

Liliana Picciotto, *Salvatori. Gli ebrei d'Italia sfuggiti alla Shoah. 1943-1945*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2017), pp. 590

by Juliane Wetzel

The history of the rescue of Jews in Italy during the Holocaust can only be narrated against the backdrop of the political situation at the time. Liliana Picciotto accordingly begins her in-depth study by detailing the anti-Jewish discrimination and persecution by the fascist government up to the period following the German occupation of northern Italy in September 1943, when deportations began under Mussolini's pro-German puppet government of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* with headquarters in Salò on Lake Garda. In addition to the hunting down of Jews, the author also discusses the dangers facing individuals who became in any way involved in rescue operations. In contrast to the situation in Poland and other Nazi-occupied countries, no one in Italy was sentenced to death if charged with assisting Jews. But when this took on the form of armed resistance, it was deemed a punishable offense in Italy, as well. However, it is essential to bear in mind that even when their lives were not at risk, the pressure upon those seeking to help Jews was immense (p. 59). Their research has led Picciotto and her team to the conclusion that clear and definitive distinctions may be impossible to draw among informants, victims, rescuers, and bystanders. Individuals would at times take on several of these roles simultaneously. They would be victims *and* helpers; a person exposed to persecution could at the very same time be a helper, as well (pp. 7ff.).

In Italy, where Jews had long been an integral part of society, the situation was unlike other lands which had come under Nazi control. In Italy Jews had held high-ranking official positions, they had been fully integrated into the economy, and with the beginning of the German occupation they were not required to wear any identifying badges on their clothing. Their options for going underground or into hiding and their chances of finding assistance were far greater than in other countries. In addition, the author points out that Jews were prepared to take steps to protect themselves, doing everything they could to secure false identity papers even when they had never previously engaged in illegal activity (p. 489). Even so, people still had to be found who were ready to take the risks involved in providing assistance. Survival depended on the state of mind of both the saviors and the saved.

In the course of empirical investigation for her study, Liliana Picciotto decided not to employ the term *salvatori* [saviors] but rather *soccorritori* [helpers], because in her view it were more frequently selective actions of assistance that were involved, and these constituted only a partial component in the final overall rescue (p. 17).

In her investigations, only in the very rare cases did she come across actual rescue activities that a single individual had organized and carried out. Similar considerations also induced the historian Wolfgang Benz at the time to designate his European project “Solidarity and Assistance for Jews during the Nazi Era.”<sup>1</sup>

However, Picciotto’s study does not have a primary focus on the rescuers, but rather, as her title underscores in the term *salvarsi* [self-rescue] – focuses on those persons who were rescued, where *salvarsi* means “saving oneself,” and thus ascribes an active role to those who were rescued. The subtitle *Gli ebrei d’Italia sfuggiti alla Shoah, 1943-1945* [The Jews of Italy Who Escaped the Shoah, 1943-1945] illuminates further the perspective that the author has adopted. Included in the analysis are also those Jews who had been able to flee to Italy after the ascent to state power of the National Socialists in Germany and the occupation of several European countries, and who were thus refugees and not Italian citizens. For that reason, in order to determine the total number, the author speaks correctly of the Jews of Italy and not the “Italian Jews.” Of the total of 38,994 Jewish individuals – Italian and foreign – 7,172 were arrested and deported, i.e. it was possible to rescue 81% (pp. 3, 16). They symbolize the “other side of the coin” against the 18% who perished in the course of the persecution. At the conclusion of nine years of intensive research, the author and her team could determine the fate of ca. one-third (10,599 persons) of the 31,822 who were rescued (p. 4).

The chapter *Numeri* [Numbers] describes in greater detail the demographic makeup of the Jews of Italy and the size of the respective Jewish communities. Interestingly, the author does not refer to her own contribution to the volume edited by Wolfgang Benz, *Dimension des Völkermords*,<sup>2</sup> in which – preceding the study by Michele Sarfatti<sup>3</sup> and parallel to Picciotto’s own large-scale investigation of the deportation of the Jews of Italy<sup>4</sup> – she provided a detailed account of the Jewish communities in Italy and the conditions prevailing in them at the time of the German occupation beginning in autumn 1943.

In the chapter *Le persone* [Individuals], 23 witnesses who survived thanks to the help of other people give their testimony, along with 25 other survivors who had managed to rescue themselves and their families. One case is described in particular

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<sup>1</sup> Series *Solidarität und Hilfe. Rettungsversuche für Juden vor der Verfolgung und Vernichtung unter nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft*, ed. Wolfgang Benz, under the auspices of the Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung, Voll. I-VII, (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 1996-2004).

<sup>2</sup> Liliana Picciotto Fargion, “Italien Die Annäherung an die nationalsozialistische Judenpolitik ab 1938 Die Zahl der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus,” in *Dimension des Völkermords. die Zahl der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Wolfgang Benz, (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1991), 199-227.

<sup>3</sup> Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell’Italia fascista. Vicende, identità, persecuzione*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Liliana Picciotto, *Il libro della memoria. Gli ebrei deportati dall’Italia (1943-1945)*, (Mursia: Milan 2000; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1991).

detail: in a rare combination of circumstances, the Finci family, who had fled from Sarajevo to Italy, later made their way from Parma into Switzerland (p. 5). Of the total of 682 Italian helpers honored by Yad Vashem, the author and her team were able to interview two who have also been officially honored in Italy for their acts of solidarity and support. Their detailed narratives are part of the book, as well (pp. 337-43).

Picciotto apologizes to a certain extent for the fact that although much is conveyed here about the history of the rescue of the Jews in Italy, it is of course not everything. She notes that the study was only able to spotlight what transpired, providing insight into the efforts for rescue and the persons involved there as actors. A selection had to be made during the investigation, and she stresses that others might possibly have chosen a different approach. It is unfortunate perhaps that she does not tell the story of the renowned racing cyclist Gino Bartali, since Picciotto tends to concentrate more on those rescued rather than the helpers. Bartali is only mentioned in a footnote (p. 188).<sup>5</sup>

Three times the winner of the *Giro d'Italia* (1936, 1937, 1946) and twice of the *Tour de France* (1938 and 1948), under German occupation in Italy Bartali found a specialized calling.<sup>6</sup> Under the pretext of doing training runs, he delivered false documents, which he would transport hidden inside the frame of his racing bike, to Jews in Toscana. Shuttling back and forth between his hometown, Florence, and Assisi, Bartali also undertook trips to Rome, serving as the courier for an inter-religious helpers' group composed of Jews, Christians, and atheists.<sup>7</sup> Bartali passed away in 2000; the media today compares him with Giorgio Perlasca, who impersonated the Italian ambassador in wartime Budapest to supply thousands of Jews with forged safe-conduct passes.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Aili McConnon & Andres McConnon, *Road to Valor: A True Story of World War II Italy, the Nazis and the Cyclist Who Inspired a Nation*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012; Italian edition 2013: *La strada del coraggio. Gino Bartali, eroe silenzioso*, Rome 2013). Michele Sarfatti, former director of CDEC, has written an article on Bartali's rescue activities which, to his mind, are to be questioned, at the very least. See Michele Sarfatti, [Gino Bartali e la fabbricazione di carte di identità per gli ebrei nascosti a Firenze](http://www.michelesarfatti.it/documenti-e-commenti/gino-bartali-e-la-fabbricazione-di-carte-di-identita-per-gli-ebrei-nascosti-a-firenze), "Documenti e commenti," n. 2 (upload January 17, 2017; last update February 3, 2017) at: <http://www.michelesarfatti.it/documenti-e-commenti/gino-bartali-e-la-fabbricazione-di-carte-di-identita-gli-ebrei-nascosti-firenze>.

<sup>6</sup> See Juliane Wetzel, "Retter in der Not? Das faschistische Italien und die Hilfe für jüdische Verfolgte," in *Solidarität und Hilfe für Juden während der NS-Zeit*, eds. Wolfgang Benz and Juliane Wetzel, Regionalstudien 4, (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2004), 281-366.

<sup>7</sup> ZENIT (online), Internationale Nachrichten Agentur der Katholischen Kirche, German version, April 9, 2003; *Corriere della sera*, April 3, 2003: <http://www.corriere.it/edicola/index.jsp?path=INTERNI&doc=BARTALI>, accessed 16 April 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Perlasca, *L'impostore*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997); Enrico Deaglio, *La banalità del bene. Storia di Giorgio Perlasca*, (Milan: Feltrinelli 1991).

In April 2003, a report in the international press stated that Giorgio Nissim's actions to rescue endangered Jews, and his group, including Gino Bartali, had only become known in their full totality by a new discovery of sources. Giorgio Nissim's children had discovered correspondence and a report by a contemporary witness that two historians had investigated, under the direction of Liliana Picciotto (CDEC).<sup>9</sup> Nissim, who passed away in 1976, provides insight into the work of the group in his notes written in 1969 and published under the auspices of the Florence Regional Council in 2005.<sup>10</sup> There he observes:

I set up a forgery workshop in a room in a secluded sisters' convent, and frequently the priests themselves would forge the signatures on the IDs. [...] Whenever possible I would go to Genoa in order to obtain some funds from Father (Francesco) Repetto,<sup>11</sup> Secretary to the Archbishop. I would then pass them on to Father [an oblate priest from Lucca] in order to cover the expenses of our operations.<sup>12</sup>

Nissim also notes that the Catholic Relief Network had been commissioned to "initiate contact [with Nissim's group], and this order had come from Pope Pius XII himself."<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, this important contemporary document goes unmentioned in Picciotto's new book, despite its detailing the history of the network. In 1999, Yad Vashem recognized Nissim's group as "Righteous among the Nations."<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, devoid of any mention in Picciotto's study is also the mountain climber from Milano, Ettore Castiglioni, who saved the lives of many Jews and of persecuted anti-fascists, helping to bring them, together with his pupils across the Swiss mountains into security. In his diary, first published in 1993,<sup>15</sup> Castiglioni, who died in 1944 after returning to Italy, mentions not just his experiences in the Alps but also reports about the actions to rescue Jews in danger. Parallel with the

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<sup>9</sup> ZENIT (online), International News Agency of the Catholic Church.

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Nissim, *Memorie di un ebreo toscano (1938-48)*, ed. Liliana Picciotto Fargion, (Rome: Carocci, 2005). See also: Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, Servizio Informazione, *Giorgio Nissim: il Consiglio pubblicherà i diari sulla "rete" che salvò 800 ebrei*, press release, May 28, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Don Francesco Repetto, Secretary to Cardinal Pietro Boetto, organized a group of helpers which he later expanded into a rescue network. The rescuers provided support for hundreds of Jews and assisted many in making it across the border into Switzerland. See Susan Zuccotti, "Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust: The Case in Italy," in *The Italian Refuge. Rescue of Jews during the Holocaust*, ed. Ivo Herzer, (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 268.

<sup>12</sup> Nissim, *Memorie di un ebreo toscano*, 99-102.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted *kath.net/ZENIT.org online*, April 10, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> *AGI-online*, April 28, 2003, quotes a statement by Liliana Picciotto Fargion.

<sup>15</sup> Ettore Castiglioni, *Il giorno delle Mésules: Diario di un alpinista antifascista*, ed. Marco Albino Ferrari, (1993).

new edition of his diary in 2017, a documentary film was brought out,<sup>16</sup> about Castiglioni and his rescue actions, a man glorified by fascist propaganda as a great alpinist climber.<sup>17</sup> The envisioned honor for him as a “Righteous Among the Nations” in Yad Vashem is still in the process of final approval. In Italy, Castiglioni was honored in 2016 by name on a memorial plaque in the Parco Groane, the “Forest of the Righteous” near Solaro north of Milan.<sup>18</sup>

Today in Italy it is not only Bartali and Castiglioni who are known for their activism in assisting Jews during the Holocaust. Similarly alive in Italian memory is the story of a group of refugee children, whose rescue odyssey took them from Germany and Austria via Yugoslavia – Croatia and Slovenia – to Italy and from there to Switzerland, whence they ultimately went on to Palestine.<sup>19</sup> In Italy, the 73 Jewish children, aged 14 to 16, lived for a year at “Villa Emma,” a term which today still serves as a name for the refugee group as a whole; the villa itself is located in the small town of Nonantola near Modena. Picciotto describes in detail the story of the teenagers’ life there (pp. 82-86). Their fate has also become the basis of a German-Austrian film broadcast for the first time on Austrian television as “*Die Kinder der Villa Emma*” in 2016 and in March 2018 on TV (ARD) in Germany.<sup>20</sup>

Picciotto deals in detail with the attitude of the Catholic Church toward the Jews during WWII (pp. 164-219). The author reports about monasteries and special church facilities where Jews were in hiding, providing numbers that the research team has confirmed. The usefulness of this may appear questionable at first glance. However, approaching the book about “the rescued” as a handbook with a list of the names of those rescued and their helpers will make the significance of this Sisyphean project clear.

The role of the Catholic Church and of Pope Pius XII in particular in the destruction of the Jews in Europe is controversial; debate concerning this has

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<sup>16</sup> *Oltre il confine. La storia di Ettore Castiglioni* [Beyond the border. The story of Ettore Castiglioni].

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.filmitalia.org/p.aspx?t=film&l=en&did=114130>, accessed April 16, 2018. Film Italy/Switzerland 2017; <http://www.oltreilconfine.com/>, accessed 16 April 2018; [https://www.swissinfo.ch/ita/aiut%C3%B2-ebrei-e-antifascisti\\_ettore-castiglioni-un-alpinista-in-cerca-di-libert%C3%A0/43748262](https://www.swissinfo.ch/ita/aiut%C3%B2-ebrei-e-antifascisti_ettore-castiglioni-un-alpinista-in-cerca-di-libert%C3%A0/43748262), accessed April 16, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.parcogroane.it/visita-il-parco/cosa-vedere/il-bosco-dei-giusti/>; here the memorial plaque: [http://www.parcogroane.it/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/20150710\\_123025.jpg](http://www.parcogroane.it/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/20150710_123025.jpg), accessed April 16, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Klaus Voigt, *Villa Emma, Jüdische Kinder auf der Flucht 1940-1945*, (Berlin: Metropol Verlag 2001), Italian edition: *Villa Emma. Ragazzi ebrei in fuga. 1940-1945*, (Milan: La Nuova Italia, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> *Il muro e la bambina* (*The Wall and the Girl*), a film by Silvia Staderoli (Vivo film, Rome, 2013), was temporarily available online at <https://youtu.be/uwYv9wcYPs> in Italian with German subtitles (accessed 21 April 2018).

continued since the 1960s.<sup>21</sup> The two volumes by Sister Margherita Marchione and Antonio Gaspari focus on assistance given to Jews by representatives of the Catholic Church. The two publications are marked by whitewashing and are occasionally apologetic in tone and approach; they also contain a wealth of material which cannot be accepted without additional verification.<sup>22</sup> Both books quote numerous statements made by survivors after the war, which repeatedly exaggerate the assistance provided by the Church and the Pope. This is due to the survivors' extrapolating from individual help they were given to the leadership of the Catholic Church, as well as to their believing much-circulated pronouncements about the Vatican's having indeed arranged for assistance to be provided to Jews.

During the German occupation, several thousand Jews found shelter in church facilities, some for only a few days and others for longer periods, with some actually remaining in hiding for the entire duration of the war. Others wandered continually in search of a new location in monasteries, parsonages, church institutes or with private families.<sup>23</sup> The issue of gilding the memory of help provided by the Church needs to be singled out. In Rome – to cite a leading example – of the hundreds of parish churches, more than 1,000 church-connected institutions for women, and 152 institutions for men which were in existence at the time, only an estimated 100 women's convents and 55 institutions for men, including 11 parish churches, accepted Jews or were otherwise helpful in any way.<sup>24</sup> Even if these figures require slight readjusting with the addition of another few instances of assistance, the numbers speak for themselves as a commentary on the widespread notion of comprehensive assistance provided by the Church. This critical assessment of the attitude of the Church notwithstanding, individual representatives of the Church, monasteries and Catholic Church relief organizations did help Jews, in Italy as well as in many other countries under German occupation, rescuing them from deportation and death.

Picciotto is critical of the Resistance (the National Liberation Committees [*Comitati di Liberazione Nazionale*]), because they were slow to recognize the threat that Jews were facing. The Italian Resistance was not interested in the Jews

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<sup>21</sup> On the role of individuals, see Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, 240-247; José M. Sánchez, *Pius XII und der Holocaust. Anatomie einer Debatte*, (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2003), Introduction and passim; *A sessant'anni dalle leggi razziali*, interventi di Guido Bolaffi, Francesco Margiotta Broglio, Michele Sarfatti, Mario Toscano, in *API* 5/6 (1998): 14.

<sup>22</sup> Margherita Marchione, *Yours is a Precious Witness: Memoirs of Jews and Catholics in Wartime Italy*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997); Antonio Gaspari, *Nascosti in convento. Incredibili storie di ebrei salvati dalla deportazione (Italia 1943-45)*, (Milano: Ancora, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Picciotto, *Salvarsi*, 166, speaks of a third of the Jewish population in Rome; Attilio Milano, *Storia degli ebrei in Italia*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1992), 404, estimates more than 4,000 Jews in Italy in total, which seems to be too high.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Zuccotti, *Under his Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 201.

overall. Nevertheless, there are numerous instances of individual partisans or Resistance committees who helped Jews in danger. In addition, the younger Jews who had joined the Resistance were – unlike what happened in other countries – accepted into the ranks of anti-fascist forces. The author suggests that some 19 per cent of the Jews who fought in the Resistenza lost their lives in partisan operations (p. 153). But she also points out that the topic of Jewish members of the Resistance has still not been thoroughly researched (p. 155).

Picciotto states that when she began her book project in 2007, only a few references were available to published books that touched on the topic of solidarity with and assistance to Jews in Italy during the Holocaust. She seems to have unfortunately overlooked the fact that the Center for Research on Anti-Semitism at the TU Berlin had – in the late 1990s and early 2000s – carried out a larger-scale project, addressing solidarity and assistance for Jews in Europe during WWII; the case of Italy is extensively documented and discussed in Vol. 7 of this series, based largely on source materials kept at the *Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea* (CDEC) in Milan and material then available at the “Righteous among the Nations” department at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> The oversight appears to have been due to the fact that the series appeared in German and consequently went unremarked upon by the Italian research team, who must have been on the lookout for national publications on the question.

The essential merit of the present study, based on many long years of research that perhaps developed at times with an excessive concern for tiny details, is the fact that a reference work has been produced here – to a certain degree a veritable encyclopedia of the rescued – which documents countless names of persecuted Jews, in each case with brief reference to their story, and in a broader frame, the fate and whereabouts of their families.

*Juliane Wetzel, Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung, TU Berlin*

This article was translated from German by William Templer

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<sup>25</sup> Wetzel, “Retter in der Not?”