Il Ospizio di Amore

A Short War Story

By Maryanne Peters

The Italians

His name was Federico and his friends called him Rico. He had many friends. He had a friendly and engaging manner. He came from the town of San Giorgio in Liguria in the north of Italy from a good family – reportedly an illegitimate branch of the Genoese nobility. He was well educated but not conceited with it. He could communicate with anybody in his unit, and with others drawn from the Southern regions of Italy, often looked down on by people from the north.

His family were not fascists but they were happy that he volunteered to serve in the army. At the time that he joined Italy had aspirations of building an empire in Africa. In May 1936 Mussolini announced a victory returning possessions on the horn of Africa and calling for people to colonize or to join up to protect those new territories and what he called “Italy’s Fourth Shore – Libya. Even if you disliked Mussolini as the arrogant little shit he was, he had brought pride back to the nation. Rico was ready to serve.

He trained as an officer and first served his nation as a junior lieutenant in the invasion of Albania. He was attached to a senior officer who warmed to the gentile and good-looking young man. But Rico saw no action in Albania and received no advancement.

There were rumours that the relationship with that senior officer included some improper conduct, but no record of it exists. Suffice to say a hurriedly arranged transfer sent the senior man back to Rome and Rico to Benghazi in Libya to join the Italian 10th Army.

Rico had only just arrived in Africa when Mussolini declared war on Britain and France in June 1940 after the success of the German *blitzkrieg* in France. Il Duce had designs on the territories of both nations, starting with British Egypt. But the ordered attack never happened, perhaps because the Italian generals in Africa guessed that the British were too strong if their ex-colonies were called in. After some period of inaction Mussolini intervened directly and a poorly equipped and trained force moved along the coast to Maklita. Despite Mussolini urging them the advance carry on, the commander of the 10th Army General Graziani ordered his men to take defensive positions around Sidi Barrani, well inside Egypt but of no strategic value. Italy had invaded Egypt.

For six months the Italian forces stayed there, essentially waiting for an attack. It was the very opposite of blitzkrieg. Defensive positions became a home of sorts.

It is said that an Italian can only be deprived of his comforts for so long and then he begins to fade. Rico seemed to his superiors to have the skills to understand what comforts are, or should be, and to procure them. He seemed like the epitome of genteel Italian with his shaggy hair and trimmed moustache and his tailored desert uniform sporting on the helmet that incongruous bunch of black feathers that seemed to insist that even in war, in Italy style must come first.

It seemed that despite Il Duce they would be in place for some time, and style is also a way of life. Fortunately, Italians are also traders, and behind the 10th Army was a civilian army of merchants ready to supply all the comforts demanded.

One of those comforts was supplied by *Il Ospizio di Amore*. Is there a proper translation into English? This was a privately run mobile bordello. It was not the only one in the service of the Italian army, but it is the only one we are concerned about in this story.

The bordello was run by a lady Signora Mariella Strinati. Rico kept her supplied with things that only he seemed able to supply, and she kept him happy in ways that it seemed only she could. Rico was curious about her and he would spend time with her, even staying over night, just talking. Her background was very different from his. She was from the North of Italy like him but of lower birth. He father was a butcher and he mother a seamstress.

Many, including Rico, had hoped to go home for Christmas. It all seemed very leisurely. Their encampment was becoming gradually more comfortable. It was until December 9, 1940 when everything changed and the Italian forces came under attack.

The British in Egypt launched Operation Compass with their own forces bolstered by soldiers from the nations of the British Commonwealth to a total of 36,000 men. It should have been no surprise. Aircraft had reported movements. A attack seemed likely but for some reason the commander at the front had not been informed.

What did come as a surprise to Ric, and an unpleasant one, was that he learned that he was a coward. Perhaps he was too hard on himself. All men have fear, they just need to find a way of dealing with it. Hiding in the bordello was his.

It was because it started with an artillery barrage. Nothing can prepare you for that. Even if you response to fear is to find the courage to attack, how can you fight falling shells? Death is all around you. Where can you find shelter? In the bunkers built perhaps, but certainly not under blankets in a large unprotected truck.

It seemed that as *Il Ospizio di Amore* was located next to the hospital and well behind the front lines, it was spared the worst of it. There was a stray shell though, and it was enough to end the life of Signora Mariella Strinati.

He was there when she died. Hot shrapnel had cut her open and her guts lay beside her on the sand but she was still conscious. She seemed to scream without noise, her eyes knowing that life was now only minutes long, and that those minutes would be pain and horror. It brought home to Rico that this could never be his life, and certainly not his death. His instinct was to run.

But the girls looked to him for leadership. He was her friend and confidant. A soldier and an officer in what it was now clear to everyone, was war. But Rico felt as if he had shamed himself as a leader of men, even as he stood there. He did not want to die. Surrender seemed like an idea, although life as a prisoner with men who had no respect for him seemed an intolerable dishonor.

And so he decided to become Mariella Strinati, at least for the time being

The British

The British called it “Operation Compass”. It commenced on 9 December and finished 2 months later with the complete destruction of the Italian 10th Army. It was a time of great shame for the proud Italian military, but the new Mariella was no longer part of that. Her duty was to look after the women in her care, and It was duty that she took her own pride in. She was not required to wage war, but simply seek safety.

To equip her the women around her set about improving her appearance. Rico had the advantage of a fine head of hair that had been neglected in the absence of a proper gentleman’s hairdresser. It was long enough that with the use of hairpieces woven from the dark hair of other ladies a convincing and elegant style could be fashioned.

Italian women often complain that facial hair is a common curse so all manner of remedies for it are available and were put to use. The limbs too could be polished and when they were they appeared by good fortune to be utterly feminine given the slim physique of the new Mariella. In fact, her dresses needed to be taken in a little, but the women were well equipped for that, and could even introduce the newcomer to some of those skills.

Mariella would develop her own style after time. She learned from the other ladies in her company what a woman should not do, but with those lessons learned she knew by her own experience what a refined lady should do. What became clear to all those who depended on her was that she took on the role of “madam” with enthusiasm.

The loss of the ports of Bardia and Tobruk to the British was a huge blow to the Italian 10th army, but Mariella and her “Ospizio” were headed further west, with the main body of the forces to be secure at El Agheila. She was able to keep things organized as secure fuel for their vehicles and access through all checkpoints with her developing charm.

But El Agheila was not far enough west. Perhaps even the setting sun would not have been far enough. The battle of Beda Fomm was the end for the Italians in North Africa. 40,000 of them had been captured at Bardia and Tobruk but by the end of the final battle the remaining 10th army had surrendered – 130,000 men.

Mariella was not about to surrender. She arranged her ladies in their best attire under an awning and awaited a senior officer of the British army. In time one arrived in the form of Colonel Anthony Sturgess who was led towards this odd group who refused to join the cavalcade of prisoners of war.

It seemed that everybody was surprised when the tall and impressively assertive addressed the colonel in perfect but heavily accented English.

“We are non-combatants General,” she said. “We are civilian contractors. We will not be surrendering but we are open to discussion as to what services we might offer your personnel.”

“Madam, or should I say Signora, we are at war and have no time for fraternizing,” said Colonel Sturgess, himself a man of refinement and bearing.

“Perhaps after you have taken all of customers away and placed all of my customers behind barbed wire you will come an visit us. In fact, come for dinner. We will be cooking ravioli with a sauce made from local goat’s cheese. Around 7:00pm?”

“Madam, I will be far too busy,” he said, but he wasn’t so he was there on time.

“I admire many things about Italian culture,” he said. “I am particularly fond of Italian opera.”

Her hair was up with an arrangement of borrowed hair on top, and she wore earrings. She could well have been at La Scala between acts rather than in the desert between battles.

“I love opera too,” she said. “But all the men are rakes and the women victims. Maybe that reflects the world that we live in?”

He looked at her with a desire that was almost lust, but was restrained by his upbringing and his nature.

“it will end … this war,” he said.

“Perhaps when it does we could share a drink at my favorite bar in London?” she said. “The American Bar at the Ritz.”

“We could make a date of it,” he said. “Say one year after peace is declared?”

She raised a glass to match his. Of course she had wine. What bordello could be without some.

“I hope you don’t think me a rake, but Don Giovanni is my favorite Italian opera,” he said.

“That is in Italian,” she said. “But it is written by a German. Generally, I dislike Germans.”

The Germans

Dislike them she did, but their turn was next. Such was the campaign in North Africa that the battle front moved back and forth. The arrival of Rommel’s Afrika Corps led to a reversal for the British and British Commonwealth forces. Two months after the Battle of Beda Fomm El Agheila was in the hands of the Germans.

The Ospizio had been cordoned off and escaped any of the fighting. The German army now practised “Blitzkrieg” as a matter of course, even at a tactical level. If no resistance was offered and no weapons were present, any installation would simply be driven past, preferably at speed. Mariella and her ladies suffered nothing more than a layer of desert dust from the advancing German tanks.

Only later did the logistical support pass through, and then the Corps High Command and Hauptmann Helmut Eichendorff.

“I am sorry. I don’t speak German but if you do not speak Italian then I do speak English,” said Mariella.

“English will do,” said the officer. “Please explain what a lady such as yourself is doing in North Africa, with these other … ladies.” He looked at the women that were her charge and her support with a disdain that Mariella found offensive.

“I am told that you are attached to Command so I am sure that I do not need to explain to you that an army needs more than orders to keep going. I think that it was Napoleon who said that an army marches on its stomach, but I can assure you that other parts of the anatomy need similar attention.”

Hauptmann Eichendorff smiled. He prided himself on having a sense of humor, although whether he was right about that was questioned by him men. “I always admired Napoleon,” he said. “I also admire the armies of ancient Rome. We Germans admire organization. That is how we win.”

“I too try to be organized,” she said. I would appreciate fuel and some basic food provisions, if that would be possible.”

“We supply only troops or prisoners of war,” he said. “Which one are your?”

“We are Italian, Sir. Italy is an ally of Germany. Do you imprison your allies? We are not troops, but we could be troop support. We could offer light relief. Help to boost morale?”

“We have men who may benefit from your services. We call such facilities *Soldatenbordell*en. We give access tickets to soldiers deserving of such pleasures. I must have your assurance that no German soldier will enjoy your services without an approved ticket.”

“We can make any arrangement, but our price is our own. It is a personal matter between a woman and a man who seeks her favor, would you agree Captain?”

“I am less interested in your workers,” he said. “But I would be curiously to know your price. Perhaps fuel and food?”

“You insult me Sir!” Mariella stood up to her full impressive height. Her big brown eyes seemed ablaze, but also betrayed the first sign of tears that left the German disarmed. “I had thought you a gentleman, Sir! I can see that I was mistaken.”

In her rage she turned away, but he grabbed her by the arm. He had not intended to be rough, but she spun around and pushed his grip away in disgust.

Helmut Eichendorff prided himself on his Aryan coolness. He had a structured and methodical mind. He was not easily affected by emotions which should be regarded as irrational and demeaning. But there was fire in this women, and fire starts fire even in frosty tinder. He found his mouth around hers.

Mariella struggled for a moment. Perhaps she told herself that she should be disgusted, or just affronted. But the passion in this man was undeniable, and Mariella suddenly realized that the passion that now seemed so great a part of her character could not resist it being returned.

She just had to brush away his hand from her breast, which was after all, not a breast at all. It was just stuffing. Something better would need to be found if this was to become commonplace.

“I have a job to do and so do you Captain,” she said.

“You shall have your fuel and your food,” he said. “Just promise me that we can meet again. I don’t care when or where. After the war perhaps. Rome or Paris?”

“London, if you can get there,” she said. “On the first anniversary of the end of this war, however it ends, at the American bar of the Ritz Hotel, at cocktail hour.”

The Americans

Mariella had no idea if Captain Eichendorff was among the 275,000 men who surrendered with the fall of the Axis forces in Tunisia in May 1943. Perhaps he had left with other German forces before the pincers closed. But with the return an Italian force to hold the eastern edge to the South of Tunis, Il Ospizio di Amore was once more back in business on the side of Italy.

The British had taken El Agheila in February 1941 and the Germans had taken it back a year later. To Mariella front lines appeared to be very fragile. Mariella was concerned for her girls, who depended on her. The best location was well back, in Tunisia, with all of Libya to be crossed to get there.

But now the Americans were in Africa and marching with other Allied Forces from Morocco to Tunisia – coming from the other direction and at some pace. Even the American defeat and Kesserine Pass was not about to slow the advance.

But it had been over two years in the job and Mariella had learned a great deal.

Her hair was now all her own and was lush and shiny because of the proper attention that she lavished upon it. Beautiful hair is a woman’s pride and Mariella was now firmly a woman (for the time being) and too proper pride in her presentation. Her skin care regime was brutal but effective. Strictly no facial or body hair, constant balms and moisturizers, protection from the sun, color whare required only when required followed by deep cleansing.

Good food and corsetry had changed the shape of her body, and not in a bad way. Furthermore, tight concealment of the parts a lady should not have seemed to have rendered those parts almost useless for anything, and certainly impossible to retrieve should she be caught short. Sitting down to toilet was now obligatory.

She had also learned that the admiration of men can achieve a great deal, and small additional favors can achieve many times more than that.

“I am in charge, not charging customers,” she would say. “I am not a plaything for any man to enjoy, but if you want one, I can arrange it.”

But for a ridiculous sum she might reach into a man’s pants or even offer to kiss or lick his member. Surprisingly, there was no sense of disgust. It seemed nothing more than a woman such as herself might allow a particularly fervent admirer. And to be honest, if he reacted by making a mess of himself she would simply cast him a scolding look but privately squeal with joy. There is something about having that effect on a man that is quite thrilling.

She also learned other things, not because she needed to but because there are some things that a woman should know. Like how to sew and how to cook, and make pasta. In the past such things had been for servants or lesser types, but now she relished in the art of these things.

She remained of a slightly higher class that the girls who worked with her, but that rubbed off on them.

“That’s’ a price for a girl off the streets,” some of them would say. “We are not that. Signora Mariella runs a high-class establishment, with only high-class women.”

And then one day nobody came. It was that simple. The trap had closed and there was no way out. Field Marshall Giovanni Messe had surrendered and the Americans had arrived.

The first few GIs arrived at the camp of Il Ospizio di Amore only a few days after the surrender. With her knowledge of English Mariella was able to give them the necessary instructions.

“My ladies are happy to accept money for sexual favors, but only once I have met with an officer of sufficient seniority,” she explained. “The rules need to be set. We want your activities to be subject to military law. No violence, no cheating on payment, proper hygiene to be respected. Bring me at least a colonel to talk it over with.”

They were sufficiently motivated to at least find a major. As it turned out, Major Teddy Oldfield was the perfect man.

He jumped out of his jeep and immediately identified the woman in charge, took her hand and kissed it.

“Well now senorita,” he said. “I can see that you are a business person so I suggest that we get right down to business. My men have a demand, and your ladies have a supply. It is simple economics…”.

“These are your men?” she asked with disdain.

“Well, not exactly. These are fighting men. I am in logistics. What we do is keep everybody satisfied so they can do best what they do.”

“I am so pleased to hear that Major, because there are a few things that I would like.”

There was something about this woman that made Teddy realize that she might be special. He was not somebody who would ever resort to this kind of establishment,, but he found himself drawn to the tall and haughty Italian woman.

“I’d like to think that there is nothing that I could not arrange,” he said.

“We don’t belong in Africa,” she said. “We are civilians doing a civilian job, and yet we have been abandoned on a foreign continent.”

“That seems mighty callous,” said Teddy. “But the fact is that the people who should be taking you home are going back across the Atlantic to be interned. But you being civilians and all, you are not going with them, so maybe we can help. Italy huh? I think that we might be headed in that direction.”

They were indeed headed there, with the British forces reinforced with Canadian troops, but it would be almost 2 months before that happened, and another month after that before Il Ospizio di Armore could be put aboard a transport ship and moved across with the last of the equipment leaving Tunisia.

Those first two months gave Teddy and Mariella the opportunity to get to know one another a bit better. She decided to cook him a meal with the new skills that she had acquired and surprised even herself a little at just how good it was.

“There is a part of me that want’s nothing more than to live my life just like this,” said Teddy. “I work my day job and I come home, and I have a beautiful woman waiting for me with the perfect meal and a glass of wine.”

“America will win this war and every man will be entitled to the future they want, so why do you doubt you can have it?”

“I am not like other men, but you need not be concerned about that,” he said. “All I can say is that I know a beautiful woman when I see one, and great food when I taste it. So, what about you? Will you find a husband when all this is over?”

“Before all this started, I would have laughed to hear a question like that,” she said. “But now that same question makes me feel a little sad … even a little envious.”

“Italy will come back. With food like this you should rule the world. Why do you doubt your future?”

“I am not like other women,” she said.

They stared at one another. It was as if they knew that this exchange put them in exactly the same place, even if neither of them knew exactly what that place was.

“Would you allow me to kiss you?” asked Teddy.

Mariella had learned a little about pleasuring men. It was all about the cock. She should know better than anybody. A woman’s lips and tongue could make a cock buck and spurt, but lips on lips?

She stepped over and sat in his lap. It was barely voluntary. She was just responding. She placed her lips against his and they joined. They seemed to fuse together at the mouth – his hands were in her hair and hers in his. It was remarkable, and almost animal, but exciting.

It seemed that her own male anatomy, long abandoned and moribund, had decided to respond, to stand up and look around. She needed to wriggle for comfort and shift it – just slip a hand down and adjust it. But his hand was down there too.

She pulled her head back. She looked at his face in the flicking light of the camp lantern. She waited for the anger, and to be thrown to the ground

“It seems that I have found the perfect woman after all,” said Teddy.

Epilog

The war threw up its share of romances. Some were short, and the pregnancies from one night of passion with a total stranger were sometimes a consequence. Some were instances of true love that language or cultures or just distance, made it impossible to ever become anything more. But there were also marriages.

Mariella Strinati became a war bride. By sheer chance one of the other girls working in Il Ospizio di Amore also became a war bride, but doubtless the marriage of that employee and her GI would be a little more conventional.

Mariella took the time to ask two other past employees to keep the appointment at the Ritz on the anniversary of VE Day in 1945. She sent money for them to attend and nice dresses that were so hard to find in Europe at that time. She heard back that both Colonel Anthony Sturgess and Hauptmann Helmut Eichendorff did indeed turn up, and were talking together at the bar when the ladies arrived just before things came to blows.

They reported that both men were disappointed that Mariella was indisposed, and in America. But of course the ladies of Il Ospizio were well skilled in making men forget disappointment, and these ladies were happy to provide this last service for their mistress. But disappointment assuaged perhaps neither man could ever forget the patrician lady in charge of Il Ospizio di Amore.

As for the gentleman soldier named Federico, he never returned home to Italy and his family dedicated an empty grave to him, as for many others presumed lost. So many were killed and buried by hand or by wind and time in the sands of the Sahara. Like Federico many recorded the death on the date of the first battle of El Agheila.

Marella Oldfield did return to Italy, to visit that grave and the graves of her parents on one of her many trips to Europe with her wealthy and successful husband Teddy. They are in the hospitality business both of them, and very good at it.

Isn’t that what Ospizio means?

The End

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