

# Marisa's Courage

Intro by Francesco Guzzo; Article by Dr. Barbara Veltri

A few years ago I was introduced to an elderly woman quite by chance as I was told she had an incredible story and a large collection of artwork she had personally created and needed assistance in selling. That was my first encounter with Margherita Fray, the last (known) living partisan, currently living in Scottsdale at the age of 96. At the time, I only got to hear bits and pieces of her story and I was fascinated. I always wanted to return and sit with her and hear more. Of course, Covid came along and all plans were placed on hold.

When Barbara Veltri mentioned Margherita's name at an event and suggested we needed to get her story out, I knew the time had come and Barbara was the perfect person to write and share Margherita's story. Dr. Barbara Veltri is a published author, Associate Professor Emerita, College of Education Northern Arizona University; served as faculty at the University of Texas at Arlington, Arizona State University, and Manhattanville College. Here is the recap of the interview with Margherita Fray.



Born in the Piedmontese region's capital city of Torino on July 8, 1926, Margherita Bartolo Fray's life story intersects culture (music/art/history), place (Torino), time (WW II), and circumstance (living under the 20-month German occupation and Italian fascist rule during her teen years).

A self-taught artist with a strong soprano voice, Margherita recounts how she survived an Allied bombing of The Opera House while attending Madame Butterfly with her parents. She navigated flames, sirens, burning bodies, and buildings reduced to rubble on the walk home, as a pre-teen.

Margherita, a petite, articulate woman of 96, came of age during World War II. She emits a formidable sigh while reliving her life history. As the only surviving child of a seminary-educated father and controlling mother, Margherita was sent away to live with neighbors shortly after birth, while her mother coped with the loss of her firstborn. Margherita developed resilience, self-reliance, coping skills, and natural aesthetic talents that she tapped into, over her lifetime.

## Marisa's Courage

At the local convent school, she wore the uniform of the *Piccolini Italiane*, sang the songs, and practiced mandatory exercises. She delighted when her Squadrini (team) traveled to Rome to parade in front of Mussolini, whose regime mandated strength conditioning, physical education, and gymnastics in school curriculum.

The nuns (teachers) noted her artistic giftedness and directed her to create colorful chalk designs on the large classroom blackboards during Saturday school. She did this while her classmates were lined up in formation practicing parade drills in the courtyard.

When her father was fired from his city administrator position by the president of the commune for failure to attend Fascist meetings, the family lost everything and moved north of the city.

As an impressionable adolescent, Margherita witnessed the brutal effects of Italian Fascist control and German occupation of her city. The random shootings, planned acts of violence against innocent civilians and dehumanizing roundups of a Jewish family with children, still haunt her.



"One day while walking home from school I freeze. Soldiers are throwing furniture, books, toys, clothing, dishes - everything from an upper floor building window on to the street. People taken from their homes at gunpoint were loaded onto the back of a truck. I had to do something and wish that I did more."

Her mother, a friend of the male leader of **The Garibaldi Brigade**, the Italian anti-fascist resistance fighters, gave her daughter permission to join the group of volunteer school girls.

"For two years I served as a staffeta. We sang songs in a secured basement location. My name was changed to Marisa and that is what's listed on my identification papers, given to me by **Ada Gobetti**." Gobetti was co-founder of the female partisans called, **Gruppi di difesa della donna**, and one of the female leaders of the Torino Resistance.

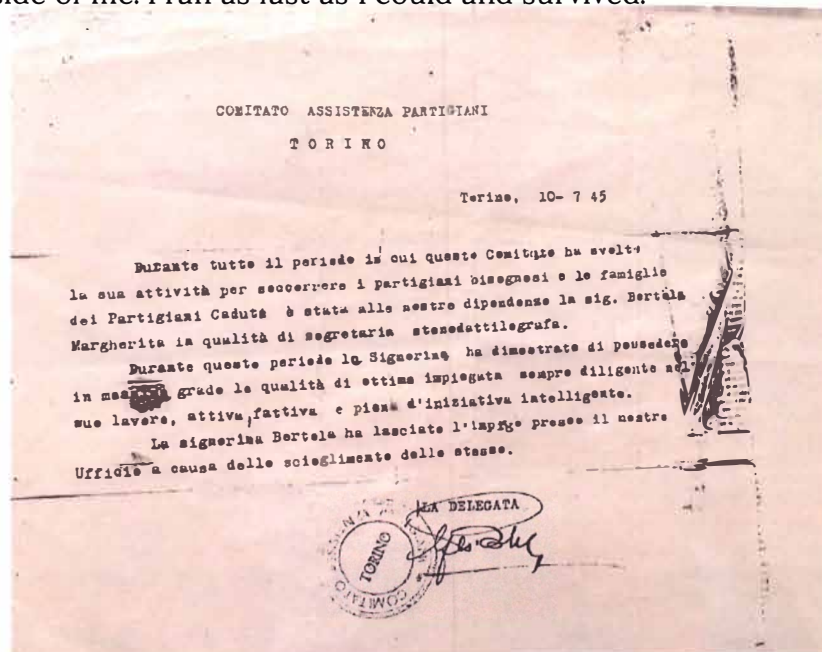
## Marisa's Courage

Margherita (known by her partisan name, Marisa) persisted with any assignment doled out by her commander, including transporting food to the partisans, serving as courier, messenger, and weapons transporter. My mother fashioned a small pillow with ties in the back to wear under my dress, which made me look pregnant,” she laughs. ”I was about 16. The Germans rarely stopped a pregnant woman. I carried a pistol in this pouch to deliver to the partisan fighters, while riding my bike. The male partisans hid in the mountains, but we (girls and women) were able to move about during the day.”

As a young, female partisan, she maneuvered the back roads, inaccessible to the German Transport Vehicles. She rode for miles on her bicycle, delivering sealed messages to partisans and Allied Command. These impacted decision-making by Allied Generals, who didn't arrive in Turin until April 30, 1945.

“We never read the messages; we just delivered them,” she states truthfully. “But I knew that they were important.” On a few occasions I carried identity papers for Jewish refugees in hiding or warning messages, written in code, for the male partisan leaders camped in the mountains. But I never knew what I was carrying on any given day. I only knew that my identity card was hidden in my shoe.”

Aware of the occupier's penchant for retaliation, she recounts a terrifying moment that impacted her personally. “I was walking my bicycle up a road and was spotted by German soldiers. Two boys (about my age) were lined up facing a brick wall. They yelled at me to join them. I ran with my bike to face the wall and what I thought was the end. My head stared straight at the bricks as I heard, shots ring out. 'Ping, Ping' the boys dropped to the ground. Blood was pouring on to the dirt. I was next. But a German soldier told me to get my bike and go. As I was walking my bike, shots hit the ground along each side of me. I ran as fast as I could and survived.”



## Marisa's Courage



I witnessed public hangings of partisans or suspected partisans. I still see images of random executions of young people, and the murder of girls from my school, whose bodies were hung from balconies, and kept there to induce fear. But .... Death was nothing to me.”

She references Tour De France champion and Giro D' Italia cyclist, Gino Bartoli, for his role in the resistance, cycling for days up the mountains to get messages to partisans and for efforts to save Jewish families from the Nazis. She reminds me that the 25,000 partisans who served in Piedmont should have received more credit for liberating Torino.

”The Allies didn't get there until the end of April. And even into May, snipers were still shooting.”

On May 6, 1945, Margherita celebrated the end of the war with other partigiani in Torino, but her service work continued. The effort to feed, clothe and support families of partigiani citizens in post-war Torino required a concerted effort.

“I worked to provide necessities to survivors. You had to be inventive to distribute portions that we received in huge vats, so, I folded paper to create secure edges to make a packet to transport small quantities of sugar, salt, and other consumables to Torino's starving people.”

Margherita pulls out the trove of primary source documents including identity papers, photos, and books. She embellishes each image with a personal recollection. She secured a post-war job in the office of a Torino architect. As a female intern, she designed a blueprint for an amphibious vehicle and laments that her incredible career as a designer and artist in her native city was cut short by her mother's expectation that her daughter quit work and remain at home, prior to marrying an American GI from California, who she met while singing at a notable bar/restaurant in Torino.

# Marisa's Courage

Margherita raised four children (two are deceased). She resides in Scottsdale with her daughter Angie. She is one of the precious, few, living partisans who recollects her first-hand accounts of life during World War II with detail and documentation. Her youth in war-torn Northern Italy parallels the war in Ukraine.

She offers these words to audiences and wishes to especially reach out to middle and high school students.

“Not everything that comes to you, comes to hurt you. You learn from your mistakes. Decide to keep making it. Every time I had a problem, I painted a picture. Remember, be different than leaders we’ve had/have. Make the world cleaner, kinder, nicer, good. War is just destruction of humanity.

You can find one of Margherita Fray's interviews with the Phoenix Holocaust Museum on YouTube.

