



## Generali on two war fronts

The Generali Group was deeply scarred by World War I with heavy human losses on both sides. Numerous artworks commissioned by the Company remember the sacrifice of its fallen employees, testifying to the importance of memory.

*by Marco Marizza*

Soldiers advancing in battle — National Library of Scotland

PHOTO: ERNEST BROOKS



Ceremony of inauguration of the Memorial to the Fallen, Trieste, 1926 — Courtesy of: Archivio Storico Assicurazioni Generali, Versamenti, scheda 28264

Memorial to the Fallen for Italy of Assicurazioni Generali in the Great War, 1926 — Courtesy of: Archivio Storico Assicurazioni Generali, Versamenti, OGG001114928



Plaque commemorating the fallen of the Direzione Veneta (1923) — Courtesy of: Archivio Storico Assicurazioni Generali, Versamenti, OGG001114928

## REMEMBERING THE FALLEN OF GENERALI IN THE GREAT WAR

During World War I, Assicurazioni Generali suffered major losses on both the fighting fronts. The running of agencies and managing offices was made difficult by many employees being called to

Italy. The Budapest office suffered the highest number of victims – over half of the total – while others came from all the Company’s main seats within the Habsburg Empire (Trieste, Vienna, Graz, Prague, Bratislava, Lviv).

In the years that followed the end of the war, the memory of the fallen on the losing side was considered untimely,

protocol of March 18 of the same year. On Sunday July 10, 1921 after the Board of Administration convened, Lorenzo Romeo Carmelich, who then managed the general agency of Trieste, received a large-size Italian flag and a bronze plaque symbolizing the reunification of Trieste and Trento to Rome. The initiative had been promoted by the owners of the Turin agency, Riccardo De Angeli and Enrico Rossi, with the support of 200 other agencies across Italy.

On June 3, 1923, a bronze plaque commemorating the eleven fallen who worked at the Direzione Veneta was unveiled in Venice. To contribute to the commemoration, the Trieste colleagues held a voluntary fundraiser to collect the necessary money for a bronzed laurel crown to be placed under the tombstone. As a letter dated April 26 of the same year shows, the event prompted others to follow the example and do something similar for the fallen of Trieste.

Before its actuation, the project remained at the planning stage for several years. On January 15, 1926, Angelo Ara, then co-director of the Head Office, wrote a letter to sculptor Gigi Supino, who had already been appointed to make the bust sculpture in honor of President Marco Besso. Ara asked him to study possible options for a commemorative plaque for the fallen of World War I. The monument would be placed under the Statue of the Foresight by Ivan Rendić, located at the bottom of the honor staircase in the entrance of Palazzo Geiringer in Piazza Duca degli Abruzzi, the Company’s historic headquarters.

Of note is the choice of sculptors for all these works, who were all deeply involved in World War I. The plaque for the Trieste agency had been the work of Giacomo Buzzi Reschini, born 1881, a war veteran and author of other war memorials. Giannino Castiglioni, the creator of the work placed at the Venice

### The business internationalization in place at the time, brought Group Generali on both fronts before World War I

arms and several others falling in war, becoming disabled or suffering injuries in their bodies and souls. Others were imprisoned or interned.

On the Austro-Hungarian side there were at least 45 casualties among fighters in various fronts, in Serbia, Halychyna, Bukovina, Transylvania and

to say the least, due to the political scenario. Several celebrations marked the victory and the 14 employees who died in battle on Italy’s side. Already in 1920, for instance, the Head Office contributed with 5000 liras to the building of the Victory Lighthouse in Trieste, as can be read in the executive



Sketches by Gigi Supino for the memorial, Milan 1926 — Courtesy of: Archivio Storico Assicurazioni Generali, Versamenti, OGG001114928

office, cooperated with Giovanni Greppi several years later on the planning of several military cemeteries for World War I victims, including those of Mount Grappa, Redipuglia and Caporetto. Finally, Supino, a Genoese of Triestine origin on his mother's side, born 1893, fought in Carso as an artillery official and was awarded with a Medal of Valor.

Supino submitted three different sketches. The first contained an allegory of peace, family, and the land symbolized by a woman holding a child and a horn of plenty, protected on each side by two wounded fighters carrying a shield. The second commemorated the liberation of Trieste and featured a female figure representing Italy, holding a winged Nike and standing on a chariot escorted by soldiers in front of another female figure, Trieste, with her arms reaching forward and her chains broken. The last one showed the winged Glory blessing and protecting the fighters

and the fallen, represented by three soldiers with a bow, a sword and a spear, the latter ideally separating the earthly from the divine. The choice fell on the third proposal given its simple, straightforward message. Supino himself expressed his preference towards a composition of multiple subjects, so as to counterbalance the unity of the Statue of the Foresight located by the staircase. An inscription was placed on the right side of the sculpture, carrying the names of the fallen in indexed letters adjacent to the figures, 'as in the ancient bas-reliefs' the sculptor said. On the top, engraved in marble, the original carried an inscription which read, 'Onore ai caduti nostri nella guerra di redenzione MCMXV – MCMXVIII' (Honoring the fallen in the liberation war MCMXV – MCMXVIII), also in red painted letters. The eleven names from the Direzione Veneta were joined by three employees of the Head Office, namely Roberto Liebmann, Riccardo



Plaque donated to the general agency of Trieste, in Le Assicurazioni, Milan, 1921 — Courtesy of: Archivio Storico Assicurazioni Generali, Versamenti, OGG001114928

Magris and Luigi Muran. All had taken part in the most crucial phases of the war and fought on different fronts (Carso, Adamello, Grappa, Piave, Vittorio Veneto); some were volunteers, as well as Irredentists, officers and private soldiers. For several years after the war ended, Generali continued to provide for the neediest families of some of the fallen.

Angelo Ara directly coordinated all the activities related to the initiative, from the contacts with the sculptor to the collection of information on the fallen and the careful planning of the ceremony, while keeping President Edgardo Morpurgo up to date. The technical issues concerning the placing of the monument were monitored by Giorgio Polli, an engineer and consultant for the Company's property management. November 4, the anniversary of the victory was the chosen date for the official presentation, but due to a shipping mistake the sculpture was

delivered to Florence, and the event had to be postponed. The ceremony was therefore held at 12.30 on Monday December 20, 1926, the anniversary of the death of Guglielmo Oberdan. In his speech, Morpurgo remembered the ventures of these soldiers and the circumstances of their deaths. In addition to civil and military representatives, the families of the fallen and the Head Office employees, the event saw the participation of Maria Bergamas who in 1921, in representation of the mothers and widows of war, had been asked to choose among eleven unknown casualties the fallen soldier to be buried in Rome at the Altar of the Fatherland.

Today, the main entrance of Palazzo Geiringer looks very different as the staircase was removed in 1966 and the whole section of the palace was redesigned. But the bronze sculpture still stands in memory of all those who sacrificed their lives for Italy.