

Speech by Francesco Trivelloni, Mayor of Fontanellato, at former Camp PG 49, on September 9th 2018

Good morning to everyone and thank you for your attendance today. In particular I would like to thank members of families who gave hospitality to prisoners of war for their presence.

It is a big honour for me to celebrate such a special occasion in this place. September 8th 1943 is an important date for Fontanellato. A date that was at least the beginning of redemption after the darkness of Mussolini's dictatorship.

The signing of the Armistice and, above all, its announcement without warning and in the absence of planning by the highest offices of state, created panic throughout the whole peninsula. But we are Italian, you know, and this kind of situation brings out the best in us. And in that very moment – which an eminent historian defined “as the death of homeland” when the state was absconding and the population was in peril, the generosity and kindness of the inhabitants of Fontanellato and nearby villages came to the fore.

It was not something to be taken for granted. In almost the whole of Italy the Armistice had consequences: deaths, deportations, detentions. Here in Fontanellato one person paid more than others: Commander Vicedomini, as has already been described by Nick Young. As for the prisoners, these gates were opened and they could be rescued thanks to the support of our fellow citizens.

From diaries and stories we know now that both soldiers and citizens were aware of the dangers they were facing. Germans occupied the area and controlled bridges and communication routes. Fascist and Nazi propaganda had described those prisoners and the Anglo-American army as something terrible, something that had to be erased. Our farmers, however, found in their fields and courtyards young men who were exactly like their own children out there fighting, but “with uniforms in other colours” to quote the Italian singer De Andre'. And in that moment began one of the most beautiful pages of the history of Fontanellato, with actions that were unintentional but natural.

All Italy was devastated. War took away from their families young people who were badly needed for agriculture. Emilia-Romagna was still an extremely poor region and the fact that it was the second war in 20 years made the situation even worse. But in poverty people always share bread. “They shared the bread they didn't have,” runs the title of a book about this period. Sharing it especially with the ones who are suffering the worst. This is a rural rule that we have forgotten over the years due to our wealth, but a rule that especially nowadays we should remember.

Those facts leave such a deep mark that even today they are an important part of our memory. It would be better having to remember something with a happy ending rather than having something to apologise for, but those events are shared and preserved by the citizens of Fontanellato.

And the role of preserving this memory belongs to us all, administrators, members of committees and Trusts, and citizens. The municipality of Fontanellato takes special care of this, also with the co-operation and support of the Historic Institute for Resistance and Contemporary History based in Parma. And obviously also with the Monte San Martino Trust, our partner for years and an important presence in the lives of our young citizens. In the next

few months we would like to create a museum about the Armistice and the prisoners who were here, even maybe travelling on the routes they used to escape on the basis of their diaries, in order to connect history, solidarity, culture and landscapes.

This is a special year for Fontanellato. In 1948 the municipality bought the castle, which became then a public heritage. A physical and economic heritage, that's true, but also a big cultural heritage that enriched our community. And in some strange coincidence this anniversary happens alongside the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Camp PG 49. In addition, 2018 is the European Year of Cultural Heritage, both intangible and material. The municipality that I am honoured to represent, and I myself, believe that the most important heritage is the social one, based on people, memories, events and friendship. We believe that this heritage should be constantly nourished with events such as this one.

With today we close a weekend of celebrations. And our last thoughts are for someone who is not with us any more: Keith Killby, founder of the Monte San Martino Trust. He was given the honours of Emeritus Knight of the Italian Republic in 2003 and Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 2001. He really believed in this Trust. His idea and his strength have been such an inspiration for many of us, and will continue to be so for years to come. His purpose was "to give something back" to those Italian people who had helped him and other prisoners to escape. Today, here, we record our gratitude to him because his work allows us to get more than "just something back". We want to make sure that his ideas will continue to prosper in the coming year, just as he wished.

I was able to meet him frequently over the past few years, a quiet man but with an iron will, very charismatic and deeply grateful to the Italian people.

Keith died just two days ago aged 102. Goodbye, Keith.