

The Ceresa Family from Piemonte, 1890-1940 and Beyond

AIFHS Webinar presented by *Edoardo Ceresa* on Saturday, 16 January 2021

The Early years

Edoardo, my grandfather, was born on the 29th May 1890 into a farming family in *Bollengo*, a small village with a fluctuating population of 2,000 in *Piemonte*. His parents were *Domenico Ceresa* and *Marianna Pollono* and he was the middle child of three brothers, *Domenico* and *Luigi*. Life as an 'agricoltori' family was hard. Migration was encouraged from an early age and many young people moved or were sent away to find fortune elsewhere. The main destinations were the UK and the USA.

It is not known when *Edoardo* arrived in England or if he came alone or in group. Young 'Bolleghini', 13 year old boys, were arriving in London during the 1900's; some stayed while the remainder moved on to other locations. *Edoardo* went to Brighton to train as a chef at the Metropole Hotel.

During 1908 his Mum and Dad wrote him a letter advising that his 15 year old younger brother, *Luigi*, was being sent to join him and they had paid his fare of 66.90 Lire.



1908 – 1915

By 1908 *Edoardo*, now 18 had been joined by *Luigi*, who may also have trained at the Metropole Hotel. There are many letters to and from family members in *Bollengo* suggesting that the family ties were very strong. The main reason for migration was that earned income potential was greater abroad and coupled with the Italian mentality of '*risparmiare*' savings would be returned home to help the family as subsistence farming was difficult and stressful.

During August 1914 *Edoardo* had lodgings at c/o *Stratta*, Manhattan, New York, an address 30 minute walk from the Metropole Hotel just off Times Square. This may suggest a transfer of staff by the hotel chain to New York. He may have met *Caterina Gaida* [age 17], his future wife, who was staying with her aunt having been sent there due to her teenage pregnancy. Correspondence is indicative of a one year stay until August 1915 as the following letters place him back in Italy and in military service by the end of the year.

Military Service 1915-1919

From 21 December 1915 correspondence to *Edoardo* was c/o 1st Regiment Grenadiers 19th Company, *Busseto*, *Parma*. During his military service in WW1 1915-1918 he achieved the rank of Sergeant. His posting was the eastern Austrian/Yugoslav border. Following many territorial gains and losses during a period of intense fighting by 10 September 1917, the Austrians had recaptured all the positions they had lost except for the ruins of the village of *Selo*, which remained in Italian hands. This ended the bloodiest offensive on Slovenian soil of WW1. *Edoardo* received a commendation for his actions at *Selo* 6-10 September 1917.

CERESA EDOARDO da *Bollengo* — Sergente 2° Granatieri.
BRONZO — *Selo* — 6-10 settembre 1917 — Durante una marcia di trasferimento, essendo stato il battaglione fatto segno ad improvviso e violento fuoco d'artiglieria, rimaneva sereno mantenendo gli uomini alla mano con energia e con l'esempio del suo contegno. Ardito comandante di pattuglia, forniva utili informazioni sulle posizioni nemiche, dando costante prova di calma, di coraggio e d'intelligenza.

Post WW1, 1919-1921

By 24 May 1919 *Edoardo* had been demobbed and was back in *Bollengo*. By 12 November 1919 correspondence starts to 8 Over Street Brighton (0.7miles 16 minutes on foot] from the Metropole Hotel to resume his post. *Edoardo* and *Caterina* were reunited here, *Caterina* having come over from New York. Shortly thereafter they married *Edoardo Ceresa/ Caterina Gaida* in Brighton, on 15 January 1920. On the 29th March 1921 my father, *Antonio Domenico* was born and *Edoardo's* work place moved to the Midland Hotel, Manchester where they lived at 14 Derby Street, Ancoats, and an area referred to as 'Little Italy'



Antonio Domenico and his parents 10th. May 1921

Family Life in Manchester 1921 – 1940

There is no evidence that *Edoardo* accompanied *Caterina* on her trip home to *Bollengo* with *Antonio* during 1923 to give birth. He remained at work in Manchester. On the 23rd October 1923 *Edoardo* junior was born. It may have been to legitimise her state of proper motherhood, having been sent away as a teenager to have an illegitimate girl, and also as confirmation of the family allegiance to Italy.

The family moved to 27 Roberts Avenue Chorlton on Medlock, Manchester in 1935. Family holidays were spent in Llandudno, north Wales. *Caterina's* passport entries - 1929, 1934, 1938, 1939, showed trips to Italy: she took the children while *Edoardo* remained at home to work.

Train Fares for London - Paris cost around £7. Channel crossings were from Dover to Calais, Boulogne or Newhaven-Dieppe.

1940

Caterina's passport's last entry was August 1939. She returned to *Bollengo* with *Edoardo* Jnr who had just completed his junior education, leaving *Edoardo* Snr and *Antonio* behind in Manchester. *Antonio* was starting his studies as an apothecary in the hospital. Sometime between August 1939 and June 1940 *Edoardo* senior, concerned with the escalation of hostilities in Europe, took *Antonio* out of his studies and sent him back to *Bollengo* to be with his mother and brother, while he stayed behind to work and look after family interests in England.

Reading through *Antonio's* POW diary and British records on his interrogation show he left England in September 1939. After 10 June 1940, following Italy's declaration of war on Britain and France, *Edoardo* was arrested, eventually ending up in Warth Mills prior to deportation to Canada on the ill-fated *Arandora Star*.



Caterina lost all contact with her husband and with limited communications between England and Italy it would have been a long time before word of the death of *Edoardo* would have reached her.

Post 1940 to Present Time

Caterina remained in *Bollengo* until her death in 1994. She lived in the family home with her mother, father and brother working as a seamstress, caring for family and helping the community through very difficult times. Her son *Antonio* was in the Italian Army in North Africa and *Edoardo* was fighting with the partisans, both in dangerous situations. She had limited information coming back to her.

It is not known when or how the death of *Edoardo* was recognised or recorded, but I, *Edoardo*, her grandson added the memory on *Caterina's* tomb in 1994, with a small plaque referencing the *Arandora Star* in 2020. I have only found one other victim's memorial in the *Bollengo* cemetery. From 2nd July 1940 our family history was in a state of limbo. It is not known when the family became aware of the sinking of the *Arandora Star* but the event was never discussed and forgotten both in *Bollengo* and the wider area of the *Canavese*.

Recent Times

During 2013 *Luigi Ricca*, Mayor of *Bollengo* contacted me for input on the migration from *Bollengo* for his publication of '*Bollengo, Sul filo della Memoria*'. This inspired me to research the history of the *Arandora Star*, focusing on victims from *Bollengo* (9) and its environs (17). In 2017 I decided to bring the tragedy to light in our corner of Italy and a memorial in *Bollengo* would be an appropriate way forward. I designed and funded the project and, with help and encouragement from *Sindaco Ricca* and the *commune*, its realisation happened with the tragedy's 80th Anniversary on the 2nd July 2020.

The memorial's location, on the *Via Francigena*, an important pilgrimage route stretching from Canterbury, England to Rome is highly significant, raising its visibility to a larger audience. The unveiling ceremony generated substantial media interest with several papers reporting and airing on *RAI Regionale* with follow up on *RAI storia*.

Future Project

While the story continues with added vigour, above the water line, the wreck itself has been largely ignored. The *Arandora Star* was sunk at the beginning of Word War 2 and there were plenty of other unpleasant issues around, leading to an out of sight, out of mind mentality. Tragic occurrences were a daily fact of life for many years and memories faded with the passage of time. Families of victims could not bring themselves to talk about the events and relive painful memories.



Ceresa Family 1938
Edoardo, Antonio, Edoardo jnr, Caterina.
Last family photo together





It is only recently that technology has become available to allow us to visit the site of the wreck and photograph, survey and investigate its physical condition; this will add to the historical content and be a virtual, poignant memorial to those who died and to the souls entombed within its rusting hull.

Many memorials exist in Italy and the UK, but a memorial of the site of origin would add a new dimension to the story and focus the minds of

descendants on the source of the tragedy. I am trying to bring the issue of an underwater survey of the wreck to the attention of National Geographic who produce Drain the Oceans Documentaries for an underwater survey of the wreck. I feel that coverage brought by NG - Raise the SS Arandora Star – on the tragic and unnecessary loss of life, the controversy surrounding its demise and the bravery of the participants will give relatives a focal point to remember.

There has been a similar event with another ship that National Geographic documentaries covered - the RMS Lusitania, a British Ocean Liner travelling from New York to Liverpool when it was sunk by a German U-boat during World War I.

Help is Welcome

As far as I am aware, a survey of the SS Arandora Star wreck has not been carried out. I have approached National Geographic both in America and through Terri Colpi with NG *Italia* with no response so far. This is not surprising under the prevailing global issue of Covid. For the project to succeed publicity, research, and a funding stream will be necessary to reach achieve this proposal and promote the story of this tragic event into the future. This enterprise will require a team effort from as many sources as possible and contributions from many fields of expertise.

Names of Bollengini on the Memorial		
Name	First Name	Date of Birth
AVIGNONE ROSSA	ITALO	12 Oct 1907
BRAVO	FRANCESCO	30 Mar 1892
CERESA	ANTONIO	20 Jun 1889
CERESA	EDOARDO	29 May 1890
CERESA	STEFANO	22 May 1900
ROSSETTO	FERDINANDO	19 Jun 1888
STRATTA	GIACOMO	7 Mar 1894
TAPPARO	LUIGI	22 Oct 1898
TEMPIA	GIUSEPPE	4 Jul 1896

All help, no matter how small, will be welcomed and appreciated. I put this out to the larger Arandora Star Family to consider its merits and move the project forward. It has already touched so many and will continue to do so well into the future.

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Further information:

National Geographic: Drain the Oceans.

<https://www.natgeotv.com/za/shows/natgeo/drain-the-oceans>

[Arandora Star Italian Victims](#)

A complete list of Italians living in the U.K. who were victims of the Arandora Star tragedy.

[Arandora Star Live Discussion](#)

Live Facebook discussion of the Arandora Star tragedy and Internment.

[Britain's WWII Policy of Internment: National Archives](#)