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Toys of War

Cristina Pepe

Every year, I travel to Orsara di Puglia, the town where I was born. One of the things I love to do every morning is walk up to *La Montagna Spaccata*, the mountain which borders on Campania. I can take in the fresh mountain air while enjoying breathtaking views of the landscape. Several years ago, while walking with Papà and family friends Maria and Emilio, we stopped at the old cemetery on our way back down.

I like to explore old cemeteries—by daylight of course. I find them peaceful and I like to imagine who the people buried there would have been and what kind of a life they had. This cemetery is particularly interesting as it is on the side of a mountain, overgrown and semi-abandoned. We entered a small family chapel where five children were buried, siblings ranging in age from four to twelve years. They had all died on the same day, November 16, 1943. Their last name was the same as Emilio's, but he said nothing, and he looked like he had seen a ghost. While we walked back down to Orsara, he told me a story that I will never forget.

In 1943, Emilio was thirteen years old. "*Erano giorni brutti*," he said. Foggia had been bombed and many of the evacuated residents fled to Orsara. Goods were only available on the black market, but there was no money to buy them. Emilio's family worked the land, so they always had food to eat, but some of his friends were not so lucky. There was very little for children to play with. They were resourceful and amused themselves playing with whatever they could find. The Allied Forces were moving north. In October, American military vehicles started coming through Orsara. When these vehicles drove in, especially the large ones full of soldiers, Emilio and his friends would run behind them. The soldiers would throw candies, cookies, chocolates, and even chewing gum from the vehicles. These were real treasures for the boys and the soldiers were amused watching them pick them up.

November 16th was a cold, damp, grey morning. There was a light drizzle and all of the farm workers had stayed home from the fields. A small American truck stopped at Porta San Pietro, right by the main fountain. When the two soldiers stepped behind the vehicle to

smoke a cigarette, a boy named Pasquale took a cardboard box from the front passenger seat and ran off with it to join his friends.

Later that morning, Emilio arrived to play with his cousins and their neighbours. They were all trying to get a look at the cardboard box which Pasquale had taken from the American truck. Everyone wanted to see the treasures inside, expecting it to be full of toys, games or even chocolates. Instead, what they found was another box, a small, funny shaped metal container.

They had not seen a strangely shaped box like this before and wanted to open it to see what was inside. They passed it around, shook it, banged it against a railing and even whacked it with a large rock. It just would not open! The mysterious object was of a dark coloured metal, cylindrical, and the outside was divided into small squares. At the top there was a small hole. This hole, Emilio later found out, was where his cousin Antonio had inserted the scissors that made it explode.

It was noon when Zio Michele, the electrician, passed by on his way home. His son was among the group, so he stopped to see what they were doing. Zio Michele looked at the object, then he turned it over and over in his hands. Like the boys, he had not seen anything like this before either. He did not know what it was, but he had a bad feeling about it. "*Sarà meglio se lo buttiamo via!*" he said. The stream nearby, across from the church, La Madonna della Neve, was where the straw-burning ovens disposed of their ashes several times a day. Zio Michele walked over and, despite the objections of the boys, threw the object in as far as he could. He hoped it would just disappear into the ashes and sink. But that did not happen.

Emilio wanted very badly to find out what was inside the funny shaped box. He was sure it was filled with little chocolates that would melt in his mouth. One of the Sisters at school had given him a chocolate once for learning his prayers. But it was time to eat and his mamma was expecting him home. Emilio and his friends all went their separate ways and forgot all about the little treasure box and what it might contain.

In the afternoon, Emilio's five cousins were at home, playing with Rocchina and Michela, two sisters who lived a few doors away. Emilio's *zia*, Tucciarella, had gone out to buy thread to alter an old coat for six-year-old Clementina. Zia Tucciarella wanted to take Clementina with her, but the little girl wanted to stay at home and play with her sisters and friends. Zio Peppino was at home, asleep by the fire. Antonio, the second oldest of Emilio's cousins, left the house unnoticed. Soon he

returned with the metal box, resurrected from the ashes like a phoenix. The children were enthralled with it, hoping to finally find out what treasures it contained. Childhood curiosity took over and seven faces were eagerly huddled around the box as Antonio took the scissors from the drawer and forced them into the hole at the top.

As the clock struck three, a neighbour came running to Emilio's house screaming "*Corri! Corri da Peppino. È scoppiato qualcosa!*" (Run! Run to Peppino's. Something exploded!) Emilio didn't even wait for his Papà. He bolted out the door and ran as fast as he could. When he arrived at Zio Peppino's, the door was open and all the neighbours were gathered at the bottom of the stairs. He flew up the stairs before anyone could stop him and was shocked at the devastation that lay at his feet. His blood turned to ice and he had to lean on the flour cabinet at the top of the stairs. Emilio could not move as he saw the charred, lifeless bodies of his five cousins and their friends torn apart everywhere. Michelina age nine, Clementina age six, Maria Pasqualina age four, Beniamino age twelve, Antonio age eleven, Rocchina age eight, and Michela age six, were all barely recognizable. Michelina was still breathing, a small moan escaping from her chest now and then. Her brothers and sisters were already dead. He saw someone trying to clean the dirt from Michelina's face—but it was charred, not dirty. Little Michela lived one more day and although she could barely speak, was able to fill in the details of what had happened.

The bomb was very powerful. As Emilio said, "*Era fatto proprio per ammazzare la gente*"—It was made to kill people. It had shattered into fragments when it exploded, sending the metal squares flying in all directions and leaving holes everywhere. Zio Peppino was badly injured and bleeding. He was frozen and grief-stricken, not making a sound as shards of metal were being removed from his left side. He survived only because he was sleeping by the fire and had been shielded by the bodies of his children gathered around the box before it exploded.

Zia Tucciarella arrived home right after the explosion but the neighbours did not let her go up the stairs. When she did force her way upstairs and saw that Michelina was barely alive, she fainted and was taken to a house nearby. Zio Peppino was taken to get medical help in Troia, where he remained for two months. When the *Carabinieri* arrived, they sent everyone away except for Emilio's papà, who stayed the night. The *Carabinieri* would have arrested Zio Peppino if Michela had not been able to tell them that he was asleep the whole time and had not seen Antonio come in with the box Pasquale had taken from the

American truck. Emilio said that his papà had told him that during the night, they had loaded six coffins into a cart and taken them to the cemetery at sunrise. Emilio's cousins, the five siblings, were all buried in the family chapel that had belonged to a relative who had gone to America.

Talking about that horrible event had given Emilio shivers, even after all these years. It was obvious that he rarely spoke about it. He told me he would not be able to sleep that night as he would keep seeing vivid images of that horrible day. This event had a profound effect on Emilio, especially after he had his own family and truly understood the loss that was suffered by the parents of these children.

I have come to realize that almost every village in the south of Italia has a similar heartbreaking, tragic story connected to innocent children and these toys, toys of war that were left behind. "*Ma quelli erano tempi brutti,*" we could say. Yes, they were awful times, but now imagine the setting as present-day Syria, Palestine, Israel or Afghanistan. Seventy-five years later, there are still places in the world where children face similar dangers every day, innocently seeking out toys to play with and instead finding toys of war.