



*Margherita Fray has a story of courage, survival, and aptation to a new life in America. The story is example of conquering life's obstacles and challenges.*

# **Marisa's Courage**

## **The Memoirs of a Survivor of the Italian Resistance**

by Margherita Fray  
as told to Bill Diekmann

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# Marisa's Courage

MARGHERITA  
FRAY

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THE MEMOIRS OF A SURVIVOR  
OF THE ITALIAN RESISTANCE

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## 2.

### *Fascism Intrudes*

I recall hearing the name Mussolini, who had risen to power in October, 1922, from my earliest days. Beginning in the first grade (for me, 1931) on, children were indoctrinated in the story of Mussolini. We were told that by following his ideas and dreams, Italy would once again rise to prominence in the world. Nobody was allowed to say anything bad about *Il Duce*. In school, Fascist dogma manifested itself through strict behavior standards and planned activities.

My first school, *Re (King) Umberto I*, was fantastic and the children were, in my youthful view, "perfect". We all wore immaculate uniforms, we arrived precisely on time, and we dutifully prayed and studied our lessons every day. Each class had its own garden patch in which we raised various kinds of vegetables. The school was very well organized and I enjoyed the exercise classes very much. We were organized into teams, and the older children eventually helped those in lower grades to learn the specific routines, which were a combination of dancing and gymnastics.

In grades 3-5, some teams were selected to travel to Rome to participate in Fascist-organized rallies at the *Foro Mussolini* later re-named the *Foro Italico*.

The trips to Rome were wonderful experiences for me and my classmates – first, just taking the long journey away from home and then being in the Forum. Surrounded by all the architecture and statuary from the Roman Empire, it was very much infused with the theater of the spectacular which so characterized the radical political movements of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In addition to these major excursions, students were taken to various Fascist parades and rallies, usually on Fridays, with the children marching in special uniforms to praise Fascism and *Il Duce*.

Around this time I discovered I could draw and paint very well, so art quickly became my favorite subject in school. Because of my apparent talent, I was permitted to skip these marches while I stayed in the classroom and decorated the blackboard. I was allowed to choose my own subjects, so I would scan magazines and books for ideas. For example, my colored chalk illustrations were often of green fields full of flowers. In each Monday art class, then, the rest of the students would copy my artwork.

My love of art has been a constant companion, and solace, throughout my life and I continue to paint today, even as my vision steadily deteriorates from macular degeneration. I mostly use oils, but I have also used watercolors, chalks, and acrylics.

Despite my exemption from those parades, from third grade on I was proud to wear my uniform as one of the *Piccola Italiana*, the “Little Italians”, a designation created by the Fascists for girls between 8 and 14 years of age. The uniforms bore a pin with the Fascist Party logo on it. Because of the constant promotion of all the good works that had been implemented under Mussolini, we children had nothing but positive feelings and admiration for him.

By 1935, conditions in Italy since the Fascists’ rise to power in 1922 had improved, especially for those in power

MARISA'S COURAGE



Margherita in her Piccola Italiana uniform.  
(Note Fascist Party symbol on left shirt front.)



Piccola Italiane in air raid drill.  
(Courtesy of the Historical Archive of the City of Turin)



and those who supported them. But for the average Italian, despite all the politics-as-theater under Mussolini, life could still be a struggle. Papa was making good wages and wanted to spend more time with his family, so Mama and I, then in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, moved to Nichelino and there they rented a small house. Some time in 1936 Papa bought some land and built a villa in Nichelino and, as we shall see, my family remained there until about 1940. There was also a small house at the edge of this property and he rented it out to a family who took care of the gardens and grounds because Papa was not available during the day to do this work himself.

I remember that we owned a St. Bernard there and each day around 2:00 in the afternoon Mama would open the gate to the property to let him out. And each day he would walk the same path that I took to the local school. Meanwhile, I was walking home from school and, inevitably, we met along the way. The dog was always excited to see me and so there were warm greetings between us. He would then accompany me for the rest of my journey home. Things couldn't have been more perfect. Well, actually they could have been if my mother's over-protective behavior toward me didn't always seem to come out as dictatorial restrictions on what I could or couldn't do, who I could be friends with, and so on. As always, I absorbed these jabs as deserved.

For example, a young boy on a bike delivered bread every day to our home in Nichelino. Apparently he was infatuated with me, as he would linger outside the gate, staring at me. This upset my always-controlling mother who then sent me to stay with my aunt for a while.

One day while I was still away, the boy showed up with a small bouquet of white roses. But right then, news spread that a bridge in the town was cracked and appeared ready to fall at any moment. Along with others, the boy ran to town to see the bridge, and indeed it did collapse. Afterwards, as

townsfolk began clearing away the debris, they uncovered the boy's lifeless body beneath the rubble, still clutching the white roses. I learned later on that my mother felt very bad for how she had been suspicious of an obviously innocent and well-intentioned young boy.

Although I don't think the episode with the little boy caused it, soon thereafter my mother enrolled me in a convent, *l'Istituto Alfieri Carru*, back in Torino when I was around 11 years old. I lived and studied at this institution for a little over two years, during which time I learned to sew, as the school did fine embroidery on clothing articles for the Royal Family, whose palaces and lives were centered in Torino.

It was traditional for the Royal Family to wear white linens throughout the summer. Being very much tied to tradition, these clothing items were almost never thrown away because of wear and tear. Instead, they would be endlessly repaired, for not only were they worn year after year by a member of the family, but they would be passed down to succeeding generations, almost as a means to keep the family members connected to the past by being able to touch cloth that once touched the skin of a royal ancestor. These constant repairs and refurbishments were also undertaken by the nuns and their young charges at *Alfieri Carru*.

For me, this environment simply provided a new source of control in my life, authority shifting from my mother to the Mother Superior and the nuns. By this time I was well-grounded in the role of obedient, compliant, sweet little girl whose life had been, was, and would always be designed and controlled by superiors. So it was not surprising that with my thoughts and behaviors so rigidly "guided" by the nuns, I came to believe that some day I would become one of them. This lasted about a year, after which my incessant curiosity about life all around me made the nuns' constant chastisements and admonitions to work harder begin to chafe.

*In other matters, a hallmark of Mussolini's and the Fascists' vision of Italy was embodied in the term Italia Irredenta, the return to Italy of claimed but unredeemed Italian territories. Continuing the theme that Italy was heir to the legacy of the Roman Empire, the Fascists promoted the need to create an Italian Empire to provide room to expand and colonize, much as the Germans craved Lebensraum. A lofty goal was to regain control of the Mediterranean Sea, just as the Romans had once controlled the Mare Nostrum.*

*Adolph Hitler, languishing in jail after the Nazis' failed Munich "beer hall putsch" in 1923 (during which time he wrote Mein Kampf), had secretly admired Benito Mussolini and his Italian Fascist Party for how they had begun to control and reshape Italy since rising to power the year before. The Fascists' successes convinced Hitler such a regime was in order for Germany and so he fashioned the National Socialist Party's early policies and tactics after the Fascists'.*

*With Hitler's and the Nazis' assumption of power in 1933, there began to develop a budding "mutual admiration society" between these two leaders, marked by visits to each other's countries to attend grandiose political rallies and similar events.*

*But it was time to make good on the dreams for Italian greatness. And so in December 1934 Italy invaded Abyssinia in North Africa and then nominally controlled that country up until 1941. It was seen as a triumph for Mussolini and Fascism.*

*The Spanish Civil War cemented the Nazis' and the Fascists' bonds more tightly, as they both supported Generalissimo Francisco Franco's rising Nationalist movement in 1936. This, coupled with Mussolini's adventures in North Africa and Albania, led the Fascists*

*to think they were standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their German allies.*

*They greatly admired Hitler's successful gambles with the re-claiming of the Rhineland, the taking of the Sudetenland and, later, all of Czechoslovakia, as well as the Austrian anschluss. None of these had required a single shot or military engagement.*

On Good Friday in 1939 Italy invaded Albania, and this brought me my first taste of the ugly realities inevitably brought down on Italy by Il Duce's unbridled militarism – Uncle Pietro, Mama's brother, was an alpine soldier in the Army when Italy invaded Albania and one day he was found frozen to death during that campaign.

But the Fascists weren't prepared for Hitler's invasion of Poland and the declaration of war by Great Britain and France. In fact, it was not until nine full months later, on June 10, 1940, when the Germans were advancing through France and the fleeing French government declared Paris an open city, that Italy finally declared war against Britain and France. And it was then that my feelings about Mussolini began to change, for that was the year my father lost his job in Nichelino.

Nichelino's mayor was an ardent Fascist and engaged in nasty goings-on with anyone in opposition, some known by my father to be good people. On the other hand, Arnaldo Bertola, consistent with his religious training, was a peaceful man. While life in Italy was comfortable for him, instead of attending the Fascist meetings and joining in the Friday marches to city hall with all of the *camicie nere* (the Black Shirts), he preferred to work in the garden and hike in the hills around Torino. Over time, with the growing excesses of the Fascists, Papa became a determined anti-fascist, although he did nothing to make public his views. There simply were no other political parties legally accepted in Fascist Italy.

With his aloofness from the Fascist movement, his comfortable tax collector's position, and the nice villa he'd built for us, it was only a matter of time before some of his "friends" began to spread rumors that Papa was stealing money from the state through his work. Perhaps he had anticipated this. No one will ever know. Apparently he was a diligent bookkeeper, however, as he had maintained a duplicate set of books and these provided sufficient proof of his innocence so as to get him exonerated about a year after being accused. But he had been immediately dismissed from his job, and things had become desperate in the intervening year.

Because of all the stress and worry about what the Fascists might do to Papa, Mama had several "nervous breakdowns," two of which put her in the hospital. Fortunately, no lasting damage was done.

## 10.

### *Hollywood Arrives*

Although we knew he would arrive in two days, we didn't know how he'd be traveling or his arrival time, but on the 13<sup>th</sup> Mama, Papa, and I left for Milan's train station, hoping against hope to see him there. We only had his photograph, in military uniform, from a year ago from which to try to recognize him. After waiting and searching for many hours, with no sighting, we decided it was time to return home. As we approached the ticket office, however, we spotted a man wearing a Panama hat and a tan suit, looking like a prince standing beside leather suitcases on which the name "Fray" was engraved in gold.

Surprised to see me, Richard picked me up and embraced me, twirling me around as he called my name at the top of his voice. No doubt the onlookers were puzzled.

Mama and Papa were impressed at how handsome he was out of uniform, and after all the emotions of meeting him had settled down he decided we should take a taxi from Milan to Torino. Since it was a quite long distance, my father whispered to me, "These Americans are crazy"!

We arrived home back in Torino the same day, but I just don't remember the details very well anymore. I do remember there was a lot of excitement and I knew there were so many

things yet to do. It was so exciting, strange, busy, and hectic that I was confused and feeling a little scared.

Here, at last, was this larger-than-life character that, except for a few days last year, existed only in our thoughts and imaginations or on the paper on which he wrote us. I was in awe of him, as one might be in awe of a comic book hero come to life. His mannerisms were grand, his talk was commanding, and he was always at the ready to be ridiculously generous. It was obvious that he had a lot of money and he wanted everyone to know that. Not too many years later I had reason to be suspicious about how he had come by all this wealth. But for now, he was acting out the life role he had fashioned for himself. He was a showman, the one who stood out from the crowd, the one who attracted everyone's attention.

Richard's flamboyance almost exploded when, after settling in, he opened his suitcase and there in front of my eyes there was the most beautiful wedding gown I had ever seen or could have dreamed of, made in Hollywood by a renowned fashion designer (which gown I still have) along with furs and jewelry! I was to learn this kind of extravagance was Richard's hallmark.

During that week between his arrival and the wedding, he would wander into central Torino and stop at a local delicatessen and bring back "a little bit of this and a little bit of that", set it out on the table and say, "Mama, Papa, come eat". Mama said, "Oh, my God, I must set the table", and Richard would wave her off with a sweep of his hand, telling her just to sit and enjoy the food. Knowing my father's body language and facial expressions, it was apparent he was all the more convinced this guy was either completely loony or quite exceptional.

Along with the food, there would also be several bottles of wine and whiskey. Like most Italians, Papa enjoyed a few

glasses of wine each day, but usually with meals. So when Richard would say, "Hey, Dad, let's sit down and have a drink," Papa would decline the invitation and wander off to find something else to do. Despite this, the alcohol levels in the bottles dropped steadily and the bottles were replaced each day.

As if a gifted impresario, Richard managed to pull together in one week, in a foreign city, a marriage event unlike any but the wealthiest of citizens could have imagined, especially coming so soon after the horrors of a destructive war whose scars still marked our city. We were to make great use of the contact in the Royal Family, *Commendatore* Chiatti, who had been recommended by the California son of Papa's colleague at the bank.



## 19.

### *Santa Barbara*

Somehow, despite the apparent financial difficulties from Buellton, Richard managed in early 1949 to lease a restaurant in Santa Barbara that had been operated by Adolph Rempp, who would later go on to market his powdered meat tenderizer product under the brand name Adolph's. Since Adolph's Steak House had apparently been quite successful, Richard decided to simply keep the same name and continue operating it as it was before.

The restaurant was located on Cota Street, just east of the intersection with State Street, Santa Barbara's main north-south thoroughfare. Just around the corner on State was Joe's Café, which had in 1948 been sold to Joe Govean, Richard's friend in whose home I had stayed just before Angie's birth almost two years before. We moved into an apartment on North Milpas Street, about a mile from the restaurant. I used to walk with Angie in a carriage back and forth between the apartment and the restaurant several times a week. It was and is a beautiful place.

Because of the clientele that had frequented Adolph's, business was good from the outset, with, once again, lots of folks coming up from L.A., and Hollywood in particular. This time Richard had a floor show, with live music and singers.

One particular name I remember is actress Martha Vickers, who popped into the restaurant from time to time. Although she wasn't known as a singer, I do recall her singing at this restaurant.



Richard in his element in Fray's Cafe, Buellton.

In addition, there was a unique up-front feature in the form of a look-alike to Johnny Roventini. That name probably wouldn't ring a bell until you heard the "Call for Phillip Morris" for which he was famous. Since the real Johnny lived in New York, at best it seems possible this little guy at Adolph's Steak House might have been Albert Altieri, a second midget bellhop that had been hired by Phillip Morris Tobacco Company to cover areas west of the Mississippi. More likely, however, it was neither of these gentlemen but a passable imposter.

Whatever the reality, all this was very appealing to Richard and his need to impress people with his larger-than-life Hollywood impresario persona.

But while customer traffic and revenues may have been good, the restaurant's business was poorly managed. Unlike Buellton, where the staff had been with Richard for several years, and who were known by many of the patrons from the small town, Richard had had to hire all new staff in Santa Barbara. Making matters even worse, behind our restaurant was an alley that ran parallel to Cota, and which provided a rear door access to the bar between Adolph's and Joe's. Very quickly this became a well-worn path for Richard as his heavy drinking continued and he spent more and more time there and less and less in the restaurant. Sadly, he was also being steadily skimmed by some of his staff.

One waitress, for example, claimed to be taking home the scraps, mostly bones, for her dogs. One day, as Richard walked through the kitchen, he knocked over the can holding the "scraps" for her dog. Out tumbled a half-dozen raw T-bone steaks! Instead of firing her on the spot, Richard told her, "If you need help, just ask me, I'll give it to you. But don't steal from me." And that was the end of it as far as he was concerned.

Not surprisingly, the restaurant failed very quickly and by mid-1949 we were once again destitute. At this point, with no other prospects in hand, Richard suggested I go back to Italy with Angie. After all these years it's really difficult to remember the details with precision, but I have always carried with me the feeling that he knew he had failed me and our child and he knew that his drinking could ruin his life and ours, too. So this was a way to take that burden away from his shoulders. There was no discussion at that point about this being a mere "visit" home. There was a distinct air of a life chapter being closed for good.



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