

Lidia Brisca Menapace (1924-2020): “Fuori la guerra dalla storia”

Federica is speaking:

“Fuori la guerra dalla storia”, “Let the War be out of History”.

Gioele is speaking:

This is the distinctive motto of Lidia Menapace, an Italian partisan who decided to do fight against Nazism and Fascism in a non-violent way. When the war was over, she gave many speeches on pacifism and antimilitarism in the attempt to put an end to every type of conflict.

This is the story of Lidia Brisca Menapace

Lidia Brisca was born in Novara in 1924 to a family of Republican traditions on her father's side and anarchist traditions on her mother's side.

During her childhood, she developed a passion for literature and, thanks to a librarian friend, she could read for the first time texts banned by Fascism. She then matured a more conscious aversion to the Regime in 1938, when some of her classmates were excluded from the class following the enactment of racial laws.

She attended the “*Carlo Alberto*” High School in Novara. There she followed the lectures of some professors affiliated with the organization “Catholic Action”, who were passively resisting fascism by pretending to forget to read propaganda journals during the dedicated hour on Mondays.

These were not isolated episodes since Catholic Action had maintained a certain autonomy despite the pressure from the regime not to get involved in politics. After the signing of the Concordat in 1929 - which regulated relations between State and Church – the pope Pius XI had repeatedly spoken out critically against the Fascist attempt to monopolise the education of young people.

Despite the opposition of her father, a convinced layman, she decided to enrol at the Catholic University of Milan because, compared to the State Universities, it maintained a wider teaching autonomy: in fact, the faculty included professors who had already expressed opposition to the regime and would later participate in the Resistance. In that university there was also a massive presence of the FUCI, Federation of Italian Catholic University Students, an organization affiliated with Catholic Action. There she read the social encyclicals and heard for the first time about Marx, Engels, and some Italian antifascist imprisoned or killed by the regime. She wrote.



Federica is speaking:

"Since 1941, I have been decidedly anti-fascist because the regime was authoritarian, corrupt, racist, warmongering."

Gioele is speaking:

In the meantime, she became a practicing catholic, a fact that will impact her future choices.

Giovanni is speaking:

Her father, Giacomo Brisca, had been recalled to military service a few months earlier from the Fascist regime's downfall. After the signing of the armistice in September 8, 1943 and the arrival of Reich troops in the city in September 12, he refused to take the oath to the Republic of Salò – the new Fascist government - so he became a Military Prisoner and was deported to Poland. He only saw his family again when the war finished.

Giacomo Brisca's deportation forced the family to return permanently to Novara, where they could count on a network of solidarity that would guarantee their livelihood.
These tragic events allowed Lidia to make a final decision: she wrote.

Federica is speaking:

"Already since the end of September, I have decided that I want to act: I want to get in touch with the partisans, I want to do something to help the Jews, I want to do something positive against Nazism, against Fascism, and I try to listen, to see and to learn. I am a member of FUCI and we have big debates [...] We also discuss a lot whether the government of the new Fascist republicans is legitimate and come to the conclusion that it is not".

Giovanni is speaking:

Through Don Giacomini, her high school religion teacher, she was introduced to the first Catholic-inspired partisans who were organizing in the city. Since as a university student she had to shuttle between Novara and Milan, she was used as a courier girl. After getting herself a new bicycle and taking on the battle name of "Bruna," she transported medicines, carried information to the mountains, accompanied some Jewish boys to the Swiss border and distributed "Il Ribelle", an information periodical of the Catholic "Green Flames" formations.

In April 1944 she became the liaison officer between the National Liberation Committee of Novara and the formations of Valtoce, Valdossola and Valsesia.

She refused to sling and carry weapons and always carried out these tasks unarmed: she only handed over explosives for sabotage, as, in her opinion, they were necessary tools for defensive purposes, since they would slow down enemy action and mainly damage property,



not human beings. She carried out these tasks in a brigade composed mainly of young FUCI members. It was a formation that was not strictly military and that dealt with the recovery of weapons and prison escapes. Through false medical certificates, Jewish patients or political prisoners were transferred to a hospital and then escaped with the support of medical staff and nuns.

During the days of the liberation of Novara in April 26, 1945 Lidia was used as a telephone operator in the Prefecture building, a delicate task that enabled the smooth running of operations and the maintenance of public order.

When the war ended an Emergency Tribunal was established, in order to prosecute the crimes of the Fascists and avoid summary executions. In that occasion Lidia was in charge of interrogating stragglers, who were captured by partisan patrols.

In the fall of 1945, she graduated with honours in Literature from the Catholic University. The following year she won the position for teaching Italian and Latin, taking service in the scientific high school in Arona, in Novara, but at the same time continued to specialize at the University.

Gioele is speaking:

In 1946 she joined the Christian Democrats, the DC, the leading party in the Italian republic for nearly 50 years. Her membership, which underwent various phases of detachment, was always marked by a nonconformist streak that led her to support the left-wing trends of the Party.

She left the party when the Christian Democrats wanted to join to NATO; she said:

Federica is speaking:

“joining represented the acceptance of world division, the end of unity”.

Gioele is speaking:

She joined again the Christian Democrats in the early 1960s when she moved to Bolzano with her husband. Indeed, the DC was the only political force who supported the South Tyrolean autonomy line. That means, they wanted to promote a development, in which the different language groups, now intertwined in the same territory, would cooperate through a self-government. Following the results of the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965, which aimed at a renewal of the Church, she showed interest in Catholic youth groups that began to theorize about overcoming ethnic barriers in South Tyrol.

In the same year she ran for the provincial elections from the ranks of the Christian Democrats and became the first woman elected to the Bolzano provincial council.

She was also the first woman to join the provincial council as local minister for Social Affairs and Health, dealing with the construction of the Bolzano psychiatric hospital in the wake of Franco Basaglia's groundbreaking thesis.



Since 1948 she had also been teaching at the Catholic University of Milan. She felt the need to renovate the teaching methods, experimenting the active participation of students in the lessons. And so, when the wave of youth protests swept Europe in 1968, she participated in the occupations and sympathized with the students, sharing their goals and methods of struggle. In July of that year, she resigned from the party after publishing a political document titled "For a Marxist Choice," in which she accused the DC of misusing the term Christian, since it did not strive to remove disparities between human beings but, on the contrary, governed to accentuate them. She then revived the need to use Marxism as a method to understand those changes taking place in society that the DC, in her view, locked into mechanisms of power, was no longer able to grasp. These utterances caused her exclusion from any position at the Catholic University and the end of her academic career.

Giovanni is speaking:

She approached the Communist Party without ever joining it and, at the end of 1968, she joined the group of the newborn newspaper "Il Manifesto". She wrote on various issues, dealing in particular with the feminism of the 1970s.

She was among the promoters of the Movement of Christians for Socialism, which aimed to synthesize the theses that emerged from the struggles of the '60 with the opening operated by the Second Vatican Council. She argued that there was no need to create a new Catholic left-wing party but to act through broad alliances among the various movements that arose from below in Italian society.

During the 1980s, she distinguished herself with her many speeches on pacifism and antimilitarism and spoke out against nuclear energy and rearmament. She promoted peace marches and coined the distinctive motto of the pacifist movement, "Let the War be out of History." For these reasons she was always opposed to the framing of partisans as soldiers, because.

Federica is speaking:

"it disturbed me to be placed in the army, which I did not really care about, which I rejected even then altogether. The definition contrasted with the Resistance itself, that was actually an experience full of discussions, empty of hierarchies, in short anything but an army".

Giovanni is speaking:

In the last years of her life she became senator and was also elected to the National Council of the National Association of Italian Partisans).

She died in Bolzano on December 7th 2020, following complications from Covid-19.

For all her life Lidia searched world's peace and freedom. She always pursued these goals in a non violent way, not only when the war ended, disagreeing with the DC, but also in the middle of resistance, when she decided to carry her tasks unarmed. She is a reference for all of us and for our future generations.

