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Book Review: Liberation

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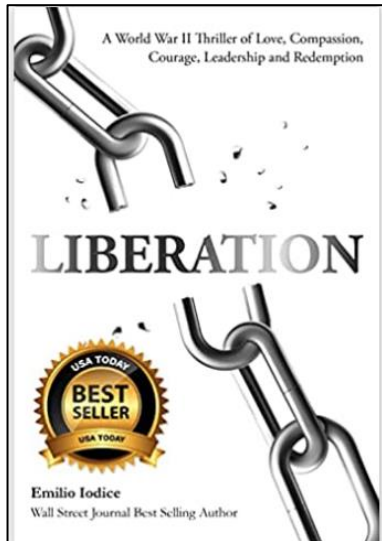
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Book Review



Author: Emilio Iodice
Publisher: Cranberry Press, San Antonio, Texas
Pages: 781
Publication Date: October 29, 2021
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Reviewer: Elizabeth Gingerich

The Geneva Convention – a collection of 4 international agreements and several protocols with the initial framework crafted in 1929 (and updated in 1949) – was originally crafted as a response to the atrocities of WWI – the “war to end all wars.” The final draft was negotiated in the aftermath of WWII and eventually ratified by 196 countries. This was to bring a degree of civility to the most uncivil of all situations – wartime – and addressed the treatment of both soldiers and civilians.¹ The underpinnings of the Convention came years before the rise of Fascism in Europe in the 1930s – Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy. Some of the international legal standards established for the humanitarian treatment of civilian and prisoners in war include:

- The prohibition of parading prisoners of war;
- Keeping women and children safe from the fallout of a conflict or trapped in a war zone; and
- Preserving the basic rights of wartime prisoners (civilians and military personnel), including the provision of medical care to those captured.

The outbreak of WWII was marked by the positioning of the Axis German and Italian troops in Europe and the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 by Japan, precipitating the entrance of the United States in the fight. Many students of history are only aware of the erection of Japanese internment camps in the American West during this time but few know of the existence of German and Italian POW camps in nearly every state in the U.S. – many in the South. Recently, National Public Radio (NPR) aired a program on one such former POW

¹ State Parties/Signatories: Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949. International Humanitarian Law. *International Committee of the Red Cross*. Of course, the world is witnessing outright breaches of the Geneva Convention with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and is revisiting the extreme compromise of human rights and democracy in U.S.-operated Guantanamo and the former Abu Ghraib facility.

camp in Aliceville, Alabama, where witnesses to the transfer of POWs were interviewed, many stating that they had to climb to the tops of lumber piles for a glimpse to see the occupants of trains unloading captured soldiers at the camp.² Several stated that many of the German POWs marched out in a synchronized, military-like format, and walked down the walkway



Officer's Club of the Douglas, Wyoming WWII POW Camp (above). The murals painted by the Italian POW artists are inside this building (right). Courtesy, Tom Leonard, CC BY 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

dispassionately to their new barracks. Although several of the interviewees expressed a degree of pity for them – especially those recruited against their will – they were reminded that their sons and brothers were across the ocean, fighting for their country, and many were



German prisoners at the Eaton, Indiana POW camp in 1945. Courtesy, Delaware County (Indiana) Historical Society.

being killed or injured.³

Against this backdrop, author Emilio Iodice has penned his masterwork, the novel “Liberation.”

Although fictitious, the context of the novel was inspired by actual events, primarily occurring during WWII in America and Italy. The author, currently living in Rome, invariably did his homework; he investigated the major events portrayed,

and corroborated his accountings with witnesses and descendants of witnesses in striving for ultimate accuracy in reporting these events. As a boy growing up in an Italian section of the South Bronx, Iodice reportedly frequented family tables, listening to stories about World War II, immigrants, Italy, and the experiences and concerns of modern-day youth. Scenes began to evolve upon hearing these narratives and were added to the book – many imbued with incredible acts of sacrifice and bravery. With this commitment to accuracy, Iodice takes the

² See also Moseley, Brandon (14 May 2022). *1819 News*. Aliceville WWII Prisoner of War camp reenactment. Available at <https://1819news.com/news/item/aliceville-wwii-prisoner-of-war-camp-reenactment-is-this-weekend>

³ See Roysdon, Keith (10 March 2022). German POW Camps in the U.S. Co-Existed with Their Towns in Sometimes Odd Ways. *The Daily Yonder*. Available at <https://dailyyonder.com/german-pow-camps-in-the-u-s-co-existed-with-their-towns-in-sometimes-odd-ways/2022/03/10/>

reader to each scene to experience vicariously the plethora of emotions described and envision the immediate physical surroundings of the characters. The reader is guided through a multitude of fascinating and enthralling journeys. The chapters are further anchored in historical fact and complemented by selected photographs from that era.

“Liberation” is a recurrent theme throughout the book – liberation from German occupiers, liberation from Mussolini and his brand of authoritarianism, liberation from generations of racism, liberation from gender-oriented stereotypes, and liberation from regional biases. America, as a melting pot rooted in waves of immigrants, was on full display in this novel, with rich descriptions of the importance of familial relations and traditions rooted in the homeland – from food choice and preparation to courtship and marriage and ultimately to children and the passing of the torch to the next generation. Young love was shown in long-distance relationships, with the eternal hope presented of those enamored one day rejoining and moving forward with their lives together.

Nearly 800 pages in length, there is a crisscrossing of paths of many individuals and families who are all conjoined by commonalities of blood, origin, and shared childhood experiences. The course of their lives are inevitably intertwined.

With the Nazi occupation of Italy, there was little regard for life on display, especially during times of indiscriminate torture, the sequestering of Jewish families, the schism between both the Fascists and those native Italians indoctrinated under the dictates of Mussolini as well as those natives who could see through the veil of hate and join incoming Allied forces. The description of the terrain and weather conditions in play as well as the anxiety, trepidation, and human and inhumane reactions experienced by the characters are detailed throughout. The author even manages to insert a twinge of humor in his narration.

Liberation is marked by the recurrent themes of family and faith, particularly as demonstrated by the acts of incredible courage committed by members of the clergy. Sacrifice was also exemplified by ordinary townsfolk who engaged in perilous feats and acts of unpretentious courage. There were additionally the dichotomies between German concentration camps and American POW camps that even surprised the foreign inhabitants. Most notably, there is triumph of good over evil, kindness over brutality, and a reckoning of the races and geographic regions of the U.S. In fact, the “liberation” of certain KKK members is accentuated with a recurrent, Bible passage found in 22 Matthew 39 – *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*.

Several salient lessons for today that are imparted to the reader include the importance placed on a collective effort to maintain democracy and to defeat dictatorship. This is so critically important in an era of disinformation and misinformation and the rise of blind nationalism and populism throughout parts of the world.

This book prompts serious introspection and reflection. The struggles of war-time, Nazi-occupied Italy, depicted in such stunning detail, evokes the fear and desperation of the civilians as well as the resistance warriors – partisans, freedom fighters, Allied troops, and specially-trained American operatives. The struggles described and the outcomes explained of particular battles draw parallels with the current Russo-Ukrainian War and the plight of so many Ukrainian civilians-turned-refugees who have lost so much. This causes – at least this reader – to wonder about what real progress we have made in the world since WWII hostilities ended in 1945. Descriptions of partially blown-out roads and lines of the desperate, starving, wounded, mentally and physically battered, and hopeless human beings, moving past burned-

out shells of tanks and transport vehicles and other indications of warfare readily connect to the current news footage of civilians leaving the ruins of what were, not terribly long ago, their homes, fields, occupations – and lives. The brutality and soullessness of Vladimir Putin are reminiscent of the brutality of the Nazi regime. Iodice's accounting reminds us of what matters in life and in the face of adversity – and of the transitory nature of cruelty when confronted by authentic indicators of humanity.

A specific narrative of the Southern pastor and the KKK encounter also conveys the terror of the moment, again, begging a comparison to today's state of race relations, the rapid emergence and dominance of America's fringe right, and incidents of police intervention. What shone throughout the book were the strength and perseverance of redemption, the prevalence of compassion and empathy, the endurance of human relationships, and the fortitude of faith and family.

Although there are multiple human dramas taking place in various regions of both Italy and America, from the first page to the last, there is integration and an intertwining of the characters throughout. Even for the reader who is not necessarily a student of history, the character interplay is so rich, that the reader naturally gravitates to the human stories presented. And for those who thrive on drama, the reader will inadvertently – and necessarily – gain an important knowledge of a very dark period of global history from various perspectives. The one thing I could have added – but is normally not provided – is a family history tree, both in Italy and in America of the characters. I did make my own notes to ensure I was always following the right person and that figure's impact on others in his or her zone of interaction and influence. One can only wonder if this novel will be chosen to convert into a limited series!

– Elizabeth F. R. Gingerich, *JVBL* Editor-in-Chief