



Behind the Lines: Italian Americans Liberating Italy on Secret Missions

Benedetta Grasso (March 15, 2010)



Nancy Schiesari, the director and creator of "Behind The Lines" takes us closer to the protagonists of a fascinating and dangerous series of missions in World War II that linked Italy and the United States

It's the final year of World War II. While Italy is torn between the political choices of its leader and its alliance with Germany, the Partisans are making every effort to fight the German occupation, engage the help of the Allies, and distance themselves from racial and Nazi crimes.

Meanwhile, in the United States the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) is created, a wartime intelligence agency and a predecessor of the CIA.

It is then – when it became clear that the United States would have had to fight in certain parts of Italy – that some OSS officers approached a group of Italian-Americans, mostly first generation immigrants or people who had just arrived from Italy, and asked them to undertake secret missions



in their ancestral homeland to help the U.S. Army as well as the Italian Resistance.

This fascinating story is the subject of a documentary project by [Nancy Schiesari](#) [2] called “[Behind the Lines](#)” [3].” Schiesari met with those who carried out these missions and with Italian Partisans to investigate what happened and learn about these people who spoke both Italian and English and could act as liaisons between the two countries. The documentary includes priceless eye-witness accounts and archival footage as well as re-enactments.

Nancy Schiesari is an Emmy-nominated filmmaker and a professor at the University of Texas at Austin where she teaches filmmaking and cinematography. Her documentaries have aired on the BBC, PBS, and the History Channel. She’s a talented artist with many years of experience that have allowed her to explore her personal passion through her art which has received several awards.

In this interview she was kind enough to share the movie’s background and her personal history, as well as discuss the issues that are crucial to fully understanding and appreciating this little-known episode in American history.

How did you come up with the idea for this documentary and how is it connected to your personal history?

I have thought about this project for a long time because I grew up surrounded by these stories and ideas. My personal history requires some background information but it’s essential to fully understanding the documentary. My parents were both involved in World War II in Italy. My mother and father met before the war. My father was a bright man who had recently graduated from the University of Padua, specifically from the medical school. He was the only child in his farming family who went to college.

Like every other Italian, he had to complete his compulsory military service before attending college. When the war began he was drafted into the army under Mussolini as a medical captain in charge of 3,000 troops in Yugoslavia and Albania. At the end of the war he was a POW in Germany. In fact, he didn’t have much of a choice. He could either fight with the Germans on the Axis side or become a POW, and he chose the latter, spending two years in a prisoners’ camp. Meanwhile, my mother’s family experienced a very different situation. Her father immigrated to Pennsylvania in 1910 to work as a miner. He came from Tuscany and his family lived in rugged mountain villages. My grandmother was from a very different social class, part of the Italian cultural elite, and at first she hated the life of an immigrant in America and was very depressed. Suddenly they were very poor; Pennsylvania had very few roads and they lived in small houses. Her daughter (my mother), though, really loved America and loved going to school in Pennsylvania. She was a straight-A student and had a happy childhood.

Eventually her mother decided to take them back to Italy to visit her own mother with the intention of never returning to America. Once the whole family was reunited, the Fascists had come to power and her family had been chased out of town since they were anti-Fascist.

Did anyone in your family come in contact with the Partisans or the OSS?

My aunt, my mother’s youngest sister started dating a guy from the University of Florence, a philosophy student, and she joined a political group which he led; it was a Resistance group. He had contact with the OSS and Americans. My aunt suddenly became very dangerous to the whole family because everyone knew who her fiancè was.

All of the sisters helped or actively joined the Partisan movement in some way, hiding in mountains around the gothic line. My mom stayed kind of neutral because her boyfriend was a POW. She didn’t really take sides. After World War II, my parents, who were in their early 30s, decided to get out of Italy and one of my aunts came with them. They emigrated for personal reasons (his parents didn’t approve of their marriage) and due to the difficult economic conditions in Italy at the time. In Pennsylvania they would later tell me about the Resistance and their personal stories.

There must have been a lot of historical research involved in this project. How did you approach it



and how long did it take?

In terms of my research and my approach to this documentary, I'm really thankful for digital technology. The way I made documentaries when I was young and studying filmmaking was by using 16 millimeter cameras – and it was much harder. In terms of the scope of my research, I always wanted – as I did in my previous documentaries – to mix my political interests with my art, to make a difference in our society and change people's thinking.

For this project, I wanted to focus on the Italian Resistance and, as I mentioned, digital technology allowed me to take a small DV camera to Italy and do research on location. It all started at Trinity College in Connecticut. They held a symposium there and invited the main participants in the Italian Resistance who had also been in contact with the OSS. Many of the main operatives in the OSS who were still alive attended the conference. The Italians and the Italian Americans of the OSS came together; the two groups could finally talk to each other and my aunt was also invited. There I met the main people in my documentary, and I then followed them back to Italy, visiting their homes in Rome and Ravenna.

Was it difficult to get in touch with the World War II survivors and the agents? Did you receive any help from the Italian government, political parties, or veterans' groups?

I received help from my university, the University of Texas at Austin). I was awarded a grant and took a semester off to do research, and I also received a small grant from NIAF.

I was very lucky to meet Ennio Tassinari, a leader in the Resistance movement, who put me in touch with AMPI association of Italian Partisans. He was very well-connected and took me under his wing. He had a very interesting life: he worked for the OSS, he was in communist party at one point, and he did so much for the liberation of Italy. We traveled together and he introduced me to different Partisans who I later interviewed.

All of the people recruited were first generation immigrants who purposely left their homeland behind, focusing all their hopes on another land. How did the OSS pick those people among all of the immigrants? Were there people who already knew what was going on in Italy? Or were they "indoctrinated" by the OSS?

All of them had already been drafted into the U.S. army. They were regular infantry soldiers, they were already on duty, and some of them hadn't yet served in Europe. In the meantime, they were trained like other troops, since they considered themselves simply as Americans of Italian descent who would have eventually have to go and fight in World War II.

The people chosen by the OSS were mostly first generation immigrants but there were others who had just come over as Italian citizens and could get their citizenship expedited by going into the military.

I've collected several stories describing how they were approached, pulled aside, and then taken into a room where a couple of officers started interviewing them. They were asked questions such as: "Do you speak some Italian?" "Do you understand this?" "Would you be interested in joining a dangerous mission where you would be dropped behind enemy lines?"

At the same time they didn't have to go, they weren't forced; they were given a choice as volunteers. Once chosen, they were sent to a special camp in Washington, D.C. and another place up north, where they were trained in sabotage and to survive behind enemy lines.

Did you ask them how they felt being sent back to their homeland? Was it more "Italy needs you" or "the U.S. needs you?" In other words, were they more anti-Fascist Italian patriots or American patriots ready to defend the U.S.?

When they were in America the feeling was very different than in Italy, especially at the beginning of the war. Mussolini was making a good impression abroad as a political leader. Even President Roosevelt met with him. He and Hitler were inspired by the national socialism of his early politics, since Mussolini was a socialist before he was a Fascist, and in a way, he wanted to move towards a "new deal." At first he was practically hero here; he was even interviewed by the big newspapers in New York. He inspired a sense of respectability in Italian Americans who were experiencing issues as



immigrants and were being exploited, discriminated against. It was more the figure of Mussolini as a leader than his actual politics that made the immigrants proud.

Obviously this was the case up until Italy decided to side with Germany and support Nazi-Fascist ideals and values, even racist policies. By then some of the people chosen by the OSS had already identified more with being American, even if they had relatives in Italy, because they had been in the U.S. long enough. I don't think they thought of all Italians as Fascists or their relatives as their enemies, but when they left for the war the American ideology prevailed and they really wanted to liberate Italy from the Nazis and to restore freedom.

What did these people feel when returning to their homeland, the country they had left not too long before, without any intention of going back?

It was very moving for them. They saw Italy so broken and devastated. They only came in during the last year of the war when the Allies were about to land and they witnessed the aftermath of the German occupation. Through their airplane missions they helped the Resistance destabilize the Nazis, since people were starving and the cities were destroyed by the bombs.

One of the people I interviewed went to visit his relatives in Salerno and he saw that half of their house was missing and only one room was left intact. People had nothing, and although they appreciated the culture, the impression was probably that of an impoverished country. I think some of them, with the best intentions, were glad, though, to be going back to America. They might have thought something like this: "There we have freedom, prosperity, and a chance to make a living."

One of the OSS survivors, an Italian American, told me that his parachute landed him in a tree, and he stayed in that tree for two days and played dead. He miraculously survived the Nazis who came by and actually thought he was dead. When he came back to America he knelt down in New York and started crying.

In one of the clips online, it's suggested that American soldiers speaking their native language had a tremendous effect on Italian morale. In another clip, the protagonists explain how wearing a U.S. army uniform prevented them from being killed or treated as war prisoners if they were captured by the Nazis. Were the missions as effective as planned? And why aren't they more well-known?

I believe the missions were very effective. The OSS dropped clothes, cigarettes, food, and supported the Partisans physically and psychologically. They gave them supplies and necessary items to survive the winter. The Partisans were about to give up but the OSS kept them fighting. The important thing to say, though, is that they did not fight alongside the Partisans, shoulder to shoulder. It was a little different; it was mutual support and help.

They were not really recognized for a few very simple reasons. First, the OSS became the CIA and changed its name. As one of the most important organizations in Italy, the CIA had to immediately deal with other issues, such as the elections. There was still a direct connection to certain Italian Americans through the CIA, but the OSS no longer existed.

They were also supposed to be secret missions. I've actually heard some of them saying things like, "We got no recognition for what we did. Some G.I. Joe did something small in a battle and got to be a hero but we didn't get a lot of that." At the same time, they are very proud of what they did, and they knew that the missions had to be kept secret, at least for a number of years.

The papers documenting the missions are now in D.C., but they were not available to the public before 1996. Luckily I was able to research these papers and some of the OSS survivors sent me copies.

Do you know of similar missions being launched today, for example in the Middle East?

Do you think that in these cases the people involved might feel compelled to help the U.S. for similar reasons as the Italians did (liberation, fighting a dictatorship, etc.)?

Although I don't want to make any political claims, and I do believe these are very different situations, interestingly enough I'm now working on another documentary about tattoos on the



bodies of soldiers who go to Iraq, and I've seen these young kids leaving for war and coming back as complete different people.

Anyway, there is a difference in the emphasis on heroism, today there are also many more choices, and therefore it's a voluntary decision that brings with it certain questions. In World War II, most people had to fight or they would be killed or become POWs; there was a strong ideological purpose in wanting to bring freedom to Italy that had practical results.

There is a connection, though. The nephew of one of the OSS members I interviewed is in the Special Forces in Afghanistan and he realizes how similar his work is to what the OSS had to do. He sees himself as a continuation of what his uncle started, but it's a tricky thing to compare the two wars.

For my grandparents who fought in the Resistance, America has always been very idealized. They grew up loving American culture, music, and movies as a synonym of freedom, joie de vivre, higher and deeper ideals. This sentiment not as widespread in other countries that also helped by the U.S. What do you personally think connects Italy and America in terms of their fascination for each other?

My father always said Italy had much more in common with the United States than with Germany, and not just in terms of political views. The German way of life, their way of doing things, the culture they produced, their strict authoritarianism was very far from the Italian culture and from what they aspired to. There were more cultural affinities with the United States. Italians were deeply influenced by American culture, and they understood it without filters; they loved jazz and all everything from the States, even something as "hip" and superfluous as a Valentino haircut, which everyone wanted to have thanks to Hollywood movies. Somehow America was the culture they looked towards and embraced, and yet they sided with the Nazis in this tragic war.

You directed a profile of Scorsese called History Man which aired on the BBC in 2003. Did you ever consider pitching this story to him? It seems like a perfect plot for one of his movies.

Well, it would be interesting to see a more narrative version of this story. I've been fascinated by the idea and I've thought about it. I had some trouble getting closer to him again, but at the shoot I proposed the idea of focusing on the OSS missions and I left a treatment with a screenwriter. It's not something I've really pursued. I don't know if I really should or want to. I've directed various documentaries and I like this format.

What is the goal of your project? What do you want people to get from it?

I want them to fully acknowledge that part of history. I think that the history of World War II has some gray areas and some of it hasn't been fully explored, and this has sometimes led to certain stereotypes about Italians. I also wanted to make sure that this was documented before people died, since obviously that generation is leaving us. I feel like I should invest even more time in this project. There are probably 80 hours of archived oral history interviews and I think that it's important testimony.

Is there one story that stands out among the rest?

There is the "Ginny Mission," something I would even consider making a documentary about in and of itself for the History Channel. A small group of Italian Americans landed on the stretch of coastline between Bonassola and Framura (in Liguria, Italy) and were charged with the task of blowing up the nearby railway tunnel, to cut off German supplies to their troops nearby. There were hundreds of tunnels in the region that couldn't be bombed from planes which allowed the Germans to move their troops and supplies along the western shore.

The OSS had to blow up a tunnel but every attempt failed and they were secretly executed by the Nazis in La Spezia, even though they were wearing uniforms and not civilian clothes. The German commander who shot them was General Anton Dostler who was brought to trial in October 1945 since he broke the rules of the International Convention. He was later convicted of war crimes and shot at Aversa.

What are your future plans for this documentary?



Right now, I don't have a complete final version that I want to release. I'm focusing on the website that has received thousands and thousands of hits, and I look forward to continuing to build the website with more clips and share these wonderful characters and this wonderful history. Although it will be a long process, I'm passionate about this documentary and I would love for many people to hear these stories and discuss them.

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