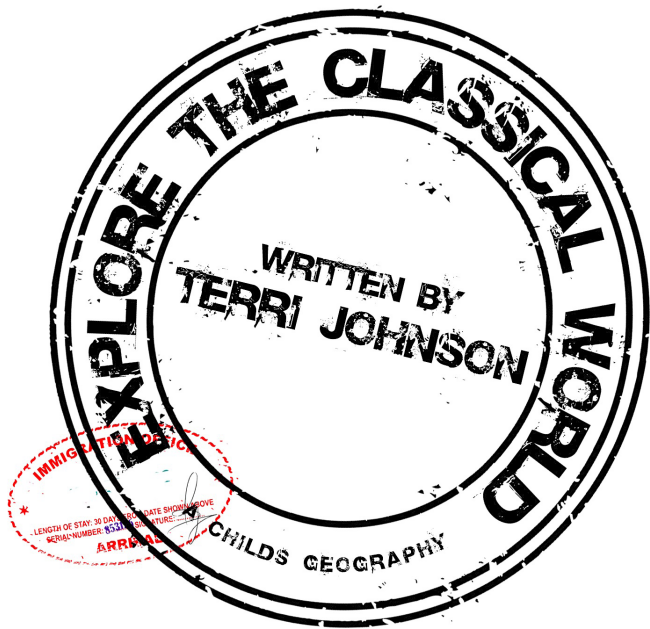


A CHILD'S GEOGRAPHY Volume III

Bonus Ebook:
THAT DECISIVE BATTLE





THAT DECISIVE BATTLE:

How One Little Town Brought an End to the Great War



Photo of Trenitalia train was taken by Niki J. Photography, all rights reserved.

The train glided along well-worn tracks through sleepy town after sleepy Italian town. We—my daughter and I—had left the watery city of Venice earlier that day and were now traveling north into unfamiliar territory. When it comes to Italy, Venice is on the map. Literally. Nearly every map of Italy shows Venice. But Vittorio Veneto—our

next destination—is rarely labeled on a map of Italy. However, we knew we were going the right direction and were on the right train, so the anticipation began to build.

Vittorio Veneto is a small town that most people have never heard of before, and yet, it has played a significant part in Italian history—world history, in fact. I am excited to tell you the story. To learn it, though, you must come along with me on my journey—my journey into territory that is well off the beaten path and yet loaded with historical treasure.

In April of 2013, my daughter, Nicole, and I had the amazing privilege to visit the countries of Slovenia, Italy and Greece. We saw some incredible sights, sights you would expect a traveler to this part of the world to see—the Colosseum, the Parthenon, the Vatican, David, the Doge's Palace... And yet, perhaps our biggest and best surprise came when we decided to visit some friends in Vittorio Veneto.

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The funny thing is, they weren't friends yet. We were invited by the parents of our friends here in the states to come visit them in Italy. We had never met them before, but I couldn't resist the invitation to spend some time with a local Italian family since I was writing a book about Italy. Here's the other funny thing... She, Cecilia, is Italian, born and raised in Vittorio Veneto. Carl, on the other hand, is a tall Texan who met Cecilia in Italy over 40 years ago while proudly serving with the United States Air Force at the air base in Aviano.

I figured they would be pretty easy to identify once we disembarked from our train in Vittorio Veneto. However, we were slightly nervous about getting off at the right town. This was more of a challenge than it sounds. We knew that our stop was the last one before this train crossed the Alps. However, without intercom announcements or visible road signs, we weren't sure how we would recognize the last stop unless we actually missed it!

This unpredictable regional train stopped in every town it passed through and then some. Some stations were well marked; others were not. Sometimes the train stopped at the crossing of two country roads out in the middle of nowhere. This train acted more like a country bus than any train I had ever ridden before!

Outside our window, the terrain was flat, but up ahead, I could see the steep mountain cliffs of the Pre-alps rising up from the valley floor. We needed to get off this train soon or next thing we'd know, we'd be on our way through the long mountain tunnels that lead into Austria.



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Thankfully, as the train pulled into Vittorio Veneto, it was easy to recognize that this was indeed our stop. There on the platform stood a petite, white-haired, beautiful Italian woman and a tall handsome Texan wearing a wide-brimmed hat. We'd found our new friends.

Carlo (as his friends call him affectionately here) and Cecilia escorted us through the park to their apartment just a couple blocks from the train station. Our great adventure and some wonderful surprises were about to begin.

Over the course of the next two days, we walked up and down the length of the town and learned about a history that we had never heard about. We walked on roads over 2,000 years old, climbed up stairways to a fortress about the same age and through the halls of a medieval castle not quite as ancient. We learned about a people, strong and resilient, who, although once subdued by Romans, attacked by barbarians, then later Venetians, ultimately saved their country from a much-later Austrian invasion, bringing an end to the Great War.

Here's how it happened...

A Tale of Two Cities

Perhaps like me, you think the name Vittorio Veneto is an odd name. With two words in its name, it seems too long. Well, it used to be two cities, but their names were not Vittorio and Veneto. That would make sense, right, but those weren't their names. The names of the two original towns were Ceneda and Serravalle. Let me tell you about these old and fascinating towns and how they were awarded a new name.



The word Ceneda comes from an ancient Celtic word, *kenet*, which means “high” or “noble”. The Celts and Veneti occupied this area in ancient times before the Romans swept in. When the Romans arrived, they built a large fortress at the base of the imposing mountains to defend their border. It was called a **castrum**, which meant “great legionary encampment”. So, the castrum was used as a large military base to house legionnaires for the Roman army. Large parts of the fortress still remain...

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A short distance from the Roman fortress lay the town of Ceneda, which became a roman city involved in trade and support to the Roman Empire. After the fall of the empire and the rise of the Church, this town at the foot of the Pre-Alps was chosen to be the capital of a duchy, which encompassed a large region of northeast Italy. As the capital, it became the seat of authority for the bishop (also known as the duke) and the location of the cathedral church. Up on the hill, overlooking the town, a mighty castle was built for the duke and his church business. This castle still stands in all its glory and it is still the private home of the residing bishop, over a thousand years later. The most famous and well-loved bishop to preside over the see was John Paul I, who later became Pope.



Photo of Castello di San Martino was taken by Niki J. Photography, all rights reserved.

The other town was named Serravalle. It did not exist until the 12th century. It sprung up very close to the original town of Ceneda beneath the shadow of the old roman castrum ruins. This close proximity to Ceneda led to tensions and conflicts between the two towns. However, Serravalle and Ceneda continued to thrive as separate towns, each with their own identity and purpose.

Serravalle was a classic medieval town; tall multi-storied buildings built close together leaving twisted narrow alleyways and small cobblestone roads for pedestrians and horse-drawn wagons to maneuver through. In fact, the original builders of the town re-purposed an old roman road as the center thoroughfare through town. Serravalle reached the height of its splendor as a medieval center of art and trade during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

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After centuries of co-existing as two separate, but growing, towns that were colliding into one another and blurring city lines, Ceneda and Serravalle merged as one city in 1866. This was the year that the twenty separate regions of Italy became united as one country, the Kingdom of Italy. The man credited for this unification is King Vittorio Emanuele II. So now, you know where half of the name came from—the first name of the king. The name of the unified city was in honor of this king, Vittorio Emanuele. Veneto is the name of this northeast region of Italy, so the city was awarded the full name of Vittorio Veneto. However, it wasn't until 1918, the end of the Great War, that this name would achieve its real and lasting significance.

So, these are the two cities. Are you ready to explore? Let me show you around...

The Keys to the Castle

After our arrival in Vittorio Veneto, the half once known as Serravalle, we met with a delightful woman named Caterina. Caterina is the niece of Cecilia and she agreed to show us around town. With a thick Italian accent but perfect grammatical English, Caterina brought dry textbook facts of a place completely foreign to us to spectacular life.



Photo of Flaminio Square was taken by Niki J. Photography, all rights reserved.

That Decisive Battle

We met Caterina at an outdoor café in the middle of Flaminio Square in the heart of old town Serravalle. We ordered cappuccinos and the five of us circled a tiny table to talk. We learned shortly into the conversation that Caterina is a leader of a group called Eleven Degrees. Eleven Degrees is an organization dedicated to preserving the history of Vittorio Veneto—a history that might otherwise be lost to us. We had no idea the secrets that Caterina knew or the keys that she held, but we would soon find out.

Sipping our foamy cappuccinos, we soaked in the medieval atmosphere of Serravalle's old square. It was the first Sunday of the month, which meant that a large antique street market was in full swing. Looking above the crowds, however, we could see that this old medieval town had been very well preserved. In fact, midway up the bell tower, a beautiful 24-hour clock, one of the oldest on the entire European continent, testified to the lateness of the afternoon.

“Come,” said Caterina, “I have much to show you!”



Scooting our chairs back in, we weaved our way out of the café and across the square. Beside the clock tower is the museum, the outside still boasting its original paint job—a work of art that has withstood the passing of hundreds of years. A pattern of pomegranates, an ancient fruit from Persia brought to Europe by the Romans who called it the Punic Apple, suggests vitality and royalty. Most of the buildings look whitewashed, but Caterina points out the vibrant paintings under the ledges of the windows and balconies. In medieval times, residents threw their waste and dirty water from



Photo of the painter's “signature” underneath the balcony was taken by Niki J. Photography, all rights reserved.

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their windows into the streets. The corrosive nature of this dirty water stripped the buildings of their gloriously painted exteriors. Only the sections hidden beneath the ledges and balconies were preserved over time. The original painters knew this would happen, so they painted themselves under the ledges, like leaving their signatures for generations to come. The forward thinking of these medieval masters amazed me.

After craning our necks for a time to gaze upon the “signatures” of these painters, we look down and begin our walk up a road leading to the old roman fortress. Caterina points out that we are walking on the original roman road from the second century BC. I stop dead in my tracks.

“Are you kidding me?” I ask.

“Oh no, I am not kidding” Caterina replies. “It was originally used by the Romans during the 2nd century Before Christ when the castrum was built and used to defend the border. Later, it was covered by earth for hundreds of years and then uncovered once again when the town of Serravalle was built during the 12th and 13th centuries AD.”

I am stunned. To think that I was walking on a road that had existed before the time of Christ was absolutely amazing!

Caterina looks at me seriously, “Terri, here in Italy, we find it astonishing that Americans are so surprised by old artifacts, buildings and ruins. We do not know anything different. We are surrounded by ancient history every day of our lives. We take our long history for granted, I think. We see our old things with new eyes when your eyes grow big with amazement.”

For a moment, we smile at each other, realizing how our difference in culture helps us to appreciate what we have just a little bit more.



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Enjoying her captivated audience, Caterina shows us more of the medieval town, including original frescoes from the 14th century and the ancient church of San Giovanni Battista. We talk in hushed tones inside the church, appreciating the artwork on the walls and the ceiling, and then step back out into the fading afternoon light.

As we retrace our footsteps back to the center of town, we enjoy a wonderful surprise. We had seen the roman castrum and medieval castle up on the hill on our way to the church and thought that that was perhaps the best view of it that we would get. To our delight, Caterina turns us onto a gravel drive and we head in the direction of the castle.

When we reach the portcullis, Caterina reaches into a secret place and says, “Shhhh... don’t tell anyone where we hide the key.”

As the modern-ish portcullis is raised and we enter the grounds, Caterina explains a bit more about this fortress. While it was once a Roman defensive outpost during the years of the Roman Empire, it fell into disrepair after the sack of the barbarians. A few towers and ruins remain giving testament to a well-organized defense system and large spacious grounds for housing great numbers of legionaries. After hundreds of years of nonuse and the wearing down of walls and towers by nature and man, it was rebuilt into a castle during the 12th century by princes from the royal da Camino family.



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Much of that castle still stands today—gatehouse and towers; curtain walls and battlements; a keep and the great hall.

Today, the old castle has been refurbished inside, and outside the grounds and gardens beautifully landscaped, by its current owners who have turned the place into an extraordinary bed and breakfast retreat.

But no one is here today and we have the place to ourselves. Caterina shows us all around the place, both inside and out. I decide that if I ever come back to Vittorio Veneto, I would like to spend at least one night right here, looking out from a tower window as the sun sets behind the jutting pre-alpine mountains. It truly is a remarkable place.

Caterina informs us that once a year Eleven Degrees holds a medieval faire right here on the lawn of the castle grounds. That sounds like a marvelous historical event to me!

Oh, Eleven Degrees... I still have not told you what that means. Let me explain...

After we leave the castle, we walk back to Flaminio Square and cross to the other side. Glinting in the fading golden light of evening is the chilly Meschio River, which runs right through the heart of Vittorio Veneto. Caterina shows us a cutout in the wall where women used to bring their laundry down to the river to wash.

Eleven Degrees

“Touch the water,” she instructs.

We do. It’s cold, as I would have expected in April from glacial run-off in the mountains.

“How cold do you think the water is?” she asks.

“Oh, maybe 50 degrees,” I answer.

She looks at me with wide eyes. “50 degrees? Really?”



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Photo of the Meschio River was taken by Niki J. Photography, all rights reserved.

That's when I remember the Fahrenheit v. Celsius problem and correct myself. "Oh, I mean 50 degrees Fahrenheit."

"Oh, yes, I see what you mean. No, no, I mean Celsius." We work out our calculations and decide that my guess must be about 10 or 11 degrees Celsius.

"Excellent, very good!" she exclaims and claps her hands. "Yes, it is exactly 11 degrees! It is always 11 degrees, in summer and in winter. It is the consistency of this water temperature that makes the Meschio River so special. You see, back in medieval times, the forgers of blades needed a water temperature of exactly 11 degrees to make the strongest, yet most flexible, blades. The swords that were forged with the water from this river were the finest swords in Europe. Princes and powers from all over Italy and all over Europe, all the way to England, would order and buy Serravalle blades because they were the best the world had ever known."

"Do you not see? That is why we call our organization Eleven Degrees. We chose the name because it was the Meschio River with its consistent 11 degree water that made Serravalle such a prosperous and important town during the Middle Ages."

That Decisive Battle



How remarkable that such a small detail, such as the temperature of the river, could make such a difference for this small town.

With the last light of day fading fast, we decide that it is time to find a good restaurant for dinner where we can talk about what we have learned and just enjoy each other's company a little while longer. My heart is warmed as I watch Cila (Cecilia's nickname, as she is called affectionately by her friends) hook her arm through Nicole's. They chat like old friends as we meander down a quaint cobblestone alley—a short-cut to our next destination.

As we approach the restaurant, we walk through a tunnel over which the old hospital extends. The wall of the building is torn up by bullet holes and Carlo points this out.

“Those bullet holes are from the Great War, which we know as World War I” he says. “Caterina has told you about the importance of this town during medieval times, but she hasn't told you how this town brought an end to the Great War in modern times.”

“How about we talk about that over dinner,” she winks.

The Ending of the Great War

Inside the Trattoria de Giraffe, we are escorted to a quiet room in the back. Again, it seems, we have the place to ourselves. After devouring bowls of radicchio di fagioli and delicious gnocchi, the dishes are cleared and we dive back into our history discussion.

Cecilia starts, “Caterina, tell them what led up to the Battle of Vittorio Veneto.”

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“The year was 1917. Italy was hotly engaged with the Austro-Hungarian army at the Battle of Caporetto, not far from Venice. During that battle, the Italian army lost over 300,000 men and was forced to withdraw. The Italian troops were re-organized at the Piave defensive line. In June of the following year, a large Austro-Hungarian offensive was launched to break the Piave defensive line, so that they could enter Lombardy and then attack Venice and the rest of the Veneto region from two sides. However, the Italians held their position and the attack came to worse than nothing as the attackers lost 100,000 men in the fight.

Allied commanders tried to persuade the Italian general to fight back immediately, but General Armando Diaz insisted on patience, delaying until Italy could strike back with almost certain success. His patience and persistence paid off. On October 24th 1918, the one-year anniversary of the Battle of Caporetto, Diaz launched his campaign from Vittorio, cutting off communications between two Austrian armies. The Austro-Hungarian commander ordered a counter-attack, but his troops refused to obey.

With Allied forces totaling 57 infantry divisions, including 51 Italian, 3 British, 2 French and 1 each from Czechoslovakia and the United States, they continued to advance into the Austrian lines and took nearly half a million prisoners-of-war. The Austro-Hungarians asked for an **armistice**, which means an end to the fighting, and the Italians agreed. The armistice was signed on November 3rd.

With the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, this Italian victory not only ended the war in Italy, but was also instrumental in bringing an official end to the Great War less than two weeks later.



Photo of the Meschio River was taken by Niki J. Photography, all rights reserved.

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In 1923, Vittorio was renamed Vittorio Veneto, which translated means, “Victor of Veneto”. This little town played a role in the decisive battle that ended World War I. Streets all throughout Italy were renamed “Vittorio Veneto” in honor of the little town with the big history that played a significant role in world-wide events.

History is Everywhere

“So that’s our town,” Cecilia beams.

“What do you think?” asks Caterina.

“I wish we could stay a few more days!” Nicole sighs as she packs away her camera for the night.
“There is so much to absorb.”



Photo of the castle lawn and Old Serravalle homes was taken by Niki J. Photography, all rights reserved.

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“I think it’s amazing!” I reply. “So much history, more than 2,000 years, in such a small space. And to think that we never got in a car, just walked from one special place to another. Thank you so much for inviting us here and for showing us around.”

“You can return the favor,” Carl smiles with a twinkle in his eye. “When we come to Oregon next fall to visit our family, you can show us something of your history there.”

My mind starts going a mile a minute as I think about the Oregon Trail, the McLoughlin House, Philip Foster Farm, Fort Stevens, and Lewis and Clark.

“You bet! I would love to show you around.”

Caterina smiles and kisses us on both cheeks. “My cousin has been trying to convince me to visit the United States for years. Maybe I’ll come too.”

It’s a perfect ending to an eye-opening day where evidence of past events was found around every corner. Who knows what tomorrow holds, but I am convinced of this... History is everywhere. We just have to open our eyes to find it.

The End

