

Podcast Teresa Mattei

"The only time I wore lipstick in my life was to place a bomb."

First voice:

Teresa Mattei was one of the many women that found in the Resistance movement a path to achieve greater justice for her and for everyone. To the attempts the regime carried out to silence the dissidents she answered by shouting louder against that same oppression. The most powerful weapon she ever employed was her voice, which she continued raising long after the armed struggle came to an end.

Teresa Mattei was born in Quarto, Genoa, on February 1, 1921 in a middle-class Catholic family. Her father Ugo Mattei was a liberal of Mazzinian tradition, a law graduate but an engineer by trade, who enlisted as a volunteer in World War I only to return from the front as a committed pacifist. Her mother Clara Friedmann was herself from an educated family. In the years that led to the establishment of the fascist dictatorship the Mattei house remained a haven of nonconformist reasoning and political engagement.

During the years of the regime, Teresa Mattei grew up in a strongly anti-fascist environment that led to her first militant activities: from propaganda, distribution of leaflets, to boycotts, such as that of a parade organized by the fascist authorities. During the Spanish civil war, the Mattei family actively supported the International Brigades. Mattei, 16 at the time, was given the task of undertaking the journey to Nice completely alone to deliver a sum of money. On her return, she was arrested and imprisoned. She was freed thanks to the intervention of her father Ugo Mattei. Teresa Mattei would always show herself as a woman with great critical capacity and an aptitude for rebellion, even in her childhood. She thus recalled an episode from when she was eight years old:

"I went to confession. The priest told me that I had to recite three Hail Marys for the Pope. I replied, 'but the Pope is a pig!' The Pope was a pig to me because he was a friend of Mussolini. From that moment on I avoided going to church: he did not persuade me".

She often demonstrated disobedience towards state institutions, especially her school:

"I was born precisely in 1921 when Fascism was beginning, so my life was marked by tremendous clashes with this shameful ideology that has blighted our lives. In school, from an early age, we were used to believe, obey, fight and we believed, we fought but for other things... we disobeyed because we



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had other ideas". And
again

"the Resistance was also made up of small things, which began long before September 8th -the Italian Armistice with Allied Troops -long before the beginning of WWII for Italy" .

At the end of the Ethiopian War, Fascist authorities invited schools to celebrate the empire in the streets of the city, but Mattei decided not to go on the streets, forcing the high school to remain open.

"I hate war and I hate all colonial wars, I hate everything that is violence."

In her second year of high school, following the promulgation of the racial laws in 1938, Mattei stood up and said, during a teacher's racist propaganda speech:

"I am getting out because I cannot witness these shames"

Expelled from all schools in the kingdom, She still managed to take her high school diploma as a private student thanks to the help of one of the most important Italian political figures during the Resistance, Piero Calamandrei, who also encouraged her to continue her battle .

She enrolled in the philosophy course at the university and in 1940, upon the announcement of Italy's participation in the world conflict, organized an anti-war demonstration together with other colleagues. The men of the Mattei household were called to arms. Her father served in one of the war production factories in Florence, where Teresa Mattei was able to break in and distribut anti-Fascist and anti-Nazi propaganda through packing leaflets together with war material, as well as sabotaging machinery together with other women.

In 1942, together with her brother Gianfranco She joined the Italian communist party, a choice shared by many other resistance fighters. Gianfranco was chemist with a brilliant and precocious academic career, he would later leave research in favor of the liberation struggle. On July 25, 1943, after years of military defeats, loss of lives, and discontent among the population, news came of the fall of Fascism with the arrest of Mussolini and of the appointment of Pietro Badoglio as head of the new government of Italy.

With September 8th 1943 and the announcement of the signing of the armistice with the Allies, wartime events precipitated and Italy became a battleground between the Allies and the Axis, with many Italians joining either side. During the Nazi occupation of Florence, Teresa Mattei, with the battle name "Chicchi", went into hiding within the Women's Defence Groups (GDD), the Communist Youth Front and the Patriotic Action Groups -in Italian Gap.



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Like other women, she took part in various activities: propaganda, assistance and rescue and transportation of weapons, ammunition, documents and information.

She would later recall: "The most important thing in our lives is to have chosen our side. It was in the Resistance that I learned that it was important for women to participate in political life as well as in the struggles. It was a great school for me: [...]we had to do everything to win and regain freedom... we understood that fear was our enemy".

And

"In the partisan war I was a courier girl, carrying weapons, all those things that were dangerous for men [...] I went more unnoticed than a man".

Second voice:

In order to function as a liaison between the Youth Front and the Communist Party, Mattei was put in contact with Bruno Sanguinetti, an intellectual and Communist militant, as well as her future husband. Mattei participated in the Resistance without taking up arms:

"I had a horror of weapons, I did not like war at all, I never shot for example. I used fountain pens, one of those black ones that were around then and holding one of them in my hand as if it was a gun, I managed to take away the takings of the State Railways of Florence, which were then channeled to Verona to finance the partisan war. Another time I managed to seize a batch of hams from a large farm to feed fellow partisans".

In the meantime her brother Gianfranco had joined the Gap in Rome, but after being denounced from a spy he was soon arrested and tortured for informations. The Nazi commander Herbert Kappler stated that the dutch tenant would, by his words, " make this terribly silent communist speak by physical and chemical means".

Gianfranco Mattei, out of fear of not resisting torture, hanged himself in February 1944. He had told his comrades to place all the blame on him and left a note to his family: "Dearest parents, due to very unfortunate circumstances for which one cannot blame only adverse fate, I am afraid that these will be my last words. You know what a bond of ardent action binds me to you, the brothers and everyone. Be strong, knowing that I have been too. I hug you all".

In the whirlwind of violence that war generates, the grief for her brother Gianfranco was compounded by further suering for Teresa Mattei. En route to Rome, where she was on her way to meet and comfort her parents, she was arrested, tortured and raped by German soldiers. Thanks to the intervention of a Fascist hierarch, convinced that "such a good girl cannot be a partisan ", she managed to escape and get to safety in the night, finding refuge in a convent. She would recount the episode of violence she suered only after fifty years .



Despite the pain she went through, Mattei resumed her spot as a resistance fighter, helped organize the March 1944 strikes in Florence and Empoli, witnessing the ensuing Nazi-Fascist repression with the deportation of workers, and participated in sabotage actions in the city.

"The only time I wore lipstick in my life was to place a bomb. I was so unrecognizable"

According to what was revealed years later, Mattei participated, although indirectly, in one of the most talked-about resistance actions in Florence, namely the killing by the Gap of the philosopher and theorist of Fascism, Giovanni Gentile, who, as a professor at her university, was pointed out by her to the resistance group .

As the Allies advanced and in anticipation of the liberation of Florence, the situation in the city became increasingly complicated. While the military committee decided to aim for liberation through insurrection, the Germans decreed a state of emergency, blew up the bridges over the Arno river, and besieged the city, making it a battlefield before the partisans could take action. In this context Mattei, active as a courier girl among the crossfire, was in command of the "Gianfranco Mattei" company of the Youth Front:

"I commanded 50 partisans and on the eve of the Liberation day we were joined by many Garibaldians who came down from the mountains and some Russian, British and Scottish ex-prisoners of war who helped us. I had the respect of everyone and I was not an exception: there were many women indeed"

After the war she became a member and leader of The Union of Italian Women, fighting for the right to vote and the eligibility of women. She engaged in the electoral campaign for the 1946 Constitutional Assembly election:

"I went from armed struggle to political commitment to build a different and democratic Italy, freer and more fair"

At the age of twenty-five, she was the youngest elected and one of twenty-one Constituent Mothers . Teresa Mattei died in 2013 in Lari (PI) at the age of ninety-two. Streets, squares, schools, books, and a play have been dedicated to her in the name of her struggles and commitment.



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