

'Holocaust memories from Italy'

*An address given in Somerville Chapel by Professor Anna Morpurgo
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Holocaust memories from Italy

I am here to remember what I would much prefer to forget. Sixty years ago the Nazi persecutions directly or indirectly killed six million Jews, a vast number of gypsies, of handicapped people, of gay people and of course masses of war enemies and internal opponents. The so-called civilized Europe had witnessed wars, persecutions, pogroms, mass murder, but never anything of this magnitude or this level of cruelty. It started when a political party took power in one of the most advanced, civilized, cultured nations of Europe. It could happen again. Indeed genocides have happened since.

We concentrate on the Jews because of the magnitude of the figures and because of the overwhelming evidence that the Nazis aimed at a final solution, i.e. at complete genocide.

The figures are necessarily approximate but well known. Before the Nazis started, i.e. in the 1930s, there were nine and half million Jews in Europe including Russia; of these some three and half million survived; two out of every three Jews were killed. The proportions differed. Poland had *ca.* 3,300,000 Jews; three million, 91%, were murdered. Denmark had *ca.* 7800 Jews; less than 100 i.e. less than 1% were killed. In a number of countries, probably in all countries which had large contingents of Jews, there was anti-Semitism, but this turned into mass murder only when the Nazis imposed it. So much is known, as are also known the ruthless efficiency of the final solution, the creation of the concentration camps, the superb technology of the gas chambers, the armoured trains which crossed Europe with Jews who started as human beings and ended as cattle going to the slaughter-house.

This is not what I want to talk about. My own experience is incommensurably better. Italy, where I was born, had some 45,000 Jews and of these fewer than 8000, 17%, were killed. My immediate family escaped, though a first cousin was taken, tortured and murdered and a number of remote relatives and acquaintances were taken to Auschwitz and killed; one of my uncles survived because he threw himself out of a train directed to Auschwitz. My memories are selective and inadequate. I was two when the war started, just eight when it finished. Italy had German occupation from 1943 to 1945 and that period I remember clearly, though obviously I saw it with the eyes of a child.

First, some history. In 1922 the democratic government of Italy was replaced by a dictatorship. The King remained the nominal head of state but Mussolini and his so-called fascist party effectively had all power. Their stronghold became more and more effective; parliament officially existed but no longer provided an opposition. In Italy there was no anti-Semitism but in 1937, partly under the influence of Nazi policy, Mussolini supported a series of anti-Semitic actions which culminated in the so-called *Manifesto della Razza* promulgated on 15 July 1938. A series of learned medics and biologists argued for the need to protect the purity of the Italian race, an Aryan race, particularly from contamination with the Jews. Nobody objected; there was no press campaign against; on the contrary much press writing in favour, no doubt inspired by the regime. There followed in October the approval by the King and the Grand Council of Fascism of a series of measures to protect the purity of the Italian race. Mixed race marriages were forbidden. Jews were not allowed to hold any educational position and eventually any job. They were not allowed to own more than a minimum of land, they were not allowed to attend state schools or any form of education where they would be mixed with non-Jews, they were not allowed to employ Aryan people. All foreign Jews were expelled from Italy. Some 300 teachers in secondary schools and some 100

university professors lost their jobs; they were soon replaced, once again without any protest. Learned Academies had to write to all their Jewish members dismissing them. They did it without protesting. My father, a successful engineer in a large industry in Milan, lost his job and it became clear that nobody could offer him anything; my brothers were expelled from school. Jews desperately looked for positions abroad. My father was offered one in Brazil and after endless hesitations – he had elderly parents who would have to be left behind – accepted. He went to Genoa to obtain his visa for Brazil, got pneumonia and died in the course of one week. My mother was left on her own with four children (I was one and a half years old, my eldest brother was eleven) without any possibility of migrating.

This was 1939. My mother moved with her children to Rome to be near her parents. In June 1940 Mussolini joined Hitler in the war and anti-Jewish legislation became harsher. Jews were now avoided by everyone because to be seen with them was harmful. A number of younger people had left; the rest lived a miserable existence. In June 1943 Allied troops landed in Sicily; in July there was a *coup d'état* against Mussolini and another general, Badoglio, took over with the support of the King; in September the Allied troops reached the mainland; on 8 September 1943 the Italians surrendered and the King and Badoglio ignominiously departed abroad. The army was left without a head and disintegrated. The old allies, the Germans, took over. From mid-September 1943 the Nazis governed Italy.

The Italian Jews were now under Nazi rule and did not know what to expect. At the end of September, the President of the Italian Jewish Communities and the President of the Roman Jewish Community were summoned to the German Embassy and informed by the SS in no uncertain terms that Jews were expected to produce 50 kilograms (*ca.* 110 pounds) of gold within 48 hours. If this was not done there would be instant deportation to Germany of all Jews. No objection was permitted. The Roman community of 8000 Jews, most of them in very humble employment, performed magnificently. A long queue for 36 hours stretched in front of the main synagogue; people offered their wedding rings, battered earrings or necklaces, family heirlooms, odd coins. A number of non-Jews joined the queue with their offerings. The Vatican made it known that if the Jews could not reach the weight in time they were willing to lend the difference. The 50 kilos were found and given to the Nazis, who refused to produce a receipt. Twenty-four hours later they entered the synagogue and carried away every document available, including the list of the subscribers. The next day two German officers, two learned Orientalists, came to look at the two libraries of the community, and later arranged for the removal to Germany of the medieval manuscripts and incunabula. On 16 October 1943 at 5.30 a.m. the whole synagogue quarter where traditionally all the small Jewish shopkeepers lived was surrounded by Nazi soldiers. At the same time, operating on a list of all Jewish families in Rome, Nazi soldiers went into every flat or house where Jews were known to live both in that area and through the rest of Rome and arrested all the Jews they found: men, women, children, newly born babies. At 2 o'clock the operation was concluded: 1259 people had been arrested including 207 children.

My immediate family escaped. That day my mother went out to shop for food very early with my eldest brother. In one of the shops she met a woman in tears; she had seen the soldiers carrying out of a house a baby and his mother and throwing them into a lorry. My mother and my brother ran home trembling and seeing the huge German lorries on their way wondered whether the SS had got there already. They were in time, they collected the other three children and we left instantly through the back door. We went briefly to non-Jewish friends from where temporary arrangements were made and we dispersed. As a six-year-old I did not

of course understand what was going on – but I sensed the terror in my mother and in my brothers. I do not know if it was that palpable fear or the fact that for the first time I was told to go out without having had my hair properly combed which left the deepest impression. Two days later, the people who had been arrested were put in twenty cattle trucks driven by a slow railway engine and deported to Auschwitz without food or water. At a short stop in Padua station after 28 hours screams of “Water, water” were heard from outside. The Nazi policemen refused any help but the Italian police protested. The reply came: “Sie sind Juden” (They are Jewish). To their honour the fascist soldiers replied: “Ma hanno sete” (But they are thirsty) and prevailed. Water was provided, but the journey started again. The trucks already contained three dead people.

After a six day journey they arrived at Auschwitz. In this first convoy (there were to be others) 1022 people left Rome; *ca.* 800 were gassed on arrival including 200 children, women, elderly people; the rest which included some 50 women were sent to work. Of the 1022 people 15 survived including only one woman out of *ca.* 600 originally taken.

Word naturally went round through the city but not a single newspaper reported the German actions, though one of them the following day produced an anti-Jewish attack.

The Nazi search for Jews was nothing if not thorough and continued both in Rome and in the whole of Italy – hence the 8000 Jews murdered. The majority escaped, largely because those same Italians who had not objected to the laws and the discrimination, when real physical danger started, showed incredible courage. There were of course those who exploited the situation either to steal Jewish goods or to report Jews to the Nazis and get payment or kudos, but they were a minority. Among the others there were innumerable acts of courage and generosity. The Vatican gave no official direction for or against Jews but individual priests and convents acted immediately and probably saved half of the Roman Jews. Even more important, when the Romans saw Jews running away, they opened their houses and concealed them. A tram driver near the synagogue saw a father and his daughter in distress running away from the military. He asked, “Are you Jews?” And then added, “Come with me.” That tram crossed half Rome, passengers and all, ignored some ten stops, and deposited the two fugitives on another side of town. They found refuge with an unknown busker and his wife, a washing woman. The neighbours knew; one by one they arrived with small bits of food for the newcomers.

Two of my brothers ended up in one of the major hospitals where the doctors did their best to save as many people as possible. They had beds but no disease. The doctors spoke in magniloquent Latin of *Hitleritis acuta* (acute Hitleritis). My other brother, my mother and I for a while found hospitality with two different families, not even friends but friends of friends, who were risking their lives for us. My grandfather, a very well known mathematician, had been warned a day before that he should leave his house – warned indirectly by the head of a Roman police station who had some idea of what was going to happen. He went with my grandmother to live with one of his old students, who again risked everything.

Perhaps the best testimonial to the Italian help came from Herbert Kappler, the SS Obersturmbannführer (Lt Colonel) in charge of the Roman operations. In his report to Berlin on 17 October 1943, the day after the main event, he regretted that there were not enough troops to do things properly so that some Jews had slipped through the net, and continued:

“We have not been able to use the help of the Italian police which in this is completely untrustworthy. ... Normal people have shown passive resistance and in some cases have provided active help. We have noticed some Jews moving in with their neighbours when the German policemen arrived. The anti-Semitic part of the population was not noticeable during the operation, but there was a great mass of people who in individual cases even attempted to keep single [German] policemen back from the Jews.”

Those who had escaped had differing fortunes; some were caught later. *In toto* 2091 Jews were deported from Rome alone (1067 men, 743 women, 281 children). No child came back. Others found refuge in Rome and survived. The Resistance provided false documents and false stories; our new ID cards and food coupons, with the spotlessly Gentile name of Bianchi instead of the Jewish Morpurgo, were made by a distinguished expert in Roman Law (Edoardo Volterra) who ended his career becoming one of the first judges of the Italian constitutional court. We starved like everyone else and probably were worse off, but survived. Rome was liberated by the Allies on 4 June 1944; the rest of Italy had another year of German occupation.

Even those who like me escaped were not entirely unscathed. It is completely irrational but I have lived and live in the certainty that this will happen again and that I shall not be able to escape a second time. My mother died at the age of 91, 46 years after the liberation of Rome. In her last night when she was in a coma she suddenly screamed: “No, not that child, do not take that child, do not kill it.” These were the last words she said. What images went through her mind I cannot know but I can guess.

What can be done? What happened in Germany in the thirties goes beyond my understanding. I have more of a feeling for what happened in Italy, and there I think a lesson can be learned. There was no anti-Semitism in Italy. The legislation against Jews came from higher up. And yet there was no public protest, no opposition, not even mild discussion in the papers. At the start it would not have been particularly dangerous to object, though no doubt it would not have helped the progress of one’s career. Yet people remained silent. But when the danger was there, a number of people, humble and less humble, risked their lives to help. If there had been some earlier discussion and some earlier protests, if Mussolini had understood that there was a limit to what the Italians could accept, if the horrible census of Jews ordered by Mussolini in 1938 and then exploited by the Nazis had not been done, if the Nazis had been aware that there was a possibility of strong reactions, things might have gone differently. Perhaps – we shall never know.

Heroism cannot be imposed and absence of heroism is not a sin. But there is something which we should strive for in our everyday life even if it is difficult: the moral courage which leads to protest when this is necessary, the mental strength which reacts against the laziness of the *laissez faire*, the determination to be alert and not to choose the line of least resistance. Past experience points in this direction, but none of us finds this easy to put into practice.

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