

# The Importance of the Elders

**O**n 23 November, just one week ago, Ernesto Guidi died at the age of 106. He was from Pruno, a mountain village 10 kilometers from Stazzema, near the Versilia coastline. Stazzema, you must recall (if only for the Spike Lee film *Miracle at Sant'Anna*), was the site of one of the worst massacres of World War II, on 12 August 1944, when the Germans killed 560 men, women, and children, in retaliation for their own losses (to the measure of 10 Italians for every German). Stazzema is a site where commemorations are held each year, on and around the International Day of Memory (recalling the Holocaust), 27 January.

In this year when so many “anziani” have died of Covid, and their deaths are often attributed to age, pre-existing health conditions, and the inadequacies of nursing homes, I am reminded of the words of an African philosopher (cited in my article last month, *Universal Visions*, page 5): *every time an elder dies, it is as if a library were burned down.*

Now more than ever, we need to appreciate our elders and help them to survive.

Ernesto Guidi was born in 1914 and spent his entire life working in the marble and stone quarries, at first alongside his father in Pruno, making thresholds and stairs for the nearby community of Cardoso. He was married to the same woman for 73 years and they had 5 children.

Ernesto had to leave that family when he was only 27 years old and the Fascist Regime sent him to fight in Libya. As his side was losing the war, he escaped without shoes or food, only to arrive at a French colony in the Algerian desert where he was placed in a concentration camp. *I walked 600 km without eating or drinking; to quench my thirst I had a stick in my mouth, and to withstand the pain of the wounds in my feet I made my own slippers with a needle and scissors.* Ernesto ended up imprisoned for the next three years. The French prison guards treated the German and Italian prisoners like slaves and many of them died.

Those years in North Africa were the hardest of his life, but Ernesto managed to return home. He went back the quarries, sometimes having to go as far as Naples and Assisi to find work. We think we are struggling, but imagine what he endured!



Stazzema

Talking about his experiences, he said that Fascism abandoned him in the Libyan desert. He learned that the most important thing in life was freedom. *Senza libertà non si può vivere*, he often repeated. Imagine how he must have felt when he returned to Pruno and Stazzema, where the horrible massacre occurred....

I am reminded of my own grandfather, who died in the town of Bologna shortly after 770 civilians were massacred at nearby Monte Sole (Marzabotto), in six horrible days between 29 September and 5 October 1944. This too was a reprisal against the Partisan Resistance movement. Born in Grizzana-Morandi, only a few kilometers from Monte Sole, my grandfather surely suffered deep emotional trauma. He died a few years after that, and so I never got to know him.

In Italy centenarians are not unusual. One reason may be that close bonds of family and community are created in small villages. Then there is the healthy hard work in the open air, and of course the red wine and olive oil. However, moral fortitude is surely another element.

They have a lot to teach us.

– by Norma Jean Bishop

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