

# War in My Town – Inquiry Based Study Guide

by E. Graziani



## About the Author

E. Graziani is a teacher, author, and speaker. She incorporates strong female characters into her writing to inspire her readers. She has worked with the Alzheimer Society of Canada to raise awareness and educate people regarding this disease. Graziani regularly speaks to young people about her books and the publishing process. Graziani has written *War in My Town* (Second Story Press), which was selected by Canadian Children's Book Centre as one of their Best Books for Kids & Teens. Graziani has also written, *Alice of the Rocks* and *Alice-Angel of Time* novels for young adults and *Jess Under Pressure*, a women's fiction novella (Morning Rain Publishing). *Breaking Faith*, a contemporary fiction novel will be published in 2017 by Second Story Press. She resides in Ontario, Canada with her husband and four daughters.

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## War in My Town - Memoir Outline

Bruna is the youngest of seven children, living an idyllic life in a small Italian village in northern Tuscany. Though the Second World War has been raging in Europe for some time, the dangers haven't seemed to reach her, and the Italian leader Mussolini's allegiance with Hitler and the distant reports of fighting seem far away. But before long, Bruna's brothers are called to fight and by 1943 food rationing and shortages begin to take a toll on her family.

Soon the Italian people turn against their fascist regime and war comes to the region. When the retreating Nazis occupy her village, Bruna struggles to cope and help her mother and sisters stand up to the soldiers. Her peaceful life is shattered when her beloved village and its occupants find themselves in the center of the fighting between the Nazis and the Allied forces pursuing them - the final front defended by the Nazis in Europe.

*War in My Town* is a true story based on the experiences of the author's mother and her family and is a powerful chronicle of a young girl growing up into womanhood surrounded by political turmoil and war. Fear, intimidation, cruelty, bigotry and oppression resulted in great human suffering. These were all part of this political system which cannot be tolerated, but should be examined and understood so that they are never repeated.

"Although the history of the Second World War is taught in secondary school, the focus tends to be on the Western European campaigns.... the travails of the Italian villagers situated in the area of the Gothic Line are not nearly as well known, and Ms. Graziani has done us a favour in telling the story of her mother's childhood during the war in the village of Eglio, in northern Tuscany."

- *Resource Links*

## Themes

Survival

Social Justice

War/Conflict

Political realization

Family and friendship

Political oppression/propaganda

## Concepts/Attitudes

Courage in the face of hardship

Growing as a person and overcoming incredible obstacles in order to survive

Significance and development of fascism in early to mid 20th century Italy and Germany.

Devotion to hopes and dreams

## Genre

Memoir - a narrative account based on historical events written from personal knowledge.

A historical account of the progression of fascism through propaganda and intimidation. An account of the effects of war in rural Italy which culminates in the invasion of a Tuscan village by Nazi soldiers in late 1944 to the end of WWII in 1945.

## Setting

1940's WWII Italy - Specifically, Eglio (province of Lucca), Tuscany, Italy.

## Preparing to Study

### *War in My Town*

This memoir is told from the perspective of a young teen girl. Bruna, the narrator of this real life account, struggles with issues that are inherent to all teens, but Bruna has other far reaching issues - there is a war happening all around her. Because there is no guarantee the children will start from the same point, it may be advisable to engage the class in some pre-reading activities. This provides both teachers and students with an opportunity to examine, through discussions and various other activities, some prior knowledge of the subject and themes which are present in the memoir.

A map of Europe, focusing on Italy and in particular delineating the Gothic Line and Eglio can be found on pg. 6. This will help the students to visualize the location of Bruna's village in relation to the rest of Italy and Europe. There are strategically placed introductions before groups of chapters in the memoir. These introductions or *Parts*, explain the events occurring in Italy and in the rest of Europe before Bruna's accounts of her village life in the proceeding chapters.

A cursory look at Europe before the Second World War through media will help to familiarize students with the larger issues and concepts that are central to a full understanding of *War in My Town*. The prime aim is to make reading enjoyable and to motivate students to enjoy what they are reading while they learn about some deeper topics as mentioned in the Concepts/Attitudes portion.

There are countless websites that are appropriate to students which discuss WWII. These sites may help provide a brief introduction via video clips, archival photos and timelines to give students a platform upon which to build the context of the events in the book.

To accommodate the differing needs of students in the class, the activities suggested in this guide can easily be adapted though quantity, length and amount of work required. Synopsis of Parts and Chapters are also included in this guide, which may be copied and given to students as a reference for study purposes.

## Suggested Topics for Pre-Study Discussion

Who Were the Allies?

Great Britain and its empire, including Canada and India, France, United States (from 1941)  
Soviet Union (from 1941) and China.

Who Were the Axis Forces?

Germany, Italy, Japan and the Soviet Union (until 1941)

What were the causes of the Second World War?

-failure of the Treaty of Versailles

-the rise of fascism in Italy, Germany and Japan

-Axis powers wanted to conquer other countries and replace their governments with military dictatorships

-worldwide economic depression which hit Germany especially hard because of the WWI reparations they had to make as outlined in the Treaty of Versailles

What is a dictator?

-a ruler who has absolute power - a dictatorship is a type of government with total control over its people through intimidation, fear and *propaganda (mass media half-truths and misinformation)* -ambitions of dictators like Mussolini, Hitler and Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin helped to steer the world into World War II

What is the Holocaust?

-a holocaust is a disaster that wipes out life - Nazi Germany organized the murder of millions of European Jews and other people who did not match their idea of an ideal race - Hitler dreamed of a nation of white, blonde haired, blue eyed people he called the Aryans - he particularly wanted to rid the world of Jews and built concentration camps where his soldiers tortured and killed them - he also didn't like gypsies, the disabled, homosexuals and his political opponents - they were also killed on a massive scale

What was the Gothic Line?

-Germany's last major line of defense in the final stages of World War II. It was situated along the summits of the northern part of the Apennine Mountains during the fighting retreat of the German forces in Italy against the Allied Armies

## Suggested Activities for Pre-Study

- Review literary terms pertaining to historical non-fiction narratives.  
  
A) Memoir or Autobiography? - A memoir is a special kind of autobiography, usually involving a public portion of the person/author's life as it relates to a person, historic event, or thing. The text is about the personal knowledge and/or experiences of the person/author. In contrast, an autobiography covers the author's entire life to the present, and is expected to include details about his or her public and private life. A biography is someone's life story written by another person.  
  
B) Memoir Writing Techniques - A memoir is written in first person from the person/author's point of view. It is narrative nonfiction written in story form like fiction. Dialogue can be included, but since few people can remember precisely every word spoken, the dialogue is not literally true; instead the author attempts to recreate it as accurately as possible.
- Theme Study - discuss themes as outlined earlier in this guide - ask students for their ideas and thoughts on the themes as they will find them in the memoir.
- Concepts/Attitudes - discuss as outlined earlier in this guide - ask students for their ideas and thoughts on the concepts/attitudes as they will find them in the memoir.
- Provide students with the Blackline Master - Personal Dictionary of Words, Terms and Expressions - encourage the students to use it throughout the memoir study.

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## Parts and Chapter Summaries

### *Part 1 - Chapters 1-3*

#### **Part 1 - Italy Before the War**

Gives a brief introduction of Mussolini, his supporters (Blackshirts) and his Fascist party's rise to power in 1920's Italy - his influence on Hitler and how Hitler began building his military and secret police - the last paragraph brings the focus to the as of yet untouched village of Eglío in northern Tuscany.

#### **Chapter 1 - Easter Sunday, March 24, 1940, & Chapter 2**

The story begins on Easter Sunday, in the remote village of Eglío - this chapter introduces the heroine of the memoir, eleven-year-old Bruna and her mother Matilde. There are also her brothers, Cesar and Alcide, and her sisters, Aurelia, Eleonora, Pina and Mery. Her father is not present, but is in Brazil and has been since before Bruna was born. The family is having dinner at Poggetti, their family home and discussions turn from ordinary topics to the possible outbreak of war. This is where we are introduced to the looming fear and anxiety felt by Bruna and all her family.

#### **Chapter 3 - A Little Background**

A brief history of Bruna's parents, why they immigrated to Brazil and how and why they returned to Italy. Bruna describes the unique story of her birth on the ship coming back from Brazil.

### *Part 2 - Chapters 4 - 8*

#### **Part 2 - Italy Enters the War - 1940-1942**

Chronicles the systematic invasion of countries in Europe and North Africa by Mussolini and Hitler - Mussolini declares war on June 10, 1940 and Hitler continues his relentless persecution of Jews as the Japanese engage the United States with a surprise attack on Pearl Harbour. The Axis powers turn the world upside down as by 1942 the horrific conflict becomes the largest land war in history. The people of Eglío are now beginning to feel the war as well.



## **Chapter 4**

This chapter begins with a sample of an ordinary day, recounting the activities of a teenage girl in rural 1940's Italy. The awkwardness of early adolescents, feelings of self-doubt and natural envy of her beautiful and popular older sisters. She tries hard to please but is often "clumsy and gawky." But her love of her mamma, her grandparents and family are evident and are her strength above all.

## **Chapter 5**

We are introduced to some information about her school experience, its organization and uniform, which mimics the Blackshirts. We are introduced to her best friends, Armida and Beppina and discover how propaganda, (praising Mussolini or Il Duce) is a common and accepted practice. Conversation turns to how an outbreak of war seems imminent, which causes Bruna to run home and seek comfort and reassurance from her mamma, as she fears that if war is declared, her brothers will surely be called to fight for the cause.

## **Chapter 6**

In this chapter, we are introduced to Alfezio, a learned man who runs the town's 'library.' Alfezio is a disabled veteran from WWI. While Bruna searches for a book to read to her mother, he notices that she is preoccupied. He tries to reassure Bruna that everything will be alright and that she need not worry about war breaking out, however no sooner are the words spoken than Il Duce can be heard over the wireless radio declaring war upon Britain and France. All of Bruna's nightmares become reality in a matter of seconds.

## **Chapter 7**

The draft notices start coming to Eglione and all those men eligible to serve in Il Duce's army are called to report for duty, including Cesar, Bruna's eldest brother and eventually Alcide, too. Rationing of food and is introduced Mussolini's propaganda machine steps up its campaign. But it's not all gloom and doom, as we are privy to a humorous incident recounting how Alcide manages to swipe all of Bruna's treasured chocolate bars.

## **Chapter 8**

"Slowly things began to change." As rations and the absence of men and boys weigh heavily on the mountain agrarian community and continue to take their toll, the people of Eglione continue to struggle to survive. But their dissatisfaction cannot be expressed because of fascist oppression. In this chapter Edo and Bruna talk about the Black Market and how much they miss their brothers: Edo's brother Mario is on the Russian front. We are also given some information on how children are taught from a very early age to trust, protect and love Mussolini above all.

## ***Part 3 - Chapters 9 - 10***

### **Part 3 - Il Duce Overthrown - 1942-1943**

The war rages on, but Mussolini's forces are ill equipped and often need help from Germany. A growing resistance as the *partigiani* or partisans battle 'underground' against Mussolini alongside the Allies. Rations and low morale lead to widespread dissatisfaction with Il Duce, which results in his overthrow in September of 1943 by King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy. Most of the citizens were happy, but there were still some who supported Il Duce.

### **Chapter 9 - July 1943**

Bruna, now fourteen, recounts the effects of three years of war so far in her village. Hunger and a constant struggle to survive with hardly any supplies take its toll on her family. The winters were long and bleak and rumours of prisoner of war camps on the Russian front are harrowing. When news reaches Eglío of Mussolini's imprisonment, some are happy and see an end to the war in the near future, but others are skeptical and foresee more trouble ahead.

### **Chapter 10**

Cesar returns home not long after Italy's new government surrenders to the United States and Britain - France is still occupied by the Nazi's. Other men from Eglío also returned, but there was still no sign of Alcide.

## ***Part 4 - Chapters 11 - 15***

### **Part 4 - A Divided Italy - 1943-1944**

Things appear to be happening quickly as news comes over the wireless that the Allies have landed in the south of Italy, but soon German soldiers march into the north, free Mussolini from prison and sweep down to Rome, taking control of Italy's capital. Mussolini is now the head of a puppet government under Hitler and Italy is now divided into two. Ordinary people continue to fight in the resistance, kill fascist collaborators and hide Jews, but there are still those who remain loyal to Mussolini and fascism. Before long, there are German troops in the heart of the Garfagnana valley, near the village of Eglío and with this comes the ever present danger of raids.

### **Chapter 11**

Bruna and Cesar talk politics as they harvest - it is now the Fall of 1943. Most of the family is home as it is too dangerous in the cities and they share stories of Jewish people being rounded up and sent to concentration camps, but Eleonora stays at the orphanage to assist the children. Others were forced into hiding and protected by Christian families, friends or former employees. Still others hid in churches and with priests and nuns. We also learn that Alcide is still missing.

## **Chapter 12**

It is now winter and the Nazi soldiers have taken to raiding the village for food and other goods. They also took men to fight and to use as labourers. Bruna overhears a conversation about Nazi atrocities in other villages which only serves to frighten her even more. The people cannot help but feel powerless, so in order to protect one another from an imminent raid the men and women devise a simple strategy to warn the people that the Nazi's are on their way.

## **Chapter 13**

As the weeks unfolded, the plan (blankets over a prominent village location - Evelina's house - red for danger, white for all clear) worked well and more and more, the villagers were saving their belongings and food from the Nazi invaders. Bruna chronicles the way her family hid their treasures (linens, cutlery and blankets) from the Nazi soldiers' frequent raids.

## **Chapter 14**

A simple, lean Christmas of 1943 and still no Alcide. The family tries to keep their hopes up as war rages on in Italy and the rest of Europe.

## **Chapter 15**

It is the Spring of 1944 and Bruna turns fifteen. She and her friends are in church just before the Easter vigil - they are supposed to be praying, but their conversation turns to how life would be without war and what they miss the most. Everyone agrees they miss their brothers and sweethearts the most. When Edo, her long-time friend, gives her a quick wink after completing some repairs in the church, Bruna realizes she may have feelings for the handsome young man - Bruna is growing up.

## ***Part 5 - Chapters 16 - 26***

### **Part 5 - Caught on the Gothic Line - 1944**

In June, 1944 the Allies land on the Normandy beaches in France and soon all of France would be liberated. The Allied forces begin moving upward in Italy and by June, they enter Rome with a momentum that brings them up to Florence and even further north, close to Garfagnana. Not wanting the Allies to advance further, the Nazis create "the Gothic Line." It extended 300 kms across Italy, from east to west, crossing Tuscany and cut through to Bologna. The natural landscape of the Italian Alps was perfect for the retreating Nazis to create one of the last fortified fronts of WWII - and Eglio, with its villagers, found itself right on the Gothic Line.

## **Chapter 16**

It is September of 1944 and fear prevails in Eglío as German soldiers maintain the reign of terror in northern Italy. News of atrocities in nearby villages along with bombings and gunfire in the distance create an atmosphere of anxiety and impending trouble. While working in the fields one day, Bruna and her family discover that the Nazi soldiers are planting landmines on the road leading to Eglío and are on their way up the mountain. They run into Eglío to alert the rest of the villagers, but there is little they can do but await their destiny.

## **Chapter 17**

Nazi soldiers enter Bruna's village and her and her sisters, Pina and Aurelia are confronted by them. Bruna runs from them and unwittingly leads them to the very place where her family is hiding. A first confrontation between the soldiers and Bruna's family and friends is a horrific one. After beating up Cesar, they begin rounding up all the villagers and set them to work.

## **Chapter 18**

The soldiers begin to divide up the people of the village - men are to put up barbed wire defenses and building bunkers, while the women must wash their clothes and cook for them. They have also taken over many of the villagers' houses and have set up a command post from a neighbour's house - the Nazi's do not appear to be moving on any time soon.

## **Chapter 19**

Bruna describes the first day under Nazi control - intimidation and fear replaces hopes and dreams for Bruna. That night, the family is reunited at Poggetti, their home and are grateful that they are still together and alive.

## **Chapter 20**

After days of daily drudgery under the Nazi's, the Allies begin their bombing campaign from Barga, a town across the valley from Eglío. They had run the Nazi's into Eglío and were trying to force them out, but unfortunately, the villagers have nowhere to go and are caught in the middle. A horrific account of the first bombing village results in the first death of an occupant of Eglío.

## **Chapter 21**

Bruna discovers that Alfezio was killed. The family manages to get to their safe house - Vincenzo's, which faces away from Barga and offers some protection. Meanwhile the Germans are returning heavy fire. And so it rages the entire night, as the villagers hide from the mortar shells raining down on their beloved village. This time prompts Bruna to think of her father and feels resentment as to why he never reunited with his family.

## **Chapter 22**

Bruna awakens the next morning after having dreamed of her brother, Alcide. The family emerges into the village and discovers that many of the houses were damaged but not Poggetti. Many more of the townspeople are now without homes, not only from the Nazi soldiers who invaded their village but also from Allied mortar shells.

## **Chapter 23**

In this chapter, we learn that many of the sick and elderly villagers will die not because of gunfire, but because they cannot get necessary medical care. Bruna's beloved nonno passes away and we also learn that Edo's father is very ill.

## **Chapter 24**

While the women are grieving their nonno's passing, a Nazi soldier pushes his way into the house looking for potatoes. Mery invites him to go upstairs to look for them, where her nonno is lying. Another side of the soldier is revealed as he comes back downstairs looking rather shocked and respectfully bows to their nonna, then Matilde recounts that he stopped when he saw their nonno lying in state and prayed, not saying anything further. Is there a heart underneath the harsh, cruel exterior of this young Nazi? We are also told that Aurelia and Dante get married.

## **Chapter 25**

This most difficult chapter recounts the death of one of Bruna's friends, Eva. She and her mother and sister take refuge in a barn after being caught in a mortar attack while out in the fields gathering chestnuts for food. A mortar shell hits the barn and mortally injures her. The villagers try to get her to a hospital with the Nazi's permission, but she is too badly hurt and soon dies. Edo's father also passes away and now, at eighteen Edo must take up the role of being the man of the house and look after his mother and young siblings. Bruna's hatred for the Nazi soldiers deepens with these terrible events fueling her contempt.

## **Chapter 26**

Bruna recounts one of the most harrowing incidents where the soldiers discover a cut telephone cord that was buried in the Bora and served as a line of communication for the commander. The commander has ordered his soldiers to round up any villagers that happened to be in the area and to have them shot. The priest, Don Turriani intervenes and through calm pleading and offering to sacrifice himself for his villagers, he manages to calm the commander and thereby spares the villagers.

## ***Part 6 - Chapters 27 - 30***

### **Part 6 - Nazi Defeat and Liberation - 1945**

This introduction chronicles the advancement of the Allies into formerly Nazi held territory across Europe. One by one in early 1945, concentration camps are liberated and the world learns of the true fate of the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis. Through the spring, meanwhile, cut off from the rest of the world, Eglío awaits its fate and in April of 1945, finds itself liberated in a most surprising and unlikely way.

#### **Chapter 27**

The stubbornness of the Nazis in Eglío was obviously wearing on the Allies and a new flurry of offences emerged. One night in a burned out shelter, Bruna's family is spared from death as an unexploded bomb lodges itself under the floor of the safe house. They narrowly escape death and make it out to live another day.

#### **Chapter 28**

Unknown to the villagers, one night in April of 1945, the Nazis abandon their post. The people of Eglío awaken the next morning to quiet and serenity, no shouts, no soldiers, no one barking orders. Upon closer inspection, they come to the realization that they were no longer under the oppressive Nazi shadow - the soldiers were gone. News did reach them about Mussolini's fate - he was killed along with his mistress, while trying to escape. Within days, the Americans come to the village and they receive a hero's welcome. News also came of Hitler's cowardly suicide - it was early May of 1945 and the war was finally over! Later the Americans cleared the landmines so supplies could be brought in and helped the men dismantle the barbed wire fences.

#### **Chapter 29**

In this chapter we learn that Bruna's nonna passed way shortly after the end of the war. It also reunites the entire family as Alcide, after years of being away and struggling to hide from Nazis and Allies alike to get home safely, finally makes it back to Eglío.

#### **Chapter 30**

Alcide tells of his journey from the Island of Rhodes, after the Nazis took over Greece from the Italians. Some of the soldiers wanted to switch sides and so they were arrested and were to be brought to a prisoner of war camp. Alcide and some others escaped, but he faced a long journey home through hostile territory. In the end, the family sees their reunification as a gift to be treasured and a chance for a new beginning. Bruna tells us that the war left her with a deeper appreciation of life and for every moment that she has with her family.

## Sharing and Responding to *War in My Town* - Comprehension and Discussion Suggestions

As students read through the memoir, teachers should stop at key points or natural breaks. Depending on the students' level of understanding, educators may wish to stop and ask the students to summarize what has happened so far, and predict any outcomes or what might happen next. A discussion of the key concepts is suggested after each 'Part,' with some parts (i.e., Part 5) requiring more frequent stops as they are lengthier.

- Try to have the students identify the themes in each part and/or chapter and give evidence to their rich responses.
- Try to have the students identify the key concepts and attitudes introduced in the pre-reading activities in each chapter and/or part and have them give evidence to their rich responses.
- To emphasize a particularly striking/important passage or to bring alive a spirited dialogue, teachers and students may engage in a read aloud and discuss the passage in terms of significance.
- Character Study - Group Work - have the students work in groups to log/profile Bruna's growth (emotionally, mentally and in terms of character) as a person: Provide chart paper to each group - at the very beginning and then at key points throughout the memoir to the end. Have them add to the paper at each key point, then share with the rest of the class.
- Reading responses to rich questions at each chapter - have the students formulate the questions for each chapter - teachers may add to these at their discretion. An overwhelming abundance of questions are not necessary, instead they should reflect the student's insight and understanding of the larger issues as it relates to them and the world around them.
- The teacher may wish to have the students work in groups and generate questions for other groups to answer, or have each group come up with three questions for each chapter and then the teacher will choose one from each group to have the entire class work on for that particular chapter. These questions may be literal (what is happening in the memoir), inferential (related to significance of events and possible outcomes), analytical (comparing and classifying).
- Once the questions have been taken up and discussed, the teacher may choose several of these questions for an end of the unit test.
- This memoir may also be studied in a literature circle format. There are many masters available online which can be used as resources for such a study.
- A culminating essay based on a thesis of student's choice relating to the memoir, may also be assigned if desired.
- Educators may want to combine the culminating activity with a media theme. Have groups of students create book trailers or even a movie trailer.

For samples, go to <http://secondstorypress.ca/books/329-war-in-my-town>

