies and we have five more POW's this time." This happened at least once a month. Finally they decided to send us to work to Lucciano in the Alps. They sent 30 people there who were sent back because they were not good workers. They found a few jobs in construction outside of the camp and a few friends of mine went out to work and got involved the black market with coffee since the Italians like Nescafe. Some of the shop keepers would put the coffee in their windows and the Fascists came to the camp and accused the commandant being in business of selling coffee in town which the Colonel denied. Either the

soldiers, officers or POWs were smugglers. The coffee was exchanged for cigarettes , 20 packages for 1 can of coffee. The police investigated and searched the Italian officers entering and leaving through the gates. When they were doing this, we would laugh and yell at them because it was funny for us to see Italian police search Italian officers. "Where is your dignity?", we would ask. An Italian officer told me, "you are a terrible people." I replied "We are the prisoners here, not you. This is war." The POW's were finding other ways to remove coffee. One day a boxcar full of English uniforms arrived containing everything an English soldier would get on enlistment-full battle gear. Most of us being skinny were getting clothes that were too big. The Greeks would wear the jackets like capes filling the sleeves with coffee and smuggling it out until they were discovered. Finally the Italians decided to puncture each can of coffee with a bayonet when the red cross parcels came so that we would not sell it but we continued to sell the coffee without the cans anyway. When we got the English uniforms we returned the Italian uniforms that were issued to us before and we exchanged clothes amongst ourselves until we found clothes that fit and we looked pretty good. The red cross came again and told the Colonel that it would be nice if once a week one barrack per day would be taken for a walk since then they would take us for a walk to the town which was nice especially the cemetery. Every grave had a monument. The people didn't talk to us for fear of the fascists but they would smile at us. Things were good for us until the winter of 1943 and things got bad. No red cross parcels and we wrote everywhere to the pope, the government asking to go to work for work meant more food. They decide to send 500 people to Bergamo in Northern Italy. After they left we got red cross parcels and got double rations and life was better. One day they sent all of us by train to Bergamo which was much different than Carlo Monte which was not a camp but a big factory made from concrete consisting of 2 floors the bottom of which was an enormous room in which all POW's slept both Greeks and Yugoslavs. From here they sent small groups to work. When we arrived we found the 500 Greeks that had arrived earlier. They were all swollen, their eyes sunken and they accepted us like enemies. "You took our food, you took our lives , you didn't send our food to us." It took a few days for them to warm up to us again. All this was because they lacked vitamins and rest. At Carlo Monte we were able to rest when hungry and we could read. One day they told me I had to work with 9 more soldiers for a German who owned a farm which grew trees. One day we were working and a lady and her daughter

brought us milk. Her name was Signora C whose husband was a doctor and who were both anti-fascists. She asked us to work at their house for a few days in the spring of 1943 to prepare their garden. We were able to sit in chairs and at a table and she cooked for us. It was really something to sit in a chair at a table after 3 years. She made Polenta for us made from corn meal which later we made for ourselves in camp. In the morning at 6:00 am a crazy sergeant came in with a stick and woke us up screaming, "To work, up, up!" We worked for one week at the doctor's house in upper Bergamo which was the best residential area. One day while going up to upper Bergamo, a priest stopped us and asked us how we were and if we had heard from our families. A fascist came and slapped the priest saying, "Why are you talking to these dogs? They are your enemies!" I defended the priest telling the fascist that he had only asked if we had heard from our families. "What is your name?", he asked. I said, "I'm not telling you my name, I'm a Greek soldier and I'm not afraid of you." This was the last day we worked at the doctors house. I don't know if it was because of this episode or because there was no more work. The next job was at the Richputti Company. forty POW's were assigned to me. Twenty were Greeks, ten were Arabs, and ten were Negroes from DeGaulle's army. The Lieutenant in charge of the camp was Italian born but grew up in America. He was visiting in Italy when the war broke out and he was drafted so we called him Americano. He was a nice man and he gave us our rights. Every morning the guard took us to the train depot. All the Italians were friendly with us. When the train stopped at the village of Darmine. Here was the factory which made cannon barrels. We walked past the factory a mile or two where they were building a big shelter 60 meters deep. Only Italians were working on this and we POW's were assigned to build a road on one side with the Italians on the other side. The foreman Farina was short and fat and he asked if anyone spoke Italian. "Yes, I do.", I replied. "listen to me and listen good", he said in a loud voice. "When I talk and ask for something it must be done immediately." "Now take a pick and shovel and go to work". I told him he would have to listen to me too. "If you ask us to do something that we are not required to do then we won't do it and if you don't ask nicely then I will put salami in my ears". This was an Italian expression. He said he would be reasonable as long as we were. Our job was to fill wagons with dirt and rocks.

A problem arose when walking the mile to work from the railroad station. The Italian kids who had never seen a black person before would chase after us screaming "Nero, Nero,

Nero!” The French blacks understood what they were saying and became hurt. When we got back to camp that night I told my friends what happened and they said, “They are just kids, don’t worry we have extra red cross parcels full of sugar cubes. Put them in your pockets and when they scream throw the sugar cubes to them and they will become your friends”. So the next day we filled our pockets with sugar cubes and when they began yelling at us we threw them sugar. That afternoon on the way back to the train from work they followed us and threw us bread, cigarettes and apples. The guards were angered and had to call the police to stop them because they were there everyday and sometimes even their parents came too. The people of northern Italy were very friendly but were not too friendly for fear of the fascist who lurked under cover. Still they gestured to us. At the Richpulti Company there was an old engineer who was a POW in German in World War I. HE told us not to work too hard. HE said the Italians only do 8 wagons a day so don’t do any more. Don’t work all 40 at once just 20 at a time . When someone comes by put all 40 to work until they leave but don’t do more than 8 wagons per day. We started the black market here and only I could run it because I was the only one who could go into the office and speak Italian. The Italians exchanged cigarettes for coffee and other things. We made a list so the exchanges would be equal amongst everyone. The Arabs however wanted to do the exchange for themselves so they could monopolize the operation. We became mad and said either respect ht list or we will stop the black market. The manager, Mr. Richputti, came and told us he was not happy with our work, as he talked, I translated for the others. “You don’t do enough work besides I am paying for you and I give you extra money for food.” I spoke up and said, “You are not paying us”. The Arabs told him, “If you don’t like our work then send us back to camp. We didn’t want to come to work here, they made us!” Finally we reached an agreement. We would fill 10 wagons a day but when we completed 10 we were done. This lasted for a while but since we finished early problems arose. Some days we finished at 2:00 instead of 4”30 so we would take naps and I would fix lunch form macaroni issued to us along with potatoes and onions I had bought from the Italian civilians. “Look”, the guards would say. “The prisoners are eating better than us.” The people would sell food to me but not the soldiers. After we ate we would nap or sing in Greek and French with a guitar we had bought from an Italian family. The Italians were jealous. Mr. Richputti came and told us you will fill 10 wagons an work from now until 4:30. We told him we would fill as many wagons as the Italians did and

that was all. One day Richputti brought a bunch of men and women black shirt fascists by to see the black men since this was a new experience for them. Just then a truck full of bricks pulled up for use on the shelter. "Everybody, all you prisoners", Richputti yelled, "Unload the truck." I said, "It's 4:10 we don't have time to unload the truck." "It has to be done", he said. "We will work until 4:15 then we will wash up and go home", I replied. "You have to do it!", Richputti insisted. "No!", I said, "We won't do it because we don't have to work after 4:30." So we started to unload the truck and at 4:15 we I told the men to stop working. "No, keep on working, you have to finish unloading the truck!", Richputti demanded. I refused and one of the fascists pulled out a gun and said, "Either unload the truck or I will shoot."

I turned to the French and told them to sing the Marseilles so they began to sing. When they finished the Greeks began singing their national anthem. Bewildered at this strange action the fascist was angered. "What is this, an Opera?", he bellowed. "No", I said, "It's the French and Greek national anthems and now we are ready to go." "I didn't tell you to do this", Richputti said. "If you want the truck unloaded then bring us cigarettes.", I demanded. "I can't do it, I don't have cigarettes.", he said. "I don't care how you get them", I said, "but get them or we are leaving." Well he was in a very bad position so he gave his word that tomorrow he would have our cigarettes if we unloaded the truck.

Things were getting worse every day. One day the foreman Farina approached me and said, "Give me an Arab to work in the shelter." I refused, saying that POW's don't have to work under ground and I had the copy of the Geneva convention to back me up. "No he won't have to work under ground.", Farina replied, "I just need a husky guy to replace an Italian that didn't show up today. He will move the wagons coming up from the shelter." "O.k.", I said, "But only for today." So the Arab prisoner left and at lunch the Italians got him drunk and he couldn't walk back to camp. I talked to the French commander about the situation. The next day we went to work and the Arab prisoner Ossan tried to go to the same work area. "Come back!", I told him, "No one will work over there today." Ten minutes later Farina walked up and said, "Give me that black one." "No", I replied, "Yesterday you gave a prisoner wine and they are not allowed wine or money, or freedom. We are prisoners and we will all stick together here." "Do me a favor.", Farina pleaded. "No, I'm not doing any more favors.", I said, "and that is that." A long time after this incident Ossoman told me, "You think I forgot what you did to me that day when

you wouldn't let me work at the shelter where I had a good time." "I did it for your own good.", I told him. The next day Richputti brought the cigarettes and told me, "You put me in a bad situation yesterday and I couldn't give you cigarettes in front of the fascists since I get them from the black market." "The fascists are involved in the black market", I replied, "What are you afraid of?" "Well, they can do the black market", he said, "but when we do it they know how to punish us." We continually had arguments with the Italians and one day the general manager of the company stopped by to see how we were doing. I didn't have the whole crew working at the time, only 20 were working while the other 20 were resting. "Why don't you work.", he asked. "I am working.", I said. "I don't see you working", he said angrily. "I work with my mouth.", I said, "I am the interpreter." "Oh, then why don't you salute me?", he replied. "Because I don't know who you are.", I said. "I'm the general manager", he stated. "So, I am a Greek soldier and in the Greek army we don't salute anyone without a hat." "You salute the fascists.", he said. "No, you can salute the fascists.", I replied, "now get out of here and leave me alone." The others had been listening and after he left they came up to me and asked, "How can you talk to the General Manager that way?" "I don't work for him", I replied, "I am forced to work here against my free will."

Back in the camp we were all in the one room Cypriots, Greeks and Yugoslavians who saluted everyone. The Greeks saluted no one. They were like Gorillas. "Why", asked the Italians, "are the Yugoslavs so nice and disciplined while you look like a bunch of bandits?" "That's the way it is.", I would say.

Comparing Bergamo to Carlo Monto was a world of difference. The best living conditions were in Carlo Monto where the officers were nice. They would converse with us and throw cigarettes when we were singing.

One day when we were in the big room at Begrima a Greek officer came up to me and talked of the good times at Carlo Monto. "Remember", he asked, "when the Colonel asked me, through you, why I did not tie my shoes and I said they are my shoes not yours and you laughed. I know you did not translate what I said correctly to him but he was a good guy who looked after us."

After Richputti brought the cigarettes he was trying to force us to work harder. I told the Americano about the incident with the gun and the fascists and he told me not to worry, that he

would find me another job by Monday. The next Monday we started working for another construction company where they were digging an enormous hole. The people were much nicer and we were getting along well. One day when I woke up in the morning I told my comrades of a dream I had in which I saw Mussolini who was very emaciated. "Watch", I said, "Something will happen in the next few days." Meanwhile the Americans had landed in Sicily. The people at the train station were not friendly with us and we saw many fascists with guns. We couldn't understand why the people were cold towards us and we thought perhaps that now that the fighting was on Italian soil that the people had become patriotic. When we got off the train I noticed that all the Italian soldiers, our guards, were carrying rifles which they never carried before. I took my group to the soldiers and the sergeant was mean. While waiting for the train Richputti stopped by on a bike and told us the war would be over soon and that we would be free. The sergeant ran up and pushed Richputti yelling, "You are not allowed to talk to the prisoners." Richputti left quickly. "What's going on?", I asked the sergeant. "Mind your own business!", he said. "But we used to work for him.", I replied. "Well you don't work for him anymore therefore he isn't allowed to talk to you." Once the train came every one put their heads and hands through the windows and began yelling, "The war is over!" We boarded the train and the sergeant kept us seated until we reached Carmine. When we got off the train we saw pictures of Bartorio and signs in the streets saying, "The English are coming!, the liberators are coming, Avanti Englese!" "What's going on?", I asked the Sargent but he would not tell me. When we got to work they told us there would be no work today and they put us in a hole in a corner since we couldn't go home until the train returned at 5:30. The Italians were walking near us and becoming friendly. The sergeant tried to keep the people away from us but he was not too effective. Around noon we heard a lot of noise. I rose to see what it was against the sergeant's orders and I saw a large group of people with steel pipes and sticks. They were singing, screaming in a riot and breaking into the offices. One hour later the Italian civilians came with baskets of food that they had stolen from the fascists whose houses they had broken into. We were shocked and bewildered not knowing what to do. "Mussolini is finished", they said, "We have a new government in Italy." The sergeant sat quietly in the corner knowing that if he said anything they would pounce on him. They told him to treat us good or else. We ate like we had never eaten before. The boss came and talked to us, telling us that maybe we would not have to work again and that soon we would



be free. So we went to the streets and we saw fascist books and propaganda in the streets and a broken statue of Mussolini. They said, "You know the manager of the company, they broke into his office and beat him and he had to go into the hospital." The French soldiers were singing and all of a sudden a group of Italians put me on their shoulders saying, "We are equal, we are all people!" The sergeant watched, knowing he couldn't do a thing. Then someone mentioned something about going to the tavern for a drink. "No, please don't go to the tavern!", the sergeant begged, "That will be the end of me!" "Don't worry", I said, "I told the people the train was coming and we couldn't miss it." I had a hard time convincing the people that we shouldn't go to the tavern. When the train came everyone waved and threw kisses to us yelling, "Amico, Amico, (Friends, Friends). They took us back to camp telling us we were lucky to come back. They said in the city the people were angry and killing and rioting. For me this was the best for in the eyes of the people we were heroes without doing anything. This was the end of the work at Darname.

The next day some of the guards told us the people from Bergamo came to the camp and demanded the POW's be freed but Colonel Turco had machine guns pointed at them and trained on the prisoners. He threatened to shoot the prisoners and fire on the people if they would not leave so the people left. A new life started in Italy, a new government under General ? In 1941 from the camp of Servidovo 500 Greek POW's were taken to Sardinia where they were put to work. They had stories to tell from there. They were ordered to work in the mines and they responded by striking and throwing away their tools. The Italians threatened to execute the prisoners. A few guys went in front of the Italians and dared them to shoot barring their chests. The Italians backed down and the Greeks won. Sardinia was in the allied line of advance so the Greeks were sent back to Serivigno. Old friends met again and we talked constantly. The professor who was the leader of the deserters was freed from jail and sent back to camp where he tried to consolidate power. Near Florence was a camp in Poppi where 75 Greek officers were who were not POW's but who were high ranking officers. The Italians held them because they were afraid that if free they would return to Greece and join the Greek underground. They had been put on a boat after they had been captured in Albania but the boat caught allied gunfire and 75 Greeks drowned so that from 150 only half survived. An Interpreter was needed at that camp and I was chosen to go.

From those who had been in Sardinia, there were a few Jewish boys from Salonika, one of which, was Morris Halejea. We were happy to be together and we were like a big family. I was happy to go to Poppi because things were getting bad at Bergamo, now that the professor was back. The camp at Poppi needed an interpreter and I went with seven soldiers. Amongst them was Andreas Popsel who was a good friend of mine and from Patras. He used to be a traveling salesman before the war. It was a consolation for us to be together as we went to this new camp. Six Italian soldiers and Allo the interpreter was the leader so the trip was good. From Bergamo to Florence we stopped at Bologna where we were mixed with the Italian people. The Vatican had started a movement for peace and everyone was wearing little buttons advertising this promotion which said "Peace". Italy is beautiful but it looked worse than when we arrived in 1941 looking the worse from the ravages of war. At Poppi, which consists of an upper and lower city the upper city was completely walled but our camp was 3 miles north of the Poppi on a large hill in an old Palace once used by Catholic priests on summer vacation. It was beautiful and from the windows the scenery was breathtaking. We couldn't believe it. The officers were very nice and many were our age. I met Constantine and some other friends here.

Here, I met an Italian Lieutenant named Novelle who was a Barasallei who are infantry like marines. When he heard my first name was Solomon he asked me if I was Jewish. "Yes I'm Jewish", I replied. "It would be better if you weren't Jewish.", he said. They used to call him the crazy lieutenant. He was young and a womanizer. He continually came to me, not merely to talk, but to argue. HE was of the opinion that the war was started by the Jews and they were responsible. "The Jews want to conquer the world.", he would say. "Don't worry about him", the other Greeks would tell me.

The food here was very good since there were only a few compared to 1700 at Bergamo. Some times they would bring fruit and one day Novelli told me to go with a couple of soldiers to the truck to unload it. I found there was only a couple of bags of apricots in the truck. Novelli reached into the bag and pulled out a few apricots and handed them to me. "No, I don't want them", I said. "Take them", he said, "that is an order." "I don't take orders from you", I replied. "Those belong to everyone and you don't have the right to give them away.", I said. "Your a nice guy, you know?", he replied.

We arrived in Poppi in the third week of August. There was an old man Francesco from Janny in northern Greece who could speak Italian but who was sick much of the time so I had to replace him most of the time as Interpreter. Allo also stayed at this camp. Things were getting bad for the Italians which we learned from the newspapers and guards. All of a sudden we heard Italy surrendered to the allies and we heard how the Italian fleet had surrendered at Corsica and how the allies were advancing. We were sure we would be freed in days and we were making preparations. In the meantime we were getting many red cross parcels, more than usual, and we didn't know what to do with them. We were preparing to escape and so myself and the Greek Colonel Francisco went to the Italian Colonel and showed him the newspaper quoting the statement of Padoriao which stated as a condition of surrender all POW's would be freed. "I don't obey them.", he said, "I only obey Mussolini." Well Mussolini had been freed by a German commando and taken back to Germany. The LT. Colonel said, "It is my responsibility to hand you over safely to the allies when they come. I will break you up into groups and put you in different villages under Lt. Novelli."

The guards had all left the camp and the Italian farmers came with wire cutters and offered to cut the wires when we were ready. We told them to cut the wires in a few places so we could escape in case the Germans came. We put our own guards on the third floor of the palace day and night waiting for the Germans. For a while they were retreating North but then we heard they were coming back down South to put up a fight. We were each getting ready to run if necessary. I filled one bag with chocolate, coffee and corned beef. All of a sudden the guards notified us that German tanks were advancing on the castle. It was 6:30 Sept. 17, 1944 and we began to escape. Those who couldn't escape went into the infirmary and acted sick. One of the Greek captains who spoke German stayed and talked to the German Major who was looking for British officers. The German told the Colonel that he was supposed to watch over the Greeks. Meanwhile, a few German soldiers pulled down the Italian flag and urinated on it. The Germans then left.

We went to a farm house with a widow and who had two girls and a son who had just returned from France. They were celebrating his arrival since he had come home as soon as he heard Italy had surrendered. They were giving us wine when we heard marching. "Oh my God, it's the Germans.", cried the widow, "What will they do to me now?" "Don't worry", I said. We

opened the window and jumped out. When we were outside we heard Greek and we found that they were Greek POW's who had been hiding in the villa where they found new shoes. I told the widow that they were Greeks and not Germans and not to worry. Her son suggested that it would be safer to hide in the mountains which we did, but being weak we had to leave our bags in some bushes. We found a stone shed and broke the lock. Inside, we found enough wood to start a small fire. The owner, an Italian farmer called Gino told us where to find water and brought us two loaves of bread, promising to bring more the next day. "Don't leave here.", he said, "because you never know who you will run across. If they are farmers, they are O.K." We slept that night almost on our feet since it was so cramped. We went outside in the morning early and got some water to wash ourselves. We dressed, ate and locked ourselves up inside again.

In the shed with me was a soldier from Volos who used to play the accordion. We still had our things in the bushes and were ready to go and retrieve them when we saw some Italian farm girls bringing the lambs to pasture. There was a village nearby with a little church and a few homes and ruins of an old medieval castle called Fransula. The property belonged to the Catholic church and the farmers split the harvest 50:50 with the church. When I heard the joyous voices of the girls I put some chocolates in my pocket and walked outside and greeted them saying, "Bon Journo". When they saw me, the Greek Major and Bobby in uniforms they thought we were bandits. "No", I said, "We are Greek POW's, soldiers like your brothers someplace in Russia, Greece or North Africa." When I threw the chocolates they picked them up and became friendly with us. They went home and later they returned with their families who brought baskets of food containing bread, ham apples, pears and grapes. So I made a small fire and made some coffee which made every one happy. We went to the bushes and retrieved our bags and the accordion. Bobby played the accordion that night when some of the younger boys and girls returned. Gino came and brought us bread and wine and we gave him some corned beef. We told him to go to the camp and take everything we left there. I told him about our encounter with the farmers and he said to be careful especially of well dressed civilians. The next day Gino came again with a newspaper. The allies were advancing and Naples had fallen.

After 2 or 3 days the Italian Colonel told everybody to go back to the camp and there would be some freedom but they must sleep and eat in the camp and draw their salaries. Most of the officers went back. After a few days some of the officers returned and told how good

things were at the villa. “We go and eat, sleep, we have roll call and then we do what we please as long as we come back at night. It’s just like a hotel.”, they would joke. “Well, if it’s like that I think I will go back.”, the Major said. I said, “Major, it is up to you but I’m not going back behind barbed wire.”

In the mean time the Italians had brought in Carabinieri which were regular police to guard the camp. They began repairing the broken wire. Bobby and I stayed in the shed, cleaning it and living comfortably. At night the Italians would visit and sing as Bobby played the accordion and we had a good time. After a while Bobby said, “The Americans are not coming. It is better if I go back to the camp and sleep in a clean bed under a roof that doesn’t leak.” “Look Bobby”, I said, “If you want to go, then go.” An old Italian once told me, “If you take a bird from a cage and let him go free, do you think he will fly back into the cage?” “Of course not!”, I replied, “Now that you are free, stay that way.”, the old man told me.

The Italians showed affection towards us like their own sons whom many had not seen for years and did not even know where they were. Being Jewish, I was worrying that if the Germans returned surely Novelli would tell them I was Jewish so I decided to stay where I was. I made the shed like my house since Bobby had returned to the villa. Each night a different family would have me over for dinner which consisted of soup with macaroni and bread. This was the season for harvesting walnuts and we were cracking walnuts, drinking wine and telling stories. At night I would go back to my shed. When I was with the Italians I met a carabinieri sergeant whom the villagers said was safe and with whom I became quite friendly. Meanwhile the Greeks in the villa, seeing the Americans were halted at Casino realized that it would be a long time before the Americans reached them and so they decided that they must try to escape and reach American lines. One Greek who spoke English well and some Italians got false papers and went to Rome and found a place where the British Intelligence was helping POW’s escape and so he returned and told a few select officers. Groups of Greeks, 5 or 6 at a time, escaped and started towards Rome to get help. He only told a few groups and each time a group escaped the Italians would lock everyone in the camp and not let anyone out for a few days. I would go up to the church and watch the camp to see what was going on and I had to be more careful since they would search for escaped prisoners. In the morning it was really beautiful in the mountains and I used to get up early, wash, eat some bread and breath the fresh air. I really appreciated my

freedom. I used to call my little shed the villa of the liberty. I was continually thinking of my fate if I were caught by the Germans and of my mother in a camp. Back in Bergamo a friend of mine Leon Alkali from Salonika had a picture of his mother and father wearing a star of David by orders of the Germans. We knew our families had been taken to Germany but we did not know their fate. Any way the days passed by and Greek friends stopped by to see me. It was the season of grape harvest and it was like a holiday. All the people would go to a certain farm each day to harvest grapes and sing filling big baskets. The priests were there also since the land was church owned and he asked me my name. I told him my name was Petro and used a Greek last name. He was asking me questions about the Greek Orthodox religion of which I knew little but I answered as best as I could. Then we had a few arguments. I told him what the church was doing was wrong. That once the church has so much land they should donate this land to the farmers so they could have a better living. "No, we can't do this", he said, "We have to help the poor." I am sure he was not helping the poor as he would stay from morning to evening to make sure the harvest was divided evenly between the church and the people. In one or two days they would finish the harvest. They would start with a small breakfast. Later in the day they would eat lightly again a meal consisting of mushrooms, bread and wine. They would work until lunch at 2:00 p.m. The women would all cook together and fix the tables and the boys and girls would tease one another as everyone sang and had a good time. By 11:00 the grapes would have all been harvested and divided. The grapes were stored in bats in the basement and days later the barefoot people would stomp on the grapes while singing. After the grapes were harvested the chestnuts were in season and the prisoners too would come and pick the chestnuts. Bobby would come almost every Sunday and would play his accordion while the people sang and danced in a clearing not far from my shed.

All of a sudden more POW's escaped and they were searching for them. Only those with passes could leave the camp. One day my friend Andrea came to talk to me and brought food to me. We noticed two men in civilian clothes coming toward us from below. As they came closer we realized that they were armed and had uniforms from the waist down. They were policemen. When they neared us they said, "Come on boys, let's go back to camp." "My friend", I said, "he has a pass to come out today." The police looked at the pass. "We've got orders to bring everyone back to the camp." They said "Come on let's go." They grabbed Andrea and told me

to come too. "You want me to come too?", I asked. "Yes, Why not?", they retorted. "I am not Greek", I replied, "I am Italian." "What do you mean you're Italian", they said unconvinced. "I'm a refugee from Genoa. This is why I am here and I met Andrea because I was in the service in the?? where I learned Greek and were we met." Apparently they were convinced and they left with Andrea but 10 min. later I saw 3 men coming, the sergeant, a friend of mine among them. He said, "I've got orders to bring you back. They know you are here and they want you back." "This is not right what you are doing to me.", I said sadly. "I'm disappointed in you, I wasn't expecting this from you." "I am giving you my word", he said, "they ordered me to pick you up. I can't refuse orders, but if you want things to go bad for me in the service I will go back without you." "No", I said, "I don't want you to have problems on my account but I still can't believe you are doing this to me!" "Listen.", he said, "I give you my word that I will help you to escape from the camp as soon as possible." So I took a small suitcase from the shed and packed a few things. Once we got back to camp everybody started to joke with me saying, "Welcome back!" and I replied, "I won't be here too long." It just so happened that on that day they were making picture I.D. cards for the hostages so they took my picture and one sergeant in the office told me, "Solomon, I know you are Jewish and if you want we can hide the fact by changing your name." There was a major who was a policeman in Salonika who told me the best thing to do was to change my name. "Your name will be Solon Saltis and your father Petro, your mother Maria. This way no one can insist that you are Jewish. So a card was made for me and my picture was taken. Then a major from the air force approached me saying, "don't worry Solomon my friend, I will get permission to go shopping and I will ask for you as an interpreter. When we get out of the camp you can run away."

I didn't listen to anyone and I hid in the bushes near a spot where the wire was broken and when it was night and they were putting everyone into the villa I was able to sneak out. No one saw me but when I neared the village it was very dark and late. The countryside was terraced for farming and while walking in the dark I fell off one of the terraces 7-8 feet and hurt my knee badly. I went to a barn nearby which was warm and I remembered how when I was young and I would hurt myself my mother would make a poultice from smashed onions. When I awoke at 3 or 4:00 am I couldn't move my leg and it hurt badly. Around 6:00 am the farmer walked in to feed the animals and I called to him. He was surprised and happy. He went back into the house

and brought back his family saying, "Solomon is in the barn, he is free again." He brought wine and we started to drink saying, "Saluto!" I was in pain and I didn't know what to do. The farmer said, "The best thing to do is to go to the Bucaroni." The Bucaroni is a large hole or ravine full of large oaks in a dense forest near the village. They gave me a bottle of wine, bread and ham and I went there to hide. The forest in the ravine consisted of about 100 acres and I felt safe here and was not afraid of anyone. My knee was really bothering me when I saw a prisoner going to a farmhouse to eat I told them what happened to me and they told me what happened back at camp. The morning after I escaped Lt. Novelli came. The day before he had been off. So he came in the morning and they joked with him telling him Solomon was back even though they knew I had escaped the previous evening. Novelli yelled my name at roll call and of course I was not there to answer and he thought I was hiding. "Why is he hiding?", Novelli asked. "We don't know.", the Greeks answered trying not to laugh. So he sent guards up to search the barracks but they could find nothing. "That dirty Jew!", Novelli screamed angrily. All those women prostitutes are helping him. I will catch him some day!" Since then he would come to the forest every day and search for me but he could never find me because I knew how to hide well. Every night he would return to camp with his uniform all muddy. "What's the matter with you?", the Greeks would ask. "For one prisoner you trudge through the mud every day!" Major Patras, a Greek who was friendly with Novelli and a teller of tall tales, sat Novelli down and said, "I will tell you a good story Novelli. Once upon a time a child was born and the King said to kill all the newborn boys because of a prophecy. Well all the newborn boys were killed except one baby whose name was Jesus. The same thing is happening with Solomon. You have caught all of the other prisoners but you haven't caught Solomon and you won't be able to so stop wasting your time."

There were three or four doctors in our camp and Dr. Banatras came to see me as soon as he heard about my knee. He told me I needed to apply compresses to my knee but where would I get hot compresses? I couldn't stay at one house for very long for fear of being caught so he suggested building a fire and heating some water. This was very risky but we built a little fire in an isolated area and the Italians brought a pan with water when they began picking chestnuts. The owner of the shed that I stayed in told me to come to his house where we applied more compresses. His brother came over and visited and we were having a good time when there was a knock at the door and we heard them identify themselves as police. I hid under the bed as



quickly as possible. His wife came into the room and told me she didn't think the police were there for me but just to visit and eat chestnuts, drink wine and play cards. I hid under the bed until 12:00 am and the wife brought me wine and chestnuts giving them to me under the bed. I stayed two days and then I went back to shed but I could not sleep there since it was winter and it was too cold. Instead I would sleep in different barns with the animals or I would sleep in different farmhouses when the search for me let up a little. Winter was not too bad and I heard that the recruiting office for the county would be located at the POW camp in the villa and all of the area youth would have to go to register for the new army Mussolini was building. Things had changed. The commander of the camp told the men that they should ..... The Greek officers came to me and told me I should return to the camp because things looked stable and they were being moved into the city of Poppi into two convents and a hotel which would act as a command post, kitchen and mess hall. I was debating whether to go or not. The Italians would ask me why I would not return to the camp like everyone else had. One day I told them that it was because I was Jewish. They laughed and didn't believe me saying, "But you don't look Jewish." "What do Jews look like?" I asked. "They have big bent noses, red hair, and they are ugly and bent over", they said. "Who told you this?" I asked. "The priests told us." "Have you ever seen a Jew before?", I asked. "They said, yes we know a man whose name is Mr. Ancona. "What is this man doing around here", I asked. "He owns a big farm and a wood mill where they cut trees, but he lives in Florence." I asked if I could meet him. I cleaned my clothes and the girls dyed my khaki uniform blue. I had some shirts that my brother sent and I dressed nicely. So I went to San Marino which was 7-8 miles from Fronzella but first I went to get a hair cut. At the barbershop I sat in an empty chair. I overheard two men talking and one described how he was fired upon by the underground. The man who had just gotten out of the chair was a fascist and said, "Did you shoot back?" "No", replied the other. "You should have shot back!", exclaimed the fascist. "They should all be killed!" I became afraid as I sat down and hoped they would not ask me who I was. I was ready to tell them I was a refugee from Genoa who had been bombed out and who was staying with some distant relatives in Fronzella. Fortunately, they didn't ask me any questions and after I got my hair cut I proceeded to the farm of Mr. Ancona. It was a huge farm and when I walked into his yard I saw 30 or more people, all well dressed gentlemen. They asked us what we wanted and I told them I would like to speak to Mr. Ancona, but they said he

was not there, and that he had gone to Florence. I said, "Actually, I wanted to talk to him. I am Jewish and an escaped POW." A young boy was standing nearby and his eyes widened with curiosity when he heard what I was saying. I didn't stay long and I felt that they didn't believe me and thought that perhaps I was a fascist spy.

I left, and I decided to go back Poppi. When I arrived, I was face to face with lieutenant Novelli who called me a bandit and a dirty Jew. A couple of Greek officers nearby spoke French, as did Novelli and they told him, "You had better leave our boy alone. You don't have any right to treat him like this." Lieutenant replied with a scowl, "Well, he escaped and tricked me. He told me he was a nice boy." "He is a nice boy", they said, "and he didn't do anything wrong. He has the right to escape." "I'll get even with him", retorted Novelli as he left. The Greek colonel Cochartes told me, "You come back to the camp. If we have a chance to escape in the event the Germans arrive you will be the first go." It was under these conditions that I returned the camp.

There were two convents where the prisoners slept and one across from the hotel. My group was staying in the convent west of the city where monks used to reside. Two officers were in each room and a large room where most of the soldiers slept with 6 or 7 policemen and the police Sargent major. I looked through the window to see how I could escape. I found a rope which I hid under my mattress just in case I would have to escape out the window which would take me outside of the walls of the city. Things were going well for me. They made me an interpreter for the kitchen. There was a lieutenant from the Greek island who went with me to buy food in the city each day. While in town, we met a rich family with a radio and every day we would go and I would take notes from the news on the BBC. We would bring the news back to the other prisoners who were happy to hear of the German retreat at Stalingrad.

Dr. Baturas came to me one day and told me of a high ranking fascist in the area whose 12 year old son had TB. He wanted me to translate for him. I was telling the father of the boy that, according to the Doctor, the boy had to eat more food especially meat, eggs, and cheese. The Doctor had an idea though. He wanted us to move into the house with them so that we could take care of the boy and get him to eat.

The commander of the camp was a captain who had been a professor before the war. The fascist wanted to ask the commandant if we could stay with him, so all three of us started walking to the commandant's office when we saw lieutenant Novelli. "I know lieutenant Novelli well.", said the father. "What if I just ask him for permission for you to stay with me?" I didn't have time to say no. They greeted each other and the father asked Novelli, "Can the doctor and Solomon stay with me for awhile to care for my son?" "Solomon, that dirty Jew!", yelled Novelli. "That dirty Jew!", he yelled loud enough so that all could hear. A crowd gathered as he called me a liar among other insults. I ran up to my room, embarrassed and hurt and I cried. The Greek officers asked me what was going on and I told them how Novelli humiliated me in the square in front of everyone. So two Greek officers went to the Greek Colonel and told him what happened. They all went to the Italian Commandant and told him that if Novelli bothered me again in any way that they could not be responsible for what would happen. They said they would help me escape if necessary. No commandant wanted escapes on his record so the he said, "I will put Novelli in his place!" Later Novelli came and apologized to me and then the commandant told me, "you will be in charge of the kitchen from now on. You are under my protection and if anyone bothers you then come directly to me."

I would go shopping and the Italians were happy to sell their goods to me. The people in the camp were surprised to see all of the vegetables and other food I would bring back. "Where did you get this from?", they would ask. I could not tell them because the people asked me not to since they would not even sell these items to the Italian army. One day lieutenant Novelli said, "they are all traitors! They help the enemy but won't help their own people." Some days I would go shopping without any guard and a couple of times the lieutenant would see me on the road coming back. "Where have you been?", he asked. "I've been shopping.", I said showing him the potatoes, Onions, and beans. "Where did you find those things?", he asked. "I'm not telling you who I bought these things from.", I said. Once he told the commandant that I was going free without any guard, but I told him if I wanted to escape could have done so a long time ago so they left me alone.

One day I to get a haircut and when I returned, Novelli was eating in the kitchen. “Do you want some wine Solomon?”, he asked. “No, thank you.”, I said cautiously. “Where have you been.?”, he inquired. “Across the street to get a haircut.”, I replied. “How much did you pay?”, he asked. “Two and half lyre.”, I replied. “This man took money from you?”, he asked angrily. “Of course.”, I said, “he cut my hair, didn’t he?” Novelli rose and pulled his gun from his holster as he walked across the street. In a moment the barber came to me and gave me my money back. After Novelli left, I returned the money to the barber and apologized. “He is really something.”, the barber said. “They have to kill that guy some day.”

When I didn’t have to work I would go back to visit the farmers whom I loved like my own family. When they harvested the wheat they would say to me, “Do you see all of that wheat? When we harvest it the fascists will take what they want without paying.” I said, “Why don’t you hide some.” “We can’t do that.”, they said. “If we are caught we will go to jail.”, they explained. “Take a couple of bags and let’s take it somewhere up north.”, I said. So we hid the wheat and when the fascists came they took their share...