

# The Journey to Find My Grandfather

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*J Am Acad Psychiatry Law* 46:212–16, 2018. DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.003749-18

I met my paternal grandfather, but he was a mystery to me. He had a large, locked trunk that I knew nothing about. From my point of view, he was quiet, detached, even distant. When I was a boy of five or six, he was the Nonno (Grandfather in Italian) I knew existed, but rarely saw. I was told that he was going to give me a white horse for Christmas, the kind ridden by the Lone Ranger. He never did. My cousin Aurora, who lived for a time with my grandfather, reported that he kept his bedroom door locked, the same room where he kept his large, locked trunk. Not a trusting soul. This is a description of my voyage and the discovery of my Nonno, Giuseppe Ciccone (January 31, 1887–March 31, 1975).

## The Gift

In September 2012, I visited my father's youngest sister, Tina Ciccone Sturdevant, at her home in Silver Spring, Maryland. I was sitting at her kitchen table, in the middle of the afternoon, when she excused herself. In a few minutes, she returned with a small composition notebook. Her father, my grandfather, had given it to her in June 1972 when she and her family visited her hometown in southern Italy, Sant'Eufemia d'Aspromonte. Tina was in the midst of raising her four children and developing her career. On returning home, she put the composition notebook away. Forty years later, handing me the notebook, she said, "I think you will find this interesting."

Nonno had written in Italian. With Tina's help I began to read the first few lines and flipped through the pages. Like Steinbeck exploring his hotel room in

*Travels with Charley*,<sup>1</sup> I searched different parts of the material with no clear direction. I wanted to understand what I was holding, reading, getting into. Written in his distinctive handwriting, the manuscript began in the top margin and went to the bottom of the page. I noticed the page numbers, the comforting precision of numbers, written at the top of each page. Ten lines between numbers. Why? Was this a poem? Was there a rhyming scheme? There was: ab ab ab ab cc. My grandfather had penned an epic poem completely filling the notebook, every page, every line. This was not a little story but a significant effort by a man with probably no more than a sixth grade education. And a large, locked trunk. What had he been hiding?

We sat reading, translating different passages, jumping ahead. Where was the saga going? At times Tina wept as we read and translated small portions of the text. It turned out that she did not know much more about him than I did. We exchanged what we knew or thought we knew about Nonno. Three hours later, we forced ourselves to stop for dinner.

## Translating the Epic Poem

I was determined to translate the entirety of my grandfather's poetic saga. By translating his poem, we hoped to give Nonno a voice. I also hoped to get to know this distant man. I eagerly jumped into the deep end. What hubris. I have limited knowledge of Italian and no experience as a poet except for some Billy Collins-like amusement. I was encouraged by Tina's eagerness to be involved in the project. She proved to be a knowledgeable, thoughtful, patient collaborator.

How to translate from Italian to English? The rhyme scheme was similar to what Torquato Tasso, one of Italy's great poets, used in *La Gerusalemme*

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*Liberata (Jerusalem Delivered)* in 1581,<sup>2</sup> the work for which he is best known. He influenced several artists, poets, and composers. In the constellation of great Italian poets, Tasso is second only to Dante.

Tasso's classic was one of only three books that Tina remembered Nonno keeping in the large, locked trunk. She recalled two other novels: Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*<sup>3</sup> and Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*,<sup>4</sup> a historical novel set in the 17th century. (Manzoni was the grandson of Cesare Beccaria, the great Italian criminologist and champion of humanizing the criminal code.) These books each carry a message of Christian redemption. There were other books in the trunk, the titles of which are lost to us. It is not much of a stretch to think that Dante's *Divine Comedy* was kept there too.

We turned to translations of Dante's *Inferno* and, selecting at random, studied 11 translations of Canto XIII.<sup>5</sup> It was clear that the translators, from Longfellow to Mandelbaum to Ciardi, brought their own voices to the words and music of Dante. Tina and I wanted to make every effort to be faithful to Nonno's poem and chose free verse as our medium. The translation of Nonno's work would not be perfect. No matter! Who better to give voice to this silent man than his daughter and grandson?

Our translation efforts began in September 2012. To make our way through the epic, we scheduled many phone meetings, usually one to two hours in length. We discovered that he had a rich, active, vital inner life. We uncovered several historical, mythological, theological, literary, philosophical, and political references. It turned out that many of his interests overlapped mine. Genetics, cultural influence, familial transmission are all powerful intergenerational ties.

## Context

After a first draft of the translation, which took us months to complete, we had a list of more than 70 words and phrases that we did not understand and could not translate. We enlisted the help of someone with knowledge of military terms: to make sense of Nonno's WWI combat experience, I wanted to learn more about World War I, the terrain where he fought, and trench warfare.

I was aware that World War I was a savagely destructive event that slaughtered millions, wounded millions more, infected the souls of many of the survivors, and wounded the West's sense of the promise

of modernity, the inevitability of progress in the standard of living, and a more humane society. At first, I was not aware of where Nonno had seen combat. I learned it was on the eastern front where the war between Italy and Austria was marked by the Twelve Battles of the Isonzo.<sup>6</sup> Named after the Isonzo River, located between Trieste and Venice, the Twelve Battles took place between June 1915 and November 1917. In May 1917, Nonno fought in the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo and possibly the Eleventh and Twelfth. The Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, the Battle of Caporetto, is the backdrop of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.<sup>7</sup>

I visited Trieste and went to the battlefield, the Carso, a limestone plateau northwest of Trieste that in 1916 marked the border between Italy and Austria. It now crosses from Italy into modern-day Slovenia. Dug out of the limestone rock of the Carso, the trenches still have intact walls that I could touch a hundred years after WWI. After learning about the complex series of trenches and their various functions (e.g., front line, supporting, reserve, and communication (connecting) trenches), I had a better understanding of Nonno's description of being buried alive in a communication trench by an exploding shell.

## The Epic Poem

Although we do not know when the poem was written, it must have been composed and rewritten several times before it was copied as a finished product into the composition notebook. The cover's Cornell University Logo is believed to predate the 1940s (Cornell University's archivist, personal communication, October 2015). The poem begins in November 1916 and comes to an abrupt halt in August 1917 on the last line of the last page. We believe that there were additional stanzas, probably copied into a second composition notebook that has been lost.

In his epic poem, Nonno does not dwell on descriptions of the landscapes, whether it be his hometown of Sant'Eufemia d'Aspromonte or the battlefield of the Carso. The difficulties of the terrain are trivial when compared with the treachery he encountered and his struggle to stay alive: getting enough to eat and trying to escape bombs, bullets, and incompetence. He uses simple language to convey complex concepts with glimpses into the inner life of one who probably read alone and without discussion of the concepts he encountered.

This first-hand account of becoming a soldier and going to war represents a microcosm of the universal soldier's experience. The poem focuses on a searing ember of the hellish fire that was WWI: the battles on the Carso. A historian might provide a prosaic summary of the conditions (a blue-green mist covered the battlefield) while Nonno's account reports from within the chaos: "The battlefield was dark and very hot."<sup>8</sup>

The story gets its strength from its simplicity and sincerity. A man returns to his native land to help defend it and finds corruption, injustice, propaganda, and incompetent leadership on the battlefield. In the 10th Battle of the Isonzo, for example, he tells us that he relied on his intelligence and courage to survive. This is the only line in the poem where he engages in anything resembling self-praise (Ref. 8, p 101; page numbers cited in the following sections are from the published poem).

### Why Write the Epic Poem?

Why did Nonno decide to write this poem? I think the poem may have been the result of an unsuccessful effort to heal from the emotional wounds of war that we now call posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). During WWI, the term in vogue was "shell shock," a warrior's reaction to intense bombardment in battle.

Why do I think of PTSD? In the poem, my grandfather describes a series of traumatic events. On May 14, 1917, during the 10th Battle of the Isonzo, the Austrian artillery was shelling his regiment intensely; he expected to die (p 85). A shell exploded near him and buried him alive in the communicating trench (p 87). He was saved by fellow soldiers who dug him out, but he sustained a severe buttock wound (p 87). Unable to walk, he crawled for help (p 89), making his way through a field of death and destruction (p 91). As he tried to escape the chaos, he was hit by shell fragments and knocked unconscious (p 93). When he regained consciousness, he was unable to see clearly (p 95). He asked for help, and the officer of his unit threatened to shoot him (p 95). This was no idle threat, as it was widely known that Italian officers executed their own soldiers on orders from Italy's Chief of Staff, General Luigi Cadorna. Unable to walk, Nonno was lifted to a comrade's back. As they exited the tunnel, they found a massacre that compelled his rescuer to flee. Nonno was left on the ground (p 99) and had to slither like a snake through

a fiery hell, among dead bodies, exploded deposits of munitions, dead mules, dead mule drivers, and exploding artillery shells. Miraculously, he found his way to a field hospital (p 103).

Nonno was evacuated to a hospital behind the front line and was there from May 14 to August 5, 1917. During those three months, he continued to be traumatized. He was assaulted by the repeated howls of soldiers being "butchered" (having their limbs amputated) (p 107). On August 7, 1917, he rejoined the Ferrara Brigade which fought in the Eleventh and Twelfth (Caporetto) Battles of the Isonzo.

Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist, has written about PTSD and the U.S. soldier in Vietnam.<sup>9,10</sup> The unethical behavior by military officers, a betrayal of what was right and honorable, contributed to the catastrophic experiences of soldiers and led to their debilitating psychiatric symptoms.<sup>11</sup> The disorder can devastate an individual's ability to participate in work and family life. This withdrawal and emotional separation from others is amplified by the unethical, morally indefensible actions Nonno witnessed. One passage demonstrates this poignantly. Wounded and unable to walk, Nonno faced an officer with a revolver in his hand, who told Nonno in no uncertain terms, "Leave or I will shoot you" (p 95). Nonno laments, "O' War, you came and transformed us into beasts" (p 103).

After the unification of Italy in 1870, the North dominated the newly formed country. There was massive emigration from Southern Italy. Nonetheless, many Italian soldiers in WWI were from the South, and some, like Nonno, returned from overseas to fight. Marching through northern Italian cities to the cheers of the populace, including the cheers of young men not required to serve, Nonno wrote, "Yes, you cheer but we are going to our deaths." This sense of doom, coupled with inadequate training and materials and incompetent political and military leaders was clearly "not doing the right thing." It set the stage for his being nearly mortally wounded more than once, and included sustaining a traumatic brain injury with loss of consciousness. For me, these facts provide more than enough evidence to suggest that he had PTSD and explain some of his subsequent distant behavior. At one point he writes, "Everyone came to understand that the war was our total ruination" (p 79).

## Biography

Yet, this is only part of the story. What was he like before going into battle? We have scant information and trying to arrive at a diagnosis without having interviewed the individual before death only adds difficulty and uncertainty to the enterprise. We know his father, Luigi Ciccone, married Ursula Orlando, and they had three children: Francesca, Giuseppe (Nonno), and Antonio. How did the death of his mother in childbirth when he was about four affect his view of the world and his repertoire for recovery? His father remarried and, by all accounts, his step-mother, Fortunata Monteroso, was kind. A half-brother, Domenico, was born of this union. In 1901, when Nonno was 14, he came to the United States with his older cousin. He visited his hometown of Sant' Eufemia in December 1908 when he was 21. While there, his stepmother died in a massive earthquake; his was not an easy adolescence or young adulthood.

Nonno returned to Italy in early 1912. In May of that year, he married Francesca Pillari. She was a determined, independent woman, who without formal training, acted as a nurse and assisted the town doctor in caring for the ill. Nonno and Nonna had five children, all born in Italy: Louis, Nino, Orsola, Rose, and Tina. Like many Italian immigrants, Nonno worked in the United States and made periodic visits to his wife and family in Italy. My grandmother was one of a group of women whom author Gay Talese described as "white widows"; "the wives of ambitious young men who had left the village (at times absent for several years) to make money in America."<sup>12</sup> With absent husbands, they were widows with no one to mourn. In public, they radiated confidence and often dressed in white linen blouses and festive skirts.

In November 1916, Nonno returned to Italy to join the Italian army and fight in WWI. Why did he go back? I consulted the Military Attaché to the Italian Embassy in Washington, DC. He told me that Italian law required Italian citizens who lived in the United States to return to Italy and report for duty. If they did not, they would face imprisonment if they ever visited Italy. If Nonno wanted to see his family again, he had to go.

World War I forever changed him. He left to go to war, was seriously wounded and returned from battle quiet, detached, and distant. Nonna (Grandmother)

Francesca Pillari Ciccone reported that he came home from WWI a changed man: "Io parlavo di ceci, e lui parlava di favi (I was speaking about ceci beans and he spoke about fava beans)." He occasionally made statements that seemed to lack context. In her own poetic way, Nonna called these "lines in the air."

In March 1971, to honor his battlefield actions, the Italian government made Nonno a Knight of the Order of Vittorio Veneto. After his death, my grandmother gave me the certificate of his Knighthood. I framed it and hung it in my home office, but it was only after translating the poem that I came to understand its meaning.

## Conclusion

Soldiers who are in combat are warriors. Like many other warriors, this one never spoke about his combat experiences. He probably returned with PTSD. He locked his trunk, locked his room, and locked himself away from others, but in his trunk he had a world of books. In his room he wrote and rewrote, I think, in an effort to heal. In his head was a universe of ideas. His simple story is, in many ways, the universal story of warriors throughout history, from the Trojan War to Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

All too often, historical accounts focus on political leaders and generals. For example, the National Archeological Museum of Naples houses the Roman mosaic depicting the battle in 331 BCE between Alexander the Great and the Persian King Darius. Alexander and Darius take center stage in this historic narrative mosaic. The fighting and fallen soldiers play a supporting role. In Nonno's poem, it is the archetypal soldier who takes center stage.

The feelings, the fears, the injuries of this World War I soldier transcend time and location. They are universal. His poem, I believe, was his personal effort to connect with his wife and his children, his grandchildren, and the world. I wish I could have spoken about all of this with him when visiting my grandparents in Sant' Eufemia in August 1973. He was not available to me or others in the family but, as a result of translating his epic, I have some understanding of the man. The trunk was locked, as he was, but the gift of his poem has been a key providing my family with a glimpse into his struggles, the struggles of many warriors.

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