



Closing ceremony of 50th anniversary

Speech of Alberto Colombo

Town hall of Olgiate Olona – December 12, 2009

Today the words are coming out of my mouth but they are springing from my heart. I thank you all. I thank the mayor: the commemoration of 50th anniversary would not have taken place without his support. I thank the "three graces" who worked more than all behind the scenes for this event: Enrica Ferrazzi, Lucia Barbarotta, Laura Testa. I thank my colleagues of the mass media who told with empathy how Olgiate Olona commemorated a page of History. One of them wrote that today I have a surprise for everyone of you: the surprises are more than one indeed and my emotion is not one of them. I do not thank the "poor reporters" of prealpine and domestic weekly newspapers who - supposedly Christians - mocked Olgiate Olona and dishonored the dead, the living, the disabled people by ignoring and / or mistreating the 50th anniversary.

People of Olgiate Olona never forgot what happened on Friday June 26, 1959: the memory of that tragedy – which miraculously saved the town - is very much alive. This is testified by the people present here on October 11, 2008, on June 26, 2009 and today: they are the real protagonists of the "journey of memory" – personal and collective - also appreciated by the President of the Italian Republic and the President of Council of Ministers.

My first book provided the "journey of memory" with "essential elements" only. It was a venture faced whatever the outcome but I had enough time to do it and the serenity of those ones who believe that nothing in life happens by chance and everything is Providence. While I was thinking about it I read the words of French anthropologist Marc Augé: a book is an experience of death, you cannot redo it, and only the unexpected flukes and guessed writings make an author conscious of being able to express what he wanted to make people understand.

Well, my work is not experience of death. No one could imagine the continuation of that literary work but immediately many people gave life to that book with their own emotions; they have handed down the history and honored the victims, the relatives, the rescuers, the eyewitnesses: some of them are present today and for all the volume was consolatory.

Three things impressed me, this is the first one: relatives of victims thanked me, and they all have used – without knowing it – the same words, *God bless you!*

This blessing is for all those people who have taken to heart not only a book but History.

All that – nor the flukes or the guessed writings – generated the priceless gift that I received from you and that I'm thanking you for: I managed in expressing more than I wanted you to understand.

You deserve an applause!

The book is so alive that other “essential elements” have arisen from people. So, here is the book commemorating the 50th anniversary: full of witness, including those who remember the loved ones whose spirit rose toward immortality on June 26, 1959.

This book is useful, indeed indispensable for the “journey of memory”. I love this book more than my first one. I wanted the cover to be just like it is, the “negative” of the first cover, with the Super Constellation inside the 50th anniversary logo and a color photomontage of the children of Olgiate Olona carrying the Country flags of the victims from “via 26 Giugno” street: they are continuing the “journey of memory”, they are the future of Olgiate Olona that commemorates the History!

I chose this picture, because I was moved by the commemoration of June 26, 2009 and because the second thing that so much impressed me has happened: a simple story from Olgiate Olona. It is the story of mother Francesca and grandmother Piera who told me several times with maternal embarrassment: *Our Tommaso is so passionate about the history and the book to leaf through it and to have it read by us many times; he wants one copy with a dedication just for him.* Tommaso's desire has been fulfilled. I wish him and new generations of Olgiate Olona: *commemorate the History and have a life full of satisfaction and happiness.*

I am moved by this simple story: it resembles the story of another child to which the tale of the plane crash was handed down orally by his granny mainly; his name is Alberto...

In short, the venture has succeeded. Because it came from the desire to do something good and useful for Olgiate Olona. I was realizing that I was achieving my goal not when many people were praising me but when they were suggesting me: *Alberto go ahead!*

Most of all, the relatives of the victims: I looked for them all, some I found and I listened to. Heart to heart, not face to face meetings: silences, words, glances, emotions which generate indelible bonds.

Yeah, the bonds. They asked me *Alberto, what did you do in the end?* I replied: I created new bonds and restored some others. Bonds between my town and a history now forgotten; bonds between “essential elements” of a literary work; bonds between the drafting of the book and the eyewitnesses of the tragedy; bonds between the people struck by fatality and people of Olgiate Olona, shocked by that same fatality but miraculously saved; bonds between the relatives of the victims and the rescuers, unknown for decades but joined by dignified ability of resignation; bonds with the mayor and those who organized the commemoration of the 50th anniversary just to make something good and useful for Olgiate Olona; bonds between the commemoration of the past and a sign of solidarity in the present to perpetuate the memory of the past into the future.

But life means creating new bonds and restoring old ones...

In his famous book French poet and pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry – who died while in flight - tells of the relationship between the fox and the little prince. The fox explains to the prince that creating bonds makes life brighter, with friends who become unique in the world and which you can die for; and he reveals his secret: *It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.* So the fox convinces the prince: *Look! You see the grain-fields down yonder? I do not eat bread. Wheat is of no use to me. The wheat fields have nothing to say to me. And that is sad. But you have hair that is the colour of gold. Think how wonderful that will be when you have tamed me! The grain, which is also golden, will bring me back the thought of you. And I shall love to listen to the wind in the wheat...* And the fox replies to the prince who is asking it what it gains: *I gain the colour of wheat.*

Today I ask you, you who are deeply bound to this page of History: is it possible for our hearts to see the essential that is invisible to our eyes? Is there the wheat gaining color in creating bonds in Olgiate Olona too?

Friday June 26, 2009, this is what I saw: hundreds of women and men wrote a new page in History with two simple gestures but as big as the universe; they honored the memory of seventy lives and their generosity made the "miracle" of a sign of solidarity, the "Ape" car for the "Carletti" cooperative whose guys and volunteers put all their efforts and hearts in the Commemoration. This thing impressed me so much.

Now an "Ape" car is "flying" over the houses and in the streets of Olgiate Olona: it's a sign in memory of the victims, a sign that bring consolation to people who mourn their loved ones.

It's up to us to grow the bonds created and restored with such persons: the *colour of wheat* depends on us!

This "Ape" car calls to mind the indescribable emotions of June 26, 2009, a day made memorable by hundreds of people: even for those who did not attend the commemoration. On that day a great international and ecumenical embrace filled up the geographical distances, it alleviated the psychological wounds, it confirmed the eternal repose of those who fatally died, and it donated moments of consolation to those affected by the disaster.

Remembering the disaster on that day had settled the debt with History and granted to all those present - victims, relatives, rescuers, eyewitnesses, people from Olgiate Olona and all the other ones – to rest in peace and harmony.

We were present here on October 11, 2008, aware that a book was not enough to remember. We were here on June 26, 2009. We are here today convinced that the "journey of memory" goes on and is not the same as before: we stay under this sky and seventy immortal lives are guiding our way, as stars that we feel close and present.

I said I don't believe in chance. And today I received this letter:

Dear Mr. Colombo, I am Ann Rey Clam, daughter of Jesus John Rey and Anna Genova Rey, sister of Manuel E. Rey, neice of Josephina Fuda and cousin of Dominic Fuda, all who perished in the Airplane Crash of June 26, 1959. I did not know of the Memorial in

Olgiate Olona, Italy. Angelo Capozzi and his mother told me of this wonderful tribute to my family and of your book. My cousin, Annamaria Zanatta, of Treviso, Italy, purchased two books when I informed her of this being available and she sent a copy to me. I have kept in contact with Angelo's mother, Louise Armanetti Capozzi, who tells me that there will be a closing ceremony on December 12, 2009 and I wish I could travel to be there, however, I am 80 years old and do not travel much anymore. I wish I had known of all the tributes bestowed upon the memory of my loving family and find comfort in knowing they are remembered in Olgiate Olona.

I remember the day on June 1, 1959, when I drove them to the Airport in Chicago where they boarded and were very happy to be going back to Spain (where my father was from) and to Italy (where the other relations were). Our family was a close and loving family and the traditions handed down to me are endearing and passed on to my children. I was pregnant at the time with my fourth child and almost lost her because of the tragedy we faced on that horrid day. My two older children remember their grandparents and uncle and all, but the younger ones never had the opportunity to know them except for the stories and the Ravioli we make as my Mother did many years ago and now my grandchildren gather with my children and we all make them together during the Holidays. I have my cousins in Treviso I email and correspond with often. Thank you very much for writing your book. It was consoling to know that people cared when it happened and felt our loss. I cannot understand all the book, however, Manuel's wife, Dolores, and Manuel's two sons are trying to decipher some of it.

I would appreciate it if any correspondence about the events and books happening in Olgiate Olona be sent to me.

And again, not by chance, I received this email today at 11:54:

Dear Mr. Alberto Colombo, my name is Kathleen Ellis and I am the youngest daughter of one of the TWA pilots, Frank W. Ellis. I was almost 2 years old and my sister, Susan, was 3 when my father's flight crashed in Olgiate Olona in 1959. Growing up there was very little information about what had happened beyond what my mother knew and passed on to us. When I was in high school I remember going to the library and searching through microfiche for any articles that may have existed and again found very little. Finally, I started a career in the airline industry hoping to learn a little more about who my father was and what kind of life he had. I have worked for Continental Airlines now for over 25 years. Through the years my sister has been more diligent in searching the web for any information. In July she found an article about a man, Don Lueke, who had attended the 50th anniversary of the disaster and whose father was also one of the pilots. She contacted the article's editor and Mr. Lueke soon sent her an email and they have exchanged several since. Not having my father has been such a solitary thing, something family and close friends knew about. I had no idea the effect it had on the people living there and those involved in assisting. Until the articles about the 50th anniversary were posted I had believed the plane to have gone down in the city of Milan. My sister and I have talked about visiting Italy and if we had known about the June Ceremony would have gone then. We still plan on coming either this summer or next. Please extend my deepest most heartfelt gratitude to the people of Olgiate Olona on behalf of myself and my

sister for the care and consideration given the victims at the time of the disaster and for not forgetting throughout the years. Knowing that there were people there at the site at the time that cared for those they had never met brings me a peace I carry within my heart now and always.

The man mentioned by Kathleen Ellis is Donald Edward Lueke, who came from the United States with his wife for attending the Commemoration of 50th anniversary.

He wrote in his *Letter to the people of Olgiate Olona*:

We were really overwhelmed by your generosity and hospitality. We wish to express our gratitude to each of you, especially those who have worked so hard to establish, build, and maintain the monument itself and the ceremony of June 26, 2009. It was obviously a labor of love. The events of that fateful day in 1959 have joined the victims, their families, and the people of Olgiate Olona together in a "family" that extends across the world, with the hometown being Olgiate Olona. We would like to return someday; but even if we do not we will always hold the memory of visit in our hearts and you in our prayers.

I have read these testimonies of relatives of the victims not because these are the most important, but because these have come from far away and because - being received today - do not appear in the commemorative volume; as you will read, all the testimony of the victims' relatives - some of whom have honored us with their presence here today and I thank them - are significant and poignant.

We are the family that has Olgiate Olona as hometown: fathers, mothers, children, brothers and sisters who have searched and found each other in memory of the accident. Whenever the bonds of the family will grow, God will bless us!
So be it.