

# ALTRE VOICI

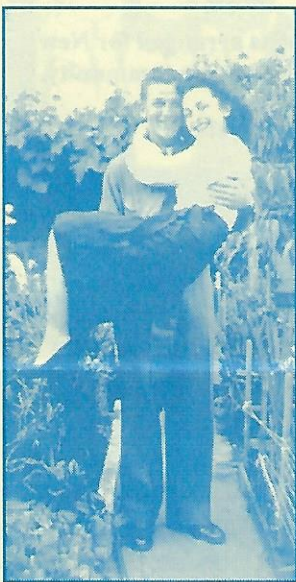
O T H E R V O I C E S

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## PRISONERS.... in Paradise



One of the untold stories of World War II is that of the 51,000 Italian soldiers brought to the United States as prisoners of war. Thousands of these men ended up marrying American women and living in the United States. The story of their lives and their romances and friendships with American women and their contributions to the Allied war effort have now been brought to film by New York film-maker Camilla Calamandrei. Producer-director Calamandrei became interested in the topic 10 years ago when she discovered that her own uncle had spent four years in the United States as a prisoner of war.

The Italian soldiers were held at camps in 26 states across the United States, many in Northern California. About a third of the film footage takes place in California. There were camps located at Stockton, Oakland, the San Francisco Presidio, on Angel Island, in Benicia, Sacramento, Pomona, San Luis Obispo, San Bernardino and elsewhere.

Captured primarily in North Africa during the early stages of the war, the Italian soldiers were amazed at the abundance of the US and the generosity of their captors. Shortly after the Italian POW's arrived, Italy officially switched sides and joined the Allied side in the war. Over 90 percent of the prisoners agreed to to work for the Allied war effort. Though still restricted

and kept under guard, the POW's joined Italian Service Units organized by the US Army. On Army Posts, they sorted and shipped war supplies and worked in Army hospitals. In their respective nearby communities, they worked as farmers and farm workers, cowboys, cook's and carpenters to earn extra money. In the Texas panhandle town of Umbarger, where 3,000 Italian prisoners of war were interned, a group of artist-prisoners agreed to decorate the local Saint Mary's Church with painted murals and carved figures in return for meals from the local community. The Church still stands.

The Italian POW's had a great degree of freedom in the camps in California. The Italian POW's stationed on Angel Island held regular dances in a hall in San Francisco that they rented with their own money. Nationwide, the men were permitted both to receive visitors and to visit the homes of Americans on the weekends.

Frequently, they were entertained on the weekends by Italian American families. The local Italian American communities welcomed them. Romances between Italian American women and Italian POW's were common, and many ended in long lasting marriages. In Stockton, California, Alma Bacigalupi, the granddaughter of immigrants from Genoa, met her husband, Louis Maccini, who was a POW at the nearby camp and who came from Parma, Italy. After the war, they married and returned to Stockton to live and raise a family. Today, Parma is the sister-city of Stockton due to Alma's efforts and her daughter, Diana Maccini Lowery, is the director of the Parma Sister-City Association and a candidate for the Stockton City Council.

After the war, most of the Italian prisoners of war returned to Italy. Some were followed by American women and later returned to the United States as "war grooms." The New York Times reported in August, 1946 that among those sailing on an American ship bound for Italy "were twenty-five American girls from various parts of the country who will marry former Italian prisoners of war. All expressed hope to return soon with their husbands."

The film, *Prisoners in Paradise*, follows the lives of six Italian POW's - and the women they met in America.

