

# **The war will not win**

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It was a summer afternoon, that time of the day when, at my grandma's house by the sea, the little ones have to wait for the adults to wake up from their after-lunch nap to go to the beach. Bored by the wait, I started searching through the drawers of the old chest of drawers in the living room, in an attempt to find a charger for my smartphone, which I had used as a video game during the wait. In that search, among old junk and old cutlery, hidden between linen napkins, I noticed a yellowed sheet of paper, which smelled of ancient. I took it out of the drawer, opened it softly, taking care not to tear it. I really didn't want to get a scolding from grandma! The edges of the sheet were frayed and worn by the years. What struck me most was what I saw in the piece of paper: an address written in German and to confirm the provenance, at the bottom of the sheet, the writing - Deutschland - still visible. After it some words translated into Italian: name, surname, prisoner number, designation of the camp. One of those words impressed me: LAGER. I had studied the Second World War in history books before and I knew well what that term meant. I understood that it was a letter, also very precious to my family, not by chance it was kept in the drawer of silverware and linen napkins. Turning the page I saw the text of a handwritten letter, in a neat cursive and certainly from another time. That discovery intrigued me, excited me, but at the same time it gave me the anxiety of waiting for a hidden secret. As soon as my mother woke up, I immediately ran to her, and without adding a word, I immediately showed her that letter. She didn't seem surprised, indeed she said to me in a low voice: -" Be careful, don't ruin it, it's a dear memory of my grandmother. My mother keeps it for the whole family"-. I couldn't help but ask her what it was, what story it hid. She warned me that, if I was interested in that story, I should have given up the afternoon at the seaside. I didn't hesitate to accept this possibility, such was my curiosity. We sat on the outside porch, where you could still feel the heat of the early summer afternoon. I have always enjoyed listening to my mother's stories about her family, I think because living far away from my loved ones I wanted to know their lives, their stories, their adventures. We sat on the porch and there her story began. During the Second World War my great-grandfather was called to war as a soldier. He, the father of

four children, left his wife pregnant with the fifth, and left Sicily for the front. His name was Giuseppe, the name written on the letter. He had never held a war rifle before. He only knew the sacrifices of the simple life of a cattle shepherd. War, however, teaches you everything and immediately: the pain of nostalgia, the hope of returning or simply to survive. So Giuseppe went to fight a war whose reasons he did not know, immediately getting used to obey the orders of his generals without questions, transforming himself from a father, husband, son, farmer, into a soldier for his country. He left confident and convinced that his only mission was to return safely to his loved ones. History is strange. When you want to make sense out of events you can't understand, you end up accepting that there are facts that can't be explained, they just happen. It makes no sense to kill to survive, to take life to protect your own. In the end, the true mission of a soldier becomes to fight for survival, beyond any ideal and value. Even for Giuseppe at that moment the main goal was to give his children a future in which he was there to guide and raise them. With this spirit the young man said goodbye to his family and embraced his destiny. The months passed, the Heads of State argued and then came to an agreement, they moved the destinies of unsuspecting men like pawns, until the ally became an enemy, ruthless and resentful. Giuseppe suddenly found himself a war prisoner of the Germans. Together with other compatriots, he was captured and transferred to the prison camp of Stammlager VI D in Portmünd in Westfalen (the address on the letter). From 1939 to 1945, over 70,000 prisoners passed through this camp, providing forced labor for Dortmund's heavy industry. Many of those did not survive. It is easy to imagine how they were treated: for the Nazis, those human beings were just things, numbered spare parts, employed in the hardest jobs in mines, factories, fields, digging trenches, always under the threat of weapons, violence, hunger, degradation, untreated diseases. Their life expectancy was a few months, working seventy to a hundred hours a week with a completely inadequate diet. For this reason, we can well imagine what happened when, one day, the camp was visited by some inspectors to select prisoners. Fear spread among them, anguished by a fate that did not promise anything good. These inspectors, after a quick check of the men's general conditions, seemed interested in him, in Giuseppe, the Sicilian. We can well understand that feeling like the object of their attention wasn't flattering. He was scrutinized like a rare heirloom, with a sort of incomprehensible admiration. Only the translation from another companion reassured him, at least in part. The man explained to him that those men were interested in

his physical appearance, in that height of almost two meters, unusual for an Italian, in those eyes blue like the sea of his land, in that hair blond like the wheat of the fields he cultivated. They were in front of a "rare specimen of a man of the Aryan race". It was truly a shame to waste that physique in the prison camp. Giuseppe still did not understand and above all he did not know if this interest was a good thing or a bad thing. Chosen from among many, he was loaded onto a small truck and taken away from that place. He was taken to a beautiful massive estate. Giuseppe did not understand what to expect. He was led towards the kitchens of the house and was made to understand that, after washing, he would have to put on a waiter's livery, because he would have to carry out that task in the house. In a short time, from a prisoner, contemptuously called "*spaghettaro*", he was transformed into a perfect example of the right frame for a corrupted political propaganda. An unwitting instrument of an ideology of death, Giuseppe could not help but accept the benefits that this new role brought him: a guaranteed meal, a warm bed, clean clothes and participation in a social life that had the appearance of normality and brought him an unusual sense of relief. The days passed and the new life as a servant seemed almost like a divine gift, a gesture of mercy from that god who until that moment had been invoked innumerable times to put an end to that life deprived of humanity. The days passed and the man's beauty was also being noticed by the young wife of the general that lived in that villa. She, neglected and relegated to a representative role, found in Giuseppe a lover with whom she could share tenderness and affection. It wasn't long before the two lovers were overwhelmed by an intense love, becoming comfort to each other. When Giuseppe wrote to his wife in Sicily, he reassured her that he is fine and that she didn't have to worry about him. In another moment, in another life, those sentences would have sounded hypocritical, written only to hide the betrayal. In that situation, however, the words Giuseppe wrote were telling the truth, unlike the ones written by the prisoners still in the camp. Time went by, at the end of 1944 the lady, whose name will never be known, is pregnant with a child, while Giuseppe is brought back to Italy after the war. He returned to his life, to his duties as a husband, a father, a son. He came back to the pleasures of that normality, leaving everything behind. He rolled up his sleeves and went back to work in the fields, with his animals, between the noise of his children who still remembered the fear of the sound of the sirens announcing the bombings. His children's stories made him feel bad. He understood that the war had spared no one, it had insinuated itself into the hearts of all those who had experienced it

and like a splinter, it had remained stuck in the souls of kids and adults, leaving a silent pain deep inside. After a few months, Giuseppe received a letter from Germany. The words "Zu Giuseppe", which translates into "To Giuseppe", were written on the front of the letter. Giuseppe immediately understood who the sender was, but he did not hide it from his wife. He opened it in front of her, took out the folded sheet of paper and took out a small photo from inside. He looked at it with a smile and then, without thinking too much, showed it to her. "Who is this child?" asked Rosa. He answered without hesitation: "It's Giuseppe, my son, I told you about him. He's a year old now. Look, he's growing well", and handed it to her. Rosa did not seem angry, did not show any sign of jealousy or envy. She took that small photo, looked at the child with curiosity, and calmly, smiling, said: "It's a good thing he didn't get elephant ears from you". Then she went into the living room, opened the glass door of the chest of drawers and placed it in a small free space in the frame that contained a photo of Giuseppe in his waiter's uniform, next to the photos of other loved ones in the family. That photo remained there, on display to visitors to the house, for more than fifty years. My mother continued her story, remembering how as a child one day, while playing at guessing the names of the people represented in the photos in the display case, unable to associate any family member with the image of the child, she asked her grandmother who that child was. And her grandmother answered her simply: "He is Joseph, the son your grandfather had in Germany". That answer was enough for the little girl, but it won't be enough for the woman she would become. She would still talk about that memory and why that photo remained exposed there, shown to everyone. Why hadn't it been hidden, a symbol after all of her husband's betrayal with another woman? Her grandmother had always tried to explain with the simple words she knew what the war had meant for all of them: "I was left alone, pregnant, with four small children to raise, I had to take care of everything, the children, the house, the animals. Your grandfather meant everything to us, and I couldn't let him be taken away from us. In my heart I always said this to myself. The war won't win, we are stronger and we will win. We won, because we didn't let ourselves be defeated by the fate that the war had decided for us. Your grandfather and I decided to survive that tragedy, maintaining the will not to be overwhelmed by hatred. We continued our life, choosing love, choosing the embrace over rejection". My mother said that when she grew up she understood the choices of her grandparents, because war makes humans brutal and violent.

Moreover the other eternal war is the one we fight within ourselves. I don't know if I understood this whole story, but I like to think like my grandmother: the war will not win.