

The Cielo
A Novel of Wartime Tuscany

By Paul Salsini

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For Barbara, Jim, Laura and Jack

Author's Note

When my wife and I visited Tuscany in 2004, we stayed in one of those ubiquitous farmhouses in the hills that now welcome tourists. This one, though, had a special meaning for me. More than a hundred years ago, my grandfather, a tenant farmer, lived there. The place had subsequently been abandoned and restored only recently.

In the village at the base of the hill, my 80-year-old cousin told us the story of the farmhouse. During World War II, she said, Italian

partisans were engaged in fierce battles with the Germans in this area, and terrified villagers fled to farmhouses in the hills for safety. We asked if her family had fled. Quietly, she said they did, and then began to recount stories of how people had trouble getting along, how they cowered when they heard the fighting and the bombing and how some of them didn't survive. Back in the farmhouse, I felt surrounded by the ghosts of villagers from sixty years earlier.

When we returned home, I couldn't stop thinking about those brave people and was determined to write a story about them. In the course of my research, I discovered the horrific event that had taken place close by, in a village called Sant'Anna di Stazzema, in August 1944. That required return trips to Italy to talk to the survivors in what remained of Sant'Anna.

This book is a tribute to the gallant people who suffered for so long, and with such courage, under the heat of the Tuscan sun.

-- Paul Salsini

The Characters

Rosa Tomaselli, 56, a housewife
Marco Tomaselli, 70, her husband

Annabella Sabbatini, 56, a housewife
Francesco Sabbatini, 57, her husband

Dante Silva, 64, a retired schoolteacher

Maria Ruffolo, a widow

Fausta Sanfilippo, a middle-aged working woman

Maddelena and Renata Spinelli, elderly sisters

Gabriella Valentini, The Contessa

Vito Tambini, an elderly man
Giacomo Tassarò, his cousin

Gina Sporenza, the wife of an Italian soldier, Pietro
Lucia, 16
Roberto, 12
Anna, 10
Adolfo, 8
Carlotta, three months

Father Luigi, the parish priest

Gavino, an elderly farmer on the adjoining farm

Dino and Paolo, young men fleeing from the army

Fritz Krieger and Konrad Schultz, both 17, members of the SS

Ezio Maffini, a partisan

Colin Richards, an escaped British war prisoner

Angelica Marchetti, daughter of Maria, who lives in Sant'Anna
Little Carlo, 4
Nando 2

Part One

Chapter One

Rosa just happened to glance out the window when she saw them running across the field in the back of the house. Quickly, she grabbed the broom handle and pounded the kitchen ceiling. Three times. That was the signal.

Just in time. She heard a heavy lid slam shut upstairs just as the three German soldiers pushed open the door and filled her tiny kitchen. They were sweating, and their shirts clung to their chests.

“*Buongiorno, Signora,*” the chubby one said. “We want to...”

“Please close the door,” Rosa said. “I’m trying to keep the house cool. We’ve never had a hotter July, have we?” The shortest soldier dutifully obeyed.

“Now, what can I do for you?” Rosa said, wiping her hands on her apron. Flustered, the soldiers looked at one another, and when Rosa picked up her rolling pin they instinctively reached for the pistols in their holsters. Ignoring them, Rosa calmly began to roll out the dough on the kitchen table. Finally, the tall one spoke. His Italian was at best imperfect.

“We are looking for an army deserter. We know he’s in Sant’Antonio and we are searching every house.”

“Why in the world would you want to find a deserter from the Italian army?” Rosa asked. “Don’t you have enough soldiers in your army?”

“Well, of course we have. But we can’t let you Italians run away from your army now, can we?”

“As you can see,” Rosa said, intent on rolling out the dough, “I’m quite alone here, and I’m trying to make these ravioli. This is a lot of work. Now if you would just leave, we can all go about our business.”

As much as she tried to speak calmly, Rosa knew that her voice, always high, had climbed higher, and she wondered if the soldiers could see her heart beating so fast under the top of her apron.

For the last three years, the Wehrmacht soldiers had occupied all of northern Italy. At first, they were simply a presence, and most people tried to ignore them. But in the last months, there had been a growing number of incidents. The soldiers roughed up men who wouldn’t answer their questions. They raided houses without warning. They took food and wine from homes. They enforced a 10 o’clock curfew every night. And there were even more convoys of tanks rumbling through the little village, sometimes skidding off the road and barely missing houses and trees.

The Italians tried to endure all this without complaint but were getting more impatient as they waited for the Allies to work their way north from the heel of the country. Now, the British were bombing cities in the north to flush out the Germans, and more and more Italian partisans, especially here in Tuscany, were sabotaging the Nazis in the hills.

“Well, then,” the tall soldier said, “you won’t mind if we just take a look around, right?”

Rosa knew she didn’t have a choice. The soldiers went into the living room, looking under the couch and behind the chair, and then the dining room, where they opened the cupboards.

“He would have to be awfully small to fit in there,” Rosa said as she watched one of the soldiers pull table cloths and linens from a space in a cupboard.

“Come on. Let’s look upstairs.” The tall soldier held a machine gun.

Rosa froze as the men’s heels clattered on the stone stairs. She hadn’t wanted to take the young man in when he arrived at their door two days ago, starving and looking desperately for food. He said he was from Montepulciano and he and a friend had jumped from the troop train in the Serchio Valley north of Lucca last month. Marco told him he could stay a few days so he hid in the sewing room upstairs. He knew that if Germans arrived he would have to crawl into the chest inside the closet and cover himself with blankets.

“Anyone here? *Raus! Raus!*”

Her knuckles white as she gripped the rolling pin, Rosa stood at the bottom of the stairs. She heard the soldiers going into the bedroom and rifling through her and Marco’s clothes in the *armadio*. Then she heard the door to the sewing room open.

“It’s dark in here. Open the curtains,” one soldier said.

“It’s still pretty dark,” another one said.

“Look in that closet,” the third one said. “Anything there?”

A long silence. Rosa closed her eyes and wiped her brow.

“No. Can’t see anything it’s so dark.”

“All right then. Let’s go. It’s too hot up here. No one could stay here for long.”

Rosa was back at the table rolling out dough when the soldiers came down. Sweat glistened on her forehead and matted her hair.

“You see?” she said. “I told you no one was here.”

“I bet you know a lot about what’s happening in this village, don’t you?” the tall soldier said, standing behind her and breathing on her neck. “Tell us what you know.”

“I don’t know anything,” Rosa said. “I just keep to myself.”

The soldier put his machine gun on the table, right next to the dough. He leaned back in the chair opposite her, watching as she put more flour on the dough and rolled it out. The chubby soldier sat in the chair next to the stove and the short one stood at the door. They didn’t look like they were going to leave.

For the next forty-five minutes, the soldiers tried to get information. Rosa ignored their questions or changed the subject.

“Who are the people here supporting the partisans?”

“Do you like ravioli? I’m using my mother’s recipe. She got it from her mother who probably got it from her mother before that.”

“What do you know about the priest?”

“I have a secret ingredient,” Rosa said. “I use nutmeg. All the other women here use cinnamon.”

“Where are the older men? Where have they gone?”

“The other women use fancy ravioli cutters. I just use a fruit juice glass, see? My mother used a glass. Her ravioli were fat and round, not square and flat like you see in restaurants.”

“That’s how they were in the restaurant in Reboli,” the chubby soldier said.

“Yes, I know. My husband took me there on our tenth wedding anniversary a year ago. I could tell they weren’t as good as mine just by looking at them. I didn’t have them. Did you like them?”

Rosa was getting tired of this conversation. Finally, the soldiers stood up, the tall one shouldered his machine gun, and they all left.

“*Mamma mia!*” Rosa said. “I thought they would never leave.”

She ran upstairs where Dino, the army deserter, was still in the chest. “Are you all right?”

Dino climbed out. He was drenched with his sweat. “A few more minutes in there and I think I would have suffocated.”

“Those soldiers just would not leave,” Rosa said. “*Basta!*”

“Thank you, Signora. That was close.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine. Just hot. Don’t worry about me.”

“You rest now. That was terrible.”