



ITALIAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

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Captive Expression: The Wartime Experiences of Donato Ruberto

When we think of prisoners of war, we often recall the experience of U.S. soldiers held captive overseas by foreign armies. What we frequently do not consider is the United States as the authority overseeing POWs. During World War II, approximately 425,000 foreign soldiers were held in camps on U.S. soil; of those, 50,000 were Italian.

Last summer, the History Center added a truly unique artifact to the Italian American Collection related to the Italian prisoner of war experience. Sergeant Major Donato Ruberto of Cairano, Italy, crafted a model of one of Fiat's WWII-era tanks during his detainment as an Italian POW and, later, collaborating Italian Serviceman. He was drafted into the Italian Army in the early 1930s; in 1939, he was recalled to serve in the infantry and was sent to Libya in North Africa. He was taken prisoner by British troops in February 1941 and held in POW camps in Egypt, the United Kingdom, and Canada before being transferred to the United States. Many Italian and German soldiers in American camps were originally captured by British or French forces and transferred into U.S. custody due to the inability to care for their basic needs.

It is believed that Ruberto's handcrafted tank is a replica of the Fiat-Ansaldo M13/40 used during Italy's North African campaign. Comparisons between the model and photographs of the vehicle show that Ruberto's memory of the tank was fairly accurate.



A close up of the tank's dedication plaque.
Both: HHC Collections, gift of Fabio Ruberto in honor of Donato Ruberto, 2014.52.1 a-e. Photo by Liz Simpson.

Ruberto was held as a POW at Camp Clark in Missouri and Pine Camp in New York; he was then detained in an Italian Service Unit at the Benicia Arsenal in California. After Italy surrendered to the Allied forces in September 1943, Italian POWs were offered the opportunity to become collaborators of the American war effort and join Italian Service Units; those who chose to sign an allegiance to the United States were given more freedom despite still being detained.¹ Ruberto became a collaborator and spent his last eight months of detention in Benicia, California.

While in Missouri in 1943, Ruberto was visited by his older brother Peter (Pietro), who had immigrated to Pittsburgh in 1911 when Ruberto was just a toddler. On this same journey Peter also visited his son Fred (Fortunato) who was serving as an aviation cadet at Maxwell Force Air Base in Alabama for the United States Army. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* got wind of Peter's trip and chronicled

the story of the Ruberto family's reunion in the July 3rd article, "Son in Air Corps, Brother War Prisoner in U.S." Their bittersweet human interest story recounts one of the many ways that extended Italian American families were adversely impacted by Italy's stance in the war.

At some point during Ruberto's confinement he was given the task of disassembling shell cradles and salvaging the wood, some of which he used to fashion the tank model. Ruberto repurposed the reclaimed wood and wires to construct a functioning replica of the Italian Army's Fiat tank from memory.² The back of the tank features the inscription "UN RICORDO LO ZIO RUBERTO DONATO P.O.W. AL NIPOTE FORTUNATO," which roughly translates to "A memento of your Uncle Donato Ruberto POW to his nephew Fortunato."

Back in Italy, Ruberto's wife, Leonilde Frieri Ruberto, received little information

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SECOND NEWS SECTION

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Son Fights for, Brother Against U. S.



Peter Ruberto, a veteran of the First World War and a member of The American Legion, is shown in his Center Avenue bachelors' room, the site of a trip which will bring about two resolutions: one happy, one sad. Ruberto will leave tonight for Maxwell Field, Ala., to see his son, Aviano, Capt. Fred Ruberto of the Army Air Forces.

Thus he will visit his brother, Donato Ruberto, whom he has not seen for 12 years, under unfavorable circumstances. Donato Ruberto is a prisoner of war, a prisoner in the Italian army who was captured in North Africa by the British, and is now behind the stockade at Camp Clark, military camp in Missouri.

Family Divided in World Conflict

Son in Air Corps, Brother War Prisoner in U. S.

Veteran of World War I on Way to Visit Maxwell Field and New Prison Camp

Peter Ruberto, 42, Chief Engineer, United States Army Air Corps, is on his way to Maxwell Field, Ala., tonight to visit his son and his brother, both of them soldiers in this war.

The son, Fred F. Ruberto, is a United States Air Force cadet stationed at Maxwell Field, Ala.

The brother is Private Donato Ruberto who was with the Italian army under Field Marshal Rommel in Libya and now is a prisoner in Camp Clark, Missouri. He was captured by the British Eighth Army nearly two years ago in North Africa and held in England until recently when he was shipped to the big military prison camp in Missouri.

Thirty-two years ago Peter Ruberto, now 42, left his village in Italy to come to America. Donato, his youngest brother was a baby of two years. Peter was born in

Italy, a son of the Pittsburgh Branch, Associated Master Masons of America, and now just a military American citizen.

Back in Italy, brother Donato joined Mussolini's legions when his class was called up, was shipped to North Africa. When the war came to America, Peter's son wanted to do his part of the job of smothering Mussolini and Hitler. The war that he saw in Uncle Donato is just beginning for nephew Fred.

Peter Ruberto had accompanied with Donato when he was a prisoner in England. He had all the arrangements made to go to Missouri to visit his brother, intending to return by way of Maxwell Field. Yesterday word came that Capt. Fred was about to be transferred to another air base in Texas.

When the transfer was announced, Peter changed his train connections and

going to visit his son and brother in Missouri to visit his brother he heart with

This 1943 *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* article incorrectly labels Ruberto as a private in the Italian Army and reports that his unit was under the command of German Field Marshall Rommel, a fact easily disputed since Rommel didn't arrive in Libya until after Ruberto was captured by the British.

HRC Detre L&A, gift of Raffaele Ruberto, 2014.0114.

about her husband's condition or whereabouts. Many years later she wrote of his absence in her memoir:

he was taken prisoner and then we knew nothing else we turned to the red cross [sic], and to others but after 7 months we only knew he was a prisoner, one day I received a letter it was all erased, I couldn't understand a word and it was explained to me that whatever was written was not good and that's why it had been erased, but now at least we knew he was alive, after a little while I received a letter that he has written from the U.S., I didn't understand, I asked if he is a prisoner how can the letter come from America I don't remember from where, I went to a neighbor who had come from America and he told me that my husband was a prisoner in America and that I could be happy because the war was over for him.³

The notion that Italian soldiers could be held prisoner in the United States was confusing for many in Italy as it contradicted their understanding of America as a land of opportunity.

Ruberto was repatriated to Italy in October 1945 after more than six years away from his hometown of Cairano. Like many post-war Italian emigrants, he migrated to Venezuela in 1949 in search of steady work, while Leonilde and their four children remained in Italy. After a few years, the Venezuelan government demanded that foreigners call their families from overseas or leave and Ruberto decided to take a chance in the nation of his former imprisonment. He immigrated to the United States in 1953, eventually settling in the Bloomfield neighborhood of Pittsburgh with his family in 1954. Leonilde wrote of the immigration experience, remarking, "people say it's easy to pass from bad to good ... us having come from the bad, we were much better off."⁴

³ Those who declined to sign a statement of allegiance to help defeat Hitler were relocated to high security camps in isolated sites.

² Though the continuous track no longer rolls, the tank's turret rotates from side to side.

³ Ruberto, Leonilde Fieri, *Such Is Life/Ma la vita è fatta così: A Memoir*, trans. Laura E. Ruberto (New York: Bordighera Press, 2010), 30.

⁴ Ruberto, 38.



Portrait of Donato Ruberto with POW/Service Unit "Italy" patch, c. 1943.

Courtesy Michael Ruggiero.