

War In Italy

& The Italian Rescue of the Jews

Few people outside of Italy are aware of the extraordinary Italian rescue of the Jews during World War II. Until the German occupation of Italy in September 1943, Italy had protected Italian Jews and non-Italian Jews seeking refuge from the Holocaust. After the occupation, Nazi efforts to deport the Italian Jews were heroically resisted until the defeat of Germany in 1945.

Italy was a neutral country until it entered the War on the Axis side in 1940. Between 1940 and 1943, despite being on the Axis side, Italy was a haven for Jewish refugees from Nazi occupied areas of Europe. During those years, a diplomatic struggle between Italy and Germany took place over Nazi demands for the extradition of Jewish refugees under Italian control.

But no Jews were deported as long as Italy was a sovereign nation. Mussolini, the Italian leader, refused to even permit Hitler to deport Italian Jews in Germany to concentration camps nor would the Italian government extradite German Jews who had fled to Italy. The Italian military protected non-Italian Jews in the Italian occupied areas of France, Yugoslavia and Greece. The areas occupied by Italian troops became refugee centers for Jews in those countries. The SS general in France complained that "The Italian is and has been incomprehensible. Italian military authorities and Italian police protect the Jews in every way they can."

But in September, 1943, an Armistice was declared between Italy and the Allies and Italy withdrew from the war. The German Army quickly occupied a disarmed Italy from the North and the Allied Army invaded from the South. From September 1943 until the end of May, 1945, Italy suffered the disaster of being occupied by two almost evenly matched conquering armies at war with each other and the peninsula became a brutal and bloody battleground.

In September 1943, about 45,000 Italian Jews lived in Italy. One of the most extraordinary, but largely untold stories of World War II is the survival of eighty-five percent of Italy's Jews during the Nazi occupation of Italy. The Italian Jews were forced into hiding during the German occupation, but they survived with the help of the Italian people, who fed and hid them, often at the risk of their own lives. To understand their heroism, one must understand conditions in Italy at the time

The Nazi occupation of Italy is a brutal story. As the German army occupied Italy, surrendering Italian military units were taken prisoner and over 700,000 Italian soldiers were sent to forced labor camps in Germany. Some 70,000 never returned. Worse still was the fate of Italian military units that resisted. Hitler had ordered that all Italian troops fighting against the Germans were to be shot as they surrendered and across Italy, Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia and the Aegean islands tens of thousands were massacred. In Corfu, after a three day resistance, 7,000 surrendering Italian soldiers were killed. On the Island of Cephalonia, 5,000 were executed. Italian soldiers on the island of Leros defied the Germans for almost two months. After they surrendered, 430 officers were shot.

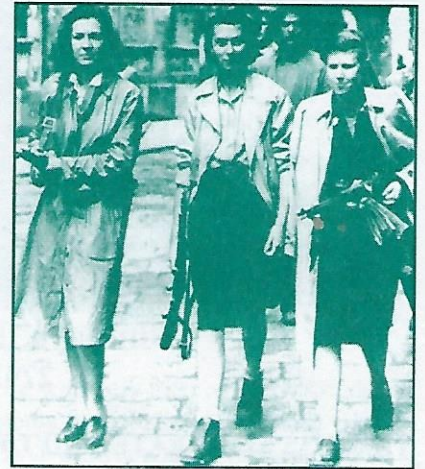
An estimated 600,000 Italian soldiers fought with the Allies to free Italy of the German occupation. Some 50,000 died in battle. Italian Naval and Airforce units joined the Allies and served in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Tens of thousands of Italian soldiers joined partisan groups in Italy, France, Greece and Yugoslavia to fight the German army. At least 70,000 Italian partisans lost their lives in the battle against the occupation.

Even Italian civilians were not spared. The Germans imposed a regime of terror on the civilian population where arbitrary arrests were common and widespread executions of innocent people occurred. German troops went from village to village to round up Italian males for forced labor. Because of widespread support for the Allies and partisans, entire villages of people in Italy were executed, including women and children. One of the most well-known massacres occurred at the Ardeatine caves in Rome where 335 Italians were executed in reprisal for the ambush of 35 German soldiers by partisans.

After Italy's withdrawal from the war in 1943 and the ensuing German occupation with all its terror, the Italian people hid and protected both Italian and non-Italian Jews as well as more than a hundred thousand Allied prisoners of war in Italy who were freed when the Armistice was declared.

Because the Vatican was a neutral state during the war, many Catholic monasteries, convents and buildings became havens for Jewish refugees and escaped allied prisoners in Italy. The Italian clergy played an important role in the rescue effort of the Jews. In Rome alone, over 150 convents and monasteries offered hiding places. Even the Vatican provided asylum and housed Jewish refugees despite its supposed neutrality.

Hitler's hostility toward the Catholic Church was well known. He considered the Vatican a threat to Nazi control and the Vatican was a target of Nazi espionage. The Pope had criticized the German invasions of other countries and protested anti-Catholic measures in Germany including the persecution of the German Catholics. Some 3,000 Catholic priests were executed by the Nazi's in Germany. More than 20,000 died under Stalin. Hitler was also aware that the Pope sympathized with the Allies and covertly assisted them. The Pope had served as a channel between British and opposition circles in Germany. When Italy entered the war in 1940, the Allied embassies in Rome were moved to the Vatican because it was a neutral territory. They used this sanctuary as a base of operations against the Axis. Because of the hostile relationship between the Vatican and Hitler, the Vatican's neutrality was precarious but its neutrality enabled it to remain a refuge for the Jews and others. At one point, Hitler was prepared to invade the Vatican, which was only about a hundred acres of territory, and imprison the Pope. Fortunately for those being aided by the Church, he did not carry out the threat.



Women Partisans

It is against this backdrop of war and Nazi occupation and terror that the rescue effort by the Catholic Clergy, and the many thousands of individual Italians who risked their lives took place. Many Italians lost their lives and many were sent to concentration camps for protecting the Jews and Allied prisoners of war. In the end, the Italians saved tens of thousands of Jews. By the time the Germans were defeated after more than a year and a half of occupation, some 8,000 Jews had been deported to German concentration camps, but unlike the rest of Europe, most had been saved. The Italian people deserve recognition for their heroism and humanity in this great rescue effort.

There are a number of recent books and videos about the war in Italy and the Italian rescue of the Jews. All of these books are available at the Italian Cultural Center Library or can be ordered at your local bookstore.

BOOKS

NOTHING SACRED: Nazi Espionage Against The Vatican, 1939-1945, [1997] - by David Alvarez & Robert Graham

YOURS IS A PRECIOUS WITNESS: Memoirs Of Jews And Catholics In Wartime Italy; [1997] - by Margherita Marchione

A VATICAN LIFELINE; [1995] - by William Simpson

THE ITALIAN REFUGE: Rescue of Jews During The Holocaust; [1989] - edited by Ivo Herzer

THE ITALIANS AND THE HOLOCAUST: Persecution, Rescue, & Survival; [1987] - by Susan Zuccotti

THE OTHER ITALY: The Italian Resistance in World War II, [1988] - by Maria de Blasio Wilhelm

WAR IN ITALY; 1943-1945: A Brutal Story; [1994] - by Richard Lamb

THE WAR NORTH OF ROME; June 1944 - May 1945; [1996] - by Thomas Brooks

ITALY: 1943-1945; [1985] - by David Ellwood

THE BANDITS OF CISTERNA; [1991] - by William Pickering & Alan Hart

WAR IN VAL D'ORCIA; An Italian War Diary, 1943-1944 - by Iris Origo

DOCUMENTARY VIDEOS & FILMS

THE RIGHTEOUS ENEMY [1991] - 64 minutes - story of how Italian officials prevented the deportation of 40,000 Jews in Italian occupied zones of France, Greece and Yugoslavia. - call the Italic Way at 516-488-7400 to order

A DEBT TO HONOR [1994] - 30 minutes - interviews with Italians and clergy involved in rescue of Jewish refugees - call the National Italian American Foundation at 202-429-9320 to order

POPE PIUS XII & THE HOLOCAUST [1997]- 1 hour - this documentary uses film footage from the period and interviews with German and Italian diplomats to examine the role of the Vatican. - call the History Channel at 1-800-708-1776 to order

THE ASSISI UNDERGROUND [1984] - 2 hours - The people of Assisi and the Catholic Church Rescue several hundred Jews - stars Ben Cross, James Mason, Maximilian Schell & Irene Pappas

Travel To Italy

Learn Italian under the sun in Tuscany - July 1999 - Continue your Italian Language study in the summer with a month-long language course in Viareggio, on the coast of Tuscany. This four week program is offered by the University of Pisa and courses are available for all levels. Your escort is Norma Andrighetto-Petta, longtime Italian instructor at the Italian Cultural Society. Call Norma at 916-457-1220 or mpetta@cwia.com.

Opera Tour of Italy - June 22 - July 6, 1999 - this two week tour of Italy includes Venice, Como, Milan, Genoa, Rome, Florence and Naples with Opera performances in Genoa, Naples and Florence. Your tour guides are Eileen and Bob Masullo, opera critic for the Sacramento Bee. Please contact them at 916-447-0192.

Art, Music & Culture in Florence - July 2 - 31, 1999 - spend a month in magnificent Florence with courses in Italian art, music and culture. The program includes excursions to Venice and Verona. Your program guide is Rona Commins. Call 916-487-2137