



## THE HISTORY OF THE BUNKER

by Mr. Adelchi Tirel

The life and history of the little village of Capriva have always been bound to the ones of the Castle of Spessa, the everlasting dwelling of "the masters".

The Castle of Spessa is that beautiful red-brick building with a square tower amidst trees, the eye may catch sight of from the bridge on the Versa river, on the left side of the main road 56 driving from Cormòns to Capriva, or even better from the train, as quoted by Mrs. Maria Gioitti del Monaco in her short story "Cormòns con la mude di viarte": *"we pass by the castles of Russiz and Spessa, buried in the glade of evergreen trees..."*

The **Castle**, built little by little through centuries on a site where a watch tower was erected in the Roman era, **has changed its design many and many times**. From the top of the hills, the ancients could lurk to defend the passage of Preval's plain from the barbarians, who were reaching this area to look for bread and sun.

As proof of the Roman origins of the manor, it is worthwhile narrating that for many years archaeologists had been digging at the foot of the hill to bring to surface a furnace that may be dated two thousand years ago. The existence of this furnace has always been known to the locals, as the name of the area is indeed *La Fornasate*. As young students seventy years ago, we used to go there with our teacher Mr. Geàt, to look for little pieces of red brick: nowadays I'm still preserving a piece of brick with the print of a dog that was indeed wandering freely on the fresh clay moulds of the bricks.

Around the year 1000 A.D already, Otto III, Emperor of Saxony, entrusted the Patriarch of Aquileia with these lands. After the eighteenth century, following to the various battles between Venice and Austria, Spessa ended up being governed by the Counts of Gorizia.

**Poets and generals, counts and barons, bishops and politicians** lived in the Castle of Spessa. It hosted people such as **Giacomo Casanova, Marshall Cadorna, Marshall Diaz and King Vittorio Emanuele** during the First World War, his son **Umberto** during the Second and then the **dukes Aimone and Amedeo d'Aosta, Mussolini, Italian and german generals, Serbian, English, Indian and American commanders**.

All this news may be found in several history books, while the information I am searching is not indeed reported in any book in writing: I go and look for any little story that hasn't been written yet, the ones talking about the peoples of our Friulian lands. Just like the story of **the bunker under the Castle of Spessa**.

The Castle is located amidst hills, on a promontory stretching up to the village of Capriva. It represents the headquarters of a modern farmhouse producing wine, much wine, expensive one. And obviously the Castle has always had its cellars. The current owners, while carrying out works to enlarge and implement the systems, found out that underneath the Castle there was another abandoned cellar, which was likely unknown, when they had bought the Castle and the surrounding land.

In order to meet modern requirements of ageing the wine in wooden barrels containing 200 litres, (whose wood is absolutely unknown to me), so that the wine itself may get a beautiful flavour, the current owners carried out great works to connect, by means of a tunnel, the old cellar on the courtyard level with the Second World War bunker that was there, forgotten, 18

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meters underground, dug in the gray "ponca" (typical local terrain), that is said to be the best soil ever to cultivate vine-grapes.

Well. Let's go back in time and focus on the year **1939**. Italy was getting ready to conquer the world and, on the Balkan side, far away from any borderline with Yugoslavia (passing along Postumia at the time) the right place for **North-East General Headquarters** was the Castle of Spessa, in Capriva. Anticipating recurrent battles and bombardments, the generals were in need of a secure anti-raid shelter and therefore they came up with the idea of digging an underground refuge in the Castle's courtyard.

The Engineers Corps let out the works to a firm in Udine. Military Direction Board, civil engineers and construction surveyors, workers from the surrounding areas of Udine, Slovenian miners from Plave and Canale (as well as others areas, where the company used to build other war forts) as well as hod men from Capriva and nearby villages worked here round the clock in three shifts of eight hours each; salary was 2 liras and 30 cents an hour. The foreign workers would sleep at Giuliano's Mill in the main square and they would dine in the "Osteria da Natalina". Working with pick and shovel, as well as mine explosions, removing the terrain with wheel barrels, by pulling it up by means of a winch and downloading it into a Decauville cart through a pit about twelve meters deep, dug in the middle of the courtyard. This pit once sloughed filling half of the tunnel, however without injuring anybody.

Thus, they dug **La galleria**, as they used to call it at that time, later referred to as **Il rifugio** and as **Il bunker** by the Germans. **7 meters wide by 5 meters high and more than 60 meters long**; it was all a casting of iron and concrete brought from the military depot in Aidussina. The pit located in the courtyard was closed from above and at the bottom – thanks to a motor pump – it served for drinkable water and for the toilets.

Two entries, of about eighty steps each, were located on both sides. Obviously, there were guards watching the whole operations (Carabinieri) from 1939 to the end of the works in spring 1941. The people who worked there narrate that the Carabinieri monitored and guarded, more than the works in the tunnel, the paintings, the carpets and the arts furniture that had been brought to Spessa, with the intent of being preserved from bombardments, from the Castle of Duino, which was too exposed and dangerously positioned on a sea cape. They recount that the Castle's dance hall was crammed with such valuable items. However, maybe all these works were done for nothing.

In April 1941, just after having completed the electric system, mounted the engines to the pumps, painted everywhere with lime, in a week the Italian troops occupied Yugoslavia together with the German ones, who had descended to Kranjska Gora along the old road from Vienna to Ljubljana and Trieste, the same road of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, which is still nowadays called Trieste Strasse, as per the writing you may see on the road signs located on the last houses of the Austrian capital.

**After the 8th September 1943 's Armistice the Germans**, who had reached Friuli Venezia Giulia, found the Castle of Spessa and its bunker as the ideal location for the **Adriatic Coastline Military Headquarters**, owing to the project they had in mind of creating a "Corridor" guaranteeing access to the sea to the Third Reich, crossing the Austrian territories. In the twinkling of an eye the Germans restored and made the Castle functional: coating with hole-bricks and panelling with wooden boards on the walls, wood-burning stoves everywhere, floors covered with the Castle's carpets, tables and chairs God knows where they came from. Offices provided with telephone lines that could reach every place on earth. A watching post on the tower, which was 22 meters tall, full of radio aeriels and men with binoculars who patrolled the surrounding mountains and the flat land down to the sea.



All around it was a tangle of landmines and sentries who did not feel like joking, so that civilians themselves would not even go close to pry.

Only we young boys, who had learnt something during war time, notwithstanding our defeat in it, by cycling along the road under the Castle on the winter weekends, would notice the tip of some mines piercing through withered grass and a spray of snow in the ground: but we would pretend we had seen nothing, striking an attentive pose of being watching the crows flying among the pine trees. In spring 1945 the allied airplanes, being the battle front already beyond the Gothic Line, machine-gunned the surroundings of the Castle more than once, but without damaging anything seriously. Once a bomber returning from Germany alone dropped a couple of bombs in the near areas, but it was never known whether the railway, which was not far away, or the Castle, was its original target.

Luigi Michelausig, the Castle's cellar man, for many years kept as a souvenir, on the chest of drawers of his bedroom, two 20-millimetre machinegun bullets that were extracted from the ground in the little road leading to the manor. One day we also saw a German pilot of a fighter that had been pulled down reach the Castle in an amphibious vehicle with rear propeller for water transportation. The story was this: it was January 2nd 1945, the sky was crystal clear. During the morning 700 four-engine aircraft "Liberator", it is said 700 counted ones, flew over the local skies, heading to Germany to bombard it. They flew high, in flocks of hundreds of airplanes, in flight formations on 3 or 4 levels, one group 10 kilometres far away from the other. It was impressing to see what a powerful air force the Allies had at their disposal! We could not believe in our eyes. We had the chance to only read our newspapers that talked about the enormous German power, but we also listened to "Radio Londra" on the sly. However, we could have never assumed the allies were so strong, even if the Americans were in between.

"Rooon....rooon...rooon" they roared flying in the North direction and leaving millions of air paper stripes behind to puzzle the German radars. That day a 2-kilo package of such paper stripes fell on the house of the tailor Nani, and, once the local Carabinieri's police station was alerted, it pierced the roof. After four hours they came back and I, together with my friend Carletto, watched them using a spyglass that we had retrieved from a signalling device once left on the village tower by the Italians.

They came back following different routes, trying to maintain compact groups, so that defence might result easier, in groups of 20 or 30 airplanes, dispersed by the German anti-aircraft artillery they had met. And some of them were in dire straits: alone, left behind, with a smoke stripe coming from the engines, while the German fighters were chasing them from above, in order to machinegun them.

We saw seven or eight aviators jump off one of those four-engine aircraft with their parachute and the airplane itself – we came to know it later – ended up falling near Romans d'Isonzo. However, also a German fighter had been hit and by following it with our spyglass, we saw it precipitate spinning around itself, until it fell down in Boatina, without catching fire.

There were very **many airplanes fighting one other** at about 4000 metres from the ground, and so a bit later we caught sight of the pilot, who had succeeded in jumping off the plane and was indeed floating and twisting in the air with his white parachute. The Bora wind drifted him away to Mossa, 3 kilometres far from his airplane, and there he touched ground in a lawn amongst the trees, almost in the hands of his German mates from the Castle of Spessa, who were waiting for him on the ground to protect him from the partisans, who were not far off. We saw him reach the Castle, as we were cycling to go and watch the airplane that had precipitated behind the furnace of Cormons. He was young, blond and as white in the face as the canvas of his parachute, which he had pulled together behind himself.



In the last days of the month of **April '45 the Germans were right at the end, but, still well organized, they took their way home.** Once the Germans had left, after a couple of days Capriva was reached by the **Chetniks**, those of King Peter of Yugoslavia, and they obviously found their way to settle in the Castle in their turn too. That day about 10,000 of such soldiers – if they may be called so– marched through Capriva. They were very shabby: long hair down to the back because, as they stated, they had sworn the oath of not having it cut until the day King Peter hadn't come back to the throne. The commander of such irregular troops had suggested to our local Mino Badin, who knew some Serbian language as he had been there as a child, while his father was working in the railways system at the time of the Austrian domination, that all young girls from Capriva should be sent to the refuge of the Castle because his soldiers were very dangerous and they were looking for women. So the refuge became the dwelling of a consistent group of young girls, who remained in it without ever getting out for two full days.

After two days also the Chetniks left Capriva and the Castle. On their way out they met the **Americans**, directed this way with their full power from the main road from Udine. As soon as the Chetniks, whose smell hovered about everywhere, departed, all of a sudden one afternoon the **allied troops** showed up: first the English, then the New Zealanders and finally the Americans. Of course, they headed straight to the Castle, without asking for the way to anybody. They instantly realized that the park was full of mines: before and after the main gate, among the trees, along the horse chestnut drive. They encircled all mined zones with a white canvass tape and they started celebrating the end of the war, which had been declared over that very same day.

**Night and day celebrations**, both in the Castle and in the village, with all the people crazy for joy after four years of curfew, bombardments, death toll and terror. Party days: every night the main hall of the Castle hosted dances and parties with the "ladies" until dawn. Order to clear the mined area was given to a Marshall and his team of specialists from the Italian army, which was getting more and more organized. At that time, one could freely visit the Castle, while such experience was definitely prohibited when the Germans were there.

The soldiers in charge of the mine clearance excavated a trench that was about twenty meters away from the barbed-wire fence: they would throw inside a long rope ending with a hook you normally used to pull up the melting pot that had fallen at the bottom of the well. They would throw the hook in and tear out the barbed-wires, iron poles, wooden boards, telephone cables, everything reachable. Once the barbed-wire fences had been cleared, they would mow the high May grass, little by little being careful not to move the green-colour mine strings reaching the height of an instep. The mines, which were positioned at the surface level of the ground, were easily distinguishable – so it was said – because they knew them so well. Everything went all right.

**Count Segrè and Countess Sartorio** had gone back to their dwelling, the noble floor of the Castle, after getting over the squall of the war at friends' in Medea.

The only possession left to the Count was a car whose engine had been turned into a diesel one. The chauffer from Trieste used to call it La carbonera, but it was not working properly and so the Americans would drive him around on business in their jeep, any time he needed so.

That aristocrat, already pretty old, would have so much fun on that crock jerking and jumping like a deer along the uneven road surface. In the meanwhile the undersigned found an occupation in the Castle during the summer of 1945: I used to read the newspapers to the count, who had slight sight problems and I would accompany him to the surrounding Friulian villages and towns to pay a visit to some of his noble friends and to give advice about the management of business or politics. He had been senator of the Reign and he knew everything. Sometimes I would take off my velvet uniform jacket and the white gloves I used to wear while serving meals and I would sweep off all the dirt left behind by Germans, Indians, Serbians and Americans.



In the enormous **Castle's attic**, under the tower's observation post, the Germans had built a strategic commanding post. They had made a plastic model reproducing the whole surrounding borderlines, from Tarvisio down to Pola, in Istria. It was a relief topographic map, drawn to a scale of one to 50-thousand, lain on an inclined plain of 12 meters by 4 and aimed at having the general picture of the whole frontier line, almost like the ones we see in the American war movies. Nearby on the desks there were full packages of topographic map complete series. All these papers were eventually abandoned, except from the radios and important documents. They represented a marvellous collection of documents for people like me, who had lived throughout the whole world war with their book of geography in their backpack.

When the Americans arrived, they took photographs of everything and allowed the soldiers to bring back home to America a **plastic model** each, as a souvenir. I am still in possession of some of these topographic maps. They are still in perfect conditions and when I used to ride around on my "Lambretta", I made good use of them, as they indicated all paths and tracks among forests and mountains. A couple of years ago I was told that the owner of a farmhouse in California had hung a piece of that relief plastic model with the mountains of Friuli on the wall of his big hall, at the place of honour. It had been brought as dowry by his wife, a girl of that time, a "war bride".

**There is one more story that deserves to be told.** It is one of those **mystery tales** I used to hear in times of war, those few times I was allowed to come back home from the foreign land where I was "camping at the expenses of the government". This story is still told, after 50 years, by the locals from Capriva who had worked in the excavation of the tunnel under the Castle of Spessa and by those who heard it in their turn. Everyone added a personal bit to the story so that it may impress the listener even further, but one thing is for sure: the story is true!

Many young boys worked there, anyone who was underage for the war, and they obviously spoke about that work in progress, both at home and out of it. The war had not even started, but everyone was making conjectures about the purposes of such a great work. The news even crossed the borderline: it is well known that each government has always spied any other.

Well: the main square of Capriva had been besieged by the **circus**, which indeed was more of a acrobat family than a real circus, visiting village by village to make their shows, as it was popular to do in those years. They had pitched their white tent under the mills' walls, where the new Town Hall is located now.

The spectators used to sit on wooden benches and a young girl dressed in ballet costumes, not like the ones of these days, who are dressed in nothing, would go round with her plate two or three times to collect a couple of pennies, and sometimes she would go back to the changing room also with three eggs or two sausages received on the sly.

They had a **dancing bear** as their main show. A trained bear would climb up a ladder on one side and get down the other side and it would stand in full height on a large board set on two trestles, while the master was dancing a waltz and the clown was playing the trumpet.

And like any prestigious circus, every afternoon the whole company, followed by all local children, used to **go around the villages to gather people**, with the bear hitting some lids, while the master was keeping it on the chain. They would also go to Spessa and in the surrounding hamlets, inhabited by 200 souls only. They would also go around the neighbourhoods of the Castle freely to make the afternoon shift workers laugh.



The Carabinieri were also there, as well as a technician from the company, who was told to be the construction surveyor and once in a while he would come to survey the works, even if he seemed not to be able to tell the difference between mortar and a concrete mixer. That very man waited for the bear and its master to wander from corner to corner and he followed up to the monumental gate of the Castle, where two Carabinieri, having turned around from the opposite side, were waiting for them, hidden behind the stone pillars. There he pulled out a gun from his overalls and aimed it at the stomach of the... **bear**. The latter lifted its forelegs and pulled down the fur coat from the head. He was a **spy** and under the fur coat he had a camera with which he had taken photos of the Castle, from one side to the other, as well as the works in the refuge, inside and outside.

Later on it was found out that the bears were indeed two, one for the show and the other to spy, and it was also revealed that inside the fur coat there was an Intelligence Service Agent, from that very English espionage organization that kept its eyes wide open and had light fingers all over Europe, the same that was getting ready for the Second World War and had also reached the little village of Capriva and the bunker of the Castle of Spessa.

This is the **true story of the bunker of Spessa**, taken from the narrations of the people who worked there in different periods and put together by someone like me, someone who has been in jail on different occasions and has been together with soldiers from different countries, but the same someone who from now onwards keeps hope that journalists and television operators only may pass by the Castle, to disclose to the world that the war Bunker of the Castle of Spessa finally acted as a "peacemaker."

**Translation from Friulian of the text  
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