

Fighting Paisanos.

By Marco Curti.

Briciola TV and RAI Cinema, 2013.

53 minutes, DVD and streaming formats, color.

The title of the film *Fighting Paisanos* (although never explained within the film itself) refers to a term coined by famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle to identify a young Italian-born U.S. citizen, Alfonso Felici, who accumulated an impressive war record fighting in the U.S. Army for the liberation of Italy. In addition to Felici, over one million young men with Italian last names either enlisted or were drafted into the U.S. armed forces during World War II. Assigned to every branch of the services, they fought in all theaters of the war. In this Italian-language (with English subtitles) documentary produced by Italy's national public broadcasting company RAI, director Marco Curti tells the story of four of these young Italian Americans who, like Felici, participated in the battle for the liberation of their country of origin.

The distinct stories of Alberto "Al" Soria, Ferdinando "Fred" Baldino, Frank Melone, and Eugenio "Gene" Giannobile represent the range of backgrounds of young Italian American GIs during the war. The first two were second-generation immigrants from working-class families who had come of age during the hard times of the 1930s in Italian American neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the coal towns of Pennsylvania. The other two, born and raised in Italy, immigrated to the United States as young adults to escape Fascism and, in one case, Mussolini's anti-Semitic laws of 1938.

Although their wartime experiences were diverse, all four shared a common determination to be on the front lines of the war against Fascism and Nazism by volunteering to serve in special units, such as the 10th Mountain Division, the Office of Strategic Services, or among the paratroopers in the 82nd Airborne Division. Interviewed while in their eighties and nineties, Giannobile, Melone, Soria, and Baldino soberly recount how their decisions to fight were motivated by a combination of youthful ardor, a sense of adventure, the determination to assert their patriotism, and, in the cases of Soria and Giannobile who left Italy as refugees, as personal responses to Mussolini's racial laws—along with the sense of duty to help rebuild their country of birth from the devastation of war.

The documentary traces the four separate stories, from the first taste of battle in North Africa to the invasion of Sicily, using a combination of interviews, off-screen narration, historical footage, and still photographs. It then follows the four soldiers as they made their way northward in the bloody fighting at Salerno, Cassino, Anzio, Rome, all the way to the final breakthrough in the Po Valley in April 1945.

Throughout the film the protagonists provide clues about the sense of pride they derived from fighting for their country of adoption as well as the concerns about taking the war to their country of origin. Unfortunately, *Fighting Paisanos* does not develop either of these themes. In fact, the film is primarily a chronological description of the men's battle-related accounts as they progressed up the peninsula. For instance, there is no follow-up when Melone and Giannobile point to the obvious contradiction between Italian citizens living in the United States being formally classified as "enemy aliens" and the subsequent decision to allow them not simply to contribute in the war against the country's enemies but, more significantly, to fulfill that service on Italian

soil. This apparent contradiction not only begs comparison with the discrimination inflicted upon Americans of Japanese descent; it also raises a broader question about the development of complex identities among Italian Americans. For instance, how did an ethnic community, many of whose members and leaders had identified support for Mussolini and his regime as important factors of their distinctiveness during the interwar years, so rapidly turn on the dictator and rally in defense of the United States? In the same way, *Fighting Paisanos* lets stand without explanation or further analysis references to Italy as “home,” remarks of the deep feeling of connection with a country never before experienced in person, along with repeated declarations of personal fulfillment for having played a role in the liberation of Italy from Fascism. Unfortunately, the film does not attempt to make a distinction between these two sets of reactions, nor does it call attention to one of the men’s Jewishness, especially in light of this history.

In the end, the greatest shortcoming of *Fighting Paisanos* is that it reduces the clearly noteworthy actions of Giannobile, Melone, Soria, and Baldino to little more than a simple chronological account of the Allied Italian campaign. Still lucid and articulate, the four “fighting *paesani*” deserve better.

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Terra Sogna Terra.

By Lucia Grillo.

Calabrisella Films, 2010.

45 minutes. DVD format, color.

My Backyard, Your Backyard.

By Sandra Pires.

Produced by Itsowel/Why Documentaries, 2012.

30 minutes. Multimedia. Web series.

The Italian Garden Project.

By Mary Menniti.

Website. www.theitaliangardenproject.com/, 2013–Present.

Accessed March 15, 2015–May 25, 2015.

On one of my first trips back to Italy after I had migrated to Australia I bought seeds for *cavolo nero* (black cabbage), which, in the days before kale became a trendy superfood, I could not buy anywhere in Sydney. I planted the seeds in my backyard and watched the seedlings grow. And grow some more, because in Sydney’s subtropical climate *il cavolo nero* grew to be the size of a palm tree.

I tell this story because it illustrates well how gardening practices are adapted in new and unexpected ways in the process of their relocation from Italy to other countries. The love and care with which fig trees are ingeniously wrapped up for