

## **A coratina girl and the black soldier** by Pasquale Tandoi

This story, which inaugurated the section "It happened in Corato" (edited by Professor Pasquale Tandoi) - among the most appreciated by readers – goes back 70 years.



Cornelius Lynn e Maria Nuovo col piccolo Giuseppe nella

Images of Cornelius Lynn and Maria Nuovo with the *piccolo* Giuseppe, photo published in the Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, 'A *coratina* girl and the "black" soldier'.

It's a story I got from an article in the Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno in May 1953. It was the language used in the title that caught my attention and was repeated several times in the article: the story of a black man and a woman from Bari will end with a wedding. It was language that we would call "politically incorrect" today : no present-day journalist would ever call a black man a "negro". This term was then used with the greatest of ease and did not provoke any reprobation. It was the lexical norm.

Then, while reading the article, I discovered that the Bari woman was in fact a young woman born in Corato in May 1919. It's an interesting story, worthy of being told because it was quite common in southern Italy and therefore emblematic of the wartime period. And it also has a happy ending.

The relationship between the "Negro" American soldier and the *coratina* Maria Nuovo had begun in 1945. In Corato, in September 1943, the British had arrived to drive out the Germans, then American troops came to take up their quarters in Bari. Many American

soldiers in 1945 were stationed in our city. Among other things, their heavy vehicles, especially tanks, had caused considerable damage to the road surface, to the sidewalks and to the entrance of the sports field where they were stationed.

American soldiers calmly roamed about Corato, among whom was the "black" Sergeant Cornelius Lynn, born in a Kentucky village in 1918, who had spotted Maria Nuovo, then 26 years old. Despite the *coratini* parents' strict recommendations to their daughters to stay indoors when there were "black" soldiers around, Lynn made verbal contact with Maria, who knows, perhaps after offering some chocolate or a pack of gum, a tin of meat or a cigarette. Or maybe after some appreciation, like "Beautiful girl!", the girl had fought off this attempt, but smiled. More fleeting exchanges followed, during which the sergeant, without too many words, also because they were Anglo-American, asked her to marry him. The new would-be wife was confused by this statement and ran off without responding. But when the "Negro" persisted during the following days, Maria did not know how to resist and began a relationship that would "bear fruit" in 1946, in the form of a "mulatto" to whom the name of Giuseppe was given. But long before Joseph was born, Sergeant Lynn had left to reach his new destination, Darmstadt, Germany, where the 465th U.S. Artillery Battalion was located.

One can easily imagine the scandal, the double scandal, that the birth of this child, out of wedlock and a mulatto, the son of a "negro" who had disappeared from circulation, caused in Corato.

Poor Maria, exposed to public ridicule, was forced to abandon Corato and move to Bari, where she found a job in the Manifattura Tabacchi, while little Giuseppe was entrusted to the charitable works Institute "Strada Bianca" in Rome.

For a long time, Maria Nuovo had no news of the "black" seducer. She had resigned herself to the fact that it had been the "fun" of a soldier at war. Then Cornelius began to appear with a few letters, sometimes with gift packages. In April 1953, came the big surprise. Maria received a letter in which Sergeant Lynn said he wanted to marry her immediately, without wasting any more time. Maria replied with a telegram in which she expressed her joy at the request.

Having received the nuptial assent, the good Cornelius, still stationed in Germany, got into his car, "a luxurious and powerful Chevrolet" (noted the *Gazetta del Mezzogiorno*), and headed for Italy pushing hard to reach Bari as soon as possible. Lynn stopped his car only when he found himself in front of number 49 of Via Bovio, where both Maria and Giuseppe lived. Giuseppe, who was now seven years old, and his mother had taken him in a few days before from the Roman Institute. The meeting aroused much emotion even in the neighborhood.

The documents were ready, and the wedding was celebrated in Bari in the evangelical church of Corso Sonnino on May 14 (Maria was born on the same day and month) in 1953. At the end of the ceremony, the little family left for Germany, where the sergeant had to finish his military appointment. Then they would move to the United States, where Lynn would resume his job as an auto mechanic.

Best wishes, Maria! You really needed it. The America of the 50s and 60s was terribly racist. Even back there, deep in Kentucky, you were probably taunted for being a *white woman* who married a *Negro*.

