

Essay on Survival and Historical Truth

Jasha M. Levi (January 30, 2012)



EDITORS' NOTE: Mr. Jasha M. Levi, a Yugoslav Jewish antifascist in the 1930s and a fighter against dictatorships and genocides for all his life, fled the Nazis and his native Sarajevo for Italy. Here he—as a foreigner whose whereabouts remained unknown "to the Nazis and their Italian collaborators"—was spared "the cruel fate suffered by Italian Jews deported in cattle cars from Milan or burned in a crematorium in Trieste." Mr. Levi, who recounted his personal experience in a political memoir, "Requiem For A Country," asked i-Italy to publish the following short essay. In complying with his request, we believe that his balanced personal account not only, as he concludes, "does not diminish the memory of the eight thousand murdered Italian Jews," but may actually contribute to a better understanding of their tragedy—of which Italians, as a government and as a people, bear a collective historical responsibility, despite the good that some of them may have done in helping hundreds like Mr. Levi to survive.



I recently found on your digital pages a discussion of the fact that many Italians helped foreign Jews survive the Holocaust. I asked for an opportunity to present my own view. I thank you for allowing me to do so.

As an active Yugoslav Jewish antifascist in the 1930s, I was too young to be accepted as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, but I got my chance to take action against Italian fascism in Split, Croatia in 1941, where I earned my credentials against Mussolini and the black shirts. I have lived much of the 90 years of my life opposing dictatorships and genocides, and what I have to say must be taken in that context.

I fled the Nazis and my hometown, Sarajevo, Yugoslavia because I was a Jew and for that reason alone, my life was in danger. I fled to Italian-occupied Dalmatia, where I was the enemy not for being a Jew but for being a member of the antifascist underground. Fascist Italy was known to Jews everywhere in Europe as less evil than fascist Germany; Those Yugoslavs who did not perish in the Holocaust survived because they escaped into Italian-held areas of Dalmatia and Montenegro.

Uprooted and barely 19, I was taken as a civilian prisoner of war to an Italian hamlet in which the natives may have been circumspect about us foreigners, but not because we were Jewish. The churchgoing grocer's wife asked us, "Sono veramente Ebrei?", perhaps surprised that we didn't look as sinister as the antisemitic propaganda had painted us.

When Mussolini fell in 1943 and we all dispersed towards Rome, we were spared the fate of the native Italian Jews whose addresses were known to the Nazis and their Italian collaborators. The refugees from Asolo, escaping with false documents given us personally by the highest government representative in the city, were not alone. Surviving with us were thousands of other foreign Jews from all over Italy, often thanks to active help from ordinary Italians.

Let me make clear that this does not, by any means, exonerate fascist Italy from being a participant in a bestial alliance with Hitler. My political memoir, *Requiem for a Country*, juxtaposes our survival with the cruel fate suffered by Italian Jews deported in cattle cars from Milan or burned in a crematorium in Trieste. We fleeing Jews, with our false paperwork, were invisible to the authorities and that may have been the primary reason we survived, but all along our route to salvation we found Italians who helped us hide, get food, move from one hideout to another.

I am to this day critical of the policies of Pius XII as being at best wishy-washy towards Hitler, but many a refugee, including myself, got assistance from some clergy in the Vatican. Was the number statistically significant? I don't know. To the thousands of foreign Jewish survivors in Italy, escaping alive is a statistic as well as an anecdote.

There is a diminishing number of us who still bear witness to the fact that in the barbaric survival times of WWII, many Italians behaved better than most Europeans with the exception of the Danes. In my own Yugoslavia, we witnessed cruelties against Jews that made even the supervising SS cringe. The perpetrator were Yugoslavs, not Italians. The modest joy of finding survivors in the Italian corner of Europe only amplifies the horror of the death of millions of others, including Italians, who perished in the Holocaust simply for being Jewish.

Honoring the good Italians does not diminish the memory of the eight thousand murdered Italian Jews. It does serve the historic truth.

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