

Fiamma Fumana and the Mondine di Novi Choir

“From Mother To Daughter” Background

About the Mondine

The stories of the people are the same all over the world. They are stories of suffering and fighting, of dreams and hopes, of slavery and the flight to freedom; they are stories of women and men, stories that are all the same, with no heroes and no names. They are the stories that ring truest, those that make a country into a nation, a tradition into a culture, a man into a hero or a tyrant. They are **our** stories, those that should unite the world behind a common ideal called peace.

And history is made of stories, told in books are sang in the piazzas, from one village to another, from one dialect into another. This is the way the story of the rice weeders was born and told, like an unwritten book, a song that continues to ring, working to find its place in the collective memory of the younger generation.

Who are the rice weeders (“mondine” in Italian)?

The mondine are peasant women of Northern Italy, who since the early 1900s through the 1950s migrated from their villages to the western part of the Po Valley to weed and plant rice in the fields.

It was hard work, with their backs bent all day long, their hands and legs in stagnant, stinking water, with the landlord always watching from the bank of the rice paddy. The women worked all in a row, keeping the rhythm, speaking little, their thoughts set on their distant homes, their children, their love. Always with poverty, sticking to them like a leech, along with the water-snakes, the bugs, and the burning sun beating down on their wide-brimmed straw hats (now worn proudly, like a uniform, on stage).

The women sang to keep the rhythm. They made simple songs, straight from the heart; singing from the need to push away dark thoughts. They are about love and longing, journeys to find work in distant lands, fighting for one’s dignity, fighting fear itself, and making clear their demand to be respected. They sing to say “Enough!” and to be aware of one’s right to a better life.

And so, singing their songs, the rice weeders were among the first workers to organize strikes. They lay down on the railroad tracks that led to the rice fields, united in music, labour, and suffering. And they won! They stood with their back straight and fought for a better life, there was steel in them and they demanded respect.

They are great small women, heroes of a tough story that carried through two world wars, and found the words and the voice to sing their pain, and the will to rebuild Italy all over again. They are women that turned ignorance into wisdom, submission into courage, and silence into music.

This music must now be passed on to the younger generations, both in Italy and throughout the world. Their music is the legacy of women that have fought and cried,

worked and suffered, laughed and sung, and always have lived in the hope that humbleness, sacrifice, faith in a better world might become a reason to fight for the dignity of humanity, of his ideas, of his sense of justice that must be grown as one grows a young plant of rice.

Eva's Story

Eva was the "battle name" of one of the singers in the Choir who helped the partisans as an undercover dispatch rider and weapons courier during the Nazi occupation of Northern Italy in 1943-45. Women were in charge of this, for men had been drafted to serve in the army under a puppet government nominally headed by Mussolini, but which was maintained by German military force. Other ladies in the choir also contributed personal memories of the same period; Eva's individual tale becomes a collective one.

They called me "Eva." A battle name to hide my real one. A name that, had someone given it up under torture, would not lead to me. I am a partisan courier, a rice weeder, a woman of the plains, I still am all of these, because this is my life.

My house was like any other in our countryside. We were a big family: old folks, children, women, and men almost always on the fields or in the stables. My brothers were tall and strong and smoked cigarettes, while my father and grandfather were always gazing upon the fields with worn-out pipes between their teeth.

My father did not want to go to the party rallies. These were the times of Fascism, hard times for people who had a different opinion, times when violence was seeded more than wheat, and kicks and punches were a more common crop than ears. In my village, the Germans behaved like they owned it all.

"Life was not as it used to be in my time," my grandfather said. But I did not know his time. I was born under fascism, and now fascism had gotten us into war. I did not like what I saw. Everything was changing. People talked less and less.

I was scared to death when, one evening, the Germans stopped me at a checkpoint. They searched me, they looked even under my skirt, and they yelled in my ear:

"You know where the partisans are!"

"Yes," I thought, "I know, but I won't say!"

The hate, fear and shame of their intrusion against my body gave me strength. I started to cry and they let me go. I took shelter in my mother's arms, but if I think of those hands all over me, to this day I begin shaking with anger and disgust.

That same year I left with my mother to weed rice for the first time. Forty days to make a little money and work a lot. There I learned the taste of the sweat of work, very different from that of play. I learned to fight off the pain in my hands and in my back. I learned to sing. I learned new words: struggle, equality, rights.

I recall that, when the sores on my hands were burning unbearably and water and bad herbs were giving me torment, one of the girls told me: "Take courage, you must hold on, do not give up, hold on!"

That same day I saw the *repubblichini** drag a boy along the streets of the village, beating him up. That day I saw his eyes giving not tears, but blood. I can still hear the dry sound of them hitting him. That day I decided I would follow my brothers. The hate growing inside me was stronger than fear. I was yet younger than that boy, but you grow old fast in pain. I started to be “Eva,” living on the razor’s edge.

I carried partisan dispatches in my curls, in the handles of my bicycle, Sometimes, on my way back from the market, I kept weapons in my bag, hidden beneath cabbages, onions and potatoes; I delivered them to people I did not know. No one must know. No one must be in danger.

Now they came through more and more often, mopping-up, searching for partisans. Once the Germans had been allies; now they hated us. I think they always hated us. I saw runs and executions, I saw boys my age die.

It was an April Sunday when they came. A holy day for a day of celebration. We all found ourselves outside our homes as if a sudden earthquake had made us run from within closed walls. Finally I felt my twenty years. I was running like mad towards the square, with all the bells ringing to make me run faster. Suddenly I saw the first American tank.

The cheers, the flowers, the kisses, the yells of joy, everything was like fireworks. People threw sweets by the handful. Someone kissed me on the mouth, on the cheeks, and for the first time being touched gave me warmth and safety. Everyone was smiling, laughing, laughing... laughing at last. Everything was beautiful, they were beautiful, the beauty of the winners. I, among the liberated people, felt the nightmare end. Finally I felt I had the strength to face the future, to face the long uphill road we would all walk together, to rebuild, to find serenity and peace once again.

They were not easy years. The war left wounds that never really healed. I lived those years between the fields, the family and the rice paddies. We were still poor, but we kept fighting. We rice weeders were the most passionate, the most united. We felt like we had no fear of anything.

I remember we were at the railway station, close to each other, lying face down on the rail tracks, with the heat that unites everyone, beasts and men. All for a little extra money, for the right to a life, not just survival. All along we sang and sang, because this much we can claim: we have always sung. With music, politics, history and life itself become lighter, lifting the clouds of hypocrisy, of pain, of indifference.

Now I feel old, old in the face of this world.

Today, we live well. We have left our own suffering behind; but I see suffering, pain and fear around me every day. I cannot think that our story has been useless.

In my village, out among the fields, there is a memorial stone for one of those boys, dead for his love of freedom. In the same gunfight a young German soldier was killed too. They died close to each other, and maybe for a moment they looked at each other before they fell into the darkness.

* *Repubblichini* is the name given by Italians to the soldiers of the Italian Social Republic, the puppet regime installed and maintained by the Third Reich in Northern Italy after 1943.

Maybe in that moment they understood.

These two young boys, so different yet so similar, so innocent in the face of the sins of the grownups... they know that there are rights stronger than any law. These are the rights of any people, no matter the race and religion, to live in peace, freedom of thought, respect of diversity, and above all in the right to say NO to war, because it cannot be justified.

This I tell my grandson when we ride our bicycles out in the countryside and we stop to say hello to the memorial stone. And there, among the smell of grass and the red poppies, I tell him my stories, I tell him of two young boys, children like him, defenseless like him, and, maybe, something will stay in his heart, something to live and respect himself for.

This memory has been written down and compiled by Manuela Rossi – “Eva sempre ribelle” from Storie Di Risaia, translated by Alberto Cottica.