

The childhood stolen from the daughter of a prisoner killed in a Nazi camp

We are pleased to reproduce a speech given by Ionne Biffi, head of ANED in Sesto San Giovanni, during an international public event at Gusen on 8 May 2010.

A stolen childhood

Here we are once again, in front of the memorial built around the crematorium ovens that serve to remind the whole world of the existence of Gusen concentration camp. I would like to remember today, together with you, the adults and children who were incinerated in these ovens. An Italian inmate at Gusen, Angelo Signorelli, told me how, during his deportation to the camp, he saw a "column of children, aged between four and seven years old, with their hands raised" marching into the camp. In fact, a sad eye-witness account tells us that at the end of February 1944, 420 Jewish children arrived at Gusen, aged between four and seven, all of them emaciated.



The ovens (picture © Rudolf Haunschmied)

Last October, during the inauguration of the Italian version of the "Audioweg" art project here at the camp, we learnt from a nearby inhabitant, an eye-witness, that many children were placed into jute sacks by the Nazis, which were then smashed against a wall until the children were dead. Children who lost their childhood, and then their lives. The devastation of war does not affect everyone in the same way, but all those caught up in its path must nonetheless come to terms with it. I also lost my childhood, as I am the daughter of a prisoner killed here in 1945, and I think that this account might offer some analogies with the memories of any child who lost their father in a similar way. These private memories help us to remember our fallen loved ones and thus the consequent inexorable changes to our daily lives, and to describe a suffering that history books do not speak of.

I was born in Sesto San Giovanni during the Second World War, and I spent my early years enjoying the affection and attention of my parents. Two absolutely good people who, finding themselves caught up in a daily struggle for survival thanks to the conflict, decided (like so many other people) not to stay out of the fray, but to play an active part for the sake of the greater good. They knew full well that this choice could lead to devastating consequences for our family.

And, in fact, so it went. One night in March 1944, the fascists burst into our house and took my father away, without telling us where he was being taken. After much desperate searching, my mother found him imprisoned in Bergamo. Some days later, we learnt that he had been removed from Bergamo to an unknown location, and in fact we would have no more news of my father until after the war, when some of the first survivors of the Nazi camps started to return home. They told us of the atrocities and the barbarities inflicted on inmates in these camps, and that my father died here, in the Gusen camp, after enduring unspeakable suffering. The thought of his suffering made the news of his death even harder to take, and has remained with me all my life.

For my mother and me, my father's arrest marks the start of a new phase of our life, a dangerous and dramatic phase. After much fruitless searching, my mother managed to find a job, and I was alone at home during the day. At that time, I was still small, only four years old, and obviously not yet able to fend for myself. Fortunately, all our neighbours offered us great support and took it in turns to look after me, free of charge. I became part of a much larger family, and I was especially struck by the affection shown to me by my uncles and my father's cousins. However, my mother's family abandoned us completely, ended all relations with us, as they did not approve of my parents' actions. I no longer heard my mother's songs at home or saw her smile, and instead we had to face many daily difficulties. The world around us offered us only a life of endless sacrifice.

I started elementary school, and immediately felt different from the other children. In a very short space of time, I had lost half of the familial affection available to me, and my world had been violently shaken in a sudden and irreparable way. Not only did I not have a father, I also did not have his tomb, he had simply vanished from my life. I could not understand why a whole part of our family no longer spoke to us, and never came to our house. I could not make sense

of my situation, and I kept asking endless questions about the behaviour of the others. I found it difficult to find answers, or to understand the answers that I did receive, as I was still too young to come to terms with what had happened. Above all, I lived with the constant fear that something would happen to my mother, who had of course become my only reference point. My father's actions had resulted in my having a life completely different from that which I would have had if he lived.

It took me many years to process my feelings, and then finally I understood. I understood, and clearly, what a brave and praiseworthy decision my father had taken, to involve himself in the noble struggle to restore lost dignity to Italy and the Italian people. He threw himself into the unequal struggle, and paid for it with his life. But his sacrifice, as with all the others who fought with him, helped give our country freedom and democracy.

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