

# ANNALES

*Anali za istrske in mediteranske študije*  
*Annali di Studi istriani e mediterranee*  
*Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies*  
*Series Historia et Sociologia, 33, 2023, 4*





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## WAR-TIME MEMORIES AND FAIRY TALES: THE CASE STUDY OF ANGELO, AN ITALIAN WORLD WAR TWO PRISONER OF WAR IN YUGOSLAVIA

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### ABSTRACT

*This contribution explores the story of Angelo, an Italian Second World War veteran who, after experiencing war and escaping captivity in Yugoslavia, finally reached Trieste in 1946, where he met his future wife. It took him nearly 15 years to heal from his harrowing wartime trauma. Between 2021 and 2023, while collecting oral testimonies, I interviewed his son Sergio and grandson Ruben. The central subject of those interviews was the war-time period and the fairy tales that Angelo used to tell his son (and later his grandson) in the evenings, inspired by his war experiences. By recounting his war experiences in a metaphorical and child-friendly manner, these tales were not only imaginative and captivating for the child, but also served a profound purpose: they were (1) a way to communicate his memories and experience to the following generations; (2) a means to cope with his experiences and past; (3) a tool to socialise and educate his son, transmitting moral norms, social memories and preparing him for life in society.*

**Keywords:** Second World War, Yugoslavia, Prisoners of War, fairy tales, trauma, transgenerational transmission of memory, socialisation

## MEMORIE DI GUERRA E FIABE: IL CASO DI ANGELO, UN PRIGIONIERO DI GUERRA ITALIANO IN JUGOSLAVIA NELLA SECONDA GUERRA MONDIALE

### SINTESI

*Il presente contributo esplora la storia di Angelo, un veterano italiano della Seconda guerra mondiale che, dopo aver vissuto la guerra ed essere sfuggito alla prigionia in Jugoslavia, raggiunse finalmente Trieste nel 1946, dove incontrò la sua futura moglie. Per guarire dal trauma della guerra gli ci vollero quasi 15 anni. Tra il 2021 e il 2023, durante una raccolta di testimonianze orali, ho intervistato il figlio Sergio e il nipote Ruben. L'argomento centrale di queste interviste è stato il periodo della guerra e, in relazione a quello, le fiabe che Angelo raccontava al figlio (e poi al nipote) la sera, ispirate dalle sue esperienze belliche. Narrando le sue vicende in modo metaforico e a misura di bambino, creava delle fiabe fantasiose e accattivanti per i più piccoli. Tuttavia, queste avevano anche uno scopo profondo: erano (1) un modo per comunicare le proprie memorie ed esperienze alle generazioni successive; (2) un mezzo per il proprio passato; (3) uno strumento per socializzare ed educare il figlio, trasmettendogli norme morali, memorie sociali e preparandolo alla vita.*

**Parole chiave:** Seconda guerra mondiale, Jugoslavia, prigionieri di guerra, fiabe, trauma, trasmissione transgenerazionale della memoria, socializzazione

The issue of Italian prisoners of war in Yugoslavia during and after the Second World War has not thus far received much attention (cf. Troha, 2000; Di Sante, 2007), especially due to a lack of primary archival sources originating from Yugoslavia. The author of the article has published various works related to the topic, mostly as a result of collecting existing archival sources, as well as oral and (auto)biographical sources (cf. Lampe, 2022). Current research has thus shown that in addition to archival sources, primary family sources and memories can be an important resource for understanding the prisoner of war experience in Yugoslavia and how it affected their lives after the war, as well as the lives of their families.<sup>1</sup>

Among the memories I have collected, the family story of Angelo<sup>2</sup> is quite singular. Although each story is unique, this one stands out for the particular way in which Angelo transmitted his memories to his son and grandson – in the form of fairy tales – and were, thus, passed on and remain an important family legacy. The purpose of this article is to highlight the life story of Angelo, focusing on the period of the Second World War, his captivity and the period that followed. The aim is to understand how the experience of war and captivity affected him and his family and examine the functions and meaning of the fairy tales he invented.

#### ANGELO DURING THE WAR

Angelo (called Pino) was born in 1922 in Trieste (Figure 1). His father Cosimo was from a Jewish family from Puglia (Italy) and born in Rijeka (now Croatia), while Angelo was born in Trieste (Italy). His mother Irma came from the region of Friuli and they moved to Trieste. His father, a First World War veteran, returned from the war traumatised by his experiences. On top of that, the family also suffered from the racial laws that came into force in Italy in 1938 (cf. Collotti, 2006). This left the otherwise well-standing family without any assets and in poverty until the Second World War (Ruben, 2021).

As described by his grandson Ruben, Angelo was a musician, a sportsman and a very strong man with a strong temperament. For some period before the Second World War, he was also a professional boxer (Ruben, 2021). He was a young man when the war broke out and after the capitulation of Italy

in 1943, as explained by his son Sergio, decided to join the partisans in order to get back to Trieste and return to his family.

*[...] from Sicily my father almost got to central Italy. Almost. I assume by makeshift means, on foot, that sort of thing. Because there was no coordination, the troops were shamefully left behind. [...] He knew well that two of my grandfather's brothers lived in Barletta. [...] My father arrives there, this uncle takes care of his nephew like a son. He feeds him, helps him, whatever he wants and in addition he tries to find a solution to get his nephew back to Trieste. And he finds this solution. I don't know how he finds out, but I do know that the Allies, the Americans, organised transport of Italian soldiers who accepted the idea of becoming partisans to the other side of the Adriatic to fight alongside the Yugoslav partisans. (Sergio, 2021)*

As his grandson Ruben recalls, his grandfather Angelo joined the Italian Partisans from the Garibaldi Brigade and left for Yugoslavia to reach Trieste. Although the way in which Angelo joined the partisans is not entirely clear, it is well-known that in 1944, the Allied Military Forces were regularly sent to Yugoslavia in order to support the Yugoslav Partisans. The most common way was from Bari to the island of Vis, at that time one of the rare Yugoslav islands that was occupied by partisans and not Germans or their collaborators. From 1944 onwards, there were organised partisan headquarters at Vis (Pirjevec, 2020, 514–517). Since Barletta is very close to Bari, this is most likely the way that Angelo travelled to Yugoslavia.

#### Angelo's time in Yugoslavia

He was thus sent to Yugoslavia as an Italian Partisan to join the Yugoslav Partisans in trying to reach Trieste. As Ruben recalls, Angelo was known for being very impulsive. Along with his strong physical condition, this had already caused him many troubles and also periods of being put in isolation when he was fighting as an Italian soldier (Figure 2; Ruben, 2021).

Probably due to his regular episodes of violence (Ruben, 2021), after months of fighting along Yugoslav Partisans, he was taken captive in 1944<sup>3</sup> and

1 This work was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement [grant number 839474], research project »Political Functions of Folktales« (ARIS N6-0268) and research programme »The Practices of Conflict Resolution between Customary and Statutory Law in the Area of Today's Slovenia and Neighboring Countries« (ARIS P6-0435), funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

2 The family name has been withheld in order to protect their privacy.

3 The reason he was taken as a prisoner of war is not fully known by the family.



**Figure 1: Angelo (1922–1994) (family archive).<sup>4</sup>**

held as a prisoner of war on the island of Biševo – which is now Croatia.<sup>5</sup> During captivity, he witnessed some very traumatic scenes that affected him for life. His son Sergio recalls one of the episodes that greatly affected his father:

*Across the islands of Dalmatia, boys, children, people of 11, 12 years old, ... They were very good at sailing because Dalmatians have always been very good at sailing. And they did a little trade. Some islands were in the hands of the Germans, some islands were in the hands of the partisans, on some islands there were the British, the allies. And they would cruise around these islands; one would give them a packet of cigarettes, they would take the cigarettes to another island, where they would sell them, get a little money. Things like that. And he told me, it was a really tough scene, because he cried every time he told the story. He told me that one of these kids was caught and he was practically stripped naked ... he dug his own grave ... and he always recalled*

<sup>4</sup> The images are published with the permission of the family, for which I would like to express my sincere gratitude.

<sup>5</sup> Although there is little information about the camp at the island of Biševo, mostly due to the limited available research, it is known that between 1944 and 1945 the island was mainly used as a prisoner of war camp for German prisoners (cf. Anić, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> The narrators are not sure how many of the prisoners made it to Trieste. Sergio is sure about another one who often visited his father after the war.



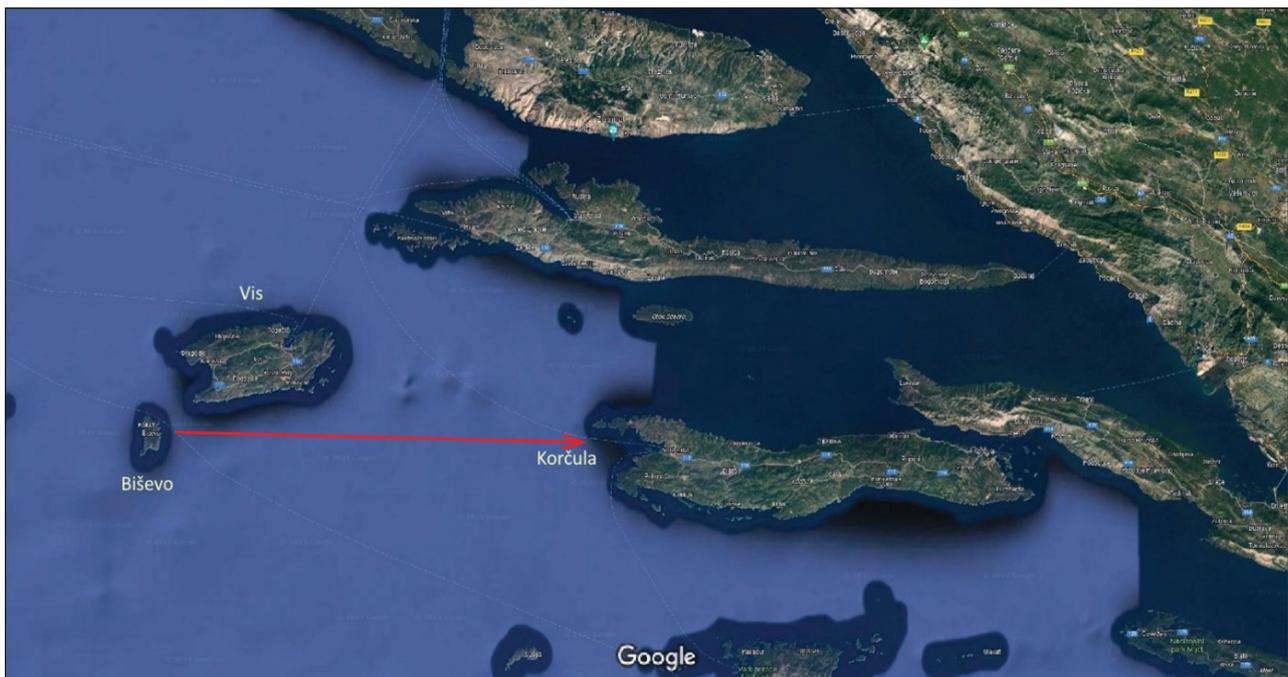
**Figure 2: Angelo during the war, 19. 3. 1943 (family archive).**

*this kid crying and digging the grave with a shovel and no one from the execution squad would shoot him. And then this angry, angry woman, [name removed], went there and said: 'I'll show you how to kill'. And she shot the boy and my father was there. It was a terrible thing for him. (Sergio, 2022)*

Angelo recounted this scene to his son on several occasions. As Sergio recalls, it must have been one of the memories that haunted his father the most.

At some point Angelo and some fellow prisoners, decided to escape from Biševo. The precise details of how they managed to escape are not entirely clear in the family's memory – either by swimming, by using boats or both. Nevertheless, Sergio recalls that they reached the island of Korčula and then crossed over to the mainland. Although the nearest island to Biševo is Vis, during that period, as we have seen, this was the heart of the partisan headquarters. The second closest island is, in fact, Korčula (although being rather far from Biševo). Consequently, this is the most likely route they took to reach land (Figure 3).

After reaching the mainland, it took them about a year to reach Trieste,<sup>6</sup> hiding around in the forests and trying to get food. Although during his life Angelo did talk about the wartime period, he rarely spoke about this one year and his journey to Trieste. There are only a few things his family knows about this time, along with the fact that he



**Figure 3:** Map of Croatian islands Biševo, Vis and Korčula, showing the route likely taken by Angelo and his companions to escape from the island of Biševo (adapted from Google Maps).

was shot by Yugoslav Partisans when passing the border with Italy in 1946. He was then saved, as his family accounts, by British soldiers.

*It is known for certain that in [19]46 [...] he arrived at the Lazaretto frontier – Muggia now. [...] And when he can practically see the finish line, he gets intercepted by the [Yugoslav] border militia. This is a story from an action film again, but he always told it to me this way. I remember this one because he used to tell it to me when I was a kid. He starts running towards the little station house of the allied militia and basically, they [the Yugoslav border militia] shoot at him and miss several times, until they throw a grenade at him. [...] This grenade explodes, and the fragments hit him in the legs. A few meters from the border he basically drags himself with his arms towards the border line, but he can't make it. They [the Yugoslav border militia] are coming after him. And then he has the luck that the Allied border militia in that moment, witnessing the scene, do something they shouldn't do. That is, they cross the border line, take him by the arms and drag him into, let's say, Allied territory. [...] This episode [his escape from Biševo], to some extent, ends there. Then these grenade fragments, as a witness, remained with him for the rest*

*of his life because they were never removed. In that period, they didn't do surgery and arthroscopy as they do now. [...] Because he really had it stuck in his knees. So that would have been a huge and invasive surgery. So, his whole life, let's say, he lived with the scars, with these fragments in his legs, which obviously caused him a thousand problems. Either in walking, I mean, pain. [...] To some extent it conditioned him a lot. (Ruben, 2021)*

#### TRANSGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF MEMORY THROUGH FAIRY TALES

In 1946, Angelo finally reached Trieste and settled in the city. Some months later he met his future wife Ida, and they got married in 1947 (Figures 4 and 5). Sergio explains that his father suffered from trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder because of his experiences in Yugoslavia, both during his captivity and during his time fighting alongside the Yugoslav Partisans. He recalls that his father could not understand all the violence he witnessed in Yugoslavia during that period. As Sergio explains, after years of fighting in an organized warfare as a soldier of the Italian army, Angelo had a hard time understanding the guerrilla warfare. He found it difficult to witness and engage in partisans actions, knowing that the civilian population would suffer the consequences.



**Figure 4: Ida and Angelo, wedding day 2. 6. 1947 (family archive).**

*What he used to talk to me about was this great violence, a bestial violence. He couldn't understand, because he said: 'In three years I have seen terrible bombings, but there were two armies, you know.' For him to go, attack, let's say, kill the Germans ... and knowing that afterwards the Germans will kill the civilian, ... burn the village ... He [couldn't understand this]. [silence] (Sergio, 2021)*

Sergio was born 15 years into the marriage, in 1962, when his father had finally begun to heal from trauma. Sergio recalls his mother recounting stories of his father waking up drenched in sweat and screaming in the middle of the night:

*I was born 15 years after marriage, because my father for many years at night would start sweating, sweating, sweating ... but a lot. He would jump out of bed: 'Shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot!' But then my mother would wake him up and calm him down. This went on for a long time. (Sergio, 2021)*



**Figure 5: Ida and Angelo, august 1947 (family archive).**

Sergio also notes that his mother played a vital role in his father's recovery and overcoming the trauma.

*They got married within a few months. I think there was a desire to start again, to restart. I know a lot of people got married immediately. As soon as they came back, yes. [...] And it began there. Life began and my mother was very patient. [...] My mother would say only this: 'I realised that behind a wreck', because my father came back a wreck, 'there was a good person. And I waited.' In fact, they made 47 years of happy marriage. (Sergio, 2021)*

As explained by Sergio and Ruben, Angelo never had any difficulty in talking about the war. In fact, they recount that Angelo talked about the period of the war all the time. He began to transmit his memories to his son from an early age. However, since this was a very sensitive period of childhood and adolescence, he adapted his memories to the child's imagination. In the evenings, he used to tell his son fairy tales based on his memories of the period of the war and captivity.

*I was born 15 years after [the wedding], in [19]62, and I grew up with these stories that my dad used to tell me as if they were fairy tales. (Sergio, 2021)*

As a child, Sergio perceived these tales told by his father as fairy tales – imaginary stories, told by the father in the evenings when he was getting his son ready for sleep. The main character – the hero – was his father. Angelo narrated the fairy tales in a way that would not scare the child, but rather prepare him for sleep.

*[...] my dad used to recount to me that when he was a partisan, he had a beautiful white horse called Fulmine [Lightning]. [...] There was never any talk of blood. Never. He would ride on this horse, go riding, and throw bombs into the forts. The Germans had low forts, little holes for shooting. And he would ride this horse called Lightning [laugh]. And as a child I used to dream of my dad riding a horse. Because those were the years we watched westerns. American. So, for me to connect my dad to John Wayne was easy, you know. (Sergio, 2023)*

Other stories were related to his escape from the Island of Biševo. His grandson Ruben recalls how his grandfather used to tell him the tale of his escape:

*But at some point my grandfather wants to go back to Trieste at all costs and decides to do it by swimming. To swim all the way to land. He does it with these comrades. Now, I don't know to what extent he made it more heroic than it was, I don't know if they then had some little boats, a raft, I don't know. His account, which is also what I remember, because I was very small, is that he faced this stretch of sea by swimming. A rather long distance. He always had [...] this great physical strength, this strong lung capacity. [...] And so, let's say, it can also be believable that he made it by swimming. (Ruben, 2021)*

Sergio recalls another account related to the escape from Biševo, when Angelo finally reached land and took refuge in the forest:

*And my father in running away ended up in a place that he never understood where it was, but I got an idea. He told me that basically, while running through the forests, at one point he found a series of small lakes and waterfalls, little waterfalls. And he stayed*

*there for a period of time, he doesn't know exactly how long. But he spoke to me about this place in a very bucolic way. In a very flowery way. That there were many bridges connecting these little lakes and waterfalls. And there he had found a lot of fish and fruits of the forest and he stayed there for so long that he had regained weight, he was feeling so good he didn't even want to leave. The climate was good. [...] I can remember it like now, that there were many little wooden and rope bridges, he said. And, of course, when I was a child, he would tell me that he would climb and sleep on the trees because the elves could pass by. The ogres could also pass by, he would tell me these things. [...] The creatures of the forest. [...] Then [I found out] he would actually climb and sleep up in the trees because he was afraid that the Germans would pass by, that anyone would pass by. Because he didn't know – anyone passing by could be an enemy. One day he made me a list of all the different fractions [armies] passing by, it was terrible. (Sergio, 2023)*

In fact, as he grew up, his father gradually began to reveal to his son Sergio that the fairy tales he had shared with him in the evenings held deeper meaning than mere fictional stories.

*And slowly then, as he got older, he said, 'No, wait, I mean, fairy tale. Enough with the fairy tales.' [laugh]. And then he started to explain to me the reality. (Sergio, 2021)*

#### **»The horse was actually a donkey«: the real events behind the fairy tales**

When Sergio grew up, Angelo gradually unfolded the truth behind these tales, explaining to Sergio that they were, in fact, reflections of his own wartime experiences; his own memories, adapted in a child friendly manner:

*[...] He reinvented them with typical Italian imagination [laugh], he reinvented everything. [...] But then, as an adult, I learnt that the horse was actually a donkey. [laugh] (Sergio, 2021)*

Recalling the story of a horse called Lightning, Sergio laughs and explains:

*It was a little old and bald donkey, he used to fetch water with that donkey. [laugh] But I learned about it when I got older. And he would transform these events into very fairy tale-like stories, very ... For example, he*

would tell me that he volunteered [while fighting along with the partisans] and that, basically, if you volunteered, they would give you more food. And he had to go and throw these bombs into German forts. But he told me the forts were uninhabited, because the Germans had already left. But you had to throw in to destroy everything so that they would not return. [silence] That was not true. [silence] It was a donkey for water. And he would go [with the donkey] and throw bombs in. But the Germans were inside. Basically, he would throw bombs in for a bowl of soup. (Sergio, 2023)

Fictional and fantastic treatment of traumatic events, especially related to the Second World War, are not rare. At the beginning of the 1990s, for instance, there was a considerable discussion among the scientific and writers' community, involving the general community as well, over fantastical and fictional treatment of the Holocaust. The discussion was triggered by the 1988 young-adult award-winning novel *The Devil's Arithmetic*, written by Jane Yolen. The main concern of the critics of the novel was the trivialisation of the Holocaust, especially since the novel was not written by a Holocaust survivor (cf. Wolfe, 1993). The major risk, as explained by Ellen R. Weil, was "telling a story which does not violate the historical experience of that event, as preserved in the memories of survivors and their descendants" (Weil, 1993, 91). This was not a recent phenomenon. As Wolfe explains, "[i]t wasn't really until the 1960s, following the TV and film productions of Judgment at Nuremberg, the Broadway and film productions of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and – perhaps most important – the widely publicised capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1960, that the Holocaust began to take on an historical identity distinct from that of World War II" (Wolfe, 1993, 6). The 1960s were, in fact, the period when increasing numbers of survivors began to speak openly about their experience – often triggered by published memoirs of survivors. After more than a decade of silence and waiting for someone to listen, the survivors of the Holocaust have finally begun to speak out. The 1960s brought an end to the so-called "conspiracy of silence" (Danieli, 2006, 34–35).

What is particularly interesting in our case, is the figure of the storyteller – Angelo. In the "era of the witness" (cf. Wieviorka, 2006), Angelo was, of course, talking about his own experience, but

when transmitting his memories to his son, he used a narrative in the form of a fairy tale. Since this is obviously a first-person memoir, any discussion about it being a trivialisation of his experience is out of the question, since he chose it himself. It is worth pointing out, however, that this decision was clearly effective; fairy tales appear to be a central motif and method of transmission of memories among both narrators, i.e. his son, Sergio, and his grandson, Ruben. However, unlike the literary works mentioned above, his stories, narratives and memoirs were never written down. Those fairy tales, thus, remain preserved only in the memories of his descendants. In an era that, as observed by Walter Benjamin, "the art of storytelling is coming to an end" (Benjamin, 2007, 83), Angelo seems to have stood out as a figure whose storytelling skills were exceptional. It is not easy to survive a traumatic experience and trauma, and then turn it into a fairy tale with the desire to preserve the memory across generations. Yet, that is exactly what he did.<sup>7</sup>

Fairy tales and myths born out of war are not an exception (cf. Fossaluzza, 2022). As Sergio recalls, he saw his father as the hero of those fairy tales, dreaming about him riding a white horse. It was fairy tales that figuratively "created a bridge between two worlds" (cf. McAfee Brown, 1994). Angelo recreated a devastating world in a child-friendly manner, introducing white horses, elves, and other forest creatures, in order to reveal only in the future, when his son had grown up, the real truth about that world. To introduce his son to a world he never knew (in the hope he never would), but at the same time he could and should learn a lot from it.

#### THE STORYTELLER: THE THERAPEUTIC FUNCTION OF STORYTELLING

After understanding the transgenerational transmission of memory, which was certainly in the centre of Angelo's intentions, we can discuss and analyse deeper what the meaning and functions, even if not fully intentional, of those fairy tales were. As already observed, Angelo never had an issue talking about the period of the war and his experience. To some extent this is not surprising, since we all tell and retell stories all the time – we are made up of personal stories and family experiences. Storytelling is virtually an ordinary activity for all of us. We need stories to tell and learn from. In addition, people exposed to traumatic experiences need an end to their stories in order to be able

<sup>7</sup> Which, of course, was not easy. Probably still one of the most comprehensive studies on the intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma among the children of Holocaust survivors is the one conducted by Dina Wardi (1992), she herself the child of Holocaust survivors. She was one of the first psychotherapists in Israel to use group therapy in the treatment of the second generation of Holocaust survivors.

to heal from potential trauma (cf. Marinella, 2017; Eftekhari et al., 2006). In fact, it is well known that the most successful therapeutic effects for Holocaust survivors were achieved when the first therapy groups were set up in the 1970s. During the sessions, survivors spoke openly about their memories and experiences, in order to comprehend the long-term consequences of trauma and the conspiracy of silence that followed the end of the war (cf. Danieli, 2006, 36–37). Scientists and therapists now agree that talking about a traumatic event is one of the best therapies for people who have been exposed to trauma.

As a consequence, storytelling and narrating fairy tales probably helped Angelo come to terms with his past experience and overcome the negative impact of the war. Which means that narrating the events and creating fairy tales must have helped Angelo overcome the traumatic effects that these events had on him. The fairy tales, to some extent, served as therapy. Related to this, Sergio believes that through storytelling, his father tried to generate some positive outcomes from his experience.

*I think that this way of creating fairy tales was a way of rendering ... not cheerful, how would you say ... positive. [...] So, he transmitted his memories in a fairy tale way. (Sergio, 2023)*

When asked what he thinks the intention of the fairy tales was, Sergio explains:

*No, there was no intent. It was that there was not a day that my father did not talk about these things. [...] One day, like all teenagers, I couldn't understand someone who lived through dictatorships. And he lived through two of them! And he told me: 'You can't understand'. Because I said: 'But how can you smile with what you have been through?' He said: 'No, you don't understand anything at all. Because when you go through these things ... I came home with my legs in one piece', apart from the shrapnel he had here, which I remember him massaging because there were bits left in them. 'I came home. In one piece. I wasn't tortured. I met your mother. We moved on, we started a family, I created my own quality of life. And you want me not to smile? Of my generation there is nobody left.' And then he would start giving me names. [of the people who had died] And he would say: 'I must be cheerful, I must live life with joy. Because it was gifted to me. Because everyone from my generation is dead.' He would say. (Sergio, 2023)*

The idea thus was also to pass on an experience that was devastating for many, but from which the father drew a positive spin. He tried to explain to his son that even the most devastating situation can be overcome and that even the most tragic experience can lead to something beautiful.

#### SOCIALISATION THROUGH FAIRY TALES

Through storytelling, Angelo also created a precious bond with his son (and later on with his grandson), which has given Sergio precious memories of his childhood. These memories hold deep emotional resonance, and they are powerful enough to bring tears to his eyes. He recalls, for instance, how his father regularly took him to the cinema.

*He would take me to the boulevard, where the big cinemas were, we would go to watch Walt Disney films. Then when we left, he would say to me: 'Look what a good smell of sausages.' There were buffets. Then, we'd go and have a sandwich with sausages and mustard. He would get me Coca Cola. And then, when we went home, of course we weren't hungry anymore. My mother would stand like this [he demonstrates how she would stand]: 'What did you eat?' My father: 'No, no, we haven't eaten anything!' [laugh] I had a wonderful childhood in this respect. He would take advantage of Walt Disney's films to explain things to me. I got a little emotional. One of those that Ruben knows very well, because that's the one I always recount to him. [...] I always say that there comes a point where a parent must step aside. Because the next generation comes along. And my father explained this to me with the film Bambi from Walt Disney. Walt Disney made a beautiful film, it's the story of this little deer. At a certain point he grows up. And the big deer, king of the forest, says to him: 'Now you go ahead.' and you see the deer retreating and Bambi stays. Because he is now a strong young man. (Sergio, 2021)*

His childhood memories are therefore rooted in the golden age of Walt Disney, when children and adolescents grew up with the values that these films conveyed (cf. Brode, 2004). This narrative is important in order to understand that Angelo generally liked to use fairy tales – even if adapted by Walt Disney animations – to socialise his son and teach him the values he considered important for life.

This is not surprising since, as Jack Zipes observes, fairy tales have always had an important function in socialisation processes.<sup>8</sup> Referring to the fairy tales written by the brothers Grimm, he ascertains that reading has been the “passport into certain brackets of society.” And although it is impossible to determine “what direct affect a fairy tale will have on an individual reader”, Zipes shows that “[a]s children read or are read to, [they] follow a social path, learn role orientation, and acquire norms and values” (Zipes, 2006, 70). Socialisation has therefore always been at the heart of fairy tales, as they have always served to prepare children and people for life in a certain community. As observed by Chudnovskaya and Lipatova, fairy tales are important carriers of cultural memory, since a “fairy tale is one of the first symbolic places that introduces a new little person to a world that he did not create himself, and values that correspond to this and previous stages of development of a certain society” (Chudnovskaya & Lipatova, 2020, 181). And although the figure of the storyteller was indeed in decline at that time, storytelling, which served to socialise children and accustom them to the (ethical) norms of a community, had not completely disappeared.<sup>9</sup>

The fairy tales narrated by Angelo served a similar function. In fact, Angelo used them to educate and socialise his son. Through storytelling (as opposite to story reading), as Bruno Bettelheim<sup>10</sup> points out, Angelo instilled in his son’s mind norms and guidelines important not only for their family legacy, but for the community and society in general.

*Listening to a fairy tale and taking in the images it presents may be compared to a scattering of seeds, only some of which will be implanted in the mind of the child. Some of these will be working in his conscious mind right away; others will stimulate processes in his unconscious. Still others will need to rest for a long time until the child’s mind has reached a state suitable for their germination, and many will never take root at all. But those seeds which have fallen on the right soil will grow into beautiful flowers and sturdy trees – that is, give validity to*

*important feelings, promote insights, nourish hopes, reduce anxieties – and in doing so enrich the child’s life at the moment and forever after.* (Bettelheim, 1976, 154)

In addition, while sharing his memories and life wisdom, he also passed on a method. In fact, Sergio reveals in conversation that sometimes he himself educates his two sons in a similar way – for instance, through the tale of Bambi (Sergio, 2021). This is not surprising, since, as explained by Walter Benjamin, the process of assimilation is usually particularly successful if the consumption of information is executed in a relaxed mode:

*There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later. This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer.* (Benjamin, 2007, 91)

The use of fairy tales narrated by the father in the evenings, just before going to bed, served its purpose. In the same way that families used to spend long winter evenings telling stories around a fireplace and, therefore, preparing young people for life in the community (cf. Toplak, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

As explained at the beginning of the article, during my research and collecting oral testimonies, I have not yet come across such a particular case. Although oral history is itself a method of storytelling – and of story-listening,<sup>11</sup> this is probably one of the very rare cases of passing on personal war-time memories to younger generations by narrating fairy tales. As the analysis here

8 The question of the functions of fairy tales, especially socialisation, has been addressed on various occasions in the past (cf. Zipes, 2006; Darovec, 2021; Tratnik, 2020; 2022; Crowther, 2022; Zima, 2022).

9 See, for instance, the interesting analysis by Cirila Toplak (2022, 632), which refers to the ethnographic records created by Pavel Medvešček, who conducted interviews with residents of remote hilly areas of Western Slovenia in the period from 1950 to 1978. The “Nature Worshipers”, in fact, used tales to introduce the small children to the spiritual life of the community.

10 Although the child psychologist and scholar Bruno Bettelheim was often criticised by scholars and prominent individuals in the field of fairy tales (cf. Dundes, 1991; Zipes, 2002, 179–205), he was not criticised for the claim that fairy tales should be told rather than read and their enriching function for a child (cf. Fenwick, 2000, 501–502).

11 As the Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli accurately notes: “[...] to tell – as many extermination camp survivors were dramatically to discover – requires the presence of someone who will listen” (Portelli, 2003, 15).

shows, through storytelling in a metaphorical and child-friendly manner, Angelo fulfilled several different functions.

Certainly, one of the primary purposes of Angelo's storytelling, was the transgenerational transmission of memory. Doubtless, he creatively passed on the memory of his past experiences through embellished fairy tales, gradually revealing the true events only over time. This unique approach allowed him to connect with his son and grandson, fostering a deeper understanding of his experience and family history.

Furthermore, storytelling certainly helped Angelo overcome his traumatic past, thus assuming, to some extent, a therapeutic function. As a storyteller, Angelo may have found a way to cope with his own trauma. The act of openly discussing his experiences and finding higher meaning

in them potentially contributed to his healing process.

Finally, the fairy tales served as a tool for Angelo to socialise and educate his son Sergio, instilling important values and life lessons. This aspect aligns with one of the fundamental functions of fairy tales in transmitting moral norms, social memories and preparing and adapting individuals to life in society. Additionally, it provided an avenue with which to raise Sergio as a conscious and compassionate individual.

It is evident that Angelo's use of storytelling through fairy tales served multiple purposes, encompassing transgenerational memory transmission, therapy, and socialisation. This approach highlights the depth of his engagement with his family history and the conscious efforts he made to convey his experiences in a meaningful and impactful way.

## VOJNI SPOMINI IN PRAVLJICE: ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA ANGELA, ITALIJANSKEGA VOJNEGA UJETNIKA IZ DRUGE SVETOVNE VOJNE V JUGOSLAVIJI

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## POVZETEK

*Prispevek obravnava življenjsko zgodbo Angela, italijanskega veterana druge svetovne vojne, ki se je po vojni in pobegu iz ujetništva v Jugoslaviji leta 1946 končno vrnil v Trst, kjer je spoznal svojo bodočo ženo. Zaradi vsega, kar je tekom vojne in ujetništva doživel, je potreboval skoraj 15 let, da je okreval od pretresljive vojne travme. Med letoma 2021 in 2023 sem med zbiranjem ustnih pričevanj opravila intervjuje z njegovim sinom Sergiom in vnukom Rubenom. Osrednja tema teh intervjujev je bilo vojno obdobje, predvsem čas, ki ga je Angelo preživel v Jugoslaviji – najprej kot partizanski prostovoljec, nato kot ujetnik v taborišču Biševo. Po vrnitvi v Trst leta 1946 je Angelo spoznal svojo bodočo ženo, Ido, s katero sta se malo kasneje poročila. 15 let po poroki, leta 1962, se jima je rodil edinec Sergio. Angelo je s sinom stkal posebno vez, katere pomemben element so bile tudi pravljice, ki jih je sinu (in kasneje tudi vnuku Rubenu) pripovedoval ob večerih. Inspiracijo za pripovedovane pravljic je Angelo iskal prav v svojih spominih in dogodkih iz časa vojne. Večerne pripovedi so metaforično in otroku prijazno opisovale njegove vojne izkušnje, šele leta kasneje je sinu razkril pravo resnico, ki se je skrivala za pravljicami. Posledično to niso bile le domišljjske pripovedi, privlačne za otroka, temveč so imele tudi globlji namen: bile so (1) način za posredovanje njegovih spominov in izkušenj naslednjim generacijam; (2) sredstvo za soočanje z njegovimi izkušnjami in preteklostjo; (3) orodje za socializacijo in vzgojo sina, posredovanje moralnih norm, socialnih spominov in pripravo na življenje v družbi.*

**Ključne besede:** druga svetovna vojna, Jugoslavija, vojni ujetniki, pravljice, travma, medgeneracijski prenos spomina, socializacija

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