

When Italy still had a king, we would see him, from the mouth of the River Arno, sat fishing on the other side. He would stay sat in his chair and the others would reel in fish. Then the war came. We lived in Marina di Pisa but it was declared a minefield and all its inhabitants were evacuated. We had family on the other side of the Gothic Line but we were not able to reach them. We went to the *carabinieri* because we did not know where else to go. They assigned us a house which belonged to a farmer who had fled to the mountains to escape the war. They gave us the keys. We did not see the fighting because it took place on the banks of the Arno and we were 150 metres away. But we heard it. The Wehrmacht soldiers were not unkind; in fact we got to know them. We were all starved. There was no salt or sugar. We would take the ears left after the wheat had been cut, grind them as best we could, mix what little flour we had with water and make a flavourless pizza. Once, we were about to pick two tomatoes but we heard a zooming sound and then there was no longer anything there. Everything was gone; simply sand all around. Everyday Flying Fortresses would drop many bombs on Livorno because they wanted to destroy the port with the goods yard and vessels. We would stay inside the house. We were 150 metres from the last remaining bridge over the Arno. The Germans placed planks where the gaps were and passed through. With an average of ten bombings each day, we fled for the camps and led down inside a ditch, waiting for something to happen. The Wehrmacht left and the SS arrived. One day, they lined us all up and told us to take whatever we had - a mattress, something to eat - and to line up again. Then we began to march towards the town. Fortunately, the Germans were at the front and we had moved towards the back in order to go unnoticed. As soon as we spotted an open gate of one of those rich people's villas at Porto di Mare, we slipped through it. The others carried on and I do not know where they were taken.

If it means dying, I want to know why the war ended. I am interested. I started to buy the newspaper everyday because I wanted to follow politics and understand what was happening. It was the turning point, a time to reflect. I graduated from high school which helped secure my future. But when I started teaching I thought, 'With my rebellious nature, I must cover my back' and so I joined the union. I did not want to become a member of any party though because I did not want to be subjected to discipline. I wanted to be free to criticise.

I went to teach in the villages around Brescia, in a school for farm-labourers which Mussolini had had built. The children came wearing clogs! Then I discovered the Cooperative Education Movement. I tested its usefulness one year when I was teaching the first years and a marvellous little girl who would spontaneously write poetry. 'Flower, how you are beautiful. Butterflies surround you.' Learning accelerated. The children had never had a school like this before. I fought with my colleagues because they said that I was just playing games but I used games as a method; they helped capture the children's attention. When children start school they become institutionalised. There is an enormous gap which must be bridged because children learn naturally and this natural learning process becomes interrupted in school. So, our job as a functional school was to remove this obstacle and to let children express themselves. We connected classes of similar levels and the need for communication motivated the children to read; they wanted to understand their friend's letters. My advice, even now, is: think, think, think. Open your mind as wide as you can.