Brava Gente? The Resurgence of the Shopworn Myth of Italian Benevolence During Fascism

Alessandro Cassin (July 29, 2009)

The complex and often contradictory story of what happened to the Jewish population in Italy during World War II is little known to the American public. Elizabeth Bettina's "It happened in Italy, Untold Stories of How People of Italy Defied the Horrors of the Holocaust" belongs to the category of non academic attempts . Unfortunately it falls short on most accounts

As the generation of Holocaust survivors and first hand witnesses is dying off, the public hunger for information tends to welcome all efforts to reconstruct facts, whether by historians, personal narratives, even attempts by non professionals. The complex and often contradictory story of what happened to the Jewish population in Italy during World War II is little known to the American public. Important scholarly publications don't reach the general public with regularity. Elizabeth Bettina's It happened in Italy, Untold Stories of How People of Italy Defied the Horrors of the Holocaust belongs to the category of non academic attempts . Unfortunately it falls short on most accounts.

Ms. Bettina is an Italian American Catholic who works in marketing. Her family came originally

from the town of Campagna, (Salerno) in Southern Italy. The author spent her vacations there visiting her extended family. For years no one ever spoke to her about what had happened in the town during World War II, nor about the presence of a Jewish detention camp. One day she accidentally stumbled upon a photograph from Campagna in the 1940's. It pictured a group of locals posing in front of the Church of San Bartolomeo, including a policeman, the Bishop and a rabbi. This picture triggered Bettina's investigations, carried out with the help of Professor Vincent Marmorale Vice President of of the Holocaust Memorial Committee of Long Beach NY. Meetings with former internees from Campagna followed, and so began the journey which provides the narrative of her book. As she learned more about the detention camps in Campagna and Ferramonti and met survivors who had fled to the United States after the war, the author felt compelled to tell their stories. The book is a history of her induction into the history of the Holocaust. She befriended a few of them and arranged for some to return to Italy for a visit. Bettina proceeds in her investigation with the dogged determination of an oral historian, the resourcefulness of Indiana Jones and the enthusiasm of a neophyte. As word spread about her research into the heart -warming story of Southern Italians saving Jewish refugees, she was granted access to the highest echelons of the Vatican. This progression led to personal visits with Cardinal Kasper, Cardinal Ruini and culminated with a group audience, with Pope Benedict VXI. The surprising silence over how these survivors were persuaded to go back to Italy is saddled with another more disquieting silence: how and why these survivors ended up being granted such an audience. Not once does the author wonder why her story, particularly the role of the Bishop of Campagna, was so readily embraced by the Vatican.

Bettina's reliance on Jewish survivors to support her tendentious argument appears to be an unwitting part of a larger orchestrated effort to pave the way toward the controversial canonization of Pope Pius XII. Not surprisingly the book is printed by Thomas Nelson, a publisher of Christian books, religious videos and software.

It Happened in Italy, weaves a few threads of anecdotal micro histories about the survival of foreign Jews, mostly in two Italian detention camps: Campagna (Salerno) and Ferramonti di Tarsia (Cosenza) without the context of the larger narrative of Jewish persecution in Italy.
On June 18th, during a presentation of the book at the Italian Consulate in in New York, Ms. Bettina and Mr. Marmorale, referring to the Holocaust, reported "You all heard about the horrors, we are telling you the good part of the story, the one that contains hope and light at the end of the tunnel". If the truth of what happened in Italy, in all it's ambiguous complexity, is to emerge, it is time to move beyond the "good stories" as opposed to the "horrifying ones" and understand that they are inseparable. Taken out of context, even true stories of Italian compassion become merely simplifications, an assortment of "feel good" tales.

Bettina fails to inform us about what was happening at the time to the large majority of Jews in Italy and seems completely unaware of the fact that after September 1943 the situation in Northern and Central Italy occupied by German forces, was radically different from the South, already liberated by the Allies. Though internees in the camps she describes might have enjoyed compassionate treatment, their survival was mostly a consequence of their geographical location. The Jews who were interned in camps in the Center and North, were also initially treated with some dignity, yet later the Fascist authorities did nothing to prevent their deportation to Auschwitz.

With respect to the roughly 8000 Jews deported from Italy to Nazi concentration camps, the subtitle "How the People of Italy Defied the Horrors of the Holocaust" is both thoroughly inaccurate and morally offensive. Bulgarians protected and saved their Jews by not allowing any to be deported. Italians simply did not.

To understand how Jews were saved by internment in Campagna one must bear in mind at a minimum a few facts and chronology, all omitted in the book. By the fall of 1936 Mussolini had adopted state anti-semitism. In March 1937 il Duce denounced Zionism as an instrument of British domination and Fascist Italy "brandished the sword of Islam". Throughout 1937-38 the national press carried out an inflammatory anti Jewish campaign culminating with the "manifesto della Razza" and the proclamation of racial laws. Paradoxically, despite its anti-semitic legislation, Italy allowed in Jewish refugees from other countries until 1939. However from the autum of 1938 the Fascists had reversed their policy and ordered the expulsion of all foreign Jews. When Italy declared war, in June 1940, most foreign Jews were already interned. Italian soldiers found themselves occupying

territories with significant Jewish populations. Despite a twenty month Nazi occupation “only” about 18% of the Jews (Italian and foreign) present in Italy were deported. Occasionally Jews were hidden and helped by locals. It is in this very small category that the book on review attempts to find its locus.

While discussing events which occurred to foreign Jews who had found refuge in Italy, Bettina completely ignores the fate of Italian Jews and makes no reference to the thousands of Italians who freely denounced their fellow citizens of a different religion. Beginning with the racial laws of 1938 Italian Jews were heavily discriminated against, denied basic civil rights, expelled from schools, government and industry. All of which eased the way for later arrests often carried out by Italian fascists and deportation by the Germans. The Italian military did not surrender Jews to the Nazis in Croatia, Slovenia, Dalmatia, Greece and later in Russia. The grateful testimonies of the Jews under Italian rule gradually started the myth of Italiani brava gente. Yet this alleged national trait of benevolence was not applied uniformly or consistently. The treatment of Italian Jews within Italy is but one example; the conquered people of Abyssinia, Libya and Albania can attest to a different story tainted by gratuitous brutality.
From 1938 till 1945 Italian Jewish resistance groups mobilized to help Jews arriving from abroad. The most effective was Delasem (Delegazione di Assistenza agli Emigranti Ebrei), which worked closely with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Delasem (never mentioned by Bettina), provided legal assistance, false documents, food and shelter to thousands of European Jewish refugees who had managed to reach Italian territory.
The book's two geographical focal points are the city of Fiume, located on the Adriatic Coast in the North East, and the town of Campagna, 852 miles away, in the South. Fiume (today the Croatian city Rejeka) had been annexed by Italy in 1924 and became a major point of entry for foreign Jews. Campagna, on the other hand, was a rural center,at the periphery of political and military activities.

Bettina’s story concentrates on the relationship and respective roles of two main characters perceived as rescuers of Jewish lives: Giovanni Palatucci, a high police official (Questore) of Fiume and his uncle Giuseppe Maria Palatucci, the Bishop of Campagna.

Yet she provides insufficient background about these two complex characters, both crucial to her narrative and to revisionist accounts of the role of the Church during the Holocaust.
It is deeply disturbing that after arranging for return trips to Campagna for a few survivors, Bettina zealously insists on parading them to high Church officials.

The author misguidedly equates the establishment of detention camps in Southern Italy with the creation of safe havens for the Jews. More specifically the narrative implies that the Campagna internment camp was set up by Bishop Palatucci in order to provide shelter for the Jews sent by his nephew. In reality Campagna, like all the other 39 internment camps, had been set up by the Italian Ministry of Interior, and though some of its internees had been sent from Fiume, this accounted only for a small percentage of its population.

The Italian researcher Marco Coslovich, author of Giovanni Palatucci. Una giusta memoria, Mephite, 2008 clarifies: “In 1940 Palatucci was only commisario di pubblica sicurezza” - a police official in Fiume - “and certainly was not in charge of deciding which Jewish refugees were sent to Campagna or any other camp. He became Questore, only in the fall of 1943, by which time it was no longer the possible to travel between Allied and German occupied areas such as Campagna and Fiume.”

Bettina’s description of Giovanni Palatucci is at best sketchy. The wealth of published material on the Questore, honored by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in 1990 as one of the Righteous Among the Nations goes unmentioned.

Bettina never discloses that Bishop Palatucci’s initial interest in the refugees in the improvised camp of Campagna had probably more to do with ministering to the sizable number of Jews who had converted to Catholicism in a desperate attempt to save themselves. Similarly, in 1941, Father Callisto Lopinot, a Capuchin friar, was sent by the Vatican to Ferramonti to tend to the spiritual needs of 85 - among the 1440 interned Jews - who had converted to Catholicism. For Marco Coslovich” it is ludicrous to imply that Bishop Palatucci had a role in conceiving the Internment camp in Campagna. On the contrary there is a letter dated April in 1942 to his superiors in Rome in

which the Bishop specifically requests the closing of the camp. His tone is totally at odds with his alleged benevolence toward the Jews ”

According to the respected scholar Susan Zuccotti: “The Palatucci story has been a subject of enormous confusion, in part because of the scarcity and unreliability of the sources. Further confusion stems from Three Popes and the Jews ,1967 by Pinchas Lapide. The author, an Israeli diplomat, completely garbled the Palatucci story while providing incomplete and deceptive accounts of Pius XII’s alleged actions in favor of the Jews. While any historian can pick out mistakes on every page of Lapide’s work, everyone gave credence to the book based on

the fact that the author was an Israeli...."

It becomes obvious that whatever benevolence the Holy See allegedly demonstrated toward the Jewish internees in Campagna and Ferromonti, this cannot be seen as either typical or indicative of the Vatican’s behavior toward the Jews in Italy and elsewhere during the Holocaust.

Moreover, focusing exclusively on the survival in Southern Italian camps and a few fortunate instances of survival in the North, Ms. Bettina blends and confuses these two radically different realities. The wide eyed naiveté of this perception gushes throughout the book: ”I discovered that Campagna was not the only place where Jews were interned in Italy during World War II.

Quietly, all over the boot of Italy - from small towns outside Torino, Milano, and Perugia to small towns in the regions of Abruzzi, Basilicata, and Calabria and many in between - Jews were helped by Italian people who risked their lives to keep them from the hand of the Nazis”.

The author's biased use of survivors' testimonies is deeply disturbing: these appear to portray Southern Italian detention centers as “summer camps” where Jews were treated with dignity, allowed to pray, get married, receive mail and visits, all in stark contrast to Nazi death camps. Sadly, their experiences and testimony cannot be taken to represent what was happening to Jews in Italy at large. After September 1943, the “fortunate” internees of the Southern Italian camps had no way to communicate with Jewish refugees in the North, nor were they necessarily aware of the arrests and deportations taking place there.

Common sense suggests that the history of this period defies generalizations, yet the author generously sprinkles such bromides throughout her narrative: “Italians, in general, did not do what they were told to do or “follow the leader”. After extensive research and interviews all over the boot of Italy, North to South,I came to understand that most Italians were going to do what they thought was right - and helping persecuted people was right”.

In her cursory descriptions of the two internment camps at Campagna and Ferramonti, the author leaves out other vital information, i.e. the dates when the two camps were in operation, who was sent there and by whom; more importantly, the essential detail that when the deportation of Italian Jews began, the Germans had no longer any access to Southern Italy.
Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, president of the Fondazione Ferramonti and author of I campi del Duce (Einaudi, 2004) states clearly “The survival of detainees of the Camps of Campagna and Ferramonti can not be attributed to the good will of Italians, but rather to the fact that the Allied Command decision for a landing in Sicily and consequent invasion of Italy starting on July 9th, 1943”.

Bettina is at best vague and superficial, at worst plays fast and loose with important numbers: while she claims that possibly thousands of Jews were saved in Campagna, from her own Appendix A we learn that the list of Internees on Sept. 16, 1940 has 272 names on it!

On the other hand overabundant detail is devoted to the circumstances and chain of events that brought her in touch with the survivors. Equal space is devoted to her relationship with her collaborator, Professor Marmorale. The book is replete with tiresome reports of phone calls between the two.

The self referential chattiness of the author frequently gets in the way of the narrative. The reader is bombarded by personal trivia about where she lives and works in Manhattan and how long it takes

to get from one place to the other: "My apartment is in Midtown, not the quietest of neighborhoods, but definitely convenient. I can walk to Central Park in five minutes, to Fifth Avenue in ten minutes, and do work in fifteen minutes. When I leave my apartment, I usually have my cell phone out of the big, black bag that is my pocketbook". Starting from the premise that "almost no one really knows what happened" Bettina confuses her own learning process with the presumption of revealing unknown historical facts.

Kindly put, her work is shoddily researched, annoyingly annotated, and full of heavy handed paraphrases. Unfortunately, given the seriousness of her subject, the author's tearstained empathy sorely lacks professionalism and depth.

Historical research suggests clearly that the comparatively smaller numbers of deported Jews from Italy has more to do with the size of the Italian Jewish community (roughly 1 per 1000 inhabitants), its high level of assimilation, and the fact that deportation began relatively late in the war, when the Nazis controlled only a portion of the country), than to any particular "goodness " of the Italian population. The relatively high survival rate among Italian Jews during the second World War has led many to suggest that the Italians were reluctant or unwilling participants in Hitler's Final Solution, a view advanced in recent years by, among others, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. However, the consensus among serious scholars has repeatedly refuted the consolatory myth of Italian benevolence.

Yet another sweeping generalization on the book's dust jacket states: "In fact, there were thousands of "other Palatuccis" sheltering and helping Jews all over Italy". Does this refer to thousands of other high police officials? Bishops? Ordinary citizens?
Whatever its motives, Elizabeth Bettina's book ends up whitewashing and obscuring facts by overlapping memory with history, individual accounts with historical interpretation .

Note: while Ms. Bettina was assembling her material, she and her collaborators video taped interviews with many of the survivors, which she plans to release as a full length documentary film. One can only hope that in the documentary she will rectify some glaring omissions and include some of the background and context missing from her printed narrative.

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