



Bobby

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A historical graphic novel
based on my father's accounts
of growing up in Fascist Italy,
his involvement in the
Abyssinian Colonial War,
and World War II.

SYNOPSIS BY CHAPTERS

1 Quest for Water

In 1935, as a raw and untested captain in the Fascist Italian army during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Bobby is ordered to advance his platoon 600 kilometers toward enemy lines to secure possession of valuable, life-saving water holes. His mission is of great importance as part of the Ethiopians' guerrilla strategy is to drive the Italians to madness from thirst. The vast desert expanse has never been crossed by motor vehicles, and resistance by rebel fighters is to be expected.

When Bobby's platoon reaches the first water hole in the Ogaden desert after one day of marching, they stop to secure the area and fetch water. As the soldiers are resting, drinking and washing, Bobby reflects on how he got there.

2 Bobby is Born

In the years leading up to World War I, Italy is siding with Germany and Austria-Hungary in the Triple Alliance. The treaty provides that Germany and Austria-Hungary were to assist Italy if it were attacked by France without Italian provocation. Italy would assist Germany if Germany was attacked by France. Italy is expected to join on the side of these two nations when the war breaks out in August 1914, but instead, Italy waits to see how the war progresses.

Britain offers Italy large sections of territory in the Adriatic Sea region. Italy has a lot to fear from a victorious Austria Hungary, from which she had taken Lombardy and Venice in the 19th century. So when Britain and France offer Italy Tyrol and Trieste from Austria, Italy jumps at the bait and switches sides and declares war on Austria-Hungary with a surprise offensive, intent on the swift capture of several Austrian cities.

A year into the war, and only miles away, Bobby is born in Verona, to Stella and Riccardo Zago. He is three months premature and is not expected to live past the first week. Doctors advise the Zagos to put him in the care of a surrogate mother, with whom they believe he stands the best chance for survival. Against all odds, he lives and grows for the first few years of his life in the local orphanage with the surrogate, whom he now views as his mother.

Back on the war front, the Italian troops manage to push only ten miles into Austrian territory, at great cost, and by 1917 the Italian Army loses 300,000 men to the war. The Allies' agreement with Italy demanded military success, and it was never forthcoming. Unable to sustain, Italy is forced to retreat, bringing shame and humiliation

to the whole country. The psychological impact for Italians is huge. War finally comes to an end in the fall of 1918, and Stella wants her son back. Though he initially rejects his birth mother, Bobby eventually adjusts to his reunited family and new home, the Liberty—a grand and luxurious hotel on the outskirts of Varese, where the Zagos take on the job of custodians.

3 Radio Days

Bobby grows up in scenic Varese with his mother, father and two older brothers, Nereo and Nello. In 1920, the Zagos purchase a radio and are among the first in Italy to own one. Family and friends gather at their home to listen to first broadcasts, which transmit a limited number of programs in the evenings.

Following World War I, the Italian economy falls into a deep slump and fear spreads that a Bolshevik-style Communist revolution is imminent. At this time, Mussolini, known as the Duce (leader) and his Black Shirts, an armed fascist militia, are on the rise in Italy, spreading chaos in the streets while posing as the champions of law and order. Many people, especially the middle class, who fear the communists, look to the Fascists as the answer to Italy's economic and socio-political problems. Understanding the power of radio as a propaganda tool, Mussolini grabs the opportunity to broadcast his message all over Italy.

Listening in, Riccardo welcomes the Duce's message and soon becomes a member of the Fascist party. In 1922 he marches on Rome with the Black Shirts to establish the Duce and the Fascists as the most important political party in Italy. A totalitarian state is taking shape but Mussolini, still faced with the problem of getting the consensus from the masses. He orders the formation of the "Opera Nazionale Barilla" in 1926. The ONB is intended to serve as the ideological counterpart of school, a paramilitary fascist youth movement (Gioventù Fascista). Riccardo promptly enlists Bobby when he is only 8 years old. Bobby is made to pledge loyalty to the Duce and to the protocol: "Credere Obbedire e Combattere" Believing Obeying and Fighting. Bobby is subjected to rigorous discipline and with imitation guns he takes part in semi-military exercises. His fascination however is with the radio and electronics. He starts his own business, run out of his bedroom, for repairing electronic equipment. He starts building and fixing radios to earn money, while dreaming of traveling the world.

4 Conformity

Eight years pass and endless arguments erupt between Riccardo and his older sons, Nereo and Nello, who outright refuse to subscribe to the new regime's politics.

Bobby, now seventeen, is unwilling to listen to his brothers' rhetoric against Mussolini and the Fascist regime. He enlists in the army, where he quickly rises up the ranks

to become a lance sergeant. Against their mother's pleading, Nereo and Nello immigrate to Egypt because of their strong disagreements with their father and for opposing the Fascist regime.

Meanwhile, Mussolini, who is now in power, is preparing the Italians for war. His dream is to revive Rome's imperial past and solve mass unemployment. His Fascist propaganda is pounding home a message of war to liberate and civilize Ethiopia. Mussolini's aggressive intentions are no secret, but the major powers of Europe only watch.

Days before Bobby is to be deployed to Africa, Riccardo is hunting deer in the Alps and tragically falls down a steep precipice. After a week combing hundreds of square miles, an entire army battalion finally recovers Riccardo's lifeless body.

5 Battle for Water

While Bobby is thinking about his father, sudden sporadic gunfire erupts as Ethiopian rebels attack, killing many Italian soldiers instantly. Frightened, Bobby takes cover and then flees toward a nearby mountain. With nowhere else to turn, many of his troops follow him up the mountain. But the trap is sprung when they reach the top—hundreds of rebel fighters are lined up waiting for them.

Completely outnumbered and attacked now from two fronts, Bobby and his troops prepare to fight a battle they likely will not survive. But as Bobby gathers the strength to give the order to attack, the Italian Air Force sweeps in to their rescue. The battle comes to an end as the rebels escape to nearby caves and trenches.

Later, two of Bobby's direct subordinates testify to a military commission that Bobby bravely led his troops up the mountain to fight the enemy and secure a victory. He is awarded the Knight Grand Cross for distinguished wartime conduct. That he was fleeing the enemy, not fighting them, remains his secret for years to come.

6 Bice

War comes to an end, and the Italian people have good cause to rejoice. Italy gains vast territory and brags to have accumulated untold mineral riches from the war—riches much magnified by Italian propaganda. Fascism was never so popular, and the shouts of military victory drown out grumbles about the underlying economic ills. But the invasion of Ethiopia and its general condemnation by western democracies isolate Mussolini and Fascist Italy. Honorably discharged from the army, Bobby enjoys freedom at home. He settles back in at the Liberty and takes on a job as a specialized mechanic in Varese. He frequents nightclubs with his wartime buddies and he meets Bice, a young dancer with whom he falls head over heels in love.

One day Bobby is returning home and he finds his mother walking down the street, confused and wearing hardly anything. Bewildered, he takes her to a hospital, where she is diagnosed with early signs of Alzheimer's disease.

In April 1939, Italy, Nazi Germany, and the Empire of Japan join together in signing the Tripartite Pact. On September 1, Hitler launches his Blitzkrieg on Europe and occupies many countries with ease. Mussolini grows jealous of Hitler's conquests and wants to prove to his Axis partner that he can lead Italy to similar military successes. Italy occupies Albania and several former British strongholds in Africa but cannot boast of victories on the same scale as Nazi Germany.

Peacetime for Bobby comes to an end as he is ordered back to the front lines in a new war. He makes a heartfelt departure from his ill mother and Bice, whom he promises to marry upon his return, and joins his troops for the invasion and occupation of Greece.

7 Changing of the Guards

It's the summer of 1943. Italy's position in the war becomes more and more untenable. After many defeats, from North Africa to the eastern front, the war comes to the nation's very doorstep with the Allied invasion of Sicily. The Italian mainland is also in bad shape as the Allied bombings are taking their toll. Factories all over Italy are brought to a standstill. Mussolini's propaganda machine loses its grip on the people, and the Italians turn to Radio London for more accurate news. The physical German presence in Italy also turns public opinion sharply against Mussolini. The Italian king, Victor Emmanuel III, has the Duce arrested by the Carabinieri (the national military police) and replaces him with Marshal Pietro Badoglio.

On September 8, 1943, Bobby is stationed on the outskirts of Athens, where he and his troops maintain a stronghold against rebel enemy forces. That night they join their German comrades in drinking and playing cards outside their barracks. Afterward, when the Italian troops retire to their quarters, Bobby turns on the radio and is shocked when he hears the announcement that Marshal Badoglio signed an armistice with the Allied forces. At the same time, the Germans return to their barracks and receive a cable from Berlin with the news of the Italian surrender and an order to arrest all Italian soldiers. Despite their drunkenness, the Germans immediately mobilize for an assault on their neighbors' barracks. Fear spreads among the Italians. They desperately try to phone their headquarters in Athens to get orders about the course of action to take in the face of a German assault, but they don't get through. Similar fear is felt among the Germans, who don't know whether to expect a surrendering army or a fierce resistance. Hours pass while both sides shout threats back and forth. They trade insults, but try to find some common ground. By sunrise, Bobby decides to surrender and spare his troops from certain death. With hands raised, they leave the barracks and are immediately surrounded

by the Germans, who train their weapons on them.

Back in Italy, the partisans occupy the Liberty and use it as their new command center. Stella is forced out and moves in to a tiny apartment in Varese.

8 Voyage to the East

When the Germans discover that the Italians signed an armistice, they move quickly into Italy to disarm the Italian forces and to take over critical defensive positions. Weeks after the armistice, Stella still has no news from Bobby—the postcards she used to receive stopped coming—and rumors of massacres of Italian troops in the eastern Europe and the Greek peninsula spread quickly. Twice a day she goes to the military headquarters, hoping for any news.

Bobby's brother, Nello, manages to slip back into Italy and lives in hiding. By bribing officials, he manages to search military records for the whereabouts of his brother. He is shocked to find Bobby's name on a list of soldiers that were executed in Greece after the armistice. His body was never found, but his medallion ID was recovered. Nello breaks the tragic news to his mother, who refuses to believe it. Despite her denial, the distraught Nello arranges to have Bobby buried in an empty coffin.

After disarmament, Bobby and his troops are loaded onto trucks and driven away. Uncertain of their fate and afraid of being killed, some soldiers try to escape by jumping off the trucks, but they are shot instantly. The prisoners reach a sorting camp where they spend several days waiting. Then they are confronted with the choice to continue fighting in the ranks of the German army or be sent to detention camps in Germany. Bobby is severely beaten for refusing to enlist and for holding back his troops from stepping forward. Surrounded by Germans wielding machine guns, the Italians are jammed into cattle cars—seventy men tightly packed—and shipped away. Each prisoner receives one can of sardines and moldy crackers, then nothing for days. The train comes to a standstill when the tracks are bombed. But they continue the journey by marching fourteen days and nights through east Prussia until they reach Allenstein. Many die on this hellish journey, and the rest are barely alive. In Allenstein they are registered and selected for work. Bobby is first assigned to work cleaning gutters, and then he is sent to steel mines, where he works 14 hours a day.

9 Survival

In September 1943, special units rescue Mussolini from his prison at the Hotel Campo Imperatore in the Gran Sasso raid, and he is taken to Germany. Hitler is shocked by Mussolini's disheveled appearance as well as his unwillingness to go after the men in Rome who overthrew him.

Back in Allenstein, there are bombardments on the camp nearly every night. The prisoners quickly abandon the barracks to hide in the factory basement. The Italians are inadequately fed and clothed for the eastern European winter, and many become sick and die. Bobby loses nearly half of his body weight. The constant work and taking cover from the bombs—and the unbearable hunger—take a toll on Bobby's health. To survive, he scavenges the trash to find anything edible. Washing the lice from his body in the freezing winter mornings means having to break the ice from the well first. Many of the sick soldiers are taken away by the guards, never to return. When Bobby falls severely ill with fever, he fears he will be the next one taken away. His companions hide him and try to nurse him, but he lapses into a comatose state.

10 Nightmares

His feverish dreams take him back to Ethiopia where he is walking up a mountain with a mule. The path suddenly collapses beneath him, and he lets go of his mule in order to not be pulled down with it. Bobby awakes in the empty barrack, which is pounded by heavy wind and hail. In the distance he hears a voice that sound like his mother calling him. He runs to the door, and runs barefoot towards the voice in the blizzard. When the snow settles, he finds himself in a snowy desert. In the distance he sees a house. As he's approaching it recognizes that it is the Liberty Hotel. He then sees his mother walking out of the gate. Bobby runs towards her but before he can reach her, she vanishes in the misty snowy landscape. When he turns to the large gate he sees that all windows and doors are boarded up and an eerie silence is filling the air. Bobby is overwhelmed by sadness and in panic starts breaking off the wooden planks that cover the gate. As he manages to break through, he realizes that the entire façade is only a backdrop. He walks through the gate and sees a bed in the snow with men in dark suits surrounding it. They turn around and they reveal themselves as his brothers and father. A frail old man laying in the bed resembles Bobby. The old man grabs Bobby's wrist and he awakes as his companions are holding him down while he is shaking uncontrollably.

11 The Soviets

The camp cook, who had been a soldier in Bobby's regiment in Africa, saves him by convincing the guards to transfer him from the steel mines to kitchen duties. Almost two years pass and Bobby regains some strength.

The Russian army advances and is now only ten miles from the camp. One night during an air raid, a bomb hits the factory and destroys it completely. Bobby is trapped under the rubble, totally disoriented, as the bombs continue pounding the camp. He loses consciousness, and his mind wanders back to Italy.

In a cathedral, Bobby is lying in his mother's arms by the altar, a scene reminiscent of Michelangelo's Pieta. As he looks up, the stained glass ceiling shatters and thousands of crystals rain down on him.

Bobby regains consciousness as rubble and dust rain down on him. The sun shines through a large hole in the ceiling. The bombing stops. He fights his way out of the rubble and finds the entire camp destroyed and the barracks burned to the ground. All German troops have fled.

12 Disoriented

As Allied forces close in on Milan, Mussolini who two years earlier had been reinstated by the Germans as a puppet leader, is captured by partisans while trying to flee from Italy. He is executed along with his wife. The bodies are taken to Milan and hung for public display in one of the main squares of the city.

Back in Prussia, Bobby and four other Italian soldiers walk in the forest, trying to avoid the advancing Soviets. They walk for several days along a river, eating what they can find. They sleep in abandoned barns or build makeshift shelters in the woods. The German civilians refuse to help them for fear of reprisal from the Nazis and some see them as traitors. One morning as they are sleeping in an abandoned barn, they are brutally awakened by Mongolian Soviet soldiers. Kicking and shouting, the soldiers throw them against a wall and point their machine guns at them.

Bobby can't make out what they are saying when they see the Fascist emblem on his uniform, the same uniform he has worn since his arrest in Greece. Petrified and expecting to be shot, Bobby closes his eyes and then starts singing a Russian song he learned from a Ukrainian prisoner in the camp. The perplexed Soviets burst out in laughter and are so amused that they decide to spare the Italians' lives. They are taken to a Russian camp where they are deloused and interrogated. They are then taken to the general camp, where they are met by chaotic masses of prisoners from everywhere. One night, Bobby and his companions take advantage of the chaos and flee. But because of the devastation, they have no clear idea where they're heading. They find a farmer who hides them in his carriage. Eventually they arrive in Prenzlau, where the Russians have set up a center for repatriation in a destroyed camp. They stay, hoping for quick processing but instead are forced to mow the fields and stack the wheat for weeks. Then a typhus epidemic breaks out and kills many, including one of Bobby's companions. Because of the epidemic, the Russians shut down any effort for repatriation, and instead quarantine the entire camp.

Finally, toward the end of April 1945, the epidemic is under control and Bobby is given a travel pass. He arrives in Berlin on May 8, the day of the unconditional surrender of the German forces and the official end of World War II.

13 Long March Home

With his travel pass and his newfound freedom, Bobby is faced with the daunting task of making his way back to Italy on foot. Throughout the long march home—through Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Germany—Bobby witnesses the worst devastation and misery. But joy for life is restored in Bobby when he meets Hilde in Lübben, Helen in Dresden, Inge in Zatec, Rina in Plzen and Mathilde in Munich. Bobby considers staying with each of them, but he is always reminded of the promise he made to Bice and eventually decides to move on.

After six long months of walking, he finally arrives in Varese in October of 1945. He calls his brother Nello, who is shocked and initially does not want him to show up at his mother's doorstep for fear she could have a heart attack at the sight of him. But when he does show up, she is overwhelmed with joy and reminds everyone that she always knew Bobby was alive and well.

Wedding plans are set in motion soon after Bobby's reunion with Bice. But Stella's health deteriorates, and days before the wedding she is in the last stage of her life. While lying on her hospital bed, she asks to see all her sons one more time. Nereo, who is still in exile in Egypt, receives the heartbreaking telegram too late. While on his way to Italy, Stella passes away and a vigil is held around her deathbed. Nereo arrives an hour after she is pronounced dead, and he collapses, crying at her bedside. A miraculous scene unfolds when Stella suddenly comes back to life, hugs Nereo, Nello, and Bobby one last time, and then lies back down and dies.

14 One-Way Ticket

In the days following his mother's death, all of the pain and suffering Bobby had suppressed, the years of imprisonment, and the mistakes he made, resurface in him all at once and drown him in a deep depression.

On the morning of the wedding, hundreds of guests assemble at the cathedral in Varese. Bobby gets dressed, takes a cab to the church, but then tells the driver to take him to the train station instead. With a one-way ticket he leaves Italy, and all of his past, behind.

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