

Maria, in her 80', recounts vividly the true story of growing up in Fascist WWII Italy. Postwar, her adventures as au-pair nanny and student in England and France lead her to a new life as a wife, mother and teacher in America.

WWII at Our Front Door

By Maria Gargano Jackson Mauck

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WWII at Our Front Door

Maria Gargano Jackson Mauck

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About the Story and the Author

This story is *not* fiction.

The first part of the story is a true recollection of World War II, 1939-1945, told by *Cettina Gargano as a 5 to 10-year-old child. The whole story is told in the first person, present tense. Only two chapters, entitled *Remembering Life in Tripoli, Libya* and *Remembering Life in Catania, Sicily* – where Cettina reminisces back to when the war was just articles mentioned in newspapers – are told in the past tense.

As the eve of the war lingers a little longer, she observes the carefree life of young people exulting with songs to life and love, dancing frenetically to the latest fashions, still unaware of the danger closing in on them.

As a child constantly under foot of grown-ups, Cettina describes people's behaviors, their conversations and imprecations. The child remembers vividly the eventual horror of the war as expressed by people's fear, their desperations, their rage at the cause of so much destruction, and their hatred.

The family, the neighbors, the tenants of the same apartment building – they all make up the experiences as related in these chapters.

In the second part of the book, Cettina is a teenager in school, in Florence, where the severe grading system in Italy still follows the fascist doctrine, which aims to reduce availability of places of higher learning. Italian parents take matters in their own hands and hire and pay extra teachers to prepare their students.

Cettina is then a young girl working as an *au pair* in London, England, and Juan Les Pins on the French Riviera, with the firm goal to continue her education.

She meets a young G.I. in France, moves to California and marries him, and continues her education at San Diego State University.

**Cettina was the author's nickname when she was a child.*

**“We do not argue with those who disagree with us,
we destroy them.”**

- Benito Mussolini

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Chapter 1:

Florence, Italy | Spring 1943

“Let’s leave the kids home. There are Nazi-Fascist snipers everywhere. The radio has been warning people all morning.”

“No,” insists my mother. “If we die, we die together. We must go. We don’t have a drop of water left.”

My sister, Ina, and I are carrying two empty coffee cans each, with wires across the tops as handles. My cans are much smaller than hers. She is two years older, much bigger, and can carry bigger cans. Uncle Frank and my mother, with my younger brother in her arms, follow closely, carrying an assortment of empty containers and bottles.

We leave the apartment building where we were staying on via Oriani in Florence, Italy. We make a left and then a right on via Massaia. There are unkempt fields in some sections of via Massaia. We walk through the fields until we reach two farmers’ wells about 100 feet apart from one another.

“Let’s stop here. The group is much smaller,” says my mother.

Lots of people are standing around the wells, especially the second one further away, where lots of children are playing and running around. Finally, our turn comes, with Mom and Uncle Frank standing opposite me and Ina, on the other side of the well. We fill all the bottles and containers when a sudden, loud *whizz* sound flies by my face, between me and mom. I extend my hand toward that whistling thing, as if to grab it, when a second, louder *whizz* flies by.

“What... was that?” I giggle.

“Don’t do that!” my mother screams.

At that instant we hear an explosion of loud, frightened shouts. People are yelling. Piercing screams and cries are coming from the group at the second well. A woman has fallen to the ground. Men and women are kneeling around her. Someone is crying hysterically.

“Let’s go! Now!” *Dear, Dear God...Dear, Dear God*, Mom is praying quietly over and over, as we hurry back home.

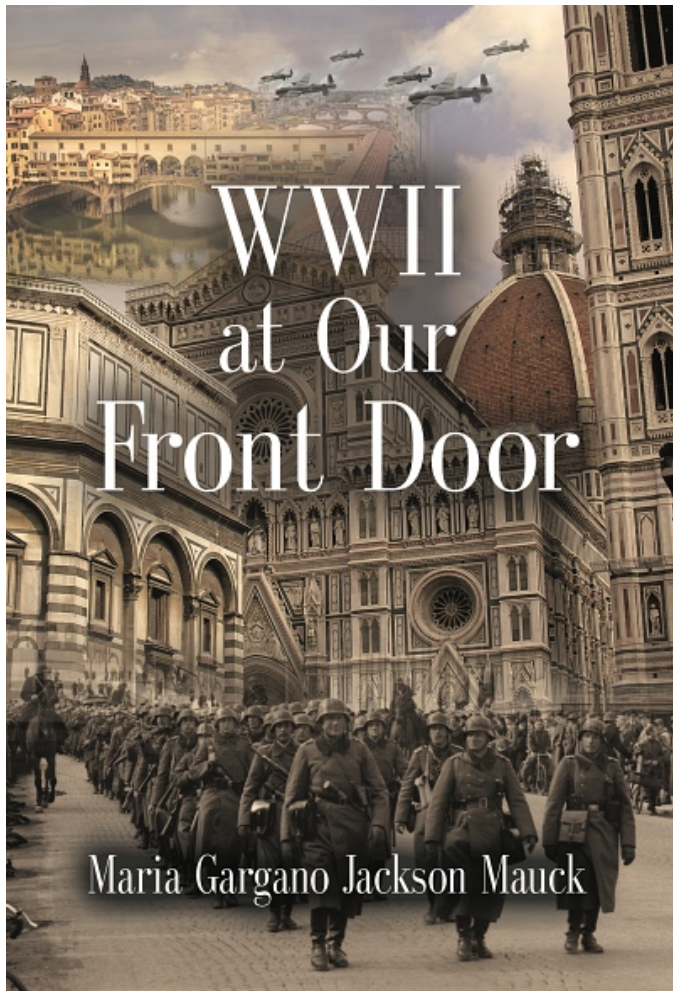
“Mom?” I ask, trying not to spill the water from my cans as I run after her, “Mom? What happened? Mom?”

We make a left onto via Oriani and up to the second floor of our apartment building.

“Mom, what happened?” I ask quietly.

“Don’t you ever understand anything?” Ina shouts at me angrily. “A woman’s been shot by a Nazi-Fascist sniper! And she’s dead!”

We have lived in Florence for 2 years since 1941 and on via Oriani for the last few months. My family is among the refugees the Italian government has ordered to repatriate from overseas at the start of WWII. Dad, a Marshal Major in Mussolini’s army, remained in Tripoli. I liked it there. It was happy, and we didn’t have snipers.



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