

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Oral histories of Italians in the North-East of England: the sinking of the *Arandora Star*

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Abstract

Within British-Italian history of the Second World War, there are several questions surrounding the sinking of the SS *Arandora Star*, on 2 July 1940, which still remain problematic. Nevertheless, this tragedy continues to play a prominent role in the heritage and memories of the Anglo-Italian communities in the UK. This article focuses on the experiences and memories of the *Arandora Star* from the perspective of members of the Italian community in the North-East of England. Oral histories of Italian civilian internees who were embarked onto the ocean liner were collected via qualitative interviews with descendants of victims and survivors. This article contributes to raising awareness of *Arandora* scholarship by articulating how memories were interpreted retrospectively and transmitted down generations. Informing the debate on the purpose of misremembering in oral history, this article sheds light on the events and their imaginary reconstruction.

Keywords: *Arandora Star*; Second World War; oral history; memory; Italian history

Introduction

The British Italian community has never forgotten the sinking of the *Arandora Star* on 2 July 1940, torpedoed by a German U-boat in the Atlantic, 125 miles north-west of Ireland (Marin 1975; Sponza 1993, 2000; Colpi 1993, 2020, 2023; Fortier 2000; Ugolini 2011, 2015; Chezzi 2014; Pistol 2015, 2019). Despite the scale of this tragic disaster, with approximately 805 men – around half of those on board – losing their lives, 442 of whom were Italian, out of the 707 who embarked (Pacitti this issue), it remains a lesser-known event in Second World War history.

The *Arandora* sinking ‘controversial at the time, remains a highly emotive event ... that has never been truly resolved’ (Pistol 2015, 51). Over 80 years later, records are still incomplete: ‘not all the facts are known and controversies persist’ (Colpi 2020, 409). Consequently, several questions surrounding the sinking still remain problematic. As Colpi points out, ‘although it is possible that answers may never be fully ascertained ... historians have a moral duty to discover and unravel the facts’ (2020, 407). Motivated by this moral obligation, this article adopts an oral history approach to shed light on the *Arandora* tragedy. In particular, it focuses on the experiences and memories of the torpedoing from the perspective of Italian community members in the North-East of England. Paying

attention to the complexity of individual memory, this article illustrates how this group of people is still concerned, in the present, with giving meaning to the traumatic events. However, before delving into these first-hand accounts, it is important to situate the tragedy within the wider historical and political context.

Arandora Star tragedy

Blue Star Line's SS *Arandora Star* was a First Class cruise liner built in 1927 by Cammell Laird & Company Ltd, in Birkenhead.¹ The *Arandora*, whose nicknames were 'chocolate box' or 'wedding cake', was one of the best-known ships in the world, cruising in the Mediterranean and the Baltic as well as the West Indies (Isherwood 1970). She carried large cargoes and first-class-only passengers for 13 years. When the War broke out, the *Arandora* was placed at the disposal of the British government. On 19 June 1940, under the command of Captain EW Moulton, the ship was ordered to carry a large number of German, Austrian and Italian internees from Liverpool to St Johns, Newfoundland, Canada (Gillman and Gillman 1980). In all, she carried around 1,600 individuals, 'a mixture of German and Austrian Jewish refugees, German POWs, British servicemen and crew and Italian internees' (Colpi 2023, 47). The date of sailing was planned for 25 June, but the ship would leave Liverpool early on 1 July, unescorted. All went well until just before 7 am on 2 July, when the ship was 125 miles north-west of County Donegal, and she was suddenly torpedoed by German U-47 submarine (Gillman and Gillman 1980, 192). At about 7.20 am the *Arandora* rolled over, flung her bows vertically in the air and sank, carrying many people with her. Such was the loss of life, the name *Arandora* was never again used by Blue Star Line in postwar years (Blue Star Line website).

Debates and controversies

The *Arandora* tragedy has been defined as a distinguishing feature of the British Italian community by several scholars. Fortier asserts that 'the death of these men speaks primarily of alienation, exclusion, discrimination, and humiliation of Italians living in Britain during the war years' (2000, 57). Nevertheless, transmission of narratives of the sinking was delayed, due to this being a 'historically complex and controversial subject' (Colpi 2020, 399). The tragedy generated several public and political debates, including controversies about the way 'enemy aliens' were treated during the Second World War and the perceived irregularity regarding the ship and the selection of Italian internees for deportation (Marin 1975; Lafitte 1988; Hickey and Smith 1989; Colpi 1993, 2020; Sponza 2005; Ugolini 2011; Chezzi 2014; Pistol 2017).

While the sinking of the *Arandora* was due to the German torpedoing of the ship, it is well established that a number of contributory errors or negligence added to the degree of the disaster: 'overloading, insufficient lifeboats, no safety drill, gun placements, barbed wire on decks, no escort, no Red Cross flag to indicate civilians' (Colpi 2020, 406). Furthermore, the ship had been designed for a maximum of 500 people, yet she carried between 1,550 and 1,610 individuals on her last voyage (Rumble; Pacitti this issue). Moreover, as Pistol summarises: '... none of the [deportation] transport ships were marked as carrying POWs. Instead, they set sail unaccompanied, equipped with anti-submarine guns, and employed a zigzag pattern in their movements, making the ships obvious targets for German U-boats' (2015, 48). Scholars agree that had some standard precautions been observed, many more individuals would have survived (Shankland 2014; Pistol 2015).

In addition, the selection of males of Italian origin for deportation attracted public and academic attention, being considered an '*ingiusta prigionia*' (Marin 1975, 87). Following Mussolini's declaration of war on 10 June 1940, Italian men between the ages of 16 and

70 with less than 20 years' residence in Britain, were ordered to be interned (Colpi 1993; Sponza 2000). The dominant social representation of Italians in Britain emphasised the risk of a 'fifth column' of thousands of enemy aliens who might include Nazi/Fascist agents and saboteurs (Pistol 2015). Subsequently, around 4,500 Italians were interned, including 300 British-born sons of Italian migrants (Sponza 2005, 154). However, it was felt that retention of prisoners-of-war and large numbers of enemy alien civilian internees on British soil might constitute a serious threat to the security of the country: those regarded as the most 'dangerous characters', therefore, were earmarked to be sent overseas (Gillman and Gillman 1980). These numbered about 1,500 Italian men on an MI5 list, who were defined as 'desperate characters', such as professing *Fascisti* (Sponza 2005, 154), although their degree of loyalty to the *fasci* organisations was not assessed (Sponza 2000; Pistol 2015; Ugolini 2015; Colpi 2023).

A number of books have been written on the general subject of the internment of enemy aliens during the Second World War.² Several sources state that the War Office's process of selecting Italian aliens for deportation from the MI5 list was uneven (Gillman and Gillman 1980; Lafitte 1988; Colpi 1993; Sponza 2000). This was confirmed by Lord Snell in November 1940, in his inquiry into the method of selection of men to be sent overseas on the *Arandora*: he held that it had been the responsibility of the security services (Snell 1940). Lord Snell reported that while there was no reason to question the deportation of 'Category A' Germans and Austrians, in the case of the Italians no classification by tribunals had taken place. He concluded that

... in selecting the more dangerous characters for early deportation the War Office had to rely entirely ... on the list which had been drawn up, based mainly on membership of the Fascist Party, and none of the Italians on the list had any opportunity of appealing to a Tribunal. This method of selecting 'dangerous' Italians could not be regarded as satisfactory, and the result was that among those deported were a number of Italians whose sympathies were wholly with this country (Snell 1940, 3–4).

In this respect, Sponza (1993, 129) quotes Foreign Office civil servant Harold Farquhar, who claimed that 'the military authorities just filled up the number haphazardly by picking out any Italian between the age of 16 and 70 whether members of the Fascio or not'. By August 1940, the Home Secretary Sir John Anderson admitted that the criminalisation process of Italian men had happened without proper judgement and he appointed Sir Percy Loraine to establish an Advisory Committee to consider the cases of Italians' eligibility for release (Ugolini 2011).

Debates moved on, considering the innocence or the political involvement of Italians on board the *Arandora* and whether these men constituted a threat to national security (Ugolini 2011, 2015; Chezzi 2014; Colpi 2020). Now, it is well-known that the majority of the Italians on the ship were innocent: indeed, they included countless 'non-fascists', alongside some well known antifascists, men with more than 20 years' residency, and naturalised British subjects (Colpi 2020, 398). It is well established that several men of Italian origin who were imprisoned and deported aboard the *Arandora* were antifascist political refugees, or Jews who had fled Italy's harsh anti-semitic laws during the dictatorship (Shankland 2014). As Pistol explains, 'unable to find the required number of "dangerous" internees required to fill the ships in time for tight departure dates, human cargoes constituted whichever internees were at hand' (2015, 47). Consequently, many Italians aboard the *Arandora* were wrongly deported (Colpi 2020).

Additionally, it is believed that the most ardent Fascists evaded internment as they managed to leave the country, as part of a pre-war arrangement. The ship *Monarch of Bermuda* with 630 'loyal fascists', nominated by the Italian ambassador, and their family

members, sailed from Glasgow to reach Lisbon by 26 June. The passengers were exchanged for British citizens who had left Italy on the *SS Conte Rosso* (Colpi 1991; Sponza 1993; Bernabei 1997; Balestracci 2008). The *Monarch of Bermuda* carried several hundred privileged evacuees while, due to the confusion of the arrests, others ‘including the Italian consuls in Cardiff and Liverpool were found languishing in police cells’ (Colpi 1991, 110). With regard to those boarded onto the *Arandora*, as Colpi attests, ‘any militant fascistic intent amongst a minority remains largely unresolvable, with some files at the National Archives remaining closed until 2041, while others are missing or destroyed’ (2023, 48). Moreover, any lists or details of Fascists and their activity kept at the Italian Embassy or at the *Fasci* had been removed or burned as war became imminent (Balestracci 2008). Eighty-four years on, further unravelling from official sources the historical facts surrounding Italian Fascism in Britain, the threats to national security, the deportation of internees, and the *Arandora*’s sinking, remains complex and requires additional research.

Silence and efforts to collect oral history accounts

Several scholars have paid attention to the silence around the events of the Second World War in general, and the tragedy of the *Arandora* in particular (Ugolini 2011, 2015; Chezzi 2014; Colpi 2020; Palladino 2022). Colpi provides possible explanations for the unwillingness of Italian community members to talk about the tragedy (2020). She discusses how the traumatic shock of the sinking, with its high loss of civilian life, produced a period of repressed ‘silence’, due to self-imposed emotional repression or external censorship. Their silence might reflect, firstly, the psychological challenge associated with trauma, with memories triggering uncomfortable and painful emotions; secondly, the fact that being regarded as enemy aliens prevented members of the Italian community communicating openly about these topics; thirdly, the lack of knowledge of the facts, and therefore an inability to answer questions; and finally, the desire for reintegration after the war. All these factors acted to suppress the *Arandora* narrative (Colpi 2020, 393–394). This silence after the war in Britain can furthermore be attributed to the dominance of the victors’ master narrative and reticence amongst the marginalised war generation of Italians to challenge the status quo. In Italy, no details of the sinking, with mainly Italian and German victims, were given in the press, ‘due to suppression by the Fascist regime embarrassed by their German ally’s blunder’ (Colpi 2023, 50). The sinking represents an uncomfortable episode of war history that three countries wished to remain hidden.

Despite the lack of accurate records, in modern times there have been several attempts to reconstruct the sinking. For example, Alfio Bernabei’s documentary *Dangerous Characters* produced in 1987 for Channel 4 uses archive film, photographs and interviews with surviving Italians who experienced the sinking.³ In 1991, the *Arandora* ‘Missing List’ was published for the very first time in a book by Terri Colpi (1991, 271–278), which included survivors’ testimonies. Later, Maria Serena Balestracci emphasised the human consequences of the tragedy, bringing to fruition interviews conducted in Italy and the UK with descendants of victims and survivors (2008). She argues that this event risked falling into oblivion, as it could easily embarrass Britain, Germany and Italy. Undoubtedly, at the time of the disaster, Britain wished to silence any examination of its mass deportation of enemy aliens without the inclusion of a proper inquiry into the seaworthiness of the ship; Germany had made the mistake of torpedoing Germans and Italians; Italy, allied with Germany, was reluctant to acknowledge the loss of so many Italian lives (Balestracci 2008). Balestracci embraced the challenge of unearthing a ‘forgotten tragedy’ by meeting and interviewing relatives of those who had lost their lives. In addition, Wendy Ugolini (2011) worked with personal testimonies, focusing on second-generation Scottish Italians serving in the British Army and women on the home front during the Second World War. In particular, using oral history

interviews, Ugolini argues that with the lack of formal sites of mourning, family members and descendants of victims felt the need to cherish memories, ‘acting as private keepers of the memorial flame’ (2015, 98). For this reason, she emphasises the importance of memory transmission within families and across generations. Likewise, Bruna Chezzi worked with second and third generation Italians in Wales, for an oral history project connected to a memorial fund. The intention was to involve ‘all those who were affected by the *Arandora Star*, regardless of their nationality or affiliation’, to narrate their experiences and re-establish confidence in the transmission of memory (Chezzi 2014, 380). By generating new narratives of stories that may have been repressed or held back, the project aimed at empowering a cultural minority in ‘unpacking a diversity of experiences that otherwise would have been ignored, forgotten and lost’ (Chezzi 2014, 380).

Yet as the time passes, the number of survivors and descendants who can actively keep the memory of the tragedy alive diminishes. Therefore, oral history accounts from descendants of victims and survivors are worthy of academic attention for advancing *Arandora* scholarship. This article is driven by this knowledge need, emphasising the importance of intergenerational transmission of cultural trauma within family networks (Hirsh 2001).

Methodology

Oral history is conceived as a field of study and as a method of recording memories of people and communities of past events (Ritchie 2012; Thompson 2015). What distinguishes oral history is its commitment to uncovering hidden histories and paying attention to ‘history from below’ (Burke 2013). In Britain, since its emergence in the 1960s and 1970s, the mission of oral historians was to recover and challenge the imbalance in written historical records by supplementing these with histories and experiences of groups absent from historical archives (Cosson 2019). Thereby, oral history projects in Britain aim to encourage ordinary people to participate in the ‘construction’ of their own history, by giving voice to marginalised groups (Cosson 2019).

The oral histories discussed in this article derive from my PhD fieldwork project at Newcastle University (Palladino 2019). During the semi-structured interviews,⁴ I let the participants guide the process, so they could talk about what was meaningful to them. Participants felt comfortable speaking about their own memories, leading to a large amount of data collected. At the time of the fieldwork, the *Arandora* sinking was not the main focus of my inquiry. A few years later, I revisited the oral history interviews and extracted references to this historic event. For the purpose of this article, I highlighted themes related to the sinking, taken from four research participants.⁵

Findings

The biographies of the Italian community members I interviewed are intertwined with the *Arandora* narrative, as the following example indicates. Mrs G is a British-born, second-generation Italian, whose family was originally from the Tuscany region. She was 86 at the time of the interview. She was born and lived in a town on the east coast of England, where her family had run a coffee shop since the beginning of the last century. When the Second World War broke out, she was nine years old. She witnessed her father’s arrest and, following policies of enforced relocation, she and her mother had to move inland, to Carlisle (see more in Palladino 2022). During the interview, she broke down in tears when reminiscing about the wartime, and she shared anecdotes related to the tragedy.

When Italy declared war against England, we didn’t know what was going to happen. My father was taken away and he went to Newcastle. Uncle Ri from Blyth didn’t go

because he had been nationalised [naturalised]. But uncle Re from Ashington and my father had never been nationalised and so they had to go.

When they got to Newcastle they decided 'We'd rather go to the Isle of Man'. Because it was in England, you see. Luckily, they went to the Isle of Man because the ship that went to Canada was called *Andora Star* and a lot of people were on that. The people that went to Canada on the *Andora Star*, it was very lucky that some survived. Because as they were crossing over, it was torpedoed by a German submarine and it went down.

Lots of people from Carlisle were on that ship and they were all in the sea. I got these stories later on, when they came back. I can remember somebody that was rescued. He had the nickname Testone [*faceva di soprannome Testone*]. I always remember that. I can't remember why he got that name, anyhow, he was in the water, in the sea and he was swimming. There was an 18-year-old German boy on that ship and he was in the water and he was crying, 'Mamma, mamma'. He was crying for his mother, he thought he was going to drown you see. He was shouting 'Mamma' in his own language, 'save me'. So Testone said in English, 'Come here son. Put your arms around my back'. They were picked up and they were both saved. Testone told us the story. He always used to tell that story.

Anyhow, where war is, nobody wins. Everybody is a loser.

Mrs G places her own subjectivity at the centre of the tale, by reporting the recollection of the lived experiences of the men involved in the tragic sinking, simultaneously emphasising its mode of transmission. Mrs G recalled a specific episode she had been told by Testone, one of the survivors, and his companion in misfortune. Apparently, Testone used to narrate the painful experience of the sinking, when he was swallowed by the waves and heard the cry for help. This moan of entreating prayer was encapsulated in the word 'mother'. Victims of the *Arandora* tragedy invoking their mothers as they were cast adrift in the ocean is well documented (Bernabei 1987; Balestracci 2008). In stating how in the atrocity of the war, nobody is a winner, Mrs G ends her narrative with a story of survival and deeply felt emotions. This extract conveys the solidarity between men in difficulty, across national boundaries, who helped each other and survived the sinking. This latter point challenges the trope of friction between Germans and Italians that prevented the rescue operations, as claimed by the media at the time of the incident. For example, as reported by *The Times* on 4 July 1940: 'as the ship was rapidly sinking there was panic among the aliens, and especially among the Germans, who thrust aside Italians in their effort to reach the [life]boats first'.⁶ Similarly, *The Glasgow Herald* declared that 'great hostility was shown by the Italians to the Germans ... because of the Nazis' ruthless conduct in attempting to rush to the lifeboats'.⁷ On this note, Balestracci interjects that the British newspapers tended to attribute the impediment to safety procedures to the conflicts between Germans and Italians (2008). She observes that the accounts quoted in these newspapers are all anonymous, and sometimes clearly at odds with each other, concluding that 'such articles had been deliberately manipulated' (2008, 250).

Further analysis of Mrs G's extract conveys how the *Arandora* is embedded into the narrative repertoire of the Anglo-Italian community, especially amongst family members of victims and survivors. It is clear how similar anecdotes have been passed on by word-of-mouth between and across generations. Mrs G recalls how, at a young age, she learned about the sinking ('I got these stories later on, when they came back'; 'Testone told us the story. He always used to tell that story'). Possibly, this spoken mode of transmission of memories might have contributed to the 'wrongness' of the history. A degree of misinformation in Mrs G's narrative lies firstly in the number of men on the *Arandora* from Carlisle – only two in fact, not 'lots' – but both were victims (Pacitti this issue). This

exaggeration indicates how the extent and the impact of the tragedy magnified all aspects of affect within the community members. Reliance on oral traditions to acquire information about the event is also evidenced by the way in which the name of the ship is mispronounced 'Andora'. This resonates with Colpi's work (2020, 392–393), who explains how the name of the ship became widely known as 'Andora' in Glasgow.

Furthermore, it is evident that family members are still trying to find justifications for the historical events. Mrs G's narrative reveals on the one hand how the arrest of her father and her uncle were seemingly justified by their lack of naturalisation as British citizens. On the other hand, Mrs G states that internees had the freedom to choose where they would be sent, either being interned on the Isle of Man or being embarked on the *Arandora*, directed to Canada. However, these men were subject to various restrictions and clearly lacked any freedom of choice, as stated by Pistol (2015). A possible explanation for these historical inaccuracies lies in the way in which oral accounts were passed on by the survivors to family members, or to wider communities, and in the way memory continuously evolved over almost 80 years. Accordingly, this extract manifests how oral testimonies are sources of memory, conceived not as a passive depository of facts, but as an active process of adding meanings and making sense of lives (Portelli 2015). Hence, this data informs the debate on the nature of memory in the field of oral history, shedding light on the purpose of retrospective meaning-making.

Since the paradigm shift to memory in the 1990s, oral historians have been concerned with exploring not only *what* people remember, but also *how* people 'do' memory (Smith 2015; Cosson 2019). Oral sources are a narrative product of the interplay between the present and the ever-changing interpretation of the past, necessarily artificial, variable and partial (Portelli 2015). According to Portelli (2015, 52), 'what makes oral history different is that it tells us less about *events*, than about their *meaning*'. Thus, Mrs G's extract can inform on how and why the past is remembered in this particular way and on the meanings associated with the selection of Italian men to embark on the *Arandora*. She narrates that her family members escaped the ill-fated journey thanks to 'luck' and their free decision-making to stay closer to home ('they decided, "We'd rather go to the Isle of Man". Because it was in England, you see. Luckily, they went to the Isle of Man'). Yet, this is a subjective interpretation about a wartime context in a time of peace (Portelli 1997). Consequently, consciously or unconsciously, instead of expressing anguish and fear of the unknown destination, the narrative framed the internees as actively involved in these decisions – possibly to retain a sense of dignity after the injustices experienced. Moreover, Mrs G's oral history extract indicates how Italian community members, and especially the victims' descendants, in the present, attempt to reconstruct the sinking, adding meanings to the event, even if only partially known. This process of retrospective meaning-making is additionally evidenced in the example below.

Riccardo, in his seventies at the time of the interview, is a first-generation Italian migrant, whose family migrated from the Lazio region to the North-East of England prior to the war. Riccardo's family used to live in Newcastle and was involved in the ice-cream business. In our research encounter, his family history was elicited from a photo album:

On my father's side, there were six brothers. This one [pointing to an uncle in a photograph] sunk in the ship. Have you heard about the ship that went down during the war with all the Italians that had been deported? It is not known who torpedoed the ship, but Germans were informed that Italian prisoners were on it. They needed to be deported to Canada. My uncle was on the ship. He was called Andrea.⁸

Similar to the previous example, this extract demonstrates how memory is more than a record of experiences, but instead functions as an incessant work of interpretations

(Portelli 2006). In this case, narratives related to the *Arandora* tragedy, embedded in family histories, are elaborated and transmitted at the hinge between orality and invention. Riccardo reveals that, at the time of the interview, there is still a lack of knowledge on the events ('It is not known who torpedoed the ship'). Nonetheless, to construct a coherent memory in light of the overall war narrative, Riccardo suggests the idea of a conspiracy that is unfounded in historical terms ('Germans were informed that Italian prisoners were on it'). Expressing ambivalence in dealing with the contradictions, this example resonates with previous works in the oral history field, which highlight the difficulty of fully articulating war events from the perspective of civilians (Portelli 2006). As such, Riccardo's example indicates how the *Arandora's* narrative is interpreted in a partial and fragmented manner and is subject to manipulation and fabrication. Nevertheless, instead of dismissing these narratives as historically unreliable, it is possible to find hints of the work of memory and traces of the narrator's perspective at the time of the interview. This is because the peculiarity of oral history is that it provides access to the speaker's subjectivity (Portelli 2015; Calabria 2023), as will be discussed in more detail via the following example.

Elena V is a British-born third-generation Italian in her eighties, whose grandparents migrated originally from Lazio at the beginning of the last century. They lived in a town near Gateshead in the North-East, where they owned an ice-cream shop. She said:

My uncle Peter and my uncle Dominic, because they were Italian, they had to go away. My uncle Dominic went down on the *Arandora Star* when it was sunk. They were sending my uncle Peter to the Isle of Man.

They'd done nothing wrong, but I think that probably when they were little they'd been in like the boy scouts in Italy. So they [the British authorities] thought that was something to do with Mussolini's military. The scouts is where you go to learn how to survive in the woods, how to light a fire whenever you haven't got anything else. Sort of surviving skills. It's like a soldier, but it's a summer camp, like a holiday.

They'd all been brought up here [in the North-East] for years. My uncle Peter was in the Italian army in the First World War. I have seen his photographs somewhere. Whether that was why he got sent to the Isle of Man, I don't know. They spent their whole life just in England working with ice-cream.

The *Arandora* was a ship that was taking them all across [the Atlantic] to a concentration camp. You'll never get to know the proper truth, what really happened. They were torpedoed. Some reckon that they were carrying different things, but I don't know what they were carrying. You'll never really know because they won't tell you directly what was on that boat, but it was definitely torpedoed.

When the ship was torpedoed they couldn't get out, they had chains on them. My uncle was never found. All of them went down. There were very few that were saved. There were the Grecos, one escaped, he got out and came home, to Middlesbrough.

This extract indicates how the unjust imprisonment of Italians during the War is reiterated amongst community members. Elena tries to find explanation for her uncles' arrest, as she says 'they had done nothing wrong' but she attributes it to being in the 'scouts' at a younger age. The role of summer camps in Italy in indoctrinating young Italians from Britain according to Fascist ideology is highlighted in Bernabei's *Dangerous Characters* (1987), and discussed by Baldoli (2003). The participant also thinks that one of her uncles had a mitigating circumstance due to his involvement in the First World War on the Allied Italian-British side, a situation which, she conjectures, may have saved him from deportation. Again, this example shows how the events surrounding the *Arandora* have been open to hypotheses and suspicion. To justify the loss of life, Elena reports information

that has been elaborated – for example, that the prisoners were chained, possibly a misinterpretation of the presence of barbed wire on board.

Similar to Riccardo's example above, Elena points to a lack of access to information regarding the event ('You'll never get to know the proper truth'). Even so, this example expresses how the lack of official information and records caused speculation and intrigue as to the reasons behind the deportations and torpedoing. Victims' relatives contributed to the creation of different tales and inventions to bring some kind of consistency to the events. In this case, Elena attributes the cause of the torpedoing to some items that the ship might have been carrying, presumably known to the U-boat captain who fired ('Some reckon that they were carrying different things'). Distancing herself from the fabricating of stories, Elena accepts that she will never know ('You'll never really know because they won't tell you directly what was on that boat').

Moreover, it is worth noting the shift from the first-person singular, *I*, to the second person, *you*. According to Portelli (1997) when in an autobiographical narrative, pronouns and verbs begin to fracture and multiply, it means that identity is questioned. In this case, Elena's transition from *I* to *you* might be seen as an invitation to the interviewer to put themselves in the narrator's place. On the one hand, Elena might refer to *you* as a fellow civilian, who does not gain access to the 'proper truth' – possibly referring to the false newspaper reports during the war, in contrast to Admiralty and government who retained the 'official' knowledge of events. On the other hand, Elena might refer to *you* as interviewer, revealing by this, the way in which *I* was regarded as a younger Italian student looking for stories of another time through which *I* did not live (see also Palladino 2023a). Indeed, the data generated during oral history interviews are always the result of the encounter between interviewer and interviewee (Portelli 2015).

The final extract is another example of how the remarkable wartime event of the sinking can be interspersed with misinformation and manipulations, generated in conversation with the interviewer. Mos is a British-born, third-generation Italian in his seventies at the time of the interview. His grandparents migrated to a village near Newcastle from the Tuscany region, at the beginning of the last century. He invited me to watch a PowerPoint presentation he was working on, about the history of Italians in the North-East. Mos was interested in this topic in order to find out more about his own roots. He planned on presenting this research to a private men's club he belonged to, in one of the wealthier neighbourhoods of Newcastle. So I sat next to him, on a chair in his office, and listened to his presentation. The slide show began with the history of the Italians who had migrated to the North-East since the 1870s. Moving on, he said:

... And then of course, we had the war. This was an interesting guy, Alfredo Donnini [pointing to Alfredo's photograph]. He was from Tuscany, and he was sent to the Isle of Man. Alfredo was in this prison camp, but his son [Dennis Donnini], about 18 years old, joined the British Army. He was killed, and he had got the Victoria Cross which is the highest award for bravery you can get in England. The Victoria Cross is always headed by the king or the queen. So, they had a problem because he [the deceased son] had a Victoria Cross, but his father was in the prison camp, he was an enemy. So how can an Italian enemy meet the king? They got a special dispensation, and he went to the Palace. He met the king, who gave him the medal for his son. This was the first time in history, when an alien, officially an enemy, crossed the threshold, and met the king! It's an interesting story.

And of course the prison camp filled up. And so the ones who were left were put on a ship called the *Arandora Star* and sent to Australia, and it was torpedoed by the Germans, and everyone was killed! Eight hundred Italians were from here, from the North-East. Eight hundred were killed on that ship. It was terrible.

This extract indicates how Italian families living in the UK often had ‘divided loyalties’ (Sponza 2000), as the father and the son were considered differently. Equally important, it is clear how historical events have been reinterpreted by members of the Anglo-Italian community, adding details that are historically inaccurate – the *Arandora* was not directed to Australia, and the victims were not all from the North-East of England. As asserted by Colpi (2020, 393) ‘in most Italian communities, there was confusion over the ship’s destination and location of the sinking...’. In this case, Mos’s narrative may have also been influenced by my request to know the history of the Italians in the North-East of England. At the time of the interview, I was a newcomer in the North-East, so this, possibly, might have shaped the way in which Mos magnified aspects of affect related to the tragedy in the local area. However, even if the story narrated can be shown to be untrue, it might still be valuable to social history (Thompson 2015). In this regard, Portelli asserts:

Oral histories are credible, but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism and desire emerge, therefore there are no ‘false’ oral sources (2015, 51).

Consequentially, in this case, it is important to ponder why a third-generation Italian is motivated to gather information on this historical time, to assemble his sources via a PowerPoint presentation, and to disseminate this knowledge in a public talk to his own community, due a few days after our encounter. This might inform on how the transmission of the *Arandora* event still takes place in today via orality – even outside the context of a research encounter, as occurred between Mos and me. In this context, ‘what counts is less the event told than the telling of the event’ (Portelli 1997, 43).

As mentioned above, the peculiarity of oral history is to pay attention to the complexity of individual experience, such as the speaker’s subjectivity. Intrigued by my interviews, all four of which contained misremembering, I started to reflect on the biographical demand to know more about these historical events and the hope and desire of this group of people to be informed. For this reason, there is a strong argument for the need for further oral history research amongst those directly connected to the *Arandora* tragedy, to pay attention to the ‘histories from below’.

Discussion

This paper explores the ways in which *Arandora Star* narratives have been elaborated by members of the Italian community in the North-East of England. From these narratives it is clear that the impact of this tragedy lies in the loss of human life, regardless of national background or political affiliation. Participants place their own subjectivity and experiences at the centre of the narratives, by highlighting the tragic loss of family members. Findings reveal that the *Arandora* sinking continues to play a major role within the British-Italian war memory, as embedded in the life histories of people who experienced it, their family members and their communities, in the present.

Some memories shared by participants demonstrate how the sinking was partially justified when viewed in the context of the wider conflict. These data resonate with the previous literature, confirming the suffering these groups of people endured as a result of the War (Colpi 1993, 2020; Fortier 2000; Ugolini 2011). I have already discussed elsewhere post-war trauma reminiscences and the ways in which injustices have been reinterpreted over time, both down and across generations (Palladino 2022). In this article, the information provided, advancing *Arandora* research, is meaningful in demonstrating how, in some instances, historical information and legendary narratives became inextricably

intertwined. Specifically, findings show that narratives related to the sinking are subject to manipulation. These constructed tales indicate how family members are still trying to make sense of the sinking and, while looking for possible justifications, reinterpret the historical events in a fragmented and artificial way. Therefore, data reported in this paper inform the debate on the purpose of misremembering in the field of oral history.

To understand the nature of misremembering, it is possible to draw parallels to the death of Luigi Trastulli, a 21-year-old steel worker from Terni, who was killed by the police in a peace demonstration in 1949, as theorised by Portelli (2010). Trastulli's death constitutes an unsettling phase of the town's history, as several narrators believed that he died during violent protests in 1953. The relevance of the event lies not so much in the fact itself, but more in how this was manipulated by the workers. Trastulli's death has been misplaced by the several narrators who changed the date of the facts, and by doing so, they created different versions and legends. Thus, according to Portelli, errors and inventions reveal the interests and underlying desires of the narrators (2010). Portelli states that the 'wrong' tales are valuable, as 'errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings' (2010, 2). Similarly, the differing versions of the *Arandora* events reported in this paper are historically questionable and accompanied by an imaginative dimension. Nevertheless, rather than dismissing the narratives as unreliable, these can provide a better understanding of the participants' subjectivity at the time of the interview.

This article has made visible how in the absence of official information and reasonable explanations, in some instances, the interned predecessors were framed as actively involved in decision-making regarding their fate, possibly to retain a sense of dignity after the injustices experienced. In other instances, the prisoners were framed as unable to escape their destiny, due to the sinking of the ship. Attempting to justify the sinking in terms of a wartime conspiracy, some participants magnified aspects of the tragedy, while others exaggerated the impact on their local areas, possibly to claim a sense of belonging to it. Shedding light on the purposes of retrospective meaning-making in the context of family history, these findings reveal that this group of people is still concerned, in the present, with elaborating the *Arandora* narrative, conceivably in the hope of better understanding how the tragedy happened.

The events narrated remained for so long on the margins of history, and risked falling into oblivion, as discussed above, due to suppression of the *Arandora* narrative and the Italian community's unwillingness to communicate about it (Colpi 2020). Thus, these findings support earlier works that reported how 'the result of this silence is that even within the "old" community itself there is only a limited base of knowledge about what happened during the war' (Colpi 1991, 100). Likewise, it has been argued that 'the silence and the delayed emergence of written and oral testimonies show how memory can be partial, idealized, fragmented and distorted' (Chezzi 2014, 389). This might be due to the fact that next-of-kin of internees were not informed about the *Arandora* disaster for weeks and only some families received a notification of 'missing presumed drowned', in April 1941, when the Home Office missing list was finalised (Balestracci 2008; Colpi 2020). Consequently, memories transmitted via orality amongst family and community members were the only sources this group of people had available to attempt to reconstruct the tragedy.

With the lack of access to official documentation, the events were transmitted via word-of-mouth, as participants indicated, and this might have contributed to narrative loss through time or the creation of different tales amongst different groups of the British-Italian community. Yet there seems some biographical necessity for the narrators to bring a consistency to the narrative. Hence, as explained by Balestracci (2008, 272) 'confusion and bitterness still surround this story, which can sometimes lead to the spreading

of “legends” ... these are in fact mere stories with no historical foundation’. Nevertheless, as Balestracci also contends, the legends and myths which have arisen can help us understand

what you can eventually believe when left with nothing but anger and a sense of abandonment, as happened for so many years when nobody cared to give any news to all those people who had the right to know the truth. (2008, 272)

Lending legitimacy and authority to the participants’ understanding of the event, this paper has intended to value such acts of misremembering, as bringing recognition to groups of people that had previously been ignored. In this way, essay stresses the need for future oral history research, by recognising the impact the effect that co-producing oral history can have on the lives of individuals and communities (see Calabria 2023). Similarly, some recommendations for researchers and practitioners for future memorialisation initiatives, cultural preservation and heritage development projects are set out below.

Recently, there has been an interest in shedding light on the *Arandora* tragedy, as evidenced by the production of populist histories and works of fiction.⁹ Attempts to engage with a non-academic wider audience via novels, theatre, and the visual arts, are well documented by Colpi (2020); in spite of that, more can be done in this respect to raise awareness of the sinking and also the significance of its ‘afterlife’. I have discussed elsewhere (Palladino 2023b) how research findings can be transferred into the community via creative art practice. Specifically, museums or other heritage settings might be the most suitable contexts to collect and navigate the *Arandora* events. With this objective, new research about *Arandora* heritage could be conducted in ‘pockets of affect’, places and communities linked to the tragedy that have played a role to ‘succour, preserve and transmit the memory’ (Colpi 2020, 390). The Maritime Museum in Liverpool would be an obvious target for such an initiative, given its recently restored large-scale model of the ship on display and the *Arandora Star* memorial at the docks, from where the ship departed in 1940. This article, by raising the need for transferring knowledge of the *Arandora* sinking into the wider community, can hopefully offer suggestions for the design of heritage projects, involving ordinary people to participate in the construction of their own history.

Finally, future works in pockets of affect might include memorialisation, or elsewhere, forensic anthropology projects. For two months after the sinking, *Arandora* victims’ bodies washed ashore and were buried by locals on Hebridean islands and along Ireland’s north-west coast (Kennedy 2008; Colpi this issue). Previous research has highlighted the need for identifying the bodies that were recovered. For example, Michael McRitchie produced a four-part YouTube video (2008), about locating the Irish graves of *Arandora* victims. Although bodies were recovered, many were not identified and lie in unmarked graves (Lorenzato 2008).

Conclusion

This article contributes to the historiography of the *Arandora Star* by providing some of the memories and interpretations of descendants of victims and survivors of the Italian community in the North-East of England. Narratives pertain to anecdotes of the tragedy passed on to subsequent generations, revealing the complexity of articulating this experience. This work highlights how the events surrounding the *Arandora* sinking have been subject of a number of narratives elaborated in distorted, and sometimes invented ways.

Informing the debate on the purpose of misremembering in the oral history field, this paper identifies the imaginary reconstruction as providing access to the underlying

desires of the narrators. Instead of dismissing these ‘histories from below’ as historically unreliable, focus is on the meanings these convey, such as the need to know more about the *Arandora* sinking and the desire to retain biographical dignity for family histories. This work stresses the importance of lending legitimacy to the understanding of members of the Italian community, and by doing so, encourages ordinary people to participate in the construction of their own history. Therefore, this paper suggests further research on oral history and on heritage projects.

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Notes

- 1 Blue Star Line became famous for its all first-class passenger vessels, such as the *Arandora Star* and her sister ships, *Almeda*, *Andalucia*, *Avelona* and *Avila*.
- 2 See for example Chappell [1985] 2017; Cesarani and Kushner 1993; Dove 2005; Pistol 2017.
- 3 For recollections of survivors see also Cesarani and Kushner 1993, 229–235.
- 4 Fieldwork was conducted between June 2015 and July 2016.
- 5 Pseudonyms are used to protect participants’ confidentiality.
- 6 ‘Arandora Star Sunk by U-Boat. 1,500 Enemy Aliens on Board, Germans and Italians Fight for Lifeboats’, *The Times* 1940.
- 7 ‘British Liner Torpedoed Off Irish Coast. German and Italian Aliens on Board, Nazis Panic and Rush the Lifeboats’, *The Glasgow Herald* 1940.
- 8 Translated from Italian by the author.
- 9 See, for example, *Personality* by Andrew O’Hagan, 2010 discussed by Duncan (2022); Soffici 2017; Maffei 2019 and Scott, Ricketts and Podmore 2022.

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Italian summary

Nella storia britannico-italiana della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, ci sono numerose domande circa l'affondamento della SS Arandora Star, avvenuto il 2 luglio 1940, che ancora restano problematiche. Tuttavia, questa tragedia continua a giocare un ruolo preminente nel patrimonio culturale e nelle memorie delle comunità anglo-italiane del Regno Unito. L'articolo si concentra sulle esperienze e i ricordi dell'Arandora Star, dalla prospettiva dei membri della comunità italiana nel Nord Est dell'Inghilterra. Le narrazioni orali dei prigionieri civili italiani imbarcati sul transatlantico sono state raccolte tramite interviste qualitative tra i discendenti delle vittime e i sopravvissuti. Questo lavoro contribuisce ad accrescere la consapevolezza riguardo l'Arandora, attraverso l'articolazione delle memorie, interpretate retrospettivamente e trasmesse tra generazioni. Informando il dibattito sullo scopo dei ricordi travisati nella storia orale, questo lavoro fa luce sugli eventi e la loro ricostruzione immaginaria.

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