

# "Il Segreto" - The Secret

Susan Cipriani

**Commended, Fiction: 2024 Marysville BookNest writing competition**

In a sobering silence we negotiated the steep track which led from Zia Francesca's house just outside Poppi. It was late afternoon, and the dense, lifeless fog was closing in around us, blotting out the last rays of sun and amplifying the sounds of our boots as we trudged our way through ice and snow. In front of the castle walls, the outline of tall, narrow cypress trees gave the eerie appearance of soldiers frozen in time, especially on this bleak afternoon of fog and war.

It was the eve of the Befana, the fifth day of January 1943. Our village of Poppi, small and medieval, best known for having one of the oldest castles in Italy (il Castello dei Conti Guidi), is situated in the Casentino Valley of Tuscany. Like countless other towns throughout Italy, Mussolini's Fascist regime had stamped its chilling imprimatur over the people of Poppi. Befana had once been a happy celebration, particularly for Italian children. The Befana was to Italy what Santa Claus was to Europe, only we celebrated it after the Italian Christmas and New Year. She was a wise old witch, flitting about at midnight on her magical broomstick, leaving presents for good, sleeping children. But should you try to look for her and see her, you might well collect a thwack from her broomstick!

From the outset of his dictatorship, Mussolini's intent was for the Fascists to assert their own take and control on personal behaviours. Befana was one of the first instances of this. He dictated that the Befana must distribute "specific" gifts to the children based on gender. Now in 1943 with the Nazi invasion of Italy, what little there was left to hold sacred during the years of Fascism in Italy, like Befana, had overnight dissolved into nothingness. The tyranny of Hitler's Nazism had, in such a short time, etched itself upon Italians, such that there was now a constantly palpable undercurrent of fear. Nevertheless, in 1943 amongst loyal Italian patriots, there remained a flicker of hope that "Il Duce" would be overthrown in the coming months and the Allies would ultimately be victorious against the Germans. But for now, the life of most Italians was iniquitous.

Once we arrived just inside the castle walls, the long, steep hike up to the Piazza of Poppi was both challenging and strenuous. We slipped and slid continuously on the icy bluestones, relying heavily on our crude sticks which at least prevented us from falling on the hard, freezing ground. When we reached the Piazza darkness had already set in, so the welcoming glow of the large bonfire, indicative of Befana, bolstered our spirits. We huddled together with the rest of the town folk as close to the fire as we dared, our faces flushed as we watched the flames licking skywards, with sparks disappearing somewhere beyond the freezing atmosphere. Behind us, the bonfire cast mysterious shadows, while to the side of us it turned the patina of the ancient walls to soft hues of reds, oranges and golds.

Later, even the loud crackling and spitting of the bonfire couldn't mask the intimidating footfalls of the German soldiers as they marched to each point of the four entries to the Piazza. This was the sign that curfew had begun. Once they had blocked those exits, no one could get in or out of Poppi during curfew hours.

Reluctantly, my Mamma and Babbo, my sister Cinzia, Zia Francesca and Zio Carlo, and of course myself, Isabella, made our way to our house which wasn't far from the Piazza, nestled as it was almost inside the thick castle walls themselves. We had stayed at Zia's house the night before to celebrate her birthday. Tonight, they would spend the evening with us.

The following morning the sun prevailed, burning the fog away to reveal a clear blue sky. Babbo was huddled by the fire deep in whispered conversation with Zio Carlo, while Mamma and Zia prepared what little they had for a meagre breakfast. After breakfast Carlo stood up and looking very seriously at Cinzia, who was only 14, asked her if the Befana had called last night? It seemed she had. Cinzia had received a pretty woollen scarf and took delight in parading it around the room. I wondered how the Befana had managed such a pretty scarf for my sister at this time of such scarcity. Then I spied the look on Zia Francesca's face and I knew the answer.

A few weeks passed and the snow started to thaw. At last spring was in the air! We noticed Signora Barro's flower box suddenly popping with little spring blooms. It was still chilly as Cinzia and I grabbed our worn old coats and set out on one of our foraging expeditions. The hunt for mushrooms, forest berries, nuts and edible greens had become quite an obsession over the war years, so desperate were we to please our Mamma and help her to spice up her cooking.

Babbo warned us continually about the German patrols, so for the most part, we did try to take care not to attract undue attention and be as inconspicuous as possible. However, we were young and despite this horrible war we always welcomed that sense of freedom and fun.

That afternoon we were scrambling up a steep hill when we came across a baby goat whose foot was caught in a snare. He was very distressed and despite our best efforts we could not free him. We were on the verge of giving up when a curious old man materialized from nowhere. He had deep lines across his weather-beaten face, but his vivid blue eyes danced and smiled so kindly as he greeted us. He bent over the little goat and gently stroked its head. Then he reached into his tired old jacket and took out some type of metal tool. A couple of minutes later the baby goat was free and skipped away! The three of us sat back in the damp grass together and just talked and talked. The old man's name was Luigi, but he said everyone called him Gigi. We told him our names and that we were sisters.

When thinking back to that first, gentle encounter with Gigi we could never have imagined that day what a profound impact he would have on our young lives.

A few weeks later, Cinzia and I were walking along the side of the road away from Poppi to visit Zia Francesca. We heard the motor bikes approaching but we tried to stay calm. Two Nazi soldiers pulled up next to us and demanded to see our papers. One of them in particular, was clearly taken by Cinzia who, though only 14 and two years younger than me, was very beautiful. We looked similar, tall and slender with olive skin, long dark hair and large brown eyes. But Cinzia captivated everyone she came into contact with; these two soldiers were no exception.

They had started to become provocative and intimidating, so we were very frightened, particularly as the road was deserted. An old man approached at a slow run, waving his hands, yelling out in anger towards us, startling even the two soldiers. Somehow during this charade, the old man managed to convince them he was our grandfather and was furious because he had forbidden us to

go out alone. It seemed the outburst proved too much for the soldiers who hopped back on their bikes and skidded their way up the road towards Poppi. The old man was Gigi. With his blue eyes and ferocious courage, he had risked his own safety to help us.

Following that terrifying confrontation, we were reluctant to risk going too far from home. When we did finally venture out, it was with much trepidation and a great deal of caution. We knew that next time we may not be so lucky.

Summer arrived and once again the magnificent hills and valleys of the Casentino were beckoning to us. Early one morning feeling brave again, we decided to take a different route out of the town. It was a path which led from the other side of Poppi down a very steep and rocky track to reach the bottom of the huge castle wall. It certainly wasn't the easiest of climbs down to the road, but it was well camouflaged. Once we reached the open road we ran like two scared rabbits across to a hill on the other side where, a few hundred metres upward, we could visualize the tree line. We crouched low within the long, lush grass as we pushed upwards towards the trees, not game to stop for a breath. We knew that once we reached the cover of the forest, we would be relatively safe and could forage to our hearts' content.

We had such a great day. Once again, we felt happy and carefree, doing what we loved the most. Mamma would be overjoyed with the various goodies we had collected in our sacks. By late afternoon the weather had started to turn and a summer storm was brewing so we decided to head for home. Feeling joyous, Cinzia and I sang as we headed down the hill again. We were well clear of the tree line, a couple of hundred metres down, when we heard what sounded like thunder—or was it the sound of motorbikes? We froze as we saw them. Four German soldiers on motorbikes, obviously out on patrol. There was nowhere for us to go but up because they were directly below us.

We were almost paralysed with fear. Had the soldiers seen us? I dared to glance back down the hill only to see the soldiers were now on foot and spreading out across the hill in hot pursuit. I screamed out to Cinzia to stand up and run towards the trees. By now we were frantic and our fear exacerbated our breathlessness as we bolted up the steep hill. We had probably run 100 metres when we heard a familiar whistle above us. It was Gigi beckoning to us to follow him.

As old as Gigi was, we were no match for his fitness and agility, but the realisation of the Nazi soldiers catching up to us spurred us on. Somehow, we managed to reach the beech forest, and Gigi. The canopy of the trees was huge, and the storm clouds had darkened the sky. In the shadowy light we stumbled and tripped our way over fallen branches as we desperately tried to keep Gigi in our sight. We had been running through the forest for at least ten minutes, our anxiety now slowing us down. But we knew we couldn't stop with the soldiers hot on our heels.

We caught up with Gigi who seemed to be waiting for us by a tree and even in the dim light, the width of its trunk looked enormous. Without a word, Gigi pointed to the ground, bent down and pulled up what looked to be a trapdoor. There appeared to be some kind of ladder, but Gigi allowed us no time for contemplation as he unceremoniously pushed each of us in turn down the ladder. All we could do was hang onto whatever we could for dear life as we scrambled down until we hit terra firma. Behind us Gigi stopped on the ladder, reached up and pulled the trapdoor closed. We found ourselves in a crude, dimly lit room, roughly reinforced by bits of timber and stone. There were two old chairs and two wooden stools placed around an old wood stove which wasn't lit. On the far side of the room there was a crude door which was closed.

Cinzia and I were still trying to catch our breath when Gigi ushered us into the chairs, pulling one of the stools in closer to us. His brow was deeply furrowed, his blue eyes intense. Then his persona seemed to relax a little as he began to speak to us in a very hushed voice. He grinned when he exclaimed that we had almost used up our nine lives today! Then he became serious again as he told us we'd had a very close call, indeed; the Germans were stepping up their patrols throughout the Casentino Valley. We listened intently as he informed us the Nazis were looking for Jews, as well as for the Italian partisans helping them escape. Jews had been moved from Rome, village by village, through central and northern Italy for a number of years, as the partisans attempted to smuggle them across the Italian alps into Switzerland and freedom. It was a desperate journey and many Jews did not survive. He described to us how so many thousands of Italians assisted the partisans in hiding the Jews in their villages, often in their homes. The Germans ransacked the villages and homes of so many ordinary, brave Italians who, if thought collaborating with the Resistance, were shot, most times in front of their family and friends.

By now we were both trembling with exhaustion and overwhelming emotion upon hearing these stories. Gigi wrapped some sort of blanket around us and resumed his dialogue. He informed us he was with the Resistance operating in our area and he himself was a proud partisan. Where we now sat, was an extremely important "safe house" and had been ever since 1938 when Mussolini, following the wishes of Hitler, began to legislate and enforce antisemitic regulations. From that time on, everything went from bad to worse, particularly for Italian Jews. With his hand over his heart, Gigi pleaded that we must not talk to a living soul about the safe house. To do so would put thousands of lives at peril. As he looked into our eyes, Gigi said he couldn't overstate enough how important it was for us to honour "il segreto".

A few hours passed until, under cover of nightfall, Gigi gave us a nod then led the way up the ladder and out of the safe house. The silence of the forest closed in on us, enfolding and shielding us as we were slowly and carefully led to a place near its edge. Gigi spoke very softly as he explained that one of the partisans would meet us here and guide Cinzia and I safely home. We had no idea what time it was but the storm at least, seemed to have passed, and, with its limited luminescence, a silver sliver of a sickle moon managed to cast vague shadows around the hills, suspended as it was in an almost black starry sky.

The dread of the Nazi soldiers made me even more anxious as we kept a vigil for the partisan who was to make contact. Suddenly we were aware of a slight movement and spontaneously heard a voice whisper an instruction to us. We must keep low and try our best to stick to him like glue. It was the wonderfully familiar voice of Zio Carlo.

Cinzia and I held hands tightly in silence, concentrating on the crucial task of not losing sight of Zio. I steadfastly prayed that there was something other than the sickle moon up there looking after us that night. At one point about halfway into our difficult trek, Zio stopped dead. He signalled for us to drop to the ground. Zio's sharp senses had been alerted by sounds of several soldiers talking and laughing as they strolled down the road towards Poppi. We stayed perfectly still for probably 15 minutes until Zio turned and hauled us both up, with one finger up to his mouth for silence. We started down the hill again. When finally we reached the road, on Zio's command, the three of us ran like the wind across to the other side and up into the safety of some bushes. We were right on the edge of the town now.

We froze at a slight movement in bushes above us. The form of another man appeared in the blackness, sliding down a very steep piece of track to reach us.

Zio didn't say goodbye, he merely slipped away into the night. The other man said nothing but perceiving this was the most precarious part of our journey, we vigilantly kept the silence. We were being led up yet another vertical track and it was hard to keep a solid footing. Then all at once we recognised the murky outline of the castle high above us. I felt at that moment my fear surely must have been palpable.

The man remained silent as we climbed ever upwards. After what seemed like an eternity, we reached the bottom of the castle wall. I noticed poor Cinzia was shaking. It wasn't a cold night so it could only have been from fear. The next thing I knew the man grabbed my arm, then Cinzia's, shoving us through an obscure opening in the castle wall as he followed close behind us. Once inside, he closed the concealed door behind him, switching on a torch to reveal a winding stone stairway. Still without speaking, he urged us forward, staying behind us but pointing the torch light ahead to help us negotiate the uneven stone steps. It seemed an age until at last we came upon an antiquated door. Squeezing past us on the stair, with one huge shove he pushed the door open.

To our utter disbelief, we found ourselves standing next to the fireplace in our own living room! Were we dreaming?

The man finally turned to face us, smiled his beautiful, iconic smile then in no uncertain terms, ordered us straight to bed. Cinzia and I hugged each other in incredulous relief.

The mysterious partisan was none other than our beloved Babbo.

