

The True Story of ParinVej

by Mario Proglia



When for various reasons I have to tell the story of my grandfather Lorenzo I always get a lump in my throat. Maybe because it touches my roots, a question of blood or maybe because it is simply a beautiful and dramatic story at the same time, with the peaks and deep apneas that life offers you.

My grandfather Lorenzo and my grandmother Teresa, not yet in their twenties, got married at a very young age in 1897. They are in Arguello in a remote farmhouse in the smallest and most isolated municipality in the Alta Langa. No job prospects and on the other hand my great-grandfather had been clear: there is no room here for another mouth to feed. Of course there was no shortage of wood for the winter, the surrounding woods were many and there was also the possibility of selling a few cartloads of wood. Then some chestnuts, some hazelnuts, a small vineyard to produce some wine, some mushrooms and some cereals for family consumption. My grandfather argued a lot with his two brothers. Everyone realized that life prospects in

Alta Langa were at the limit of poverty and survival. And then those voices that came every now and then from foreigners arriving from Alba or the Bassa Langa, that progress, that well-being that we heard about more and more often animated the discussions of the three brothers. But where to find the courage to leave? How can we leave our dear and safe loved ones for a dive into the void?

The meeting with grandmother Teresa radically changed things and the long-meditated fateful decision suddenly became concrete and achievable in a myriad of projects and prospects that seemed to undergo a rapid surge. The simple and discreet wedding party with roasted polenta and "soma d 'aj". Very few guests. Only the neighbors and uncles who lived in town showed up; the relatives who were supposed to arrive from afar did not feel like making that journey in that harsh winter and with that thick blanket of snow present in the Alta Langa. Eye to eye, my grandparents only saw the positive side of things with the recklessness, hope and determination of their twenties. In the early afternoon the celebrations were already over and by dusk they were already in bed. The whole family moved into the stable and my grandparents were able to occupy that one bedroom with peace of mind. But the conditions were very specific: it would only be for that night. Then the darkest unknown, no destination, everything to be built with many objectives set in mind. As was in the DNA of his character, that evening too my grandfather preferred to quickly untangle himself and get on with the work. The next day would certainly be a busy day and my grandparents, impatient, decided to tackle it shortly after midnight. On the kitchen table two "cavagne" constituted the young couple's only assets. And on the other hand, the family had made many sacrifices and sacrifices to fill those two piles: a few spare clothes, a blanket, a little food, some money and a lot of uncertainty. Who knows where that road would have led beyond the crossroads of the "Three Wedges" where until that day the world ended for them? In the pitch darkness of the night they traced the path in the snow with their hooves and only on the crest of the hill where the road that leads to the Lower Langa passes did the path become clearer. They knew it was a one way trip, but they didn't look back, no regrets, no second thoughts, now they had to look forward.

At the crossroads for Rodello the stop was quite long. Not to rest, it was necessary to decide. Nobody was waiting for them, but they were animatedly discussing the rumors and what they had heard, evaluating the road to Alba where they apparently were looking for laborers at the brick factory or the road to Diano where an old aunt had found her fortune. They knew that her name was Proglia Anna and she had married the rich landowner Olivero Filippo, but it had happened almost a century earlier! My great-grandfather had been very vague in providing information and it seemed clear that relations with my old aunt had been rather acrimonious. The grandfather had the brick factory in mind and insisted on finding that job, furthermore, not having the right indications on the dates, the aunt could very well already be dead. Ultimately, he was sorry to find himself begging some unknown relative and in general having to ask for favors to someone. The grandmother on the other hand preferred to look for support, the old aunt, even if no longer alive, must have had some children. She knew that otherwise it would be very difficult to find accommodation. Even a stable was fine, but without references in those times of poverty and mistrust it would not have been easy to knock on doors. Regardless of

the cold, they remained on that side of the road for a long time. They did not know that in addition to planning their future they were deciding the future of several generations to come. It was the grandmother's wisdom that prevailed, in fact not excluding any of the hypotheses, she would have passed through Diano and continued on to Alba in the event that the aunt proved reluctant to help them. The road towards Diano was much easier, a little further down the valley there was no trace of snow and with the first light of dawn unforgettable scenery appeared. As soon as we crossed the sharp U-turn "of the Oriolo", the lights of dawn painted our hills with plays of light and shadow that left our grandparents speechless. The hills of the Lower Langa, gentler and less harsh than those they were used to, were well cultivated with vineyards, hazelnut groves, herbaceous meadows and fields in which their grandfather found it exceptional that the wheat had already grown luxuriantly by a good palm's length. In the background the Alps with Monviso and Monte Rosa which seemed to delimit the area which was already too large for them. The place was fascinating and engaging and the grandfather thought out loud that with all that work on those hills two strong arms would certainly be useful. She listed all the work that needs to be done in the vineyard and hazelnut groves which she knew well since they were her job in Arguello. Even the grandmother, often shy and silent, thought in silence and only at a certain point did she break out and say in an extraordinarily loud and decisive voice: "We will stay here."

Once they reached the square in Diano they were struck by the grace of the small ruined village on a hill that seemed more accentuated than the surrounding ones with the majestic parish church that dominated the concentric area from above. It was now daylight and a little further on they met a group of laborers who were on their way to work. The grandfather, anxious to find a job, ran to meet them asking for information. The foreman present in the group assessed with an expert eye that eagerness to work, those broad shoulders and those two large hands marked by the hard work of the woods and wood. There was no talk of remuneration, nor of the type of work to be done, nor of the duration, the important thing was to have a job. He joined the group and shortly afterwards discovered that it was a matter of widening the church square by transporting a large quantity of earth and stones downstream. Willing and strong, he immediately became passionate about his work and immediately made himself loved by his new companions. The desolate grandmother remained alone in that square with the two "cavagne". She would have preferred to find accommodation first, even a modest one, but she understood and shared the importance of a job. She did not lose heart and set off in search of her aunt Anna. At the first request for information she discovered that the once rich and powerful family had significantly reduced its size and had sold almost all its properties. Aunt Anna had already died a long time ago, as had her son. She was shown where the family lived, in a beautiful house in Borgo Remondato adjacent to the small Chapel of San Sebastiano. How she would have liked to have her grandfather at her side! How hard it is to have to knock on that door to request a favor with the risk that old grudges might resurface.

Whoever opened the door declared that her name was Gabutti Margherita and it took a long time to understand and understand each other. She was the daughter-in-law of the old aunt Anna who had been dead for 35 years. Mrs. Margherita immediately proved affable, her husband had spoken to her about certain relatives in Arguello, but by then he too had already been dead for seven years. It was clear that the house had once been grand, but Margherita had had no children and there was a vague sense of desolation. When she discovered the real reason for the visit, Mrs Margherita offered to host her in her large and empty house. she. The grandmother was adamant, too ladylike, she wouldn't have been comfortable and then she wanted contact with the earth. After brief negotiations they agreed to look for a small room to rent, but that she had at least a plot of land available. The fact that my grandfather already had a job with the most important master builder in the town also proved to be an excellent credential. They evaluated various hypotheses, but the grandmother was adamant in choosing a rustic house in Via San Sebastiano n.3 where there was a kitchen from which the attic could be accessed via an internal wooden staircase. She estimated that that attic could become a good bedroom with a few modifications by taking advantage of the heat from the kitchen stove. It would have been an excellent solution especially with the arrival of some children and the grandmother smiled slightly at the thought of her. Adjacent to the kitchen there was a good stable, small, but well sheltered and exposed to the sun. A little further down the valley, in addition to the shared courtyard, there was a small hazelnut grove and the possibility of setting up a nice vegetable garden by uprooting a small part of it. Grandma had to sit down when the landlady blurted out the rent. It was a huge sum and the grandmother felt regret and anger at having to make such a decision alone.

He reserved the right to decide by noon. Shortly afterwards she was happy to be alone in that decision, her grandfather would never have let her spend such an amount. She didn't enter the small kitchen a second time, but she went around the woods several times until she was close to the rock that leads straight onto the road to

Alba. Her view was that of the "Giro dell'Oriolo" over the large vineyards that stretch from Barolo to Verduno, crossing Monforte, Serralunga, LaMorra and Roddi. She felt the rich, greasy soil with her hands several times, finding it strange that it was sandy and draining. Ideal for setting up a beautiful vegetable garden. The hazelnut plants were tall and lush, full of Gatin, the male flower that would soon pollinate the female bud, certainly giving a good harvest. It was a shame to uproot part of it, but he could already see the furrows of vegetables and the little fruit trees that were little more well sheltered from any late spring frost at the top. My grandfather never knew the exact amount that my grandmother promised to pay every San Martino on November 11th. There was no point in giving him that great worry which would have worried him a lot, perhaps convincing her to give up and opt for a more modest accommodation. When she went to look for her grandfather at his workplace towards the evening, the kitchen was already completely cleaned and next to the lit stove there was a good supply of wood derived from dry branches of the forest. In that kitchen with the bedroom above, 7 children were born, including in 1906 my father Secondo, known as Pinotu. Everyone collaborated according to their possibilities and those two dumps full of first fruits set off with their grandmother twice a week to the Alba market. The 7 km route is strictly on foot to avoid the additional expense of the bus. The grandfather soon found other jobs with the landowners of the town where he did not spare himself to carry out the heaviest jobs. The opportunity to buy that small farmhouse soon arose and the grandmother was happy to free herself from that great secret of the overly expensive rent which she only confided to her daughter, my aunt Gustina, on her deathbed. With small savings and great sacrifices they later purchased the adjacent farmhouse, then other hazelnut groves and other plots of land that my grandfather worked in his spare time, on Sundays and often at night. Only every now and then when it became necessary and urgent to carry out the verdigris and sulfur treatments in the hazelnut groves and vineyards he owned did he require a half day of leave. It was in a particularly rainy year in which it was necessary to carry out 2 treatments a week that the frequency of requesting permits earned him the nickname "Verdaram" which still distinguishes my family from the elderly people of the town. In thirty years they put together, I don't know how, a collection of small properties, a social position of great respect and consideration as well as a considerable amount of savings deposited at the Banca Cattolica.

But bad luck was lurking and the entire family situation changed radically in a short time.


The terrible economic crisis of 1929 also brought its effects to Diano with the bankruptcy of the Banca di Bagnolo which controlled the Banca Cattolica di Diano where my grandparents had their savings account. There was no longer any way to recover those hard-earned savings consisting of almost 30,000 Lire which would correspond to a current value of approximately 230,000 Euro. The crisis also involved the winery that collected the grandparents' grapes which had already accumulated two years of missed payment arrears. Not only that, but for three years already, despite her 7 children, the grandmother had been nannying the last born of the family that owned the cellar for the sum of 500 Lire per year. Everything was lost and the blackest desperation reigned in the family. My grandmother was the first to react, but she smiled on the outside to give strength to others and brooded inside, the most dangerous thing. She became seriously ill and within a few years her death came, but not before suffering the further drama of the death of two of her children. The grandfather was as if dazed with no desire to do anything anymore, totally absent and alien to any interest. He cried for two years and, already with poor eyesight, gradually became completely blind. It was my father, the first of the sons, to take over the reins of the family and my grandfather, who was always demanding, let it happen without ever intervening. The arrival of his first grandson, in 1935, shook him and with great strength he was able to get out of that terrible situation and rebuild his life. His great character, his desire to do things, with the will and tenacity of the true farmers of Langa were able to impose themselves despite the terrible handicap of blindness. He reorganized his life and developed his other senses to such an extent that my father on several occasions had doubts as to whether he was actually blind. Yet completely in the dark he moved with the usual naturalness carrying out in equal measure the small jobs that he had organized to carry out.

He noticed from every little noise what was happening around him and protested when they were about to turn on the light, stating that it wasn't absolutely necessary. She confidently grabbed and put down objects and performed her usual stretches of street with a lot of determination. It is more difficult to manage unexpected events such as a chair left on his usual routes. He protested decisively and authoritatively, but it was the only battle he never managed to win. With the arrival of other grandchildren it became increasingly difficult to leave his ways completely free and one day he stopped protesting vigorously. For the grandchildren who had christened him "ParinVej" it was guaranteed great fun to leave obstacles of all kinds in his path. He reorganized himself and with "his" stick he detected those small obstacles and, dodging them with precision, continued to

walk resolutely. He took back the reins of the family and had some innovative intuitions at the time. He organized a direct sale of milk which he managed directly by recognizing the type of sheep, goat or cow's milk by touch and by smell. He wanted to start very early in the morning so that customers could find fresh milk before their already very early working hours. He turned on the lamp only at the customer's request, worrying about doing so even in complete darkness. The activity could have borne good fruit in a short time, but the Second World War imposed hardship and miserable living conditions, especially in the Langhe where the partisan, republican and German struggle were concentrated. But even if there were no spaces and conditions for a real economic recovery for my family, my grandparents still left a great legacy. My father always understood work as great physical effort, wanting to carry out all the work of the land manually which could now instead be carried out mechanically.

He planted new hazelnut trees manually because there was a great demand from the Ferrero industry. The small hazelnut grove that served the family's needs was expanded and new hazelnut groves were created in Bosco Rotondo, in LaFeja, in Garambel, in Viarasch and in LaBiria. Until he was around 80 years old he hitched his cow Cita to the cart with whom he had established an exceptional relationship. He spoke to her as if to a person and she inexplicably followed his orders to perfection. She wanted to hoe the vineyards by hand, cut the grass in the hazelnut groves and in the lawn by hand. He had a physical resistance that I have never been able to match, even when I was in my twenties and he was over 70. Only with great physical effort can one be completely satisfied, she said. My brother Piergiorgio, 16 years older than me and unfortunately already deceased prematurely, did not accept these reasonings and they had eternal discussions. One day my brother borrowed a mower to cut the grass on the lawn, but my father started the work by hand at 3 in the morning so that when the mechanical vehicle arrived at dawn it was already halfway through the job. I was 5 years old and I remember well that sputtering lawnmower that my brother deliberately accelerated to excess. In a few dozen minutes she arrived close to my father who had also significantly accelerated his pace. It was an unequal race. Yet my father didn't duck and the mower had to stop. He finished her "pace" more calmly.

The last mow was his. Then I go over by hand where the mower had already passed, cutting a few tufts of grass. "Yes, yes, it's a good job, but" He said, never finishing the sentence every time a mechanical vehicle did what he would have liked to do by hand. I didn't understand his reasoning, but I never dared to dispute his positions, because I imagined and now I know that they have deep roots. One day in the last year of his life, perhaps prompted by some of my questions, he explained himself better: "This way of life will make you run faster and faster, the mower will never be fast enough, you have to believe in yourself. But where do you want to go? Cars will run you off the road." Little by little I'm starting to understand that way of thinking about him. We are running a lot, many times without knowing where we are going. That moral legacy left by my grandparents, lived and transmitted by my parents is not written in wills and public documents. But it has a high value. And it's the only thing I will try to leave to my children.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Pylow', is located in the lower right quadrant of the page. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.