

Honours



PAUL MAYNE // WESTERN NEWS

Professor Emerita (Music) Damjana Bratuž was honoured this past summer by Urbisaglia Mayor Robert Broccolo with an Honorary Citizenship, in memory of her father Rudolf, who was held in an internment camp in the small Italian city during the Second World War.

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Urbisaglia Mayor Roberto Broccolo

Family's hardship honoured by community

BY PAUL MAYNE

GROWING UP IN THE shadow of dictatorship and enduring the reigns of Mussolini, the Nazis and the Yugoslav communists, Damjana Bratuž confesses her memories still haunt her to this day.

But recently, those dark days, and the courage shown by her family during them, were remembered by her homeland.

She was born in Gorizia, Italy, on the border with Slovenia, in a territory that until the First World War belonged to the Austrian Empire. The professor emerita (music) grew up at a time when the fascist regime had decreed anything Slovenian to be illegal – language, songs, family names – to the point of even Italianizing names on gravestones.

It was Christmas 1936. Bratuž and her family would endure an event that marked them for life when a cousin, a distinguished composer and choral conductor, performed a Slovenian carol in church.

"They waited for him and punished him, putting him to death because of that," says Bratuž, an unstable inflection in her voice. "Here was an innocent person, a musician, conducting a religious service. This was the extent of the hatred for the other race, which we were told was as 'inferior' as the Jewish and the negro ones."

By that time, her father, Rudolf, who as a teenager served in the emperor's army, already suffered the first of his imprisonments at the end of the First World War, in the notorious fortress of Legnago. In 1941-42, he was interned for the second time, at the camp of Abbadia di Fiastra, near the ancient small town of Urbisaglia in the Marche.

He survived the third and worst imprisonment, this time on the part of his own people, after the Second World War, when he was deported by Josip Broz Tito's communists. Bratuž says she learned early the universality of evil, and how it is always fueled by ideology.

Following her Doctor of Music in Piano Literature and Performance, with a minor in radio and television, from Indiana University in 1967 – where she became the first woman to do so – Bratuž came to Western to begin a 25-year career.

During this time she celebrated not only her love of music, but also the examination of that music, in particular the work of composer Béla Bartók, of whom she is considered a worldwide authority.

Along with teaching Piano, Piano Literature, Theory, Vocal Literature and Italian Diction, she also created popular courses for non-music majors.

Bratuž continues to remain active internationally in her retirement, her last presentation having been in July at the Bakhtin Congress of the University of Bologna. She also spoke to Western students recently, part of PhD student Nicholas Virtue's *Fascism in Italy* inter-session course.

She says very little is known about the many concentration camps that existed in Italy before and during the Second World War. Only in recent years dedicated Italian researchers, wanting the truth to be known, have compiled lists, gathered documentation and published a great deal of material on the camps.

Then an extraordinary and moving event, Bratuž says, occurred this past summer when the mayor and the city council of Urbisaglia, as part of the celebrations for the 150th anniversary of Italian Unity, conferred upon her and her sister, Bogdana, an Honorary Citizenship of Urbisaglia in memory of their father.

In a letter to Bratuž, Mayor Roberto Broccolo said the gesture was meant to be "a sincere and fraternal recognition in the memory of your father, Rudolf Bratuž," during a period he calls "the ugliest period of human history."

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Broccolo wrote.

Bratuž continues to hold on to the more than 120 letters her father sent her while he was interned with about 100 Italian and German Jews. "This is a documentation of life in that camp," she says. "He documents their conversations, their lives. He describes how they entertained themselves, how they studied languages. It documents also the humanity of that place, despite of the horrible times."

Bratuž adds her father, during his last years in Canada, used to copy and re-copy the list of those he called "my Jewish friends," who had been his internment companions.

"Forty-two names which I found transcribed in numerous sheets and notebooks, with pens of various colours, in a writing that became smaller and smaller, until it was almost indecipherable," she says.

Italian-Jewish writer Giorgio Bassani, who visited Western in 1976 and to whom Bratuž showed some of the relics from Urbisaglia, advised her to let them be known. Through the wonder of Internet, some American descendants of those 'Jewish friends' have recognized those names on Bratuž's website, damjanabratuz.ca.

She did so after her retirement, when she first visited Urbisaglia.

An exhibit of photos and documents of the internment, which included some of her father's letters, poems and photos taken with his Jewish friends – all but one of whom died in Auschwitz – was held at the Abbadia di Fiastra in 1998, surprising even many who were born there.

The place is now part of a Natural Reserve, visited by tourists and school children, but there is no sign to inform them it had been once a concentration camp.

Asked how she feels now, looking back at those times, she hesitates. Bratuž confesses that inquiries about one's 'feelings' have always appeared to her as a North American obsession. No matter how kind and well meaning the questions may be, she finds it abhorrent to try and reply. **WN**