



GENDER REMEMBRANCE

Donne, totalitarismi e la nascita dell'idea di Europa

Women, totalitarianism and the birth of the idea of Europe

a cura di
Cinzia Leone



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Wydawnictwo Società Dante Alighieri

ul. Komuny Paryskiej 21

50-451 Wrocław

tel. +48691961655

tel. +48798493454

gianluca.olcese@uni.wroc.pl

dante.wroclaw@gmail.com

<http://www.dante.uni.wroc.pl>

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Indice

Le donne e il totalitarismo in Europa, storia di una resistenza al femminile	7
<i>Cinzia Leone</i>	

PARTE I

Notes on Women in the European Resistance	30
<i>Lara Piccardo</i>	

In nome dell'Europa unita: Ada Rossi fra passione civile e coerenza morale	44
<i>Antonella Braga</i>	

Ursula Hirschmann. Una federalista europea senza patria	70
<i>Silvana Boccanfuso</i>	

Il contributo di Luisa Villani Usellini al Movimento federalista europeo e al Partito socialista nella Resistenza romana	92
<i>Antonella Braga</i>	

La pedagogia dell'Europa di Anna Siemsen	131
<i>Francesca Lacaita</i>	

Le parole e la vita di Liana Millu tra resistenza e testimonianza	173
<i>Chiara Dogliotti</i>	

La resistenza della Rosa bianca e il contributo di Sophie Scholl	200
<i>Umberto Lodovici</i>	

PARTE II

I ruoli delle donne tra Fascismo e Resistenza. Un percorso nell'immaginario audiovisivo	240
<i>Alessandro Castellano</i>	

The Legacy of Authoritarian Ideologies in Recent Conservative Mobilizations against Women's Rights in Bulgaria	273
<i>Valentina Gueorguieva</i>	

The Carnation Revolution Portugal, 25 April 1974	292
<i>Ana Rita Miranda</i>	

Elenco degli autori	298
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Notes on Women in the European Resistance

Lara Piccardo

Università di Genova

During the Second World War, in European States invaded by the Germans and, until 8 September 1943, by the Italians, movements of opposition developed both to the occupiers and to local elements who had placed themselves in various ways at the invaders' service. As well known, those movements took the name of "Resistance"¹.

Directed against a single opponent, the Nazi-fascist enemy, the Resistance was a phenomenon of European dimensions. Despite the common traits, the Resistance assumed different characters in the individual countries.

The various starting situations of the individual countries provide the possibility to trace a typology of the different Resistances in Europe. The first distinction is between the countries that before the war enjoyed a sufficiently stable democratic and political structure and the countries for which war and invasion were instead the cause of deep internal upheavals and in which the Resistance nourished consequently of more or less incisive innovation projects,

1 Among the studies on European Resistance, see in particular: Jørgen Hæstrup, *European Resistance Movements, 1939-1945: A Complete History*, Westport-London, Meckler Publishing, 1981; Jason Sharman, *Repression and Resistance in Communist Europe*, London-New York, Routledge, 2004; Guillaume Faye, *Why We Fight: Manifesto of the European Resistance*, Budapest, Arktos, 2011; Ben H. Shepherd, Philip Cooke, *European Resistance in the Second World War*, Barnsley (UK), Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2013; Olivier Wieviorka, *The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940-1945*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019.

up to taking on some characteristics of civil war. Norway², Denmark³, the Netherlands⁴ and Belgium⁵ belong to the first group even if in the latter country the existence of a national question between Walloons and Flemings generated particular tensions. At the other extreme, in Yugoslavia⁶, the dismemberment of the State wanted by the Italians and the Germans sparked violent political, social and ethnic struggles, from which emerged the hegemony of the Communist Resistance under the leadership of Marshal Tito. Even in Greece⁷, the Resistance was characterized by bitter internal conflicts, the premise of the civil war that devastated the country from 1945 to 1949. In France⁸, the Third Republic was overwhelmed and humiliated by the defeat of June 1940 that had brought the collaborationist government of Vichy to power; it was considered by the defendants to be a political and institutional structure that had to be overcome. The case of Poland⁹ is different, annihilated by the occupation as a State and as a nation. The situation of the Soviet

2 Kim M. Johnson, *An Analysis of the Norwegian Resistance During the Second War*, Auckland, Pickle Partners Publishing, 2015.

3 David Lampe, *The Danish Resistance*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1960 (reprinted e-book Lucknow Books, 2016).

4 Jos Scharrer, *The Dutch Resistance Revealed: The Inside Story of Courage and Betrayal*, Barnsley, Pen and Sword Books, 2018.

5 Yvonne de Ridder Files, *The Quest for Freedom: Belgian Resistance in World War II*, McKinleyville (California), Fithian Press, 1991.

6 Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002.

7 Spyros Tsoutsoumpis, *A History of the Greek Resistance in the Second World War: The People's Armies*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1 ago 2016.

8 Olivier Wieviorka, *The French Resistance*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016.

9 Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *Between Nazis and Soviets: Occupation Politics in Poland, 1939-1947*, New York-Toronto-Oxford, Lanham-Boulder, 2004.

Union¹⁰ is still different: in the USSR a not inconsiderable phenomenon of collaborationism in the areas occupied by the Germans was matched by a Resistance, which had as its reference point an undisputed State. In the Axis satellite countries, such as Romania, Hungary and Slovakia¹¹, the Resistance had to pave the way with particular effort¹².

The Resistance against the totalitarian State was organised also in Italy and in Germany.

The story of the Resistance in Italy¹³ was particularly complex. In many aspects it constituted a direct development of anti-fascism which, since the rise to power of Benito Mussolini in 1922 and the advent of the dictatorship (1925-1927), had continued to operate in open forms and then illegal immigrants within the country and abroad. Anticipated by important events such as the great strikes in Turin and Milan in March 1943, the Resistance started after 8 September 1943, when Pietro Badoglio announced that Italy had signed the armistice with the Anglo-Americans.

10 Alexander Werth, *Russia at War, 1941-1945: A History*, New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 2017.

11 Kevin McDermott, Matthew Stibbe (edited by), *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule*, Oxford-New York, Berg, 2006.

12 Cf. F. Koch, *Resistenza in Europa*, in *Dizionario di storia moderna e contemporanea*, on the webpage <https://keynes.scuole.bo.it/sitididattici/farestoria/dizionario/tr040.htm>, consulted on 31 May 2020.

13 Roberto Battaglia, *Storia della Resistenza italiana*, Torino, Einaudi, 1964; Arturo Colombo, *Partiti e ideologie del movimento antifascista*, in *Storia d'Italia*, vol. 8, Novara, De Agostini, 1979; Gianni Oliva, *I vinti e i liberati. 8 settembre 1943-25 aprile 1945: storia di due anni*, Milano, Mondadori, 1994; Giorgio Bocca, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana*, Milano, Mondadori, 1995; Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato. La guerra civile*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997; Santo Peli, *La Resistenza in Italia. Storia e critica*, Torino, Einaudi, 2004; Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2006; Roberto Battaglia, Giuseppe Garritano, *Breve storia della Resistenza italiana*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 2007.

The Resistance in Germany was more complex, difficult in many ways, and still not very well studied¹⁴: only several events linked to the White Rose Group¹⁵ and to the Circle of Kreisau¹⁶ are partially known.

Women played an important role in various Resistance activities. For decades on historiographic and institutional level the contribution of women to the Resistance has never been adequately recognized, remaining relegated to a secondary role, which served a vision in which even the Liberation Fight was declined to the male. The official figures of women's participation in the Resistance also serve purely military recognition and award criteria, not taking into consideration the different, but no less important ways, with which women participated in it. For these reasons, historians refer to “unspoken resistance”¹⁷.

Many were the women who, without taking up arms, contributed with antagonistic actions and in decisive way to the fall of Nazism and Fascism, allowing purifying the concept of uniquely armed Resistance, alongside a civil Resistance.

This was especially the case for women who were involved in Socialist, Communist, or Zionist youth movements. In Poland, women served as couriers who brought informa-

14 Hans Rothfels, *L'opposizione tedesca al nazismo*, Bologna, Cappelli, 1963; Peter Hoffmann, *Tedeschi contro il nazismo*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1994.

15 Hans Scholl, Sophie Scholl, *At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl*, edited by Inge Jens, New York, Harper & Row, 1987; Paolo Ghezzi, *Sophie Scholl e la Rosa Bianca*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2003; Marta Perrini, *La Rosa Bianca. La sfida della responsabilità*, Milano, Ipoc, 2013.

16 Volker Ullrich, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 2008; Ian Ker-shaw, *Operazione Valchiria*, Milano, Bompiani, 2009.

17 Anna Maria Bruzzone, Rachele Farina (edited by), *Resistenza taciuta. Dodici vite di partigiane piemontesi*, Milano, La Pietra, 1976, reprinted Torino, Bollati Boringheri, 2003.

tion to the ghettos. Many women escaped to the forests of Eastern Poland and the Soviet Union and served in armed partisan units. Women even played an important role in the French (and French-Jewish) Resistance. Some women survived the Holocaust to tell remarkable stories of heroism, determination, and courage. However, most of them were murdered by the Nazis; their stories of resistance have become their legacy.

Some women were leaders or members of ghetto resistance organizations, such as Haika Grosman¹⁸ in Bialystok¹⁹. Others engaged in Resistance inside the concentration camps. In Auschwitz I, five Jewish women deployed at the Vistula-Union-Metal Works detachment – Ala Gertner, Regina Safirsztajn (aka Safir), Ester Wajcblum, Roza Robota, and one unidentified woman, possibly Fejga Segal – had supplied the gunpowder that members of the Jewish *Sonderkommando* (Special Detachment) at Auschwitz-Birkenau used to blow up a gas chamber and kill several SS men during the uprising in October 1944. Contrary to common knowledge, they were not alone in the smuggling activity: no less than 30 Jewish female prisoners participated in the gunpowder smuggling, carried out in secrecy during a period of about 7 months²⁰.

Other women were active in the aid and rescue operations of the Jews in German-occupied Europe. Among them were

18 Haika Grossman, *The Underground Army: Fighters of the Bialystak Ghetto*, New York, Holocaust Library, 1988.

19 Sara Bender, *The Jews of Bialystok During World War II and the Holocaust*, Waltham (Massachusetts), Brandeis University Press, 2008.

20 Ronnen Harran, *The Jewish Women at the Union Factory, Auschwitz 1944: Resistance, Courage and Tragedy*, in «Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust», vol. 31, n. 1, 2017, pp. 45-67.

Jewish parachutist Hannah Szenesh²¹ and Zionist activist Gisi Fleischmann²². Szenesh parachuted into Yugoslavia in 1944 and then she tried to enter in Hungary: she was captured by the Nazi police and condemned to death. Fleischmann, the leader of the Working Group (Pracovna Skupina) operating within the framework of the Jewish council in Bratislava, attempted to halt the deportations of Jews from Slovakia. All of them strove to live despite the horrors they faced, and that choice is worth teaching and discussing. Furthermore, the non-Jews who risked their lives to defy the totalitarian dictatorship that occupied their countries are examples of extraordinarily brave moral behavior.

In France, only a very small minority took part in the armed struggle. While the resistance fighters were emblematic and numerous figures in the partisan movements in Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia and the occupied USSR, they were few in number in the French Resistance. Women organised demonstrations of housewives in 1940, were active in the popular committees of the underground French Communist Party, omnipresent in the encouragement and material aid to strikers (as in Nord-Pas-de-Calais in May 1941) as well as to refractories. They were essential as typists, as “mail-boxes”, as hosts, and above all as liaison officers. French women already printed journals starting in January 1941 with «Nous... les femmes» published by the People’s Committee of Women of the 17th arrondissement²³.

21 Candice F. Ransom, *So Young to Die: the Story of Hannah Senesh*, New York, Scholastic, 1993; Hannah Senesh, Marge Piercy, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life and Diary*. Woodstock, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004.

22 Joan Campion, *In the Lion’s Mouth: Gisi Fleischmann and the Jewish Fight for Survival*, Lanham (MD), University Press of America, 1987.

23 Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters In the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945*, Hoboken (New Jersey), John Wiley & Sons, 1995;

Among the French women involved in the Resistance, a “mother of Europe” was working: Simone Veil²⁴. Born in Nice to an atheist Jewish family in 1927, Simone Jacob (her maiden name) was arrested by the Gestapo in March 1944 and deported to Auschwitz with one of her sisters and her mother Yvonne. The two girls, who were put to work in a concentration camp, survived. Veil’s mother died of typhoid in Belsen just before the camp was liberated in 1945 and her father and brother were last seen on a train of deportees bound for Lithuania.

In Italy, fascism attempted to exclude women from any extra-family activity and to reaffirm the ideal of women as the “angel of the hearth”, but propaganda triggered the reaction of a substantial part of the female world. Young and old intellectual women, students and teachers, but also and above all women from the people, from factories, from the fields began to demonstrate and protest their dissent against the regime in the streets.

The women of the cities were more attached to the activity of GAP (*Gruppi di Azione Patriottica*, Patriotic Action Groups) and SAP (*Squadre di Azione Patriottica*, Patriotic Action Teams). Sometimes women with higher culture organized private political meetings. On the other hand, among rural women, practical support for partisan activities prevailed rather than direct participation in war or political activities.

Female newspapers were born, where among the many headlines it was possible to read: «We too took the field» (*anche noi siamo scese in campo*) or «All women took their

Harry Roderick Kedward, *À la recherche du maquis. La Résistance dans la France du Sud, 1942-1944*, Paris, Les éditions du Cerf, 1999.

24 Simone Veil, *Une vie*, Paris, Éditions Stock, 2007.

places in battle» (*tutte le donne hanno preso il loro posto in battaglia*). To further increase the political role of women in the Resistance, were the GDD (*Gruppi di Difesa della Donna*, Women's Defense Groups), the first born in 1943 in Milan by some women of the CLN (*Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*, National Liberation Committee)²⁵.

In Italian historiography, the first moment of rupture with respect to an ancillary interpretation of the role of women is undoubtedly represented by the work of Anna Maria Bruzzone and Rachele Farina²⁶. Thanks to the voices of twelve partisans, the two authors pose the question of removing the presence of women from the memory of the Resistance. The women, it is claimed, were there, were active and decisive, played fundamental roles, but were canceled from any recourse and celebration. Present in history they were hidden by historiography and public memory and a knot related to this only apparent contradiction involves the re-

25 Emilio Sereni, *CLN, il Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale della Lombardia al lavoro nella cospirazione, nell'insurrezione, nella ricostruzione*, Milano, Percas, 1945; Mario delle Piane, *Funzione storica dei Comitati di liberazione nazionale*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1946; Giorgio Pisanò, *Storia della guerra civile in Italia (1943-1945)*, Milano, Fpe, 1965-1966; Giorgio Bocca, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana. Settembre 1943-maggio 1945*, Bari, Laterza, 1966; Pietro Secchia, *Enciclopedia dell'antifascismo e della Resistenza*, Milano, La Pietra, 1971; Franco Catalano, *Storia del Comitato di liberazione nazionale Alta Italia*, Milano, Bompiani, 1975; Alfredo Pizzoni, *Alla guida del CLNAI*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1995; Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini. L'alleato (1940-1945)*, vol. 2, *La guerra civile (1943-1945)*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997; Dianella Gagliani, *Brigate nere Mussolini e la militarizzazione del Partito fascista repubblicano*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1999; Federico Chabod, *L'Italia contemporanea (1918-1948)*, Torino, Einaudi, 2002 [1950]; Erik Gobetti (a cura di), *1943-1945, la lunga liberazione*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2007; Daniele Biacchessi, *Orazione civile per la Resistenza*, Bologna, Promomusic, 2012.

26 Anna Maria Bruzzone, Rachele Farina (edited by), *Resistenza taciuta. Dodici vite di partigiane piemontesi*, Milano, La Pietra, 1976, ristampa Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003.

lations between men and women between war and peace, between Resistance and Liberation, for example it does not seem improper to ask what type of Liberation – if a “failed release” or a “partial release” – corresponded to such an unspoken resistance.

A decisive contribution to the debate on wars as a phenomenon of change and modernization came from Ersilia Alessandrone Perona²⁷, who give the most explicit reflections on this topic: her analysis enriched the picture of war and Resistance²⁸.

The writer Italo Calvino tells of the “inventor” of the Italian women’s resistance: Ada Gobetti²⁹. Multifaceted by culture and character, anti-fascist, writer, translator, she received the Silver Medal of Resistance and, in 1945, she was the first female deputy mayor of Turin just released.

In her tireless activity, Ada dedicated herself to pedagogy, to the themes of childhood, family, school and social issues. A courageous woman who faced every experience with a deep civil commitment. In 1926, she became the young widow of Piero Gobetti, an anti-fascist intellectual, persecuted by the regime. She does not lose heart and thanks to the support of Benedetto Croce, she continues her activity as a writer, and becomes a partisan engaged in the Piedmontese Resistance fight, together with her young son Paolo. After the war, she dedicated her life to the building of the new democratic and Western society through education.

27 Ersilia Alessandrone Perona, *Le donne nella seconda guerra mondiale*, in «Italia contemporanea», n. 195, June 1994, pp. 363 and following.

28 Anna Bravo, Anna Maria Bruzzone, *In guerra senza armi. Storie di donne. 1940-1945*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1995; Anna Bravo (edited by), *Donne e uomini nelle guerre mondiali*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991.

29 Emanuela Banfo, Piera Egidi Bouchard, *Ada Gobetti e i suoi cinque talenti*, Torino, Claudiana, 2014.

In the galaxy of the women of the European Resistance, in addition to Ursula Hirshmann³⁰ and Luisa Villani Usellini³¹, another Ada appears, Ada Rossi³², wife of Ernesto, author with Spinelli and Colorni of the *Ventotene Manifesto*. She met and became engaged to Ernesto Rossi in a technical institute in Bergamo where he taught economics and law, and she taught mathematics. The civil wedding was celebrated when Ernesto Rossi was already serving the prison sentence imposed by the Special Court for the defence of the State: on 24 October 1931, in the office of the director of the prison of Pallanza they married with two guards as witnesses. School had to keep up with private lessons, and in 1942, she was sent to confinement.

From her letters and testimonies emerges the profile of an independent woman, against the current, capable of difficult choices, supported with a moral consistency that has never failed. She was an active subject who did not live by reflected light and had a role that was anything but marginal, carrying out important propaganda, connection and political training of young people even in the absence of Ernesto. While giving private math lessons in Bergamo in the Thirties, she also gave anti-fascism lessons to young people who later became protagonists of the Resistance in Bergamo.

Sentimentally linked to her land (Emilia), Ada immediately belonged to a larger homeland. The paternal gre-

30 Ursula Hirschmann, *Noi senzapatRIA*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1993; Luisa Passerini, Federica Turco, *Donne per l'Europa*, Torino, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2013; Maria Pia Di Nonno, *Le madri fondatrici dell'Europa*, Roma, Nuova cultura, 2017; Silvana Boccanfuso, *Ursula Hirschmann. Una donna per l'Europa*, Genova, Ed. Ultima Spiaggia, 2019.

31 On this woman, Antonella Braga wrote an article in this book.

32 Caterina Barilli, Carlotta Barilli, Leo Valiani, *Un uomo e una donna: vita di Ernesto e Ada Rossi*, Manduria, Lacaita, 1991.

at-grandfather had been a Polish officer who arrived with the Napoleonic armies in the Grand Duchy of Parma. There he had settled with his Swiss-German wife. Among the maternal ancestors, there was also a French woman, the beautiful Henriette, perhaps the natural daughter of a Habsburg. The paternal grandfather had participated in the Second War of Independence, while the maternal grandfather had been a mathematician and a revolutionary socialist. Her father, Carlo, although a career officer, had republican ideals and his mother, Concetta Montanari, had followed regular studies until she reached the classical high school diploma, a still infrequent title among girls. Ada therefore grew up in an open family context, in which Jacobin and Risorgimento memories, republican and socialist principles, Mazzini and Garibaldi's ideals circulated, along with agnostic and anticlerical positions. These values inspired her future life choices and predisposed her to anti-fascist militancy in the ranks of Justice and Freedom, the European Federalist Movement, the Action Party and, finally, the Radical Party.

The experience of the war was determined by her experience. As happens to young people born in 1899, who were among the last to be called on the battlefields of the First World War, Ada's life – "girl of '99" – was also marked by the war, three times during the his life. In 1912 his father Carlo died of typhus upon his return from the Libyan war. Ada, then thirteen, suffered greatly. In 1917, as soon as she left the college with a high school diploma, she saw the suffering of veterans, mutilated people and refugees from Caporetto. She was horrified and forever vaccinated against nationalist and warlike rhetoric. Faced with the nascent fascism – which in twenty years would have dragged Italy into a new devastating conflict – she immediately made a decisive choice of field. She abhorred the violent methods

of the “squadristi”, who in 1921 had killed a fellow student at the University of Pavia, where Ada graduated in mathematics in 1924. Her anti-fascist choice was therefore made before meeting Ernesto Rossi in 1928 in Bergamo, where both taught at the “Vittorio Emanuele” technical institute.

Ada Rossi was a political militant in the most authentic sense of the term, as she made the contradiction between facts and values a personal matter, exposing herself personally, at the cost of serious sacrifices and risks. This total commitment erased the barriers between private and public life, involving the sphere of affections. By marrying a man sentenced to twenty years in prison, Ada sacrificed her youth by imposing a fate of solitude for long years to come. To stay close to him, she also accepted that she had no children. Yet, as happened to many women of her generation, she was a “political animal” almost without knowing it, living her militancy as a natural consequence of an ethical impulse, unavoidable, and as a continuation of the “care” tasks traditionally assigned to women, without no claim to protagonism³³.

In November 1939, as a result of an amnesty, Rossi was released from prison and sent to the island of Ventotene, where he was confined until July 1943. Ada went to see him as soon as her work allowed her, but the journey from Bergamo was long and expensive. During her visits to the island, she met the former communist Altiero Spinelli and the socialist Eugenio Colorni, with whom Rossi had formed an intellectual partnership from which arose the *Manifesto for a Free and United Europe*, better known as the *Ventotene Manifesto*. She also met the sisters of Spinelli,

33 Antonella Braga, Rodolfo Vittori, *Ada Rossi*, Milano, Edizioni Unicopli, 2017.

Gigliola and Fiorella, and Colorni's wife, German Jewess Ursula Hirschmann, who fled Germany for her socialist militancy, who resided for long periods on the island with her little daughters.

When Ernesto read her a first draft of the *Manifesto* in the winter of 1940-1941, she liked it very much as she found some themes on which they had already discussed with each other in the letters of the prison years: the horror of the war, the demonic face of the nationalism, the critique of the dogma of absolute sovereignty of the nation states, the project for a federal Europe, together with the principles for a liberal-socialist reform of society. With Ursula Hirschmann, Ada smuggled the text out of the island and took care of typing it in Bergamo. The federalist demonstration thus began to be widespread among anti-fascists on the continent.

Ada's adherence to the federalist project was never again questioned as it was based on a deep-rooted belief. The European federation seemed to her the necessary premise to restore peace and democracy in a lasting way. She therefore participated in the birth of the European Federalist Movement (Milan, 1943), contributed with her husband to international propaganda in the years of the Swiss exile (1943-1945) and in the years of the start of the European integration process (1947-1954).

When 1954 Ernesto lost confidence in the possibility of realizing the European federation on a constituent basis shortly after the failure of the Treaty of the European Defense Community in 1954, Ada was less pessimistic about the future of the integration process, than from there little would have started again – albeit from a functionalist and non-constituent point of view— with the Treaties of Rome of 1957. European unity seemed to her a necessary, almost

“natural” outcome of history, which sooner or later had to come. He said it was in fact, it was enough just to “want” it a lot and continue to “don’t give up”.

After Ernesto’s death in 1967, she would have grafted this Europeanist faith into the new Radical Party, founded by Marco Pannella, to which she joined by finding some battles shared with her husband (secularism, civil rights and radical liberalism tinged with social issues).

Faithful to voluntarism of the Risorgimento matrix, Ada maintained throughout her long life (she died in 1993 at almost ninety-four years) an unshakable faith that the world could be improved by the will and the common commitment of people. In the most difficult moments, she knew how to communicate serenity, perseverance and trust, especially to young people. Until the last few years, she did not fail to criticize the limits of the European integration process inaugurated according to the functionalist logic of “Europe in small pieces” and not according to the constituent perspective dear to the federalists. Often she loved to repeat that the Republic born of the Resistance, despite all its limitations (and its clerical character as a “Republic of the Sacred Heart”, as Ernesto Rossi ironically ruled), was still “our Republic” and had to be defended in order to do so that it became more and more democratic. And modestly she concluded: «We must always make it better, fight for it, rather than go home to make our thumbs turn; at least I am of this opinion». Her simple but lucid and passionate words and his example as a militant have not been forgotten and have left a legacy of affection in many of those who have been lucky enough to meet her. It therefore deserves to be counted among the mothers of our Republic and of the future united Europe.