

**“Good Moral Conduct” in an Italian Concentration Camp:
Women’s Daily Lives in Ferramonti di Tarsia, 1940-1943**

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Abstract

This article analyzes the situation of female inmates in the Italian internment camp of Ferramonti, 1940-1943. Women formed a minority among the internees, who consisted largely of Jews from central and eastern Europe. Historical accounts of the camp of Ferramonti have been based mainly on the testimony of male members of the camp’s Jewish self-administration, who focused on the camp’s successful institutions and the flourishing social and cultural life among the internees. A somewhat different picture emerges from the testimony of former female internees. Based on female voices from Ferramonti, this article examines women’s lives in the camp: their work, health, daily chores, and gender relations. It argues that women’s bodies in Ferramonti were subject to rigid surveillance by both the camp inmates and the Fascist authorities. It also shows that the specifically male and rather positive perspective on Ferramonti promoted the postwar myth of Italians as “brava gente.”

Introduction

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Introduction*

Situated in the malaria-ridden valley of the river Crati in the far south of Italy, the internment camp of Ferramonti di Tarsia housed at its height more than 2,000 inmates. Ferramonti was one of the largest of a series of such camps that was established after the Fascist government had ordered the interment of foreign Jews and enemy aliens following Italy’s entry in World War II in June 1940.¹ Ferramonti was unusual in that it was the largest camp for Jews and one of the few camps for Jews in which men and women were interned together. Yet, only about 33% of the internees at Ferramonti were women.² Women arrived in Ferramonti later than the male inmates, and their daily lives and struggles in Ferramonti have largely been obfuscated by a preponderance of male memories and testimonies that focus on the Jewish self-government and the institutions of the camp. The purpose of this article is to reintroduce the female internees into the history of Ferramonti, and to examine life in Ferramonti through the lens of its female population.

Consisting largely of Jews from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia, the inmates of Ferramonti established their

*Fellowships from the Leibniz Institute of European History (Mainz), the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History (Munich), the European Holocaust Research Initiative (EHRI), and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM, Washington) made the research for this article possible. Some names have been anonymized to protect the privacy of the individuals or because of archival rules.

¹ Ferramonti was the largest camp that housed Jews but some camps for non-Jewish internees held more inmates, e.g. Le Fraschette (4,500) and Gonars (over 6,000), see Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *Mussolini’s Camps: Civilian Internment in Fascist Italy (1940-1943)* (London: Routledge, 2019), 174 (Le Fraschette), 225 (Gonars).

² Leo Fürst and Alexander Rosenbach, “Ferramonti-Tarsia: Das Leben der Zivilinternierten in Zahlen,” fondo Kalk, busta 2, fasc. 17, p. 1, Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea (hereafter CDEC).

own camp government and administration, court, school system, healthcare, and cultural program. Despite these accomplishments, life in Ferramonti was utterly miserable. The inmates were locked up behind barbed wire merely because they were Jews (and, in some cases, non-Jewish enemy aliens). They had to deal with extreme heat in the summer, and cold and damp in the winter. There were mosquitos that carried malaria as well as vermin that infested the large, crammed dormitories. Some of the inmates did not have enough food or bare essentials such as shoes and clothes. There was a total lack of privacy. Many of them had been ripped from their families and were in the camp without their loved ones – sometimes for years.

Despite the hardship, postwar testimonies about life in Ferramonti have been surprisingly positive.³ The reasons for the positive views are manifold. Most importantly, Ferramonti, misleadingly named a *campo di concentramento*, had little in common with German concentration camps. The inmates were not murdered or tortured, and they did not have to perform forced labor. After the war, many Jewish internees felt they had to emphasize the stark contrast in the way Jews had been treated by Germans and Italians.⁴ In addition, early postwar testimony stemmed largely from men who had held important positions in the camp government.⁵ They had an interest in emphasizing what was accomplished at Ferramonti. In addition, the humiliation experienced during internment may have led male internees to turn this negative experience into a narrative of achievement.⁶ In this way, the story of Ferramonti became one of virtuous and robust inmates who overcame highly adverse conditions, and who, under the eyes

³ On this point, see Klaus Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf. Exil in Italien 1933-1945*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1993), 140-41 and 198-99; Carlo Moos, *Ausgrenzung Internierung Deportation. Antisemitismus und Gewalt im späten, italienischen Faschismus (1938-1943)* (Zurich: Chronos, 2004), 119.

⁴ This point is made in many ego-documents. Just to provide one example, Mirko Haler reflected on the fact that his testimony of Ferramonti—written 35 years after the war—appears perhaps as overly positive. He explained that this had to do with what he had learnt about the German concentration camps after the war. Mirko Haler, “I ricordi di Mirko Haler,” fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 66, p. 10, CDEC.

⁵ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 198-199.

⁶ On the experience of humiliation in internment, Urška Strle, “Revealing Italian Fascist Camps: Some Gendered Perspectives,” *Chronica Mundi* 13, no. 1 (2018): 350.

of benign Fascist supervision, built a flourishing Jewish community in the uninhabitable wetlands along the river Crati.⁷

Most literature about Ferramonti relies to some extent on this body of recollections which can be described as a postwar “male master narrative” of Ferramonti.⁸ These testimonies were collected by Israel Kalk after the war. Kalk had founded the *mensa dei bambini*, a Jewish aid organization based in Milan that had also been active in Ferramonti, and, in this capacity, Kalk had gotten to know many internees.⁹ Many testimonies of former inmates and their correspondence with Kalk became part of Kalk’s personal papers which are housed in the archive of the Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center in Milan (*Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea*, CDEC). Subsequently, Kalk

⁷ The most important of these accounts that form a kind of a “male master narrative” are by Hans (Gianni) Mann, Martin Ruben, Albert Springer, and Jan Hermann. They can be found in fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 53 (Springer), fasc. 64 (Mann), fasc. 67 (Ruben), and fasc. 70 (Hermann), CDEC.

⁸ The literature about Ferramonti is comparatively small and constitutes a mix of academic and non-academic works. The following are among the most important contributions: Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *Ferramonti. La vita e gli uomini del più grande campo d'internamento fascista (1940-1945)* (Florence: La Giuntina, 1987); Francesco Volpe, ed., *Ferramonti: Un lager nel Sud. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi 15/16 maggio 1987* (Cosenza: Orizzonti Meridionali, 1990); Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*; Francesco Folino, *Ferramonti? Un misfatto senza sconti* (Cosenza: Brenner, 2004); Francesco Folino, *Ferramonti. Il campo, gli ebrei e gli antifascisti* (Roggiano Gravina: La scossa, 2009); Francesco Folino, *Ferramonti: un lager di Mussolini. Gli internati durante la guerra* (Cosenza: Brenner, 1985); Francesco Folino, *Ebrei destinazione Calabria (1940-1943)* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1988); Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, “L’entrata in guerra dell’Italia e l’internamento degli ebrei stranieri: il campo di Ferramonti,” in *I campi di concentramento in Italia. Dall’internamento alla deportazione (1940-1945)*, ed. Costantino di Sante (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001), 83-94; Mario Rende, *Ferramonti di Tarsia. Voci da un campo di concentramento fascista 1940-1945* (Milan: Mursia, 2009); Stefano Nicola Sinicropi, “L’esilio tedesco a Ferramonti di Tarsia. Storie di ebrei in fuga dalla Germania,” PhD thesis, Alma Mater Studiorum-Università di Bologna and Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes Paris, Bologna, 2020, online at <http://amsdottorato.unibo.it/9313/1/Sinicropi%20Stefano%20Nicola%20Tesi%20Dottorato.pdf>, accessed May 20, 2024. Works in English include Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, “The Internment Camp of Ferramonti-Tarsia,” in *The Italian Refuge: Rescue of Jews During the Holocaust*, ed. Ivo Herzer (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 159-177; Silvia Del Zoppo, *Ferramonti: Interpreting Cultural Behaviors and Musical Practices in a Southern-Italian Internment Camp* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021). Only Voigt acknowledges that the representatives of the Jewish self-government had a very specific perspective on the camp and on their accomplishments, Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 198-199.

⁹ On Kalk and the *mensa dei bambini*, see Lucia Realini, “La Mensa dei bambini a Milano 1939–1943,” *Italia contemporanea* 232 (2003): 365-400.

was one of the first to publicize this story of resilience and achievement to an audience of ex-internees, historians, and the broader public.¹⁰

In these male testimonies, women featured very little, and if they did, the image conveyed tended to be negative. In one of the few extensive descriptions, women were characterized as hysterical and quarrelsome: “Generally, fights in the women’s barracks were much more frequent than in the men’s barracks, and excesses in the women’s barrack [sic] were a daily occurrence. Resulting mainly from the most trivial causes, differences of opinion assumed such proportions that, regularly, our intervention was necessary.”¹¹ At the same time, some of the few female voices in the Kalk collection have been ignored by historians. The most glaring example is that of Nina Weksler, whose text *Ferramonti Streiflichter* (Ferramonti Highlights), written in 1941 in Ferramonti, has hardly been used at all.¹² Since the postwar years additional ego-documents by former female inmates of Ferramonti have become available. For the intended purpose of this article, a variety of testimonies are used to provide a more multi-faceted perspective on life in Ferramonti.¹³

The literature on the exclusively female internment camps has remained limited, and while it has discussed the living conditions in these few, comparatively small camps, it has ignored the situation of women in Ferramonti, where both men and women were interned.¹⁴ While some of the problems that women experienced in

¹⁰ Israel Kalk, “I campi di concentramento italiani per ebrei profughi: Ferramonti Tarsia (Calabria),” in *Gli ebrei in Italia durante il Fascismo*, ed. CDEC (Milan: Arnaldo Forni, 1981), 63-71.

¹¹ Albert Springer, “Die Statuten des Lagergerichts,” fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 53, p. 28, CDEC.

¹² Nina Weksler, *Ferramonti-Streiflichter*, fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 106, CDEC. Weksler also published a memoir-novel about her time in Ferramonti, Nina Weksler, *Con la gente di Ferramonti. Mille giorni di una giovane ebrea in un campo di concentramento* (Cosenza: Progetto 2000 [1992]). While some personalities (most, but not all of the names are changed to anonymize individuals) and occurrences may have been modified for personal or artistic reasons, the book provides a clear and in-depth account of daily life in Ferramonti from a female perspective. It is similar to Maria Eisenstein’s book about the women’s camp of Lanciano. Maria Eisenstein, *L’internata numero 6. Donne fra i reticolati del campo di concentramento* (Rome: De Luigi, 1944).

¹³ Among the sources I use are interviews conducted by the USC Shoah Foundation, published and unpublished memoirs and testimonies as well as internee files (fondo A 4 bis) held at the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* (ACS) in Rome, testimony from Yad Vashem and compensation claims files from German archives.

¹⁴ On the camps for women, see Annalisa Cegna, “Di dubbia condotta morale e politica.” *L’internamento femminile in Italia durante la Seconda guerra mondiale*, *DEP: Deportate, esuli*,

the women-only camps manifested themselves in Ferramonti as well, there were also significant differences that need to be examined and acknowledged. This article seeks to broaden and deepen our understanding of daily life and living conditions in Ferramonti. Focusing on women and women's voices, the article argues that much of the extensive testimony by male members of the self-administration has ignored the situation of women and has established a somewhat "sanitized" image of life in Ferramonti. Viewing Ferramonti largely through a male lens focused on the achievements of the camp administration has limited our knowledge of women's lives and gender relations. In addition, the male perspective focused on achievement—rather than hardship—has also starkly influenced how Ferramonti has been commemorated.

To begin with, this article briefly discusses the internment of foreign Jews in Italy in 1940, the emergence of the Italian internment camps, and the special role of Ferramonti di Tarsia within the Fascist camp system.¹⁵ It provides an overview of the camp's population and organization before focusing on women's experiences

profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile 21 (2013): 28-54; Annalisa Cegna, "Fascist female segregation during the Second World War," *Chronica Mundi* 13, no. 1 (2018): 76-91; Cegna, "Alcune riflessioni sull'internamento femminile fascista," *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea* 35, no. 3 (2018) http://www.studistorici.com/2018/09/29/cegna_numero_35/; Gianni Orecchioni, *I sassi e le ombre. Storie di internamento e di confino nell'Italia fascista, Lanciano 1940-1943* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2006).

¹⁵ On the Italian internment camps: Capogreco, *Mussolini's Camps*; Di Sante, *I campi di concentramento*; Luigi Reale, *Mussolini's Concentration Camps for Civilians: An Insight into the Nature of Fascist Racism* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011); Alessandra Kersevan, *Lager italiani. Pulizia etnica e campi di concentramento fascisti per civili jugoslavi 1941-1943* (Rome: Nutrimenti, 2008); Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi and Costantino di Sante, "Die Geschichte der Konzentrationslager im faschistischen Italien," in *Faschismus in Italien und Deutschland. Studien zu Transfer und Vergleich*, ed. Sven Reichardt (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005), 176-200. For the internment of Jews in specific regions of Italy, see for example Marco Minardi, *Invisibili: Internati civili nella provincia di Parma, 1940-1945* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2010); Iolanda Ferri Bianchi, ed., *Ebrei a Macerata Feltria, campo d'internamento, 1940-1944: Voci, testimonianze, documenti per non dimenticare* (Urbino: Comune di Macerata Feltria, 1996); Francesco Terzulli, *La Casa Rossa. Un campo di concentramento ad Alberobello* (Milan: Mursia, 2003); Barbara Cardeti, *L'internamento civile fascista: il caso di "Villa Oliveto" (1940-1944). Storia, documenti, immagini, testimonianze* (Florence: Regione Toscana - Edizioni dell'Assemblea, 2010); Anna Pizzuti, *Vite di carta. Storie di ebrei stranieri internati dal fascismo* (Rome: Editore Donzelli, 2010); Alberto Gagliardo, *Ebrei in Abruzzo tra internamento e deportazione. La provincia di Chieti (1940-1943)* (Lanciano: Regione Abruzzo, 1998); Italia Iacoponi, *Il Fascismo, la Resistenza, i campi di concentramento in provincia di Teramo* (Teramo: Grafiche Martintype, 2000).

at Ferramonti. The article examines women's daily lives in an environment characterized by filth and overcrowding, in which women's behavior and bodies were under constant close surveillance by the camp community and the Fascist directorate of the camp. The latter, in particular, expected "good moral conduct" of the female internees.¹⁶

The Internment of Jews in Fascist Italy

The internment of foreign Jews in Fascist Italy in 1940 needs to be seen in the context of the wave of Jewish refugees that had started to come to Italy since Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and the passage of a series of antisemitic laws in Italy starting in the summer of 1938. By that time, around 5,000 German and Austrian Jews had sought refuge from Nazism in Italy.¹⁷ The Italian government conducted a census of the Jews present in the country in August 1938. Mussolini then promulgated a package of antisemitic measures, which included the Racial Laws as well as a degree stipulating the expulsion of foreign Jews.¹⁸ Issued in September 1938, the expulsion decree, required foreign Jews (except those older than 65 years or married to Italians) to leave the country within six months. Italian Jews who had acquired citizenship after January 1, 1919, i.e. after the First World War, were categorized as foreign.¹⁹ Paradoxically, foreign Jews could still travel to

¹⁶ "Buona condotta" was expected of all inmates, see page 71. Female internees were widely suspected to be of "dubbia condotta morale e politica," see Cegna, " 'Di dubbia Condotta' ."

¹⁷ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 1, 144.

¹⁸ For the antisemitic laws of 1938, see Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 121-141; Enzo Collotti, *Il fascismo e gli ebrei. Le leggi razziali in Italia* (Rome: Ed. Laterza, 2003), 58-79; Michele Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei. Cronaca dell'elaborazione delle leggi del 1938* (Turin: Zamorani, 1994). For their impact: Fabio Levi, "Come continuare a vivere nella bufera. Gli ebrei Italiani di fronte alla persecuzione," in *Storia della Shoah in Italia. Vicende, memorie, rappresentazioni*, vol. 1, *Le premesse, le persecuzioni, lo sterminio*, eds. Marcello Flores et al. (Turin: UTET, 2010), 306-328; Iael Nidam-Orvieto, "The Impact of anti-Jewish Legislation on Everyday Life and the Response of Italian Jews 1938-1943," in *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule*, ed. Joshua Zimmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 158-181.

¹⁹ The expulsion decree ("provvedimenti nei confronti degli ebrei stranieri") is reprinted in Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei*, 185. For the impact of the decree, see: Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 1, 292-348; Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy*, 141-144.

Italy on six-month tourist visas.²⁰ Large numbers of Jewish refugees arrived in Italy on tourist or transit visas as a consequence of the mass expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany in October 1938, the Kristallnacht pogrom in the German Reich in early November 1938, and the destruction of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939. Starting in August 1939, the entry of German (including Austrian), Polish, Hungarian and Romanian Jews was restricted to Jews who held transit visas for third countries.²¹

Many foreign Jews left Italy in 1939 for places like the US, Britain, France, or Palestine. However, not all of those required to leave Italy were able to obtain visas or permits or could still afford to travel. Hence, despite the expulsion decree, by early 1940, several thousand foreign Jews were still in the country. As the Italian government was getting ready to enter the Second World War, it made plans for the internment of citizens of enemy states in Italy. In addition to this group, Jewish citizens of Allied states that persecuted Jews, stateless Jews, and Italian Jews who were considered “dangerous” were to be interned as well.²²

In May 1940 Mussolini let it be known to Dante Almansi, the head of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, that foreign Jewish men would be sent to concentration camps, and ultimately be reunited with their wives and children in a camp in Tarsia in the far south of the country, where they would all be interned until the end of the war. From there, they would be sent directly to those countries consenting to their immigration.²³ As Michele Sarfatti has pointed out, this shows clearly that the regime had not abandoned the goal of expulsion and that the concentration of foreign Jews in Tarsia would be one step in that direction.²⁴ As it happened, not all foreign Jews ended up in Tarsia, but between 1940 and 1943 many of them spent some time there.

In June 1940 Jewish men were arrested in large cities such as Milan, Rome or Genoa and taken to local prisons for a few weeks. From there, they were put under guard on trains to various camps, including Ferramonti di Tarsia, Campagna, Isola

²⁰ The reasons for that had to do with the interests of tourist industries, Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 1, 294-295.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 294-297.

²² Sarfatti, “La legislazione antiebraica,” 75-77; Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 21-23.

²³ Sarfatti, “La legislazione antiebraica,” 75-76; Capogreco, “L’entrata in guerra,” 83.

²⁴ Sarfatti, “La legislazione antiebraica,” 76.

del Gran Sasso and Urbisaglia (to name a few).²⁵ Women and children were sent to confined residence (so-called free internment) in small villages. Some women were initially left at their place of residence while others were sent to a comparatively small number of women's camps, among them Lanciano, Vinchiaturro, and Casacalenda.²⁶ By the late summer of 1940, women and children were taken to Ferramonti to join their husbands and fathers, as family barracks became available at the camp.²⁷ One year later, however, many families were allowed to leave Ferramonti and transfer to confined residence in remote villages all across Italy. This was largely due to the fact that more and more Jews and enemy aliens were arrested.²⁸ All in all, 9,747 foreign Jews are known to have been interned in Italy, of whom 3,929 were female and 5,818 were male. Out of the 3,929 female internees, 1,075 spent some time in Ferramonti.²⁹ The actual numbers are likely higher.³⁰

The Camp of Ferramonti di Tarsia

Near the town of Tarsia, where, according to initial government plans, all foreign Jews would ultimately be concentrated, a huge camp was hastily built from scratch starting in June 1940. Six rows of barracks housing around 30-40 inmates each were divided by a main "alley" in the middle. Two adjacent barracks were connected with kitchen facilities and a lounge of sorts, thus forming a U-shaped unit. They would also share toilets and sinks. A few barracks contained "family

²⁵ For arrest, imprisonment, and transfer to the camps, see Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 38-40; Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 23-31. According to Osti Guerrazzi and di Sante, "Die Geschichte," 185-187, there were roughly 50 camps. On Campagna, Isola del Gran Sasso, Urbisaglia and other camps, see Capogreco, *Mussolini's Camps*.

²⁶ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 28, 79. For these camps, see Capogreco, *Mussolini's Camps*, 180-181, 192-194 and 200-201; Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 61-62.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 85-87.

²⁹ All numbers are from Anna Pizzuti, "Ebrei stranieri internati in Italia durante il periodo bellico," <http://www.annapizzuti.it/database/ricerca.php>, accessed May 18, 2024.

³⁰ Over the years, numerous names have been added to Anna Pizzuti's database and are still being added.

apartments” (1-2 rooms and individual cooking facilities).³¹ At one end of the alley stood more elaborate buildings for the director and his staff. The *direttore* of the camp was a representative of the Public Security division in the Ministry of the Interior. Underneath the director, a *maresciallo* supervised the guards who consisted of police and Fascist militia.³²

Following the arrival of several hundred men in June 1940, the first women and children came to Ferramonti in September 1940 as part of a group of 300 foreign Jews.³³ The group had attempted clandestine immigration to Palestine from Italy but got stranded at Benghazi, Libya, then an Italian colony. After a short period of internment in North Africa, the “Benghazi group,” consisting largely of Jews from Germany, Austria and Poland, was brought to Ferramonti by the Italian authorities.³⁴ One year later, the number of internees at Ferramonti had grown to over 1,200, of whom 93% were Jews, the vast majority non-Italian.³⁵ Women were still in the minority (33% of the inmates) but there were now 270 families living in the camp.³⁶

In March 1942, another large group of Jewish refugees arrived in Ferramonti. The “Rodi group” was brought from Rhodes (Rodi, then controlled by Italy) to Calabria. Like the members of the “Benghazi group,” the more than 500 members of the “Rodi group,” among them 30% women, had tried to make it to Palestine but failed. Consisting largely of young Czech, Slovak, German, and Polish Jews, the group was shipwrecked as their vessel sank near an uninhabited Greek island. They were rescued by an Italian warship and taken to Rhodes where they spent several months in internment before they were taken to Ferramonti.³⁷ In 1942 and

³¹ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 164-165; Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 42; Folino, *Ferramonti*, 14. For a visual model image of the camp, see CDEC, Il campo di Ferramonti di Tarsia, <https://jewishrefugees.cdec.it/il-campo-di-ferramonti-di-tarsia/>, accessed June 20, 2024.

³² Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 45-46; Folino, *Ferramonti*, 15.

³³ Hans (Gianni) Mann, “I primi a Ferramonti,” fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 64, p. 6, CDEC.

³⁴ On the “Benghazi group,” see Susanna Schrafstetter, “Ferramonti, not Palestine. The Failed Aliyah bet of the Benghazi Group, 1940-1943,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 37, no. 3 (2023): 373-389.

³⁵ Fürst and Rosenbach, “Ferramonti-Tarsia: Das Leben der Zivilinternierten in Zahlen,” fondo Kalk, busta 2, fasc. 17, p. 1, CDEC. Only two internees were Italian citizens but 23 spoke Italian as their mother tongue, *ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ On the “Rodi group,” see Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 99-113; Folino, *Ferramonti*, 119-138.

1943, Yugoslav Jews but increasingly also non-Jews, among them a group of Chinese men (mostly sailors) and Greek, Yugoslav, French, and Italian anti-fascists, arrived at the camp.³⁸ While the number of non-Jews increased over time, they remained a fairly small minority among the 2,000 inmates.³⁹

Two Jewish aid organizations—which were allowed to operate legally in Fascist Italy until September 1943—Delasem (*Delegazione per l'assistenza agli emigranti ebrei*) and the children's canteen (*mensa dei bambini*) supported the inmates with resources from the outside. The *mensa dei bambini*, in particular, took care of the needs of individual internees, especially children (delivering items such as shoes, clothes, milk) but it also provided support for the camp as a whole. For example, it helped to pay for necessary improvements in the camp, such as the installation of showers.⁴⁰ Israel Kalk, who had originally founded the *mensa dei bambini* to help the children of foreign Jewish refugees in Milan, visited the camp a few times, as did the Rabbi of Genoa, Riccardo Pacifici, as envoy of Delasem. In addition to the material aid provided, both Kalk and Pacifici also tried to help with emotional support for the inmates.⁴¹

Jewish Self-Government and the Institutions at Ferramonti

When the first hundred men arrived at Ferramonti, the camp was still a construction site. There were no bathroom facilities or electricity. The inmates had to line up in the sun for hours for the distribution of drinking water. Many fell ill with diarrhea and other diseases. The dirt, the mosquitos, and the heat made the place hell.⁴² Yet, the inmates started to set up a system of self-government. Each barrack elected a speaker of the dormitory (*capo camerata*) and these in turn elected a speaker for the entire camp (*obercapo, capo dei capi*) to deal with the

³⁸ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 170-172.

³⁹ There are no detailed statistics of the camp population in 1942 or 1943 but the percentage of Jews in Ferramonti remained at or above 75%, Capogreco, *Mussolini's Camps*, 217.

⁴⁰ Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 73-76.

⁴¹ Ibid, 74, 142. On Delasem and Pacifici, see Sandro Antonini, *Delasem: Storia della più grande organizzazione ebraica italiana di soccorso durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Genoa: De Ferrari, 2000).

⁴² Mann, "I primi a Ferramonti," fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 64, p. 2-3, CDEC.

directorate. The *obercapi* were always men and the *capi camerata*, who met regularly as a kind of a parliament, were overwhelmingly male but the women's dormitories elected female speakers.⁴³

Hans (Gianni) Mann, the first *obercapo*, described his relationship with the first *direttore* as good. According to Mann, the director tried to accommodate the inmates' needs because he understood that ultimately, the allies would win the war.⁴⁴ Yet, the camp rules were strict: inmates could not leave the camp without permission and had to show up for three daily roll-calls at the main square. Political activity, foreign newspapers, and radios were forbidden. By 9:00 pm everybody had to be in their barrack. Correspondence was generally limited to family members and mail was censored. Inmates had to display "good conduct" and "disciplined behavior."⁴⁵

As the situation in the camp gradually improved, a broad array of economic, social, cultural, and religious institutions and activities emerged. Kitchen commissions were set up for each barrack which were responsible for employing cooks and preparing the meals. Internees who received their daily meals from the communal kitchens had to pay 5 lire daily.⁴⁶ There was a camp infirmary run by inmates who were doctors. The Jewish inmates of Ferramonti operated two synagogues and a Talmud-Torah school, and they formed a Hevrah Qadishah brotherhood, providing for proper ritual burials. They founded a school for the numerous children in Ferramonti.⁴⁷ A judicial tribunal dealt with criminal offenses within the camp.⁴⁸ A concert office was in charge of staging performances and theatre productions, and there was a sports club, which had divisions for soccer, athletics and ping-pong.⁴⁹ Much of the postwar testimony has focused on these male-dominated institutions and initiatives and their positive impact on life in

⁴³ Ibid, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 4. On the directors, see Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *Poliziotti. I direttori dei campi di concentramento italiani 1940-1943* (Rome: Cooper, 2004).

⁴⁵ Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 47; Folino, *Ferramonti*, 16.

⁴⁶ Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 53.

⁴⁷ Fürst and Rosenbach, "Ferramonti-Tarsia: Das Leben der Zivilinternierten in Zahlen," fondo Kalk, busta 2, fasc. 17, p. 5-8, CDEC.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 7, 10. On concerts and music, Del Zoppo, *Ferramonti*, 89-138.

Ferramonti.⁵⁰ While all of these examples are proof of the internees' remarkable resilience and inventiveness, the ways in which life in the camp was portrayed appears to be rosier than the reality. Women were largely absent from these accounts.

The Arrival of Women in Ferramonti

The first women who arrived in Ferramonti in the summer of 1940 were visitors, not internees. Some women were granted visits to Ferramonti to see their husbands. According to Klaus Voigt, it was “fairly easy” to obtain permission for a short visit, but the process was arbitrary, especially when it came to the length of the visit.⁵¹ Nelly Morpurgo Mann was only granted a week, which ended in an agonizing, tearful good-bye from her husband.⁵² Women had to make difficult decisions whether to leave their children behind to fend for themselves or to take them along. Rosa Stavsky Ivankowski's mother wanted to go alone. Rosa and her siblings were worried about their mother having to travel by herself. When they saw her off at the train station in Milan, loaded with luggage in a packed train, they burst into tears.⁵³ Shortly after her return to Milan, the mother was notified that she and her children would also be interned and taken to Ferramonti.⁵⁴

The first women to stay in Ferramonti were those who arrived with the Benghazi group in September 1940. Others were sent from major cities or from free internment in a village. Some were married women who chose to come to Ferramonti voluntarily to be reunited with their husbands. Sultana Razon Veronesi's mother spontaneously decided to leave the family's Milan apartment and move with her daughters to Ferramonti to join her husband. They appeared at the camp unexpected, and, to the astonishment of the guards, demanded to be admitted. Her mother wanted the family to be together and had been frustrated

⁵⁰ Pubblicità a Ferramonti, section “Was sie wissen müssen,” (What you have to know, a brochure containing a list of key offices and their all-male representatives in the camp), fondo Kalk, busta 2, fasc. 18, CDEC.

⁵¹ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 114, see also *ibid.*, 117.

⁵² Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 84-85.

⁵³ Rosa Stavsky Ivankowski, *Not Enough Points* (Chicago: Rosa Stavsky Ivankowski, 2009), 83.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

by the fact that communication with her husband had been almost impossible.⁵⁵ Margarethe H. came voluntarily because she had no income after her husband had been arrested and she could simply not afford to stay in Milan on her own with her little son.⁵⁶ Adele Obarzanek also struggled financially. She applied for her and her two children to be transferred from free internment to Ferramonti.⁵⁷ Fanny F. went to Ferramonti because her husband had fallen seriously ill in the camp.⁵⁸ Some women may have felt isolated in free internment or at the mercy of local Fascist officials. In addition, Ferramonti offered a religious life and schooling for children—something that had become impossible in many places because of the racial laws.⁵⁹

Many female internees were adolescents or young adults who arrived with their families, like Thea Obarzanek (16 years), Zdenka Baum (17 years), Edith Fischhof (18 years) or Herta Bratspiess (18 years).⁶⁰ Some were all by themselves like eighteen-year-old Nina Weksler. Others came to Ferramonti with their children but without their husbands. Tony Isaack's husband had been hiding to avoid the arrests of Jewish men in Milan. Eventually, the police knocked at the door and took his wife and his children, then five and seven years old.⁶¹ To most of the

⁵⁵ Sultana Razon Veronesi, "Foreword from the book *The Heart, If It Could Think*," in *Stories of Survival: The People of Ferramonti Then and Now*, ed. Yolanda Ropschitz-Bentham (Tuningen: Texianer Verlag, 2021), 145-146.

⁵⁶ Margarethe H. to Ministero degli Interni, Jan. 23, 1941, A 4 bis, busta 242, Dir. Gen. Pub. Sicurezza, Div. Affari Generali e riservati, MI, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter ACS).

⁵⁷ Thea Aschkenase, *Remembering. A Holocaust Survivor Shares Her Life* (Amherst: Levellers Press, 2015), 34, 37.

⁵⁸ Sworn statement by Fanny F., Nov. 14, 1956, LEA 12260, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich.

⁵⁹ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 115, 136.

⁶⁰ For the testimonies, see Zdenka Levy (née Baum), interview 12393. Interview by Harriette Kanew. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Feb. 24, 1996, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/12393>; Thea Aschkenase (née Obarzanek), interview 38084. Interview by Renée Hecht. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Jan. 21, 1998, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/38084>; Herta Gerber (née Bratspiess), interview 40869. Interview by Maurina Schinasi Alazraki. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, April 14, 1998, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/40869>, all accessed May 17, 2024. Edith Fischhof Gilboa, *Farben des Regenbogens am Meer. Ein jüdisches Mädchen überlebt den Holocaust* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2016).

⁶¹ Tony Isaack, interview 43852, segment 65-67. Interview by Marianna Bergida. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, May 16, 1998, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/43852>, accessed May 17, 2024.

women, who had not already been there as visitors, the arrival was a shock. Nina Weksler's first impression of Ferramonti was that of a "stable." It was night when she got there, and she remembered: "I saw 30 beds, 29 sleeping strangers, above my head a straw-covered roof – a stable."⁶²

Most women arrived exhausted because they had had to sell a family business, empty an apartment, and acquire things that were needed or potentially useful in the camp.⁶³ At the arrival, many women were happy that families were reunited. In other cases, the reunions were strained. Men who had already been interned for many months were depressed and irritable. Nina Weksler overheard a couple arguing bitterly on the evening that the wife had arrived.⁶⁴ Many couples without children had to sleep in the dormitories for single men and women. Apparently, there were not enough family barracks, and whether a couple received a family barrack may have depended on their good connections within the camp.⁶⁵

Daily Life: Dirt and Disease

Many women were appalled by the dirt and the vermin. When Tony Isaack arrived in April 1941, she stood "almost knee-high in the mud."⁶⁶ In the cold humid winters, clothes and fabric started to grow mold.⁶⁷ In the summer, the mud turned to dust that was everywhere. For many internees, especially women, life at Ferramonti became an eternal struggle to keep dirt and bugs at bay. They often discussed the best measures to kill bedbugs.⁶⁸ Some used pins to skewer them or killed them with boiling water.⁶⁹ Others aired out sheets and mattresses daily or

⁶² Weksler, "Ferramonti Streiflichter," fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 106, p. 1, CDEC.

⁶³ Salomon Hauber, "Internato civile a Ferramonti," fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 62, p. 6-7, CDEC.

⁶⁴ Weksler, "Ferramonti Streiflichter," fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 106, p. 2, CDEC.

⁶⁵ Weksler, *Con la gente*, 43.

⁶⁶ Tony Isaack, interview 43852, segment 72. Interview by Marianna Bergida. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, May 16, 1998, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/43852>, accessed May 17, 2024.

⁶⁷ Weksler, *Con la gente*, 76.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

sprayed the beds with kerosene.⁷⁰ Tony Isaack remembered that she always had piles of dirty clothes and had to do laundry every day.⁷¹ Nina Weksler described waking up in the morning. Every morning, her first impression was a swarm of flies in her face, her second impression the screaming and fighting from the wells where “women became hyenas.”⁷² In both the communal and the family barracks the problem of dirt was exacerbated by the fact that chickens and turkeys were raised as food supply.⁷³ Typically, these family units consisted of two “rooms” separated by a blanket including a small kitchen area where families could prepare their food. In the summer, many women cooked outside because of the heat, but they faced unexpected problems such as wild dogs in search of food, and they had to defend the meals from hungry animals.⁷⁴

Personal hygiene in Ferramonti was a particular challenge for women. Marta Grunbaum’s first impression of the camp was that she was so disgusted by the sanitary facilities that she could not go to the bathroom for quite some time.⁷⁵ Apparently, this was not uncommon. During their time in prison Nina Weksler and Maria Eisenstein became so constipated that they needed an enema.⁷⁶ Initially there were no showers in the camp and the inmates had to get water at the wells and wash in the barracks. Later a small number of showers were installed. Vera S. signed up voluntarily for the task of cleaning the toilets because that entitled her to a daily shower. However, after a while she realized that the guards had drawn holes in the walls of the women’s shower room and were watching them.⁷⁷ In the women’s barracks women had little privacy to wash and get dressed

⁷⁰ Dina Smadar, “Zvi Neumann and Gita Friedmann,” in *Stories of Survival*, ed. Ropschitz-Bentham, 128-129.

⁷¹ Tony Isaack, interview 43852, segment 85. Interview by Marianna Bergida. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, May 16, 1998, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/43852>, accessed May 17, 2024.

⁷² Weksler, “Ferramonti Streiflichter,” fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 106, p. 3, CDEC.

⁷³ Weksler, *Con la gente*, 91; Stavsky Ivankowski, *Not Enough Points*, 95.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Marta Grunbaum, interview 26611, segment 48. Interview by Elaine F. Miller. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Feb. 14, 1997, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/26611>, accessed May 17, 2024.

⁷⁶ Weksler, *Con la gente*, 21; Eisenstein, *L’internata numero 6*, 92-93.

⁷⁷ Vera S., interview 23437, segment 79-80. Interview by Klara Firestone. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Nov. 6, 1996, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/23437>, accessed May 17, 2024.

because husbands of the married women joined their wives for breakfast.⁷⁸ Nina Weksler wrote about “things people dream about in Ferramonti.” She made five points. In first place she listed: “a real bathroom with bath tub in which you can sit” and in second place “a real toilet,” followed by “an affidavit” and “a check made out in dollars,” and, for once “being alone for an entire day.”⁷⁹

The insufficient sanitary facilities and the weather promoted diseases, which were much more widespread in the camp than much of the positive testimony would suggest.⁸⁰ Despite the distribution of quinine pills, many inmates came down with malaria. Some of them had outbreaks of malaria for the rest of their lives.⁸¹ There were cases of typhus, gastroenteritis, heart diseases and eye diseases.⁸² Sometimes, illnesses were embellished or invented because in this way, inmates could get permission for a journey to Cosenza or another nearby town, but nevertheless, many internees were seriously ill. Barbara E. suffered from cervicitis and weighed barely 44 kilograms.⁸³ Vera Alkalaj arrived with her sister in the fall when the camp was cold and damp. After a few days her sister contracted pneumonia.⁸⁴ Deborah M. suffered a complete nervous breakdown shortly after her arrival.⁸⁵ Rosa Epstein, then twelve years old, was brought to the hospital in Cosenza with malaria together with another internee who had typhus. None of

⁷⁸ Weksler, *Con la gente*, 37.

⁷⁹ Weksler, “Ferramonti Streiflichter,” fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 106, p. 6, CDEC.

⁸⁰ On this point, see Susanna Schrafstetter, “Zwischen Skylla und Charybdis? Münchner Juden in Italien, 1933-1945,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 66, no. 4 (2018): 603-605.

⁸¹ Walter Greenberg, interview 33330, segment 7. Interview by Martha A. Frazer. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Aug. 14, 1997, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/33330>, accessed May 17, 2024.

⁸² For a list of common diseases, see Fürst and Rosenbach, “Ferramonti-Tarsia: Das Leben der Zivilinternierten in Zahlen,” fondo Kalk, busta 2, fasc. 17, p. 8, CDEC.

⁸³ Barbara E. to Ministero degli Interni, Nov. 29, 1940, A 4 bis, busta 206, Dir. Gen. Pub. Sicurezza, Div. Affari Generali e riservati, MI, ACS.

⁸⁴ Vera Alkalaj, interview 74, segment 8. Interview by Sandy Jacobson. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Aug. 24, 1994, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/74>, accessed, May 17, 2024.

⁸⁵ Sworn statement by Deborah M., Oct. 25, 1962, LEA 25399, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich.

her family members were allowed to visit her. A few weeks earlier her grandmother had died in the hospital because in Ferramonti they did not have any insulin.⁸⁶

Many inmates tried to work in one form or another because the government allowance paid to the inmates (lire 6,50 per day which was paid out every 10 days) was not nearly enough to survive in Ferramonti.⁸⁷ Families were disadvantaged because the full government allowance of 6,50 lire was only paid out to single adults. Married women and children received only 1,10 and 0,55 lire respectively.⁸⁸ This meant that mothers, especially, had to struggle to put food on the table and tried whatever they could to obtain food.

Some internees worked in the camp administration and received small 'salaries,' while others opened up small "businesses" in the camp. Watchmakers, shoemakers, tailors, plumbers, painters and locksmiths offered their services. There were bakeries, tea-stands, and "coffee houses" where inmates could get fresh pastries and beverages.⁸⁹ Internees who had family members outside of the camp could have goods sent to them and open a "store." For example, in this way Ernst Steiner was able to sell soap, toothpaste, and other toiletries to his fellow inmates.⁹⁰ Those internees who still had financial means could buy goods on the black market and set up a business in the camp. The Fascist militia that guarded the camp ran an elaborate black market, regularly bringing in large amounts of goods in the middle of the night.⁹¹

Women operated successful businesses in typically female domains such as cooking. Marta Grunbaum spoke excellent Italian and because of that she had a good relationship with the guards. She could afford to buy yeast and flour and other baking goods and started making pastries. But she had to get up at 4:00 am

⁸⁶ Rosy Berne (née Rosa Ebstein) interview 2679, segments 26-28. Interview by Jay B. Straus. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, May 10, 1995, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/2679>, accessed May 17, 2024.

⁸⁷ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 118-19.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Pubblicità a Ferramonti, fondo Kalk, busta 2, fasc. 18, CDEC.

⁹⁰ Ernesto Steiner, "Come vendevo sapone a Ferramonti," fondo Kalk, busta 6, fasc. 73, p. 1-2, CDEC.

⁹¹ Enrico Besztynt, "Meine campagna in Ferramonti," fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 58, p. 2-3, CDEC. On the black market and bribery in Ferramonti, see also Albert Alcalay, *The Persistence of Hope. A True Story* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 174-175.

every morning to prepare the dough and do the baking.⁹² Other women offered to do laundry and alterations, to cut hair or to provide manicures and pedicures. Renee L., who came with the Rodi group, brought her customers with her from Rhodes. She cut hair for bread and cigarettes.⁹³ Most likely not all the women who were now compelled to make some money had worked before they came to Ferramonti or to Italy. Some of the women in the camp could fall back on savings or rely on a husband's income, which allowed them to buy food from the local peasants who regularly came to the camp fence to sell groceries at inflated prices across the barbed wire.⁹⁴

Those who lacked funds, specific skills, or contacts outside of the camp were in a much more difficult position.⁹⁵ Nina Weksler drew a stark contrast between the “upper crust” of the camp and those inmates who earned a few extra lire cleaning the toilets.⁹⁶ Those who did not have the means to start a business offered their services as housekeepers or butlers. Albert Springer, the head of the camp tribunal, later claimed in his testimony that “those who did not have private financial means always had the option to find a decent source of income and could improve their standard of living in this way.”⁹⁷ Yet many inmates barely scraped by, among them many women. In October 1942, fifteen women, who had formed part of the Benghazi group, wrote a desperate letter to the Red Cross, explaining that they had lost everything and were now utterly destitute.⁹⁸ Rosa Ebstein remembered that practically every day she “used to faint from hunger.”⁹⁹ Hanna Koppel wrote to

⁹² Marta Grunbaum, interview 26611, segment 49-50. Interview by Elaine F. Miller. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Feb. 14, 1997, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/26611>, accessed May 17, 2024.

⁹³ Renee L., interview 52708, segment 53-54. Interview by Gail Moscoso. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Jan. 08, 1996, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/52708>, accessed May 17, 2024.

⁹⁴ Alice Redlich, trascrizione della testimonianza, fondo Vicissitudini dei singoli, serie 1, busta 21, fasc. 618, CDEC. For an English version see https://deportati.it/wp-content/static/upload/eng/english_alice/english_alice.pdf, accessed May 17, 2024.

⁹⁵ These social differences have so far only been addressed briefly by Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 178-79.

⁹⁶ Weksler, “Ferramonti Streiflichter,” fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 106, p. 5, CDEC.

⁹⁷ Albert Springer, “Ferramonti,” fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 53, p. 5, CDEC.

⁹⁸ Folino, *Ferramonti*, 61-62.

⁹⁹ Rosy Berne (née Rosa Ebstein), interview 2679, segment 21. Interview by Jay B. Straus. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, May 10, 1995, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/2679>, accessed May 17, 2024.

a relative, describing how weak she was, and how she had to lie down frequently when she felt dizzy from hunger. Her letter was censored by the camp authority for portraying a negative image to the outside.¹⁰⁰

How many inmates—female or male—were able to find work in the camp administration or open successful businesses? These questions are difficult to answer but obviously, there were considerable social differences between the internees who could afford to buy extra food and hire a housekeeper and those who were barely able to survive. Claims like the one made by Albert Springer that everyone could make a decent living in Ferramonti were simply not true. Former inmates described prolonged involuntary boredom as one of the main problems of the camp.¹⁰¹ They were forced to lead the “apathetic humiliating life of grazing animals who have their stable and their food. But what else?”¹⁰²

Love, Sex, and Marriage

The cramped conditions, the widespread boredom, the absence of political news and the general anxiety led to the emergence of a great deal of gossip. Nina Weksler joked that the news in Ferramonti contained about 5% truth.¹⁰³ That may have been exaggerated, but gossip, rumors and slander were widespread. The inmates keenly observed what was going on in the camp and commented widely. Lacking any real news from outside of the camp, the inmates’ “news” often concerned the behavior of women. “With plenty of free time, there were new daily scandals to be discussed – whose wife had been caught with whom, etc.,” explained Richard Mayer who also described the daughter of neighbors in Ferramonti as “blonde [...] with no good reputation as for her morals.”¹⁰⁴ Nina Weksler sarcastically commented that there was so much gossip about sex that no young attractive

¹⁰⁰ Folino, *Ferramonti*, 135-36.

¹⁰¹ See for example Miriam Weiss, interview 1265, segment 47, 51. Interview by Hilary Kahn. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation 1995, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/1265>, accessed May 17, 2024.

¹⁰² Weksler, “Ferramonti Streiflichter,” fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 106, p. 3, CDEC.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ “Richard and Hella Mayer: Richard Mayer tells the story,” in *Stories of Survival*, ed. Ropschitz-Bentham, 113, 112.

woman had her moral reputation intact.¹⁰⁵ Women’s behavior was monitored closely. Sixteen-year-old Thea Obarzanek, who had her first boyfriend in the camp, remembered that the young couple was under constant surveillance, “with many eyes watching us.”¹⁰⁶

Love blossomed, despite the miserable conditions. Many young women experienced their first relationships at Ferramonti.¹⁰⁷ Members of the “Rodi group” especially were overwhelmingly young adults in their 20s and 30s. Some were in relationships hoping to get married soon. Others arrived all by themselves. Hedwig P.’s situation was particularly difficult. She entered the camp as a young widow together with her in-laws. In Ferramonti she met a man she liked, and she was grateful that her in-laws were welcoming to her new fiancé despite the pain of having lost their son.¹⁰⁸ The main alley in the camp and the “coffee houses” were central places for courtship. So were sports events. For Sunday afternoon football matches everybody showed up in their best clothes, and the women with their hair done, wearing make-up.¹⁰⁹ Padre Lopinot, the priest looking after the Catholics in Ferramonti, commented sourly about men (internees and guards) still hanging out in the women’s barracks after the curfew of 9:00pm.¹¹⁰ It is important to remember that in 1941 only 33% of the internees were women, and although we don’t have statistics for 1942, the number is unlikely to have gone up because among the 506 members of the “Rodi group,” who arrived in 1942, only 156 were women.¹¹¹ In a society with a large male surplus, young women received a lot of attention, and while some of it was welcome, a lot of it was unwanted.

¹⁰⁵ Weksler, “Ferramonti Streiflichter,” fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 106, p. 5, CDEC.

¹⁰⁶ Aschkenase, *Remembering*, 39.

¹⁰⁷ Among them were Buena Pearlman, interview 51619, segment 71. Interview by Paula Saltman. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, May 11, 2001, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/51619>; Zdenka Baum, see Zdenka Levy (née Baum), interview 12393, segment 70. Interview by Harriette Kanew. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Feb. 14, 1996, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/12393>, all accessed May 17, 2024, and Heidi Mystovski, see Stavsky Ivankowski, *Not Enough Points*, 93-94.

¹⁰⁸ Hedwig P., interview 49972, segment 72-73. Interview by Larry Rosenberg. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, July 7, 1999, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/49972>, accessed May 17, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Weksler, *Con la gente*, 166.

¹¹⁰ “Dal diario personale di padre Callisto Lopinot (1941-1944),” in Rende, *Ferramonti*, 120.

¹¹¹ Numbers according to Anna Pizzuti, *Ebrei stranieri internati in Italia durante il periodo bellico*, <http://www.annapizzuti.it/database/ricerca.php>, accessed May 17, 2024.

Women who became pregnant were allowed to go to the hospital in Cosenza to give birth. Getting there could be a challenge. About to deliver her baby, Gita Friedmann had to ride on a donkey to the train station to board a train to Cosenza.¹¹² After the women had given birth, they were sent back to the camp with their newborns. While a number of infants were living in the camp, their situation was precarious. Meta and Philipp Kanner's baby daughter Liane was born in the fall of 1940. In the winter, they had only cold water and the baby got very sick.¹¹³ A couple of the newborns lived only for a few months.¹¹⁴ Not all of the women who became pregnant carried the pregnancy to full term. Salim Diamand, one of the doctors at Ferramonti, recounted that his girlfriend secretly had an abortion: "One day we discovered that Mala was pregnant. This camp was no place for infants and an abortion was performed by a colleague, a physician from Germany. He did the operation with limited equipment and the most important drug we had was sulfanilamide. The abortion was completed without complications."¹¹⁵ Unfortunately, we don't have Mala's perspective on her pregnancy, her relationship with the father of her unborn child, or her life in the camp. We don't know why she agreed to the procedure. The brief, matter-of-fact account by Diamand suggests abortions may have been carried out more than once. Apparently, there was a doctor who was willing and able to perform them. Salim Diamand was transferred shortly thereafter because a doctor was needed in another camp.¹¹⁶

Weddings occurred frequently at Ferramonti and they were contests of improvisation. Gita Friedmann's veil "was made of mosquito netting," and for the ritual bath, she walked to the river Crati, accompanied by a guard, and immersed herself in the muddy stream.¹¹⁷ Anny Lazar had a wedding dress made of bedsheets.¹¹⁸ One internee remarked that by 1942 a real "wedding fever" had

¹¹² Smadar, "Zvi Neumann and Gita Friedmann," 129.

¹¹³ Philipp Kanner to the Ministero degli Interni, May 12, 1942, A 4 bis, busta 181, Dir. Gen. Pub. Sicurezza, Div. Affari Generali e riservati, MI, ACS.

¹¹⁴ Folino, *Ferramonti: un lager di Mussolini*, 142 and 220.

¹¹⁵ Salim Diamand, *Dottore! Internment in Italy 1940-1945* (New York: Mosaic Press, 1987), 21.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁷ Smadar, "Zvi Neumann and Gita Friedmann," 128.

¹¹⁸ Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 141-142.

emerged in the camp.¹¹⁹ The lack of privacy and the constant observation led some couples to consider an early marriage in hopes of securing a family barrack. Other couples simply lied about already being married to get their own quarters or had a “fake” marriage ceremony.¹²⁰ In fact, some couples were married in a religious ceremony only, without the necessary documents and registration.¹²¹ One of the inmates reminded his fellow Ferramonters that they needed to legalize their marriages after liberation.¹²² Some couples understood the provisional nature of a ceremony, that for the time being, their union was valid only within the camp. Nina Weksler made it clear that women worn down by loneliness, lack of financial resources, and constant nasty gossip entered into strategic relationships with men who had money, and who would be able to obtain a family barrack thanks to his connections.¹²³

A number of testimonies indicate that sexual bartering, i.e. “the exchange of sex or affection for resources or protection”¹²⁴ was common. Sometimes this involved relationships like the ones described by Nina Weksler, in others it would be merely a single encounter.¹²⁵ Renee L. explained in an interview that at the internment camp in Rhodes, “there were quite a few things going on for money, [...] sex for sale was very prominent at that point, and also for favors, for favors from the management [...].” When she was asked whether this happened at Ferramonti as well, she replied, “at Ferramonti, even more, I guess [...].”¹²⁶ Nina Weksler explained that the topic of sexual bartering formed a central part of the daily gossip

¹¹⁹ Unknown author, “Ferramontiechen,” fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 108, p. 1, CDEC.

¹²⁰ Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 131-32.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Unknown author, “Ferramontiechen” fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 108, p. 1-2, CDEC. Based on information from a former internee, Capogreco confirms that not all marriages at Ferramonti were legally valid. Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 131-132.

¹²³ Weksler, *Con la gente*, 143-148.

¹²⁴ This definition of sexual bartering is from Anna Hájková, “Between love and coercion: queer desire, sexual barter and the Holocaust,” *German History* 39, no. 1, (2021): 112; See also Anna Hájková, “Sexual barter in times of genocide. Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt ghetto,” in *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (2013): 505. On sexual barter in other Italian internment camps see Cegna, “Alcune riflessioni,” 1.

¹²⁵ Hájková, “Between love and coercion,” 112-113, differentiates between longer, “‘rational’ relationships” and “‘instrumental’ sex.” See also Hájková, “Sexual barter,” 505.

¹²⁶ Renee L., interview 52708, segment 54-55. Interview by Gail Moscoso. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Jan. 08, 1996, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/52708>, accessed May 17, 2024.

in the camp.¹²⁷ By March 1943 Padre Lopinot wrote warily about the “great immorality” in Ferramonti. He complained that “in order to gain some money, married and unmarried women abandon themselves to vice.”¹²⁸ At the camp of Le Fraschette, where non-Jewish internees were held, the guards had their favorite young beautiful women, whom they provided with food.¹²⁹ There, the situation was such that “the entire supervisory staff conducted their tasks in a negligent manner with total lack of discipline, instead seeking every possible opportunity to socialize with the female internees.”¹³⁰ Sexual bartering and relationships between female internees and guards were common in the women’s camp of Casacalenda.¹³¹ According to Maria Eisenstein, in the women’s camp of Lanciano, the commander maintained a relationship with one of the female inmates.¹³² In Ferramonti some women apparently felt uneasy in the presence of the camp director. Edith Fischhof Gilboa wrote that “he liked young women” and that she felt deeply embarrassed by his sexualized language when he talked to her.¹³³

While Padre Lopinot confided his thoughts to his private diary, male inmates of Ferramonti tried to convey a different public image. Albert Springer, head of the Ferramonti tribunal, claimed that there had only been two women in Ferramonti offering sex for money, and that they had not been “driven by need.”¹³⁴ While both Lopinot and Springer stigmatized the women, they did not say anything about the men involved in the sexual barter.¹³⁵ Springer also assured the reader

¹²⁷ Weksler, “Ferramonti-Streiflichter,” fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 106, p. 6, CDEC.

¹²⁸ “Dal diario personale di padre Callisto Lopinot (1941-1944),” in Rende, *Ferramonti*, 131.

¹²⁹ Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, “I campi di concentramento per civili in Italia durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale,” *Studi Emigrazione/Migration Studies* 43, no. 164 (2006): 809.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 809-810.

¹³¹ Reale, *Mussolini’s Concentration Camps*, 110.

¹³² Eisenstein, *L’internata numero 6*, 16-17 and 25.

¹³³ Fischhof Gilboa, *Farben des Regenbogens*, 116. The sentence that he liked young women is missing in the Italian translation of the book, in which the director is described as “carogna” (swine) instead, see Edith Fischhof Gilboa, *Vivro libera nella terra promessa* (Milan: Mursia, 2018), 86. Similar allegations by other women can be found in Weksler, *Con la gente*, 45, 99 and John Bierman, *Odyssey* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 184-185. See also Smil Reis, “testimony regarding his arrest in Milan and his life as an inmate in the Ferramonti (Italy) camp, 1941-1943,” item ID 3690517, file 132, Record Group O.21 (Italy Collection), Yad Vashem, <https://documents.yadvashem.org/index.html?language=en&search=global&strSearch=Ferramonti%20Reis&GridItemId=3690517>, accessed June 18, 2024.

¹³⁴ Albert Springer, “Die Kriminalität im Lager,” fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 53, p. 34, CDEC.

¹³⁵ For this common pattern in male postwar testimony, Hájková, “Sexual barter,” 505.

that women were never molested, and that “public morality” was never offended in Ferramonti.¹³⁶ While men had their own reasons to remain silent about sexual barter, it is understandable that female testimonies talking openly about these kinds of experiences and choices, be it at Ferramonti or other camps, are rare. Sexual barter has been “among the most stigmatized”¹³⁷ themes in Holocaust history. Yet, it does become clear that sexual barter was widespread in a system in which male Fascist authorities claimed full control over female behavior.

“Buona condotta” was one of the camp rules that the Fascist directory had imposed on the inmates. For Italian Fascism internment was—amongst other things—a tool to discipline women (Jewish or otherwise) and the rule of “buona condotta” was typically enforced when it came to women.¹³⁸ As Victoria de Grazia has noted, Fascism drew “a sharp line between bad women and good ones,”¹³⁹ and many female internees who were educated, emancipated or non-conformist were subsumed in the latter category.¹⁴⁰ In fact, the all-female internment camps were reserved for women considered to be of “dubbia condotta morale e politica.”¹⁴¹ Most of them were not Jews but enemy aliens—among them suspected prostitutes and spies (or wives of suspected spies), known antifascists but also women from Yugoslavia (collectively suspected to be anti-Italian), some Jewish women, women who had violated the rules in other camps. Sometimes no reason was discernable.¹⁴² The subjugation was stronger and the list of vexatious rules longer in the all-female camps, where women suffered under more direct and stricter control of the fascist authorities than in Ferramonti.¹⁴³ In Casacalenda some women tried to escape from the camp, others attempted suicide.¹⁴⁴ Suicide

¹³⁶ Albert Springer, “Die Kriminalität im Lager,” fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 53, p. 33-34, CDEC.

¹³⁷ Hájková, “Between Love and Coercion,” 112.

¹³⁸ Cegna, “‘Di dubbia condotta,’” 29.

¹³⁹ Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women, Italy 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 45.

¹⁴⁰ Cegna, “‘Di dubbia condotta,’” 29; Cegna, “Fascist Female Segregation,” 76.

¹⁴¹ Cegna, “‘Di dubbia Condotta,’” 28.

¹⁴² Cegna, “Fascist Female Segregation,” 80-81, 85; Cegna, “‘Di dubbia Condotta,’” 28, 31-33 and 37.

¹⁴³ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, III; Cegna, “Alcune riflessioni,” 14.

¹⁴⁴ Hanna Cassel, interview 53177, segment 62, 67-68. Interview by Gail Kurtz. Visual History Archive, JFCS Holocaust Center, June 3, 1991, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/53177>, accessed May 17, 2024.

attempts also occurred in Vinchiaturio and Lanciano.¹⁴⁵ In these women's camps, a self-government organized by the internees did not exist. In Ferramonti, the presence of a Jewish self-government provided somewhat of a buffer from Fascist scrutiny, and the presence of men meant laxer rules for everyone, but female behavior was also controlled closely by the Fascist directorate. Tony Isaack, who was in the camp without her husband, was reprimanded by a camp official for walking and chatting with a young man.¹⁴⁶ Lily S. had an infection that was treated by the doctors in the camp infirmary. Somebody informed the camp director about this, and, as a result, she was forced to undergo an examination to see if she had had an abortion.¹⁴⁷ Nina Weksler was repeatedly reprimanded for meeting up with male friends in the evening after curfew and accused of maintaining sexual relations with various men. She was also reprimanded for wearing trousers and threatened with transfer to an all-female camp.¹⁴⁸ At one point, the directorate considered separating the women's barracks from the rest of the camp to discipline the female inmates.¹⁴⁹ We don't know who signaled the female "transgressions" to the directorate but can assume that it was not always the guards.

While some comparative conclusions can be drawn between the situation of women in Ferramonti and that of women in the all-female camps, Ferramonti was unique. It was the only large camp for Jews where both male and female internees were held, and which had a Jewish self-government. The Fascist universe of camps was vast. Comparisons are fraught, given the different camp populations, the vastly different conditions in the camps, and the changes resulting from German occupation. Just to provide one example: In the camp of Gonars, where Yugoslav civilians were held, conditions were much worse than in Ferramonti, leading to an extremely high death rate. In Gonars, "about 80% of all pregnant women delivered

¹⁴⁵ Capogreco, *Mussolini's Camps*, 201; Eisenstein, *L'internata numero 6*, 69.

¹⁴⁶ Tony Isaack, interview 43852, segment 78. Interview by Marianna Bergida. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, May 16, 1998, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/43852>, accessed May 17, 2024.

¹⁴⁷ Lily S., interview 52438, segment 42-44. Interview by Anne Feibelman. Visual History Archive, JFCS Holocaust Center, Jan. 27, 1990, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/52438>, accessed May 17, 2024.

¹⁴⁸ Weksler, *Con la gente*, 98-100.

¹⁴⁹ Springer, "Die Statuten des Lagergerichtes," fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 53, p. 28, CDEC.

stillborn fetuses.”¹⁵⁰ Marija Poje remembered that she was too weak to bury her son who died from starvation only days after he was born.¹⁵¹ Much work remains to be done examining women’s lives in various locations within the Fascist camp system—research that is also hampered by a scarcity of sources. Some places housed only a small number of internees and an even smaller number of women, and, as noted, few women talked openly about sexual abuse or barter. Hence, much of the comparative perspective lies beyond the scope of this article.

The Liberation of Ferramonti: Nostalgia for a Concentration Camp?

Mussolini’s removal from power in July 1943 did not lead to an immediate dissolution of the camp, as the directives for internment were not revoked. At that point, the food supply had deteriorated and the camp was overcrowded.¹⁵² More and more inmates had fallen ill with various diseases.¹⁵³ The *capi camerata* demanded more food and less censorship and surveillance.¹⁵⁴ In the final days of the camp’s existence, several internees were killed by erroneous fire from an Allied plane that mistook the place for military barracks.¹⁵⁵ In early September 1943 the camp was finally liberated by the British, which meant that the Jews in Ferramonti, and in the regions of the far south of Italy that had been reached by the Allies before the announcement of Italy’s surrender, were spared from German occupation.

Following its liberation, the camp continued to function as “home” to many of its inmates who were now free but did not immediately have a place to go. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration provided the supplies, the barbed wire was removed, and the camp continued to exist under Jewish self-administration.¹⁵⁶ Some of the internees stayed until 1945. Among the last to leave

¹⁵⁰ Capogreco, *Mussolini’s Camps*, 224. At one point almost 6,400 internees were imprisoned in Gonars. 439 internees did not survive the camp, *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Kersevan, *Lager italiani*, 156.

¹⁵² Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 140-41, 144.

¹⁵³ Folino, *Un misfatto senza sconti*, 84.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁵⁵ Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 145-146.

¹⁵⁶ On the final phase, Capogreco, *Ferramonti*, 143-166.

was Siegfried Danziger from Munich, who wrote about the “comfort” (*Geborgenheit*) he experienced in Ferramonti “during terrible times,” and who was convinced that “former Ferramonters [...] will never forget their camp which for many years had been an involuntary Heimat.”¹⁵⁷ Julius (Giulio) Fleischmann from Vienna reached a similar conclusion:

And in this way in the camp of Ferramonti, a whole range of institutions emerged, the likes of which you only find in big, well-developed communities. And when the camp was dissolved and closed after the war, all former Ferramonters felt, on the one hand, the joy that they had survived the war more or less intact, on the other hand, a certain nostalgia and a deep sense of regret that Ferramonti, this interesting and strange concentration camp, was now consigned to history.¹⁵⁸

Danziger’s and Fleischmann’s remarkably nostalgic looks back are indicative of much testimony from men romanticizing the community that they had built in Ferramonti. Whether it was them or Albert Springer writing about moral virtuosity or work opportunities, or Gianni Mann stressing the good relationship with the Fascist director, they focused on their achievements as they searched for meaning and belonging. Not everyone saw it this way. By contrast, the Viennese teenager Gisella Weiss had little time for nostalgia. She expressed her hope that Ferramonti “to us will remain nothing but an ugly record far away from our lives.”¹⁵⁹

Conclusions: The “Best Camp” and Its Afterlife

The women of Ferramonti were a heterogeneous group from different countries, of different ages, with or without their families. What they shared in Ferramonti

¹⁵⁷ Siegfried Danziger, “Die Letzten von Ferramonti,” fondo Kalk, busta 5, fasc. 55, p. 3, 4, CDEC.

¹⁵⁸ Julius (Giulio) Fleischmann, “Die Chevrà Kadishà in Ferramonti,” fondo Kalk, busta 6, fasc. 71, p. 1, CDEC.

¹⁵⁹ Gisella Weiss, “Momenti salienti della vita del campo,” fondo Kalk, busta 7, fasc. 103, p. 2, CDEC.

was a daily struggle against dirt, disease, boredom, and hunger, heat in the summer and damp in the winter in a space dominated by men. They had to find ways to make money in order to maintain themselves and their families in a society of great economic inequality with a flourishing system of barter involving internees, guards, and the local population. In this system, sex was a readily accepted currency that was used strategically to acquire food, favors, protection, and other assets. They had to negotiate sex, love, marriage, and maternity in a confined setting in which their bodies and behavior were under constant surveillance by the camp community and the Fascist directorate. They dealt with all of this, sometimes for years, while receiving no news about family members and loved ones. Despite this, many female internees (like their male counterparts) emphasize the positive aspects of their time in Ferramonti in their testimonies and relegate the specifically female experience and hardship to the sidelines.

The reluctance by survivors to be critical of internment (and of their treatment by the Italians more generally) has surprised historians.¹⁶⁰ As mentioned in the introduction, this has to do with a comparative lens juxtaposing treatment in Italy with the situation in German concentration and death camps. Especially for a survivor of Auschwitz, in retrospect, time in Ferramonti appeared to have been quite pleasant.¹⁶¹ Many survivors were young at the time and associated Ferramonti with the years of their youth, with first romance, with courtship and perhaps with marriage. Others put all of their energy and life blood in the running of camp, in bettering the conditions in the malaria ridden wetlands of the Crati valley, and, in this way, experienced a sense of purpose and belonging.¹⁶²

Yet, the unusually positive assessment contributed to the self-exculpatory postwar narrative of the “good Italian,” who unlike the “bad German,” never meant any harm to the Jews.¹⁶³ In this narrative Ferramonti became a “humane camp,” the best camp in Italy, and, in this way, the narrative also deflected attention from Italian camps that had been much worse than Ferramonti. Among them were the

¹⁶⁰ Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 140-41 and 198-99.

¹⁶¹ Aschkenase, *Remembering*.

¹⁶² Voigt, *Zuflucht auf Widerruf*, vol. 2, 199.

¹⁶³ For the myth of the good Italian and the Italians as “brava gente,” see Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco ed il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Bari, Editori Laterza, 2013); Davide Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1994).

camps for Yugoslavs, such as Gonars, which has been mentioned above, or Arbe, and those in north Africa, such as Giado.¹⁶⁴

There were some signs however, that not all the former inmates approved of this narrative of Ferramonti as the “good camp.” The dissenting voices were female. In 1979 Bojana Jacovljević complained to a fellow former internee that Israel Kalk had painted too rosy a picture of Ferramonti.¹⁶⁵ At the time, Kalk did much to publicize the narrative of heroic achievement. A few years later, in February of 1984, a controversy erupted when one of the most important Italian newspapers, the *Corriere della Sera* published an article titled “In Calabria, a Lager which was not a Lager,” by Mario La Cava. The author was an accomplished writer from Calabria. “However, in 1940, Italy was not yet flooded with German and Nazi directives,” La Cava wrote. “The persecution of the Jews could appear to be formal only, not substantial, and even if it was not legitimate, it was appropriate to the serious situation that Italy experienced and to the need of not annoying the German allies.” Following this stunning (and in itself contradictory) justification for the persecution, La Cava explained that Ferramonti was the most humane camp in all of Italy, where one could play soccer, go to concerts, get a permit to go shopping in town, attend religious services, and get married in a serene environment. The rest of the text was a eulogy to the humanity of the camp *maresciallo* Gaetano Marrari.¹⁶⁶ In essence, the text painted the same picture of Ferramonti as Fascist propaganda had done 50 years earlier, according to which internment of opponents of the regime was nothing but a “*villeggiatura*” (vacation time) for the inmates.¹⁶⁷ And the article nourished the myth of Italians as “*brava gente*,” portraying Marrari as a splendid example.

¹⁶⁴ For these camps, see Capogreco, *Mussolini's Camps*; Kersevan, *Lager italiani*; Davide Rodogno, *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), 397-484; Eric Salerno, *Uccideteli tutti. Libia 1943: Gli ebrei nel campo di concentramento fascista di Giado* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2008).

¹⁶⁵ Haler to Kalk, 11 July 1979, fondo Kalk, busta 2, fasc. 25, CDEC.

¹⁶⁶ Mario La Cava, “In Calabria un lager che non era un lager,” *Corriere della Sera*, February 13, 1984, fondo Località d'internamento, busta 1, fasc. Ferramonti, CDEC. For an assessment of how newspaper articles about Ferramonti spread a positive image of the camp, see Teresa Grande, “La ricostruzione ‘in positivo’ di un’esperienza di internamento: il camp di Ferramonti di Tarsia,” in *Responsabilità e memoria. Linee per il Futuro*, eds. Donatella Barazzetti e Carmen Leccardi (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1997), 147-149.

¹⁶⁷ Capogreco, *Mussolini's Camps*, 20-21.

Shortly thereafter, Rita Koch, who had been interned in Celico near Ferramonti and had come to the camp in the fall of 1943, wrote an angry letter to the editor in chief of *Corriere della Sera*. She asked whether the author had any idea of what it meant to be locked up behind barbed wire in a torrid malaria-ridden area, whether he understood the humiliation, the denigration, and the despair of the inmates. Koch made it clear that a friendly *maresciallo* did not alter the fact that Ferramonti constituted a “terrible crime” and serious violation of human rights.¹⁶⁸ The long-term distortion in the public perception of the camps caused by the way in which Ferramonti was portrayed for decades after the war has most recently been critiqued by the Italian historian Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, a trailblazer in the critical examination of the Fascist camp system. In 2019 he berated “the hilarious description of the Ferramonti camp proffered by the local Pro loco association, for example, [which] describes it as the ‘unique experience of an internment camp that was free from every racial prejudice’.”¹⁶⁹ Adding to Rita Koch’s point, he stated that the Jews who escaped deportation in southern Italy did “not owe their lives to the ‘kindness’ of the fascist camps” but to the geostrategic situation of the Second World War in southern Italy.¹⁷⁰ For Koch, the sanitized image of Ferramonti was “counterproductive to the safety and respect of democracy.” She concluded, you “don’t do a service to Italy of today if you’re trying to prettify the crimes of the past.”¹⁷¹ Her admonition still rings true today.

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¹⁶⁸ Rita Koch to direttore di *Corriere della Sera*, February 21, 1984, fondo Località d’internamento, busta 1, fasc. Ferramonti, CDEC.

¹⁶⁹ Capogreco, *Mussolini’s Camps*, 10.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷¹ Rita Koch to direttore di *Corriere della Sera*, February 21, 1984, fondo Località d’internamento, busta 1, fasc. Ferramonti, CDEC.

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