

## IL TEMPO DI ZEITHAIN 1943 - 1944

### *Diary of a young Red Cross nurse*

After the armistice of 8 September 1943, some 630,000 Italian soldiers chose to work in German labour camps, rather than swear allegiance to Nazism and fascism and continue the war on the side of Hitler and Mussolini.

These Italian military internees (IMI) were deprived of prisoner-of-war status. Consequently, they were not treated as such and were unable to enjoy the protection of the ICRC.

In a further violation of the 1929 Geneva Conventions, the Nazis also interned medical and religious personnel who refused to comply with their requests. All the internees, both combatants and non-combatants, were subjected to intense physical and psychological pressure in order to induce them to side with the Axis powers. Very few of them changed their minds: the total number is estimated at no more than six per cent.

The conditions in the labour camps were atrocious, even in the Zeithain Lager,<sup>1</sup> though officially established to serve as a sanatorium for sick and wounded military personnel.

It was here that Maria Vittoria Zeme, a young Red Cross nurse aged 21, chose to endure sacrifice, suffering and illness in order to remain with her patients.

This young member of the Italian Red Cross kept a kind of journal in which she entered a few lines every day to record what she saw and felt most deeply during her life in the camp.

These notes, which were contained in a small diary forbidden by the camp's regulations, were published fifty years after the events they describe.<sup>2</sup> They need to be read at least twice. First, in order to experience their emotional impact, and then to analyse the text as an eyewitness account and a page of history.

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<sup>1</sup> The Zeithain Lager, officially known as "Lazarett" or field hospital, was intended for use as a sanatorium for convalescing military internees, but in reality, like all other camps, its occupants suffered from severe food shortages and the total lack of sanitary and other facilities. Ailing Italian military personnel were sent to it from field hospitals in the Balkans, as were those in other camps who became invalids from exhaustion caused by slave labour conditions.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Vittoria Zeme, *Il Tempo di Zeithain, 1943 - 1944. Diario di una Crocerossina internata volontaria in un Lager-lazaretto nazista*, Alberti Libraio Editore, Verbania-Intra, 1994, 94 pp.

The lines, concise of necessity, reflect the fresh outlook of a young mind and the spontaneity of those endowed with the capacity for love. The eternal message, finding expression despite all the horror and abomination, is charged with emotion. The text also has beauty and considerable delicacy. It evokes the image of the "fioretti di San Francesco" flowering in the northern mist, between the cruel thorns of grief and death.

Above all, the journal demonstrates the writer's immense faith. This young nurse, with a dedication far beyond the requirements of her status, drew her strength and determination from a divine presence she never disowns, and which she integrated fully into her life.

Moreover, since when has barbed wire been sufficient to prevent the Holy Spirit from moving among mankind?

Sister Zeme's faith supplemented and strengthened the ethical principles of her chosen profession, working as she did within the Red Cross which demands a great deal of its members, even heroism, but not necessarily martyrdom.

One image will long remain printed on the hearts and minds of those who read this journal: a fragile young woman leading a blind soldier by the hand through the camp.

The second section of the book is devoted to numerous accounts and documents concerning the "sorellina's" work, which underscore her spirit of self-denial and sacrifice. It also reproduces the texts accompanying the medals and decorations bestowed on Sister Zeme, together with letters of congratulation.

On 12 May 1983, Sister Zeme was awarded the Florence Nightingale Medal by the ICRC as a tribute to her great professional skill, her sense of duty and her devotion to the ideals of the Red Cross at all times.

The book furthermore contains photographs and a twofold bibliography listing over forty specific and general works and other sources.

*Il Tempo di Zeithain* will be appreciated by those who wish to know more about this dark chapter in the world's history and to learn of the experiences of the 630,000 Italian soldiers who paid a high price for their dignity, as well as all who wish to share the impressions these events made on a noble mind.

*Fabrizio Scaravelli*