

Diary of WWI veteran translated into book

The 65-year Chicago Heights resident never talked about his experiences, daughter says

BY DAVID SCHWAB
STAFF WRITER

Thirty years after his death, and almost a century after the war, the translation into English of the diary of a World War I Italian soldier has simultaneously fascinated and terrified his daughter.

"I never knew my father was a hero," said Lee Malizia, daughter of the late Settimo Damiani, who was raised in Chicago Heights, where her father resided for 65 years after the "Great War."

But, "it was hard to read," she said.

On Saturday, the Italian scholar Alessandro Gualtieri, who translated Damiani's war diary into English, was expected to visit a group of Damiani's family members and other invitees in Flossmoor to share the details of his newly published book.

The 90-page diary had been in Malizia's hands for years, she said, but she couldn't find anyone able to translate it until Gualtieri accepted the task and succeeded.

The diary tells the story of how Damiani fought on the Italian front lines against Austro-Hungarian and German forces in the infamous Battle of Caporetto, where more than 10,000 Italians lost their lives and hundreds of thousands were taken prisoner.

Damiani somehow survived the battle, but ended up a prisoner of the Germans and Austrians for more than a year. He wrote about all this, forming "a detailed and comprehensive history" of the build-up to the terrible battle, the battle itself, and some of his time spent as a prisoner of war, Gualtieri said.

"He was incredibly lucky (to have survived)," said Gualtieri, speaking from Italy just days before he was set to make his way for the first time for the presentation of the book.

Malizia said that by reading the diary for the first time just recently, she realized that her father went through great lengths to write and preserve it.

She said he wrote about trading crackers for a pen so he could



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keep writing, even though he was on starving rations.

"It was pretty awful," Malizia said of what she learned of her father's experiences.

At one point in his description, he noted keeping himself warm with only a piece of paper.

He also wrote about burying many of his fellow friends and soldiers.

Damiani died in 1979 in Chicago Heights when Malizia was in her 30s.

Malizia has lived there ever since.

She described her father as a quiet man, a bricklayer by trade, who never talked about his war experience.

Now, she's conflicted about the diary's public emergence, even though she admitted she tried for years to have it translated and interpreted.

"I often wonder what (my father) would think about all this," Malizia said.

She said her father, during his post-war life in the U.S., "wanted to forget his experience" in the War.

Gualtieri said translating and interpreting the diary was difficult because of the author's extensive use of Italian dialects and contextual omissions.

He said he spent months translating, interpreting, filling in details of the man's diary, and putting them into a legible format for publication.

The book's already been published in Italy, and Gualtieri hopes to publish it soon in the United States.

Malizia said family members from around the country were coming to hear Gualtieri this weekend.

If you want more information about the book, interested people may phone Malizia at (708) 754-2433.

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