

A Debt of Gratitude

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Between Viale Apua di Pietrasanta and Via Crocioletto, there is a small square surrounded by laurel shrubs, a statue of an American soldier recalls the sacrifice of those who fought in April 1944 in the Apuan mountains. They came from Hawaii and California; they were the soldiers of the 100th Btg. and the 442nd RCT, soldiers of Japanese origin who, contemptuous of danger and animated by the spirit of the Samurai, managed to eradicate the Germans from the trenches. Behind that pleasant place, conceived by a citizen originally from Strinato (Strettoia), hides: "a gesture of gratitude." It is a beautiful and moving story that in 1995 was also remembered in The Hawaii Herald, the Japanese American newspaper of the Hawaiian Islands. That citizen was the Commander Amèrico Bugliani!

Amèrico was originally from Strinato, a locality above Strettoia. His father left for the distant Americas in search of fortune in 1909. The family remained at the Strinato; his mother, a brother, three sisters and Amèrico. His father became an American citizen and enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War I. He often returned to Italy because the family had remained in Strettoia, however, the political conditions of the time did not allow him to work as he would have liked, so he returned to the United States. Amèrico was born in 1932 after his father in America had become an American citizen and also became an American citizen. His name was given to him because his mother (Baldi Leonetta) advised by a neighbor, since with her husband they had not decided the name of the child, gave him the name: "Amèrico," as America and not Amerigo ...When the front of the Gothic Line settled in Strettoia, Amèrico was 12 years old, for him as for many other boys and their families, a difficult moment began: they had to dislodge from Strettoia; the Germans did not want people in the zone of war operation. Amèrico, was the little man of the house, three sisters did not enjoy good health, his father, an American citizen, was far away, and his older brother captured and deported to Germany in internment camps. They left Strettoia with some luggage, little stuff and found a makeshift shelter in Valdicastello, in a wooden and sheet metal shack of the miners. Hunger gripped the stomach and to survive it took courage, a lot of grit and inventiveness. Amèrico recalls: "in the mountains there were chestnuts from the end of September until October-November and the owners of the chestnut groves, recognizing the gravity of their situation, allowed them to collect the chestnuts that could be roasted or boiled but the main value came from drying and then grinding and having the flour." With this precious flour, the boy and his mother walked from the mountain to the various villages of Pisa where they exchanged chestnut flour for corn flour. With a kilo of flour they had in return 12 hectograms of corn. But it wasn't enough! In spring they went to Vadicastello in the plains. The peasants allowed them to take what little the Germans left: vegetables and sometimes grain. To cook Amèrico and a friend of his went with a cart to the sea, to fill a demijohn of 50 liters with salt water. While one pulled and the other pushed, they struggled to cross the paths to return to Valdicastello. Putting the sea water in a pot they boiled it over a wooden fire until a little salt remained at the bottom. It was dark and bitter but it was the only salt they could have. The physique of these poor boys was affected but at the same time it was strengthened.

The summer of 1944 was a terrible summer because, in addition to providing for their livelihood with enormous difficulty, their efforts risked being thwarted by requisitions by German patrols. The situation precipitated with the arrival on the Arno front of the 16th SS Panzergrenadier Division of General Max Simon, who placed the operational command in Nozzano (Lucca). The Germans decided to make "scorched earth"; around the partisan formations, indiscriminately hitting the population to break any effective or possible support for the Resistance. A "strategy of terror"; was thus implemented with a series of terrible massacres of unarmed civilians, which in the provinces of Lucca and Apuania caused about 2000 victims. In September 1944 the allies arrived on the Arno and on September 19 in Pietrasanta, then the front stopped at the gates of Strettoia. The first Allies that Bugliani remembers meeting were the British who moved towards Capezzano Monte, then the African American soldiers of the 92nd Buffalo Division, a regiment of white Americans, the soldiers of Japanese origin, the Germans, and Italians themselves.

The Allies tried to break through the Gothic Line for five months and in April 1945 after the defeat of February, in which numerous black soldiers died, the Allies prepared the final assault on the Gothic Line. The American general Mark Clark, brought to Versilia small soldiers with "almond" eyes. Twenty years old or so, small in stature but a bundle of nerves, above all they embodied the spirit of the Samurai: "A Samurai must possess heroic courage, this is absolutely risky and dangerous, this means living in a complete, full, wonderful way. Heroic courage is not blind but intelligent and strong". People called them Filipinos, even Mongols, they were instead the Nisei, boys from the Hawaiian Islands and California and elsewhere in the United States second-generation children of Japanese immigrants. Their motto was "go for broke" or ...until the last breath... They were the most decorated soldiers in America. They had already fought in Italy at Anzio and in the Tuscan plains, they were the first to cross the Arno and to liberate Pisa with a patrol of 12 men.

In the late afternoon of April 3, 1945, these soldiers arrived in secret in Pietrasanta and deployed in the plain of Valdicastello in front of the Romanesque church of S. Giovanni and S. Felicita. The Pietrasantini boys mixed with these soldiers so Americo also approached a young Nisei soldier. The soldier immediately showed his friendliness and a sense of compassion for these poor and hungry boys and gave them something to eat. On the morning of April 4, as they prepared to leave to go and fight on the front of the Gothic Line, the same soldier gave Americo candy and a ration of combat food. Then he turned around and returned to his tent - in the story Bugliani speaks of it as if it had happened yesterday - Amèrico was about to leave when the soldier called him back and gave him a tube of Colgate toothpaste, a toothbrush, and his cap. That precious woolen cap bore the frieze of the A-class uniform with the insignia of the infantry: the two crossed rifles. For the boy, it was an immense joy: in a situation of extreme suffering a fantastic gift. Then the soldier gave Americo a small picture of him in a Jeep and said to him with a sympathetic smile: "My name is Paul Sakamoto." The generosity and kindness of that fleeting gesture had a tremendous impact on the life of the Italian boy and that encounter remained forever imprinted in the heart and spirit of Amèrico. Amèrico in the future will remember that gesture with a bit of nostalgia because being a

boy he could not fully understand and appreciate the gesture. Later he realized that the man gave him practically everything he owned.

On April 5, 1945, there was the attack, the Nisei opened a breach in the Gothic Line, conquered mountain after mountain, starting from Monte di Ripa and Folgorito, on April 25 they arrived in Aulla. Then to Piedmont finally after checking the prison camp of Coltano in Pisa they returned to America in July 1946 welcomed by President Truman.

After the war life resumes slowly but Strettoia is a minefield, over two years it took to make the territory minimally safe. In 1954 Americo Bugliani who was 21 years old and worked for the Santoli and Rovai company, decided to leave for America and went to Florence to the American Consulate to collect his American passport. Santoli and Rovai give him the money for the passage and he leaves for the USA. After a few months, he was drafted and taken to Fort Dix, NJ, to begin basic training in the United States Army. He is an interpreter with authorization for secret and confidential assignments and serves in Austria, Germany, and Italy during the Korean conflict. For two years he was in the army then found a job in New York in a factory, making hats for women after having accidentally heard Versilian talk on Fifth Street in New York. It was the Lanè who had a hat factory. They immediately hired him. But the work is seasonal and soon he is unemployed, he queues for the subsidy. He wanted a better life, he had gone to Amèrico for this and could not find himself in that situation. He throws away the paperwork runs to a newsstand and buys the New York Times looking for job ads. Travel was a good industry and a good opportunity, and he went to American Airlines to apply for a job. He had an interview with a woman named Ruth Davenport who told him she would like to hire him but only had a part-time job available for weekends. It was little for him. The woman is very kind and gives him good advice: he could have the benefits provided for veterans and she told him that he should go to college to complete his studies. Following Davenport's advice, he enrolled at the City College of New York for evening classes. Davenport even tried to find him a job on Wall Street. On Wall Street he went to American Express and applied for a job and was immediately hired as an international travel specialist. Amèrico is transferred to their office in Chicago. In Chicago he married and began a life of work and study, Bugliani left American Express for a more remunerative position in the travel industry and in fact became vice president of a company based in Switzerland.

Until that moment his life was not easy, he met the Germans who dislodged him from home, hunger, he met black Americans, the British, the Japanese Americans, then emigrated to the USA at just over twenty years old around the world as an interpreter, precarious work, all this formed him in character left him without prejudice towards others. Then he was advised by one of his professors to consider teaching. He decided to study at Northwestern University full-time for a year where he took his PhD to become a university professor. He taught at the University of Illinois until 1980 and did a lot for Italians in Chicago and America, Amèrico was heard, but that is another story to tell. Again he made the decision to change his life, to leave teaching to become an entrepreneur and start his own business in the wholesale jewelry sector. This is America.

In December 1991 the nation stopped to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Pearl Harbor, when the Japanese attacked the American naval fleet without a declaration of war by Japan. That evening on TV was interviewed a highly decorated soldier, a Nisei veteran named Sam Yoshinari. Americo is fascinated "this is one of the soldiers I met in Pietrasanta; At that juncture, even after 40 years, he is reminded of the scene of Valdicastello, in his wallet he still has the photo of Sakamoto. Sometime later, in Chicago, he accidentally came across a shop with a sign: "articles of war". He walks into this shop and asks if they have any publications about the 92nd Buffalo Division to which the Nisei were attached. The shopkeeper at the moment has no availability but he leaves the phone number and calls him back a few days later telling him that he has recovered something at the same time given his interest in the Nisei provides him with a phone number of a veteran of the area Mr. Ed Kelly.* Kelly was drafted with the 34th Red Bull Division in Italy to which the Nisei in particular the 100th Btg. Nisei joined. The two talk to each other and Kelly seeing Amèrico so interested in the history of the Nisei invites him to the Chicago Post. Amèrico is a bit embarrassed by the invitation to be part of the post, he is not Japanese, he is Italian. Kelly tells him it doesn't matter. He was Irish and was still part of the Chicago Nisei Post 1183. Amèrico is invited to join the Post. He makes friends with veterans, who welcome him with "open arms" demonstrating once again their kindness and goodness. He attended the post and was appointed Commander of the Chicago Nisei Post 1183 of the American Legion for Americo a great honor.

In the installation ceremony he thanks his liberators with emotion for having done so. Their Commander Americo still has in his pocket the photo of Sakamoto and begins to concretely ask himself questions: "what happened to him? Did he die that day in the Apuan mountains?" He feels a strong need to search for Sakamoto even if the fear is to learn of a tragic fate of that young man who was so kind. He starts asking and calling. He had read in a book a list of Nisei veterans named Sakamoto on the West Coast. He calls continuously, tells his story, everyone would like to be that Sakamoto but the searches are in vain. He knew that Sakamoto was of the 100th Btg. whose soldiers were originally from the Hawaiian Islands so he decided to direct the research there. He manages to have contact with the Club of their battalion, the 100th Btg in Honolulu. They tell him that a certain Paul Sakamoto was a veteran member of their club and lived on the so-called "Big Island".

Akiko Nosaka, a lady of extraordinary kindness, gives him the phone number of club President 100 in Hilo, on the Big Island, named Motoyoshi Tanaka. Americo talks to Tanaka! Amèricò confides his story to him. Tanaka listens carefully to his story then replies: I know Paul Sakamoto we are friends. Tanaka gives him the home address and phone number. With great emotion Americo dials that number, on the other side of the phone someone answers: I'm sorry but here there is no Sakamoto, Amèrico is discouraged, but does not give up, contacts the President of the club again who tells him: "maybe the number is wrong but I will go in person to contact him. He lives not far from my house". Americo looks forward to it. Tanaka had exchanged phone numbers and this time the number is the right one. At that point with great emotion, he dials that number and after 50 years he heard a voice that told him: "I am Paul Sakamoto and I fought in the mountains of the Gothic Line but I do not remember you."

Americo is very happy even if Paul does not remember, "it is understandable that he does not remember me he was surrounded by kids both in France and in Italy". They call each other and write to each other but for Amèrico that man is a real obsession, and he wants to meet him in person. In 1995 he decided to go with his wife Ann to Hawaii to see Paul Sakamoto on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of their meeting in the plains of Valdicastello. Amèrico would later write that that meeting was wonderful. It was a great emotion also to show him that photo that he kept for 50 years in his wallet: "it was wonderful to meet also his lovely wife Jane". Again, Paul's generosity was moving: "He gave us many things, all kinds of Hawaiian delicacies and many fruits from his garden. Jane gave my wife two beautiful necklaces from the island." The obsession had its happy conclusion, however in a confidential moment Americo asked Sakamoto why he gave him his hat that day. Paul's response was that of a real samurai: "I felt I didn't need anything anymore, I thought I would be killed that day." He also confided to him another truth: "I had great compassion for the children, they were in a terrible state." That day, the Nisei broke through the Gothic Line and he, in the ranks of 100 Btg., trampling on those mountains of Cerreta St. Nicholas and Thunderbolt did his duty as a soldier to the end and fortunately returned to his Hawaiian island. He was a soldier enlisted in the Army before the attack on Pearl Harbor, where he served with the Hawaii Territorial Guard and later with the 100th Infantry Battalion, which trained at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. He survived battle campaigns in Italy and France. After the war, he became a nurseryman at the Foster Gardens in Honolulu and after his retirement settled in his native, Hilo.

Amèrico has always had in his heart the thought of owing something to those soldiers from the Hawaiian Islands, California, and other American states. He wanted to leave a sign of gratitude. This feeling of gratitude took concrete form when going to the Hawaiian Islands to meet Sakamoto, the veterans, listening to his story, gave him the jacket of a Nisei soldier worn during the breakthrough of the Gothic Line. A precious gift that inspired the idea of proposing to the versilian mayors the creation of a monument to honor those, as Americo writes: "who gave their lives for the liberation of the Italian people". Amèrico often returned to Italy for holidays and in Pietrasanta and Strettoia he had friends, acquaintances and relatives.

The idea materialized in 1996 when together with his long-time friend attorney Paolo Tommasi, former President of the BCC, were present at the visit to Italy and Montignoso of the African-American hero, Second Lieutenant Vernon Beker, who earned a Medal of Honor, conquering the Aghinolfi castle starting from the plain of the Proniccia area and crossing palatine olive groves. On the occasion of the visit, Americo proposed to Paolo to do something in memory of the Nisei in Pietrasanta. The idea was immediately liked and Marcello Tommasi, an established painter and sculptor, was immediately given the task of making a sketch, however, it was necessary to identify a hero who could represent the sacrifice of these soldiers. Overseas a name was made: Sadao S. Munemori, Medal of Honor for action on Mount Ripa, then right on the mountains of Strettoia. That soldier died on April 5, 1945 on Mount Canala and for this gesture he was awarded on March 7, 1946, the highest honor of the United States. Sadao S. Munemori was born in California on August 17, 1922, the family was incarcerated in Manzanar. During the assault action on Mount Canala, he took command of an assault

team, because the commander was wounded. Munemori led frontal attacks on the enemy and managed by crawling belly to the ground to eliminate with hand grenades two centers of fire with German machine guns. At the time of the hard and chaotic battle, the Germans continued to shoot and throw grenades from the ridge towards the steep slopes of Monte di Ripa and Munemori, returning to the hole by his comrades to find temporary shelter, was hit by a grenade on the helmet. The grenade bounced and rolled into the hole. Munemori threw himself on the bomb shielding it with his body, he was torn apart by the explosion but saved the lives of the two companions.

From the story Marcello Tommasi drew an idea to prepare the sketch, everyone offered to work for free including the Del Chiaro foundry which took on the burden of making the bronze. For the likeness Maestro Tommasi used a photo of Sadao Munemori provided by his sister, Mrs. Yaeko Yokoyama and for the uniform he used a field jacket given by Martin Tohara, it was the jacket they gave to Amèrico during the trip to Hawaii in 1995. Americo presented to the Post the first sketch of the soldier, however the memory of that curious scene remained imprinted: "I showed the sketch to the veterans but everyone remained silent for a long time, the faces were stunned, gloomy, I felt something was wrong". The idea was beyond their expectations outside of an oriental culture: "the nisei soldier was completely naked"! For them it was inconceivable to accept a naked fighting soldier, perhaps more typical of Italian Renaissance culture, and even if, the somatic traits and physiognomy were typical of that people, the concept did not represent them in the slightest and for them it was not acceptable. The sketch was modified, in a nutshell he was fully dressed in the military uniform and the rifle was added. The work was carried out and was inaugurated in the presence of many authorities including a delegation of the Nisei and their families who came from Hawaii and other parts of the United States in the year 2000.

The small monument is still today a destination for U.S. delegations relatives and family members of the Nisei and intends to pay tribute to all the Allied soldiers who fought for liberation. This is one of the many stories that can hide behind a simple bronze statue but for Americo, who died in 2019, it was a great satisfaction to have crowned a dream, with the realization of the square between Viale Apua and Via Crocioletto a 'debt of gratitude' they wrote in Hawaii of which we are all proud. I would also add that we from Strettoia and Pietrasanta can only be honored by the commitment and values of brotherhood that this illustrious stranger who deserved to be remembered taught us. We would like to thank Ms. Ann Bugliani for her valuable information.