

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

by Gabriella Gribaudo

With the publication of her *Salvarsi*, Liliana Picciotto brings to completion a monumental research project extending deep into documents and memory. As the author explains in the introduction, the volume forms a complement to her *Il libro della memoria*, published in 1991, wherein she records the stories of victims who lost their lives in Nazi extermination camps. A counterpart to this, the new study a sort of “other side of the coin” the trials and the trajectories of the survivors – the title’s “saved.”

9 years of painstaking research, including 613 interviews and extensive work with national and international documentary sources, have led to the reconstruction of 10,599 narratives – out of the total number of 31,822 Italian Jews who survived the war thanks, in part, to the efforts of others. Studying the biographies of the saved and of their saviors, the author reflects on a spectrum of key issues: modalities of rescue, regional differences, social characteristics of communities and individuals, the role of the Church, and the contribution of the Resistance. The testimony of visual images and documented figures intersects with eye witness accounts, so that ultimately a composite picture emerges, conveying the nuances and the fluidity of a context too complex to be exhaustively broken down into rigid categories. The book aims to demonstrate precisely this: to bring to light the infinite flux of the predicaments in which rescue took place, and to understand in depth the dynamics that have generated them. What qualities did the saved share in common? Courage? Social bonds? Financial resources? What motivated the saviors? To address these questions, Picciotto reconstructs the contexts of the events’ unfolding. Ahistorical stills and timeless medallions that preserve isolated moments are unhelpful when it comes to understanding human causality; only the totality of dynamic context can enable insight into how people came to be saved and how and why individuals reached out to rescue fugitives.

The book’s chapters are a flowing unity of instances, contexts, individual personalities, and institutions, through which ways to salvation took shape. The focus shifts by turns to rescue efforts in Italy and Switzerland, the Resistance, the Catholic world, assistance networks, and particular communities; individual skills,

inventiveness, ability to adapt, and courage are taken in next; social networking, generosity, group and individual selflessness enable another angle of vision; geography, war zones, the urban world and rural settings also form part of the list. The book analyzes salvation strategies, addressing the role of information and economic resources, the helpfulness of social networks, ways of covering fugitives' tracks, the nomadism of escapee families, and the complexity and continuity involved in modifying ways to safety.

There is a long chapter devoted to life stories; stories of individuals and family groups underscore the complexity of the composite picture. The narratives, pieced together from oral and videotaped interviews, emerge as the orality and the dialogic give-and-take of each interview are translated into statements recounting the events that accompanied the fugitives *en route* to being saved. The doubts, the hesitation, the silences – none of the typical indications of orality are preserved in the accounts. But it was in a certain sense a choice following the questions posed by the book and the desire to show almost in its entirety the outline of the research and to offer as many individual events as possible. The emergent corpus of recorded stories represents a crucial documentary archive that future scholars will be able to investigate from many as yet unknowable points of view.

A long chapter close to the end of the book reflects on the overall canvas formed by the historical events that the book addresses. Italians had remained indifferent when the racial laws of 1938 went into effect. The author notes the “incredibly low... number of people who showed solidarity with the Jews publicly humiliated and banned from society.” Intellectuals who openly objected to the racial laws or to specific instances of discrimination that the laws were invoked as the basis for, could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The fascist regime was harsh in repressing opponents, but left its citizens in peace overall, on condition that they address nothing but their daily lives. [...] Few people evinced much concern for the fact that between 1938 and 1943 Jews had been discriminated against and marginalized in the life of the nation; many thought it best to have nothing to do with the matter. The impression is that not all those who stopped having anything to do with the Jews were fanatical fascists; they were rather folks who simply did not want get into any trouble. (p.57)

This attitude changed with the beginning of deportations in 1943. Seeing the unambiguous death warrant which the deportations spelled out for entire families

made many Italians shift from silent indifference to active assistance. As Picciotto explains, this was a matter not of “strategic conduct,” but of “private altruism”: the rescuers responded to their own humanity and personal impulse of compassion. Being physically indistinguishable from the Italians around them and well integrated into Italian society was to the Jews’ advantage, as was the fact that no primacy was ascribed to race and racial origins in fascist ideology. From the typical Italian’s point of view at the time, fascist ideology was shallow; it proved ephemeral. In fact, the regime’s rites and propaganda had left room for “individual action and unconventional thinking to be exercised among close family or circles of friends, where people were allowed to mock the Duce and his campaigns without evincing much veneration for the new myths” (p.490). Fascist propaganda failed to turn the Jews into aliens in the minds of Italian civilians. This meant that the Jews continued to be thought of as human beings in danger no less than many others in wartime. And like many others, they were offered help. The proffering of succor was the expression of a spontaneous attitude typical of Italian society at the time: Italians would provide assistance to whomever needed to flee, hide, or find shelter.

The 31,822 saved Jews were part of a second, submerged Italy, which was made up of thousands of individuals in need of help: soldiers escaped from their barracks because they refused to fight alongside the Germans, Allied POWs escaped from internment quarters, political dissidents, Jews.... [...] Rescuers were urged to help anybody, not only the Jews, in a context created by Allied bombings, food shortages, enormous difficulty of maintaining communications, fear for the lives of sons and brothers at the front, and pleas for help from impoverished civilians. In this setting, rescuers responded with solidarity not only but also to Jews; a popular mentality of a new kind had emerged. (pp. 495-496)

Jews were among the myriads of others clandestinely floating about a “submerged” Italy to seek asylum and relief. The rescue they would be offered was impulsive and humanitarian. The Church and its intermediary institutions, priests, parishes, and convents, was one of the few organizations to offer protection and aid to the needy at the time; it provided real help without discriminating against Jewish refugees. “During 1943-45, compassion for the miserable of any category was exercised without restraint, making the Catholic world a principal source of aid for thousands of the persecuted” (p. 502).

Picciotto emphasizes that it was not the organized Resistance, which never made the struggle against racism or anti-Semitism one of its declared objectives, that helped fugitive Jews, but a “civilian, unarmed, and non-politicized resistance arisen among a people weary of war, of the regime’s rhetoric, of Nazi violence, of the alliance with Germany, of harsh living conditions, of Allied bombardments” (p.140). It was “a type of primordial anti-fascism, not necessarily premeditated, often spontaneous, and practiced by small everyday heroes, not at all revolutionaries or nonconformists” (p. 498). Rescuers would often be unaware of the ethical or political import of their actions. Picciotto sums up by describing the rescue of 81% of Italy’s Jews as a phenomenon of “collective resilience,” (p.506) a type of resilience central to the mindset of the Jews, who acted with “resistance to adversity, with wisdom, foresight, adaptation, and timeliness of action,” (p.506) as well as the resilience of the rescuers “who, put in individual contact with Jews in danger, opted for principles of humanity“ to resist fascist dictates. The book’s final lines resound with significance for the world of today, when many countries close their doors to refugees fleeing wars and massacres. “We must look with reverence upon individuals who thought the care of others an absolute value, revolutionizing the common mentality of their time, which consisted of fear, mistrust and inhumanity” (p.507). Unfortunately, these are words that could also be adapted to the situation today, when political parties and movements in Europe are once again spreading xenophobia and mistrust.

Gabriella Gribaudi, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II