



**WOLF'S  
MOUTH**

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*In Memory of*

CARL EICHER

AMY ZEMMIN

▪

*For*

ELLEN

*Then & Now*

▪



*In bocca al lupo.*

*Crepi il lupo.*

I wish you to go into the wolf's mouth.

I wish the wolf to die.

—Italian means of saying good luck and have courage,  
and responding with thanks.

▪

No, that is the great fallacy; the wisdom of old men.

They do not grow wise, they grow careful.

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *A Farewell to Arms*

▪



I. 1944





**M**y mother often told the story about how I was born one afternoon in August 1919 in Macerata, a walled hill town that lies between the Sibillini Mountains and the Adriatic Sea. Usually she claimed that this sacred event occurred in the storeroom at the back of the family's shop, where cheese and sausages were kept cool, though sometimes she said it happened right on the stone floor behind the counter. Her telling likely included driving rain, thunder and lightning, and visions of angels and putti descending from the cathedral in nearby Loreto, though occasionally my father reminded her that the birth was brought on so swiftly because of the heat that often plagued Le Marche during the summer. The point was, always, that my mother worked every day in the shop while she was pregnant, which was intended to be instructive, if not inspirational, for she and my father both believed that one's life was measured by what one could endure, and how one could tolerate and adapt to any circumstance.

I was christened Francesco Giuseppe Verdi, in honor of our distant relative, the great composer, whose portrait hung next to the crucifix in our dining room. On my seventh birthday, we took the train north to visit Villa Verdi, which is outside of Busseto, near Parma. The mistress of the house was particular about

the maestro's belongings; yet, because I had recently begun to study music, she allowed me to place my hands on the keys of one of the two pianos in his study. I played a chord, an A-minor, which resonated about us, causing her to daub her moist eyes and whisper, "So, Verdi lives." I believed that she was divulging a family secret, and for the rest of the day I wandered about the manor and its surrounding grounds, expecting to encounter the man whose portrait graced our dining room wall, his massive and intimidating white beard offset by humorous eyes illuminated by true genius.

Some dozen years later, it was apparent that I possessed none of the maestro's virtuosity for the piano or music composition. War was imminent and I was conscripted into the Italian army, and after several years of fighting in the *mezzogiorno*, the vast southern region of the Italian peninsula, my unit was shipped across the Mediterranean to fight with the German Afrika Korps. May 1943, we were captured by the Allies in Tangiers. After months of being confined to detention camps in the desert, we were marched to Casablanca and put aboard a ship bound for the United States. I was not seasick during the voyage, fortunately, but there were men who were ill for the duration of the three-week crossing. After we disembarked at the port city of Boston, we were sent west by train to Detroit, Michigan, and then north, to be ferried across the Mackinac Straits, and then taken on another train farther north and west, until we arrived in the spring of 1944 at Camp Au Train, which is outside the small town of Munising, on Lake Superior. There were a little over two hundred men imprisoned at this camp, which was one of five in the Upper Peninsula. As in all the camps, the majority of men held at Au Train were German soldiers, but there were also Austrians, Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, two Italians, and one Russian.

The journey from Boston to Michigan had been a revelation. It took longer than a train from Torino to Bari. American cities had not been bombed, as we had been told. There was an incredible amount of farmland, so much that the Po River valley would be lost in a state such as Michigan. I had never seen so many cars; they were substantial and well-made, but the remarkable thing was that most of them appeared to be owned by ordinary citizens. The architecture, however, was a disappointment. The houses were typically constructed of wood, and many were poorly maintained. Stone and brick were reserved for city buildings—town halls and post offices. These facilities lacked any sense of proportion and were uglier than anything Mussolini's architects had designed. At first this fact alone

convinced me that though the Allies were going to win the war, America could not last because it was built out of wood.

But for the moment, our purpose was to cut down trees. The American military had so depleted the male labor force that prisoner-of-war camps had been established all over the country, housing more than 400,000 captured European soldiers. Some camps provided farm labor, while others, like ours, produced lumber. Toiling in Michigan's Upper Peninsula was healthy if tedious, but preferable to fighting in the African desert.



Geography had been a primary concern since we arrived at the camp, which was in the hills to the east of Au Train Lake, which fed Lake Superior a few miles to the north. Prisoners continued to attempt to escape, but their efforts routinely failed and only confirmed just how remote the camp was, there in the forest of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Still, we were frequently drawing maps while planning to escape. The night before Corporal Gerhardt disappeared into the woods, Kommandant Vogel had instructed him to draw a map of the United States in the dirt with a stick. We were behind our bunkhouse, out of view of the guard towers, and about a dozen men stared down at the ground, speechless. Not simply because they couldn't comprehend what they were looking at, but because language was such a problem in the camp.

"It's not correct," I said. I was the highest-ranking member of the Italian army in the camp, a captain, and I spoke a fair amount of German, which naturally was the dominant language. Around me some of the other men whispered translations in Czech, Polish, and Hungarian.

"How can you say that?" Vogel demanded. He was a colonel. Because he was the ranking officer in the camp, he had assumed superiority over all of the prisoners, and we were required to address him as Kommandant. Among ourselves, we sometimes called him the Bird, which was what his name meant in German.

I took the stick from Gerhardt and pointed toward the map's east coast. "He forgot New York City, Kommandant."

"It's destroyed, completely," Vogel said.

I ignored this. "And San Francisco is not in Florida. And *this* is where Boston is—"

“What do you know of Boston?” the kommandant said.

“Our ship landed in Boston. I saw it on a map.”

“Il Duce’s soldiers can’t read a map.” Vogel looked around at the men and, after further translation, there was the obligatory laughter.

“*This* is Boston,” I said, making an *x* with the stick. “And below that is New York, and down here is Washington, where President Roosevelt lives.”

“Roosevelt?” Vogel said, folding his arms. “He’s worse than Churchill: he’s a drunk *and* a cripple. His ugly wife makes all the decisions.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But they live in the White House in Washington of the D.C., not—” and I pointed to the northwestern coast—“in Washington of the state, where George Washington was born.” Though this too was translated, nobody dared laugh.

Behind me, Corporal Adino Agostino, the only other Italian in the camp, chuckled and said, “Gerhardt could walk to the White House. And Elena Roosevelt will fuck him many times, standing up, lying down, on her hands and knees, even sitting on top—and then she’ll give him a souvenir, a signed photograph of President Roosevelt, and send him back to Germany.”

“I don’t want to go back to Germany,” Gerhardt said. He did little work in the forest. He had proved most useful in the kitchen, peeling potatoes. I never knew how much Germans loved potatoes until I arrived at Camp Au Train. And beer. We could only get something called 3.2 beer, which meant that you had to drink many bottles to get a little drunk. It was preferable—more efficient—to buy the homemade potato mash from the Polish prisoners. There was no wine, ever.

“Where do you want to go, Gerhardt?” I asked.

“Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” he said quietly. “A guard told me many Germans live there.”

“I think it’s down here,” I said, pointing to the west side of Lake Michigan. “But it’s hundreds of kilometers south. I think maybe Green Bay is closer.”

“Are there many Germans in Green Bay?” Gerhardt asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not sure, but I may have cousins there.” All the men looked at me in awe.

“Verdi means green,” Adino explained. “So of course he has relatives there. And they are all related to the master who wrote *La Traviata!*” He began whistling “*Libiamo Ne’ Lieti Calici,*” and recognizing the melody to the “Drinking Song” the other men laughed.

Except Dimitri Sabaneyev, the Russian. He never laughed. He only stared fiercely at the rest of us as though he would kill us the first chance he got.

“When you get out of the woods,” the kommandant said to Gerhardt, “you must do your duty. Kill Americans. Blow up trains. Destroy factories.”

“And find an American girl with blond hair and a nice big bosom,” Horst, one of the Czechs, said. “And destroy her with your thing.”

“Whatever you do, Gerhardt,” I said, rubbing out the map by dragging my boot across the dirt, “make sure you get back to camp before dark. Otherwise, you’ll miss dinner.”

■ ■ ■

Late the following afternoon we watched Gerhardt walk uphill across the clearing toward the line of uncut trees. He favored his right leg, which had been wounded in Africa. His timing was good because most of the POWs had already started down to the trucks that would return us to Camp Au Train, and the nearest guard was off somewhere in the bushes relieving himself. When Gerhardt reached the edge of the clearing, he was hard to see in the October twilight, which was hazy with sawdust from the day’s cutting. He hesitated and looked back at Adino, me, and the German private who often worked with us, Wilhelm Ruup. Then Gerhardt walked off into the woods.

Adino blessed himself, saying, “I didn’t think he’d really do it.”

“At least he’s walking in the right direction,” I said. “South.”

“He had no choice,” Ruup said. “The kommandant ordered him to escape.” He rested his shovel on his shoulder like a carbine, clicked the wood heels of his boots, and made a crisp military about-face. Like the other German prisoners, he wasn’t allowed to wear the U.S. Army-issue boots with rubber heels, which were far more comfortable. Kommandant Vogel had ordered that all the Germans have wooden heels nailed to the soles of their own boots, so they could make a loud click when they came to attention.

I swung my axe up onto my shoulder and we walked down toward the trucks, dry leaves crackling beneath our feet. The guard emerged from the woods and followed us at a distance. His name was Shepherd, and we often referred to him as *the* Shepherd. This GI wasn’t more than nineteen and he would never see combat—everyone knew the war wouldn’t last another year.

“If Gerhardt doesn’t return by dinner,” Adino said, “a wolf might eat him.”

“Coyotes,” I said. “They’re called coyotes.”

“What’s the difference?” Adino said. “You see them beyond the prison fence. They look hungry.”

“One of the Americans told me that wolves are much bigger, and they’re rare,” I said. “But if Gerhardt did make it out of these woods, he might meet a woman.”

Wilhelm looked back across the clearing. “What could Gerhardt do with a woman? He has only the one testicle left. I should follow him, in case he meets her and can’t do it.”

“Go then,” I said. “Germany’s virility is at stake.” Wilhelm Ruup was a big man and he looked at me with hard eyes. He was often reminding us that because we were Italian we were naturally inferior. “Gerhardt will not find a woman,” I said. “And he’ll never make it to New York, or even Milwaukee.”

“You heard the kommandant last night,” Wilhelm said. “New York City has been destroyed.”

“Vogel may believe such Nazi propaganda,” Adino said, “but we know you don’t.”

Ruup said nothing—a good sign: he was learning to think for himself.

“Wilhelm,” I said, “you saw the map last night. We are in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Gerhardt won’t get out of these woods. He’ll be back for dinner.”

“What do you Italians know?”

“We live on a peninsula,” I said. “It’s hard to get off a peninsula covered with trees.”

“The kommandant says it is our duty to try to escape.”

“Then why has Kommandant Vogel never attempted to escape?” Adino asked.

“His men need him here,” Ruup said.

“Or perhaps he needs the blankets,” I said. “And the food that is plentiful.”

“After the war they will shoot men like Vogel in Germany,” Adino said.

“Do you really think so?” Ruup’s voice began to quiver. The end of the war was a matter of great concern for the Germans. “He is a good soldier.”

“He’s a monster,” I said. “And stop that. You always say it is the Italians who get emotional, but you find a reason to whimper every day.”

“At least I don’t cry over food, like Adino. Or that opera you listen to.”

“Food and music are legitimate reasons to be sad,” I said. “No race of men will be superior until they come to appreciate that fact.”

“When I weep,” Ruup said, “I weep for a woman.”

“That, Wilhelm, is acceptable,” I said. “There’s hope for you yet.”

Ahead we could see the other prisoners climbing into the trucks. I was twenty-four years old, and my muscles ached pleasantly from the day’s labor of cutting wood. I had learned to try and not think too far beyond the next meal, which fortunately would be substantial. Even then, I had already come to understand that America was a great yet confusing country, but this was tempered by the fact that the food was ample.



Gerhardt didn’t return in time for dinner. His absence seemed to quiet the entire camp, as though we were listening for him to come out of the woods, which this time of year smelled of dead leaves.

Au Train wasn’t an ordinary prisoner-of-war camp. Before the war, it had existed for a number of years as a Civilian Conservation Corps camp, which had been built during the Depression, providing work for men who cultivated the forest and planted trees. The fact that Americans had stayed in these CCC camps was, to Vogel and his Nazi crowd, further evidence that the notion of democracy and freedom in the United States was another big lie. He was convinced that for years the American government had thrown its impoverished citizens into such camps, where they were worked to death, just as the Russians did in Siberia.

But the fact was, our camp was quite comfortable. Every one of the men staying there would admit that they were better housed and better fed than when they had been in the war. Even most of the Nazis, when they were out of Vogel’s range, admitted this. The camp was a series of simple wooden buildings; there were latrines, a medical clinic, a large recreation area, and a central building designed for social functions. We held classes, performed music, produced plays and skits, and displayed arts and crafts. There was a canteen where a bottle of 3.2 beer could be purchased for ten cents. We were actually paid—eighty cents a day—to cut wood. There was a fence around the grounds, of course, and guard towers at each corner, but during the day the gates were often left open because work details came and went frequently. The gates were locked at night, but it would not have been difficult to get out—the lighting was poor, and there were many shadows along the perimeter.

The U.S. government made every attempt to adhere to the rules of the Geneva Convention regarding prisoners of war. Some believed this was because the

Americans were honest, decent people; others were convinced it was a matter of propaganda. It was both, really. Clearly, the U.S. government feared that to mistreat their prisoners would only encourage the Axis to do the same to American prisoners of war. We had heard that the Allies were air-dropping leaflets in Europe—leaflets signed by General Eisenhower himself—that promised excellent accommodations to German soldiers who surrendered. And conditions in the German army were such that more and more soldiers were giving up, approaching the Allies, waving leaflets. Such news infuriated Kommandant Vogel, and he liked to explain that in English “Allies” really meant “All lies.”

We had sufficient access to news—newspapers, radio, movies—though Vogel was often trying to establish some kind of control over what we received. Some of the most reliable news arrived by the mail, both from our families in Europe and from relatives in other U.S. prisoner-of-war camps. The mail we received and sent out was censored by the Americans, and there were restrictions on how much we could send out: one letter and one postcard a week, and nothing over twenty-five lines. Adino, who was illiterate, asked me to write to his wife every week, until he learned to write well enough on his own in the Introduction to Italian class I was teaching two nights a week. He was remarkably proud of his first letter, which read: *Carissima Maria*, followed by *Ti amo* (“I love you”), written twenty-three times, followed by his name.

What we learned from other camps in the U.S. made most of us thankful that we were in Au Train. The Americans weren’t the problem—it was the Nazis. They succeeded in taking over a camp, terrorizing any German prisoner who had been a Social Democrat before the war, or anyone who was not convincingly pro-Hitler. The only ones who were disturbed by the fact that we weren’t under the same influence, naturally, were Vogel and his gang. Several of them were SS men, and they chafed at the fact that our camp operated so efficiently without being under complete Nazi control. So an incident such as Gerhardt not returning in time for dinner was for them a ray of hope. But the men often sang while cutting down trees, believing that it would ward off an attack by wild animals, and I wondered if Gerhardt might actually be eaten by a bear or a wolf.

There were stories about other breaks that had occurred before I arrived at Au Train. Communication between the five camps in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan was frequent, particularly with Camp Evelyn, which was not far to the east. There were stories about men walking into nearby small towns. Evidently, many of the Americans living in the U.P. weren’t even aware that prisoners of war



were being held in camps out in the woods. So on several occasions, prisoners who entered a town were treated cordially, despite the fact that they were either wearing the military uniform of a foreign country, or wearing a prisoner's outfit, which included the letters *PW* on their shirts and trousers. In such cases, a member of the local law enforcement would be notified by the prison command, and soon the prisoners would be escorted back to camp, often to be greeted as though they'd been on a pleasant holiday.

But one break from a Michigan prison had been somewhat successful. Several prisoners escaped, and though most were quickly picked up, two of them were not. It soon became clear that they were on the run with one of the guards. Often when we were drawing maps in the dirt, there would be speculation about how these three might get out of the United States and return to Europe. Some, who paid little attention to maps, insisted that they could sail from San Francisco and cross the Atlantic. Adino suggested that they might swim to Cuba. I didn't understand why they would want to go back to Europe, at least until the war was over. But then I didn't have a wife and children, like many of the men, and my parents and sister, who wrote to me regularly, seemed safe in their villa in Macerata. I was most curious about whatever possessed the American guard who ran off with these two prisoners.