

Resilience and Resistance

Jewish Experiences in Italy During WWII

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Holocaust survivor Laura Varon said, “So my mother, when we heard the bombs, called us inside and we went in the corner and it was terrible. Everything moved, everything was destroyed. And you think you’re going to die and we started to say the ‘Shema’ because we thought that we are going to die. A lot of homes around us were destroyed and my father came from synagogue fast and said, ‘We have to leave, we have to leave Rhodes because they’re going to kill us if they come again.’”¹ While Italy was not exempt from antisemitism, its response and participation in the Nazi persecution of Jews was ambiguous and often complex because of a multitude of different social and political factors. Italian Fascism was never inherently antisemitic. Mussolini was focused on creating a strong, nationalist state that glorified the power of Italy, and less so on racial extermination. Italian Jews were tightly integrated into Italian society; many themselves were Fascists and felt nationalistic pride for their country. Because Italian Fascism was more focused on political control and nationalism than racial purity, the approach to the genocide of Jews was thought to be less extreme. Many Italian families and communities aided Italian and foreign Jews during the Holocaust. The reasons for their assistance were multitudinous: hatred of fascism and rebellion against the government, humanitarian values, personal relationships, and cultural and religious beliefs. Their aid contributed to the ambiguous narrative of Italy’s role in Jewish persecution.

The history of the Italian Fascist regime is divided into four phases. First, the March on Rome from 1922 to 1925, during which the government maintained continuity with the parliamentary system but operated through a legally executed

1 Laura Varon, “Testimony of Laura Varon, born in Rhodes, Greece, 1926, regarding her experiences in Rhodes, in the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Dachau camps, and in the death march to Bergen Belsen,” interview by Yael Ben Shmuel, *Testimonies Department*, Yad Vashem Archives, November 14, 1996, File #10423, 10.

dictatorship. Second, the construction of the Fascist dictatorship from 1925 to 1929. Third, diminished activism from 1929 to 1934 and passive acceptance of the Fascist regime which resulted in the fourth phase, active foreign policy, military campaigns abroad, growing economics, and semi-Nazification.² Understanding the development of fascism through these four phases is essential for discussing the Holocaust in Italy and differentiating between Mussolini's Fascism and Hitler's National Socialism. Hitler's ideology was based "mystical Nordic racism," a foundation not shared by Italy.³ Italian Fascism was not founded on racist principles, though scholars debate when and how the treatment of Jews changed within the regime. Some posit that fascism always harbored antisemitism due to its extreme nationalistic doctrine, which gradually surfaced over time. Others attribute the rise of antisemitism to the signing of the Lateran Treaties in 1929, which reinstated the special relationship between the Catholic Church and the Italian state, excluding the Jewish community and making it unequal to the Church. Alternative perspectives identify the turning point of antisemitism with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and the Spanish Civil War.⁴ These events heightened Italian racial consciousness, prompting Italy to align more closely with Nazi Germany as a friend and ally. Despite minimal German pressure on racial matters during this period, the overall deepening of the Italian-German relationship empowered proponents of a more explicit antisemitic policy.⁵

The emergence of antisemitic doctrines and schools of thought later in the regime does not reflect the foundation of fascism in Italy. Mussolini's fascist regime focused on the colonial expansion of the Mediterranean area and the establishment of a nationalistic state.⁶ The Italian regime also maintained the practice of formal law and a juridical state, whereas in Germany, Hitler was the "unchallenged chief of state and complete dictator."⁷ Although Italy was totalitarian, Mussolini did not control all institutions, allowing some freedom within Italian life.⁸ Although Jews have lived in Italy since the Roman Republic, facing documented persecution from the Roman Empire until the modern period, they have also seen periods of toleration and integration in Italian society.⁹ In the late 19th to early 20th century, Italian Jews were actively involved in the struggle for Italian unification. During this period, several legal and political measures were enacted to ensure the equal rights and citizenship of Jews in the new Italian state. Many Jews were elected to positions in the Italian parliament and

2 Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 212.

3 Payne, *History of Fascism*, 208.

4 Michael A. Livingston, *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy: Mussolini's Race Laws, 1938-1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 15.

5 Livingston, *The Fascists*, 15.

6 Payne, *History of Fascism*, 209.

7 Payne, *History of Fascism*, 208.

8 Payne, *History of Fascism*, 209.

9 Alexander Stille, "The Double Bind of Italian Jews: Acceptance and Assimilation," in *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule, 1922-1945*, ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 23.

experienced increased integration into Italian society, dismantling the institutionalized segregation seen in the Ghettos.¹⁰ So when Mussolini adopted the Racial Laws, Jews were shocked at the growing antisemitism of the fascist government. They had considered themselves full-blooded Italians, whose religion did not define their ethnicity, and who were fully integrated into Italian life.

The diverse influxes of immigration have also shaped the multifaceted identity of Italian Jews, creating distinctions between Sephardic Jews (originating from the Iberian Peninsula), Ashkenazic Jews (with roots in Germany or Eastern Europe), and a third group often referred to as Italian or native Jews. However, these classifications are fluid, and at present, the majority of Italian Jews likely embody a blend of influences from two or more of these distinct groups.¹¹ By the year 1650, Italy accommodated a diverse array of Jewish traditions, encompassing, but not confined to, Italian, Ashkenazic, and Sephardic nusachs, or rites. These customs significantly differed from one another in liturgical traditions, prayers, language pronunciation, customs, and traditions. Each was heavily influenced by its own cultural environment, indicating that Jews who emigrated to Italy had different self-identities from Italian Jews who had lived there since the Roman Republic. Specifically, in Rhodes, the Italian Jewish citizens are mostly Sephardic, speaking not only Italian but also their own separate language of Ladino. These Jewish communities who did not identify themselves as strictly Italian could still not comprehend such aggression from the Italian government. As mentioned previously, Jews had even responded to Mussolini's fascist call in the beginning, aligning with a movement that was patriotic and predominantly middle-class. Although the fundamental fascist structure of Mussolini's regime was not inherently antisemitic and was significantly different compared to Nazi Germany, Jewish Italians still faced life-changing circumstances with the increase of fascism and the creation of Racial Laws in the country.

Beginning in May of 1937, anti-Jewish propaganda increased significantly with the preparations for an alliance between Hitler and Mussolini. This propaganda argued that Jews were inferior to Italians due to "historical, religious, and national considerations," rather than biology or eugenics.¹² Giorgio Israel, a historian of science, discusses this "spiritual" racism seen in Italian Fascist discriminatory practices. Italian "spiritualistic" racism exhibited unique and modern elements, focusing less on a strictly biological sense of race and more on the concept of ethnic groups.¹³ Theoreticians of "Italian Racism" concentrated on population formations or ethnic groups that were historically characterized as "excellent," emphasizing the need to preserve the biological purity of those groups.¹⁴ Scientific racial documents did emerge during the beginnings of the Racial Laws, exploring the idea of a biologically superior Italian

10 Stille, "Double Bind," 25.

11 Livingston, *The Fascists*, 13.

12 Stille, "Double Bind," 29.

13 Giorgio Israel, "Science and the Jewish Question in the Twentieth Century: The Case of Italy and What It Shows," *Aleph*, no. 4 (2004): 196.

14 Israel, "Science," 198.

race. However, the Manifesto of Race asserted that “the Jews do not belong to the Italian race,” because their population in Italy never assimilated, being composed of non-European racial elements fundamentally different from those which gave rise to the Italians.¹⁵

A “good Jew,” one not considered inferior to Italians, was defined by their good conduct and assimilation into society. According to this train of thought, antisemitism is something the Jews either bring about or prevent through their own behavior.¹⁶ The major theme that emerged from this propaganda was the notion of a certain “good status” ascertained through the conduct of Jewish Italians. The perfect Jewish model, according to antisemitic Fascist Italian writings, would be someone fully integrated into Italian life beyond recognition by others. In this scenario, Jewishness would be practiced internally and not publicly, and Jews would instead become overly patriotic and openly support fascism. Interestingly, many did.

Political cartoons, created in the context of rising antisemitism and the threat of allied intervention, encapsulate the fascist narrative written under Mussolini. These sources shed light on fascist propaganda circulating in Italy during WWII.¹⁷ The images depict a powerful fascist state—a new Roman empire—and portray the allied powers as enemies. Interestingly, there are no documents that discuss the treatment of Jews in Italy. Nevertheless, the primary sources allow us to better understand the political environment of Italy during the war and the resulting treatment of Jews, as indicated by the testimonials of survivors.

The broadside picture titled, “The new barbarians invaded the city and camped among the great vestiges, moving expressions of the human civilization,” circulated around Italy in 1937 after Mussolini’s Fascist troops entered Rome and announced the creation of the second empire.¹⁸ The passage reflects an Italian Fascist perspective on Mussolini’s 1937 declaration of what they called the new Roman Empire. The language used is dramatic and emotive, expressing a mix of pride and nostalgia. The text starts with a metaphorical reference to “new barbarians” invading the “Urbe,” a term often used to refer to Rome. “New barbarians” refers to the Fascist troops entering Rome—barbarians not in a negative sense but rather as a nationalistic outlook on the power of the new warriors defending Italy. The text expresses a deep faith in the “shining years of the resurrected Empire,” referring to the period when Rome was a dominant imperial power. This nostalgia is portrayed as a source of hope and encouragement for the future, indicating a desire to reclaim past glory through

15 Israel, “Science,” 226.

16 Stille, “Double Bind,” 29.

17 The broadsides and political cartoons used in this paper are from the BroadSides and Ephemera Collection at the Duke University Libraries. Specifically, the sources are located in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, a highly reputable archive consisting of a variety of printed material.

18 *I nuovi barbari hanno invaso l’urbe e bivaccano tra le grandi restigia, toccanti espressioni della civiltà umana*, “The new barbarians invaded the city and camped among the great vestiges, moving expressions of the human civilization,” (Italy: Rome, 1937), Duke 464065, Ephemera Collection.

the Fascist regime. A mention of the power of Rome being reborn under the sign of the “Littorio” deepens its nationalist and militaristic tone. The Littorio fascist symbol, used in Fascist Italy, features an axe surrounded by a bundle of rods, representing the ancient Roman symbol of authority and strength.¹⁹ The text’s reference to the conquering phalanxes parading through the streets celebrates military strength and dominance. The passage reflects a strong sense of nationalism, glorifying the past achievements of the Roman Empire. There is also a notable hostility towards perceived enemies, specifically pointing fingers at a “perjured king” (Victor Emmanuel III) and the “Anglo-American powers.”

The poster titled, “Do not betray my son,” signed by Gino Boccasile, who was an Italian illustrator and supporter of Mussolini, and depicts a mourning Italian mother wearing a gold medal in memory of her son, who died fighting for the Italian Social Republic.²⁰ This was a puppet state established by Nazi Germany in Northern Italy during the latter part of World War II. It existed from September 1943 to April 1945 and was led by Benito Mussolini, the former dictator of Fascist Italy.²¹ The woman is dressed modestly in black, a symbol of the Italian Fascist movement, while the red background could suggest several different elements such as the red of the Italian flag or the blood of fallen soldiers. The cartoon aims to encourage Italians not to give up on the Fascist cause for domination and a return to a Roman inspired imperialistic nation, as well as to draw sympathy and patriotism from its viewer. Under the German occupation, the Italian Social Republic implemented more severe anti-Jewish measures, including the arrest and deportation of Jews. Jewish individuals and families faced persecution and increased discrimination.²² Propaganda which drew sympathy to the Italian Social Republic and aimed to increase nationalistic sentiments in Italians also promoted this antisemitic persecution of the Jews. These posters threatened Jews in Italy, as the Italian Social Republic not only fought against the Allies but aided in the Nazis’ systematic genocide of Italian Jews.

Beyond propaganda, testimonials provide useful insight into the experiences of Italian Jews in WWII. Many of the primary sources used in this paper are from the Yad Vashem Archives, a renowned institution dedicated to Holocaust documentation and remembrance, and a key source for researching Italian Jewish experiences. These sources include written testimonials of Jewish Holocaust survivors, recorded almost 50 years after the end of the Holocaust (May 8th, 1945). Because each survivor recorded their memory of the events so long after their occurrence, the information is only so accurate as far as it can be compared to statistics and documentary evidence collected after the war. The testimonials used here all center around Italy, including the

19 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory, For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2011), 182.

20 *Non tradite mio figlio*, “Do not betray my son,” (Italy, 1944), Duke 463204, Ephemera Collection.

21 Stille, “Double Bind,” 19.

22 Stille, “Double Bind,” 19.

experiences of both foreign and native Jews. These experiences follow general themes that are often unexpected and surprising to read. But it is important to note that these experiences do not represent all experiences of Jewish people. My collection of sources is limited to those that are transcribed or translated into English and focuses solely on Italy. The sources are also heavily biased in many ways because they all express emotional, personal experiences of a horrific event. When analyzing and understanding each interview in the context of the present analysis it is imperative to acknowledge subjectivity, trauma, and selective memory. Holocaust survivors may choose to focus on specific aspects of their experiences, and certain details may be emphasized or omitted based on individual priorities, coping mechanisms, or the desire to convey a particular message. This selectivity can influence the overall narrative presented in a testimonial. Still, the experiences recounted by these survivors are important for creating a greater understanding of Italy's treatment of Jews compared to the many Nazi-occupied areas of Europe.

Another source collection used in my research on Jewish Italy is that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.²³ These are recorded and transcribed testimonials of Jewish experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. Many of the sources regarding Italy were recorded and transcribed in Italian, a few were available in English. The USHMM archives are a credible institution, established by the U.S. Government, and dedicated towards documenting, educating, and remembering the lives lost in the Holocaust. The testimonials used in this research focus mainly on the stories of Italian Jews who were able to escape the Holocaust and flee to the Americas before persecution. The accounts detail their experiences growing up under a Fascist regime that implemented antisemitic policies against its Jewish citizens, and provide a deeper understanding of the experiences and events of Italian Jews leading up to WWII. Because the testimonials included from this database were told by people living in the U.S. around 50 years after the Holocaust, their perspectives are different from those who remained in Italy or fled to Palestine. They provide both a first-hand perspective in Italy leading up to the Holocaust and second-hand perspective on the treatment of Jews in Italy from places outside of Europe.

During World War II, Italy, under the Fascist regime led by Benito Mussolini, established a network of concentration camps. While not as widely recognized as the concentration camps operated by Nazi Germany, these Italian camps were instrumental in the persecution and internment of various groups of people. Italian POW and concentration camps held political dissidents, individuals considered enemies of the fascist state, and foreign Jews. Many Italian Jews were also placed in these camps, for various reasons, including suspicion of anti-fascist sentiments or distrust from the government. John Weissman, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust who spent considerable time in Italy during WWII, was born in Arosa Switzerland and lived his whole life

23 Stille, "Double Bind," 19.

in Leipzig, Germany, leading up to the war.²⁴ At the age of 20, Weissman left Berlin to work in the fur trade in Milan. Weissman had planned to leave Germany, stop in Italy, and then head to France or Chile, but he was arrested and taken to internment camps in Macerata and then Ferramonti di Tarsia.

During his time in Milan, there had been rumors circulating that the Germans had asked the Italians to send foreign Jews to Germany, on the basis that they were enemies against the war effort. The Italians instead interned the Jews in camps in Italy. According to Weissman, no atrocities took place there, and the Red Cross took care of the prisoners. The internees could even send twenty-five-word letters.²⁵ According to James Walston, author and historian, there were two types of concentration or internment camps: camps that were for the purpose of repression, and camps for the purpose of protection. In the first set of camps, most of the internees were real or potential partisans: anyone that was resistant to the authority of the Italian Fascist regime. In these camps, the conditions were terrible, and insufficient food, shelter, and medical care caused many deaths within the camps. The second set of camps were created to protect Jewish prisoners from German persecution and were the salvation for many non-Italian Jews.²⁶ In Italy, at the beginning of WWII, the Italian Fascist government began to intern foreign Jews and Italian Jews who had taken Italian citizenship within the previous twenty years. That is, until Nazis infiltrated Italy in 1943 and began to round up both Italian and Foreign Jews.

John Weissman had quite a different experience from the millions of Jewish people who died in the Holocaust. Weissman flitted in and out of work camps across Italy and consistently worked to elude the Gestapo and SS Officers. These German forces were not present in Italy until Mussolini's overthrow and the German occupation of Italy. Their job was to find hidden Jews in Italy to be rounded up and taken to larger concentration camps in Europe. Weissman was first arrested in Milan and then sent to San Vittori, Italy's largest prison, to wait for his transfer to the work camp in Macerata, Italy. When describing the Macerata camp, he said it was a beautiful place with no barbed wired, and the Jews only had responsibilities to fulfill. If they had known about the camps in Germany, he says, "we would have been terrified, no question about it."²⁷ Weissman stayed at the camp in Macerata until 1940, when he was transferred to Ferramonti, but his journey to the camp was quite unconventional in comparison to the way the Germans transported Jews to camps. He traveled in a private cart with an Italian police officer, stopping on the way so that the officer could visit his family. Weissman was given his passport and some money and allowed to sleep on his own for the night.²⁸ His experience is startling when compared to the

24 John T. Weissman. "Testimony of Theophile Teddy Weissman, born in Arosa, Switzerland, 1919, regarding his experiences in Italy," interview by Aviva Kelleman, *Testimonies Department*, Yad Vashem Archives, July 20, 1992, File #6668, 1.

25 Weissman, "Testimony Theophile," 7.

26 James Walston, "History and Memory of the Italian Concentration Camps," *The Historical Journal* 40, no. 1 (1997): 170.

27 Weissman, "Testimony Theophile," 8-9.

28 Weissman, "Testimony Theophile," 9.

terrible stories of Jews packed inhumanely into cattle-cars or the forced death marches they took in Germany. He was lucky to have received the treatment he did, relative to the experiences of Jews in the rest of Europe. In Ferramonti, Weissman described the living conditions as beautiful, with plenty of leisure time.²⁹

Walston discusses how although the Ferramonti camp did have barbed wire and constrained the individual's freedom, the internees enjoyed a large degree of self-government. At the beginning of its construction, the Ferramonti camp often lacked food and the conditions were harsh, but eventually life in the camp was tranquil and good relations existed between the internees and the Italian authorities.³⁰ In Weissman's time at the camp there were roughly over a thousand people interned: all non-Italians, nearly all Jews, with the exception of a few Yugoslavs. They had a clinic run by doctors who were also internees, and work at the camp was optional. Weissman discusses how the internees were obviously not granted the freedom to go where they wished, but if they did work, they could walk to the woods and build a canal. He describes it as a refreshing and peaceful experience, where the work was hard, but they could buy goods with their earnings, saying, "I believe we were better off than people of our own age in any other country at that time."³¹

Boyana Yakovlevich, a Jewish woman born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, was also sent to the Ferramonti di Tarsia camp. Her father wanted to get their family out of Yugoslavia, away from German persecution. At the time, they had no concept of the treatment of Jews by Mussolini, which she later realized was much different from that of Hitler.³² They wanted to escape to Egypt or even Palestine, but were they taken by the Italian Fascists to a concentration camp in Albania where the conditions were awful. The camp was full of Montenegrin families who had participated in an uprising against the Fascist Italian government. The sanitary conditions were bad, wire surrounded every barrack, and they were often without windows, doors, or water. Internment of Yugoslav and Montenegrin partisans by the Italian Fascist forces was quite normal, but they faced a problem when deciding where to put them. Many were taken to the concentration camp in Albania, and as the conflict between the partisans and Italy grew, so did the number of work camps.³³ Yakovlevich details her embark to Italy, in which she was one of three Jews taken from the Albanian camp to live in the Ferramonti di Tarsia camp.

From the beginning, she knew the conditions were much better than those in the previous camp, and the majority of people living in the camp were Jews. Yakovlevich describes how although wires and guards were all around, the barracks were smaller but nicer, with windows and doors; there was a communal water-fountain and

29 Weissman, "Testimony Theophile," 10.

30 Walston, "History and Memory," 171.

31 Weissman, "Testimony Theophile," 10.

32 Boyana, Yakovlevic, "Testimony of Boiana Iakoblevich, born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, 1922, regarding her experiences in Durazzo camp, Ferramonti Di Tarsa camp and with Tito's partisans," interview by Miriam Aviezer. *Testimonies Department*, Yad Vashem Archives, April 4, 1994, File # 7266, 26.

33 Walston, "History and Memory," 174-175.

kitchen; it was larger and more sanitary; families had their own rooms with stoves; and men and women were separated.³⁴ She explains the curfew that was in place, until which the Jews could move around all day. At the time that Yakovlevich was interned there, there was a school where she could teach children, and a choir.³⁵ She resided in Ferramonti for 11 months.³⁶

The experiences of the camps so far follow the theme laid out by James Walston: two camps, one typically outside of Italy, intended to subdue uprisings by foreign people, and the second, meant to save Jews from the persecution of Nazi Germany. The camps in Italy, as seen in the two primary sources, were more humane and cleaner, and prisoners had cordial interactions with the Italian police. However, these more peaceful and free concentration camps were not always the experience of Jews in Italy, specifically in the case of Trieste, which held the only extermination camp in Italy. The camp, Risiera di San Sabba, was first used as a transit camp in 1943, and then in 1944 crematoriums were created to exterminate Jews.

Besides the extermination camp and the work camps, Jewish people could live independently in Borgo Val di Taro, which was quite different from places like Ferramonti. In 1942, the Italians began to evacuate the Ferramonti camp and Yakovlevich's family used this opportunity to travel to her mother's cousin, in "libero confino," or "free imprisonment." The policy of the Italians was to allow families and relatives to live together in these "free confinement" conditions. Typically, a Jew had to apply to live with their relative, sister, or brother in these places and if they were accepted, they moved there.

Yakovlevich and her family moved to Pizzoli and then to Borgo Val di Taro, between Florence and Livorno. They were there from January 1943 until the capitulation of Italy on September 8th 1943, under the statutes of "Internati Civili di Guerra," or civilian war internees.³⁷ She and her family had to check in with the police every day, but were allowed to live in a flat with Italian families and landladies, and they received some money from a Jewish organization that paid the Italians.³⁸ In this way, Jewish people enjoyed considerable freedom, more than even in Ferramonti or Macerata. In both Ferramonti and the "libero confinos," Jewish people were treated with relative humanity. In these "protection camps" they were not treated as animals or humiliated as such, but rather with dignity and respect. In Nazi German camps across Europe, this was not the case. Two Italian Jewish women deported from Rhodes, Clara Menasse and Laura Varon, experienced horrible atrocities at Auschwitz. It is important to note key aspects of life in a Nazi-run concentration camp in comparison to Italian camps. While this does not excuse Mussolini or the actions of the Fascist Italian police, it helps to explain why most Italian Jews that survived the Holocaust did so and the positive attitude of these survivors toward Italians, as opposed to Germans.

34 Yakovlevich, "Testimony Boiana," 51.

35 Yakovlevich, "Testimony Boiana," 52-53.

36 Yakovlevich, "Testimony Boiana," 56.

37 Yakovlevich, "Testimony Boiana," 56-57.

38 Yakovlevich, "Testimony Boiana," 57.

On 16 August 1944, Clara Menasce arrived at Auschwitz after a trip of 20 days, left as one of the only survivors from Rhodes.³⁹ When they arrived, she remembers being shaved, completely undressed, and showered. They were given dresses with no shoes, leaving them unable to recognize one another. The miseries she experienced included roll call at 3 AM when it was cold and raining, soup and coffee thrown into their faces, sharing food in a bowl with four people and sleeping three people to a blanket, carrying bricks from one place to another, and being beaten by soldiers if there was dust on their dresses.⁴⁰ These are only a few of the inhumane actions against Jews in Nazi-run work camps like Auschwitz. In Hitler's eyes, Jewish people were inferior to Germans in every capacity, and thus treated like they were not human, rather as if they were animals. Menasce was forced to continue to other camps as the allies drew closer to Germany, and she almost died. Luckily, she was liberated by the Americans in Turkheim and saved.⁴¹ The conditions of these German-run camps drastically contrast to experiences at the Italian ones, not specifically because Italians were nicer or better people, but because the Italian population was rarely in support of antisemitism and the atrocities rumored to occur abroad.

As previously discussed, the actions of the Italian government towards Jews evolved over the course of the war and were influenced by various factors. Initially, Italy enacted antisemitic Italian Racial Laws in 1938, which restricted the rights of Jewish citizens. However, these laws were not as extreme as those implemented by Nazi Germany. While discrimination against Jews most definitely occurred, the Italian government did not systematically pursue the mass extermination policies seen in other parts of Europe. Nonetheless, Italy did participate in the persecution of Jews and worked towards isolating them from Italian society. The climax of this persecution began in 1943, when Mussolini was arrested, and Italy signed an armistice with the Allies. Following the armistice, the German military occupied northern Italy and established the Italian Social Republic, a puppet state led by Mussolini. During this period, the situation for Jews in Italy became more perilous as the German authorities sought to implement their "Final Solution" across Europe: the mass extermination of Jewish people.

Despite the challenging circumstances, there were numerous instances in the testimonials of Jewish survivors of aid and support received from Italian community members. Many ordinary Italians, including some members of the clergy, resisted anti-Jewish policies and collaborated with the Italian resistance to help Jews escape persecution. The answer is not simple as to why Italian members of society worked to save Jewish people. There are numerous factors that went into decisions to aid and abet Jewish people in the face of persecution. Many Italians were simply anti-Fascist and thus against any policies implemented by the Fascist regime, including the Ra-

39 Clara, Menasce, "Testimony of Clara Menasce, born in Rhodes, Italy, 1923, regarding her experiences in Auschwitz, Landsberg, Kaufering, Tuerkheim and other places," interview by Jacqueline Ben-Atar, *Testimonies Department*, Yad Vashem Archives, October 19, 1984, File # 4318, 11.

40 Menasce, "Testimony Clara," 12-13.

41 Menasce, "Testimony Clara," 16.

cial Laws. Others felt sympathy and friendship towards their Jewish neighbors, having bonded over millennia of shared history, or they simply were doing what they felt was right and could see the threatening measures implemented by the Germans. Two distinct groups of Italians who aided Jews emerge from archival testimonials. First, government workers and Carabinieri, and second, normal Italian citizens. Clara Menasce, a Jewish Holocaust survivor born in Rhodes, Italian-occupied Greece, discusses the treatment by Italians she experienced growing up in Rhodes. The Italians in Rhodes, according to Menasce, “were not antisemitic.”⁴² In fact, according to the author Anthony McElligott, the German authorities had been complaining that the Italians were preventing the implementation of anti-Jewish policies by providing little to no cooperation.⁴³ McElligott’s work is one of few sources that discusses in detail scholarship on Jewish experiences in Rhodes leading up to and during the Holocaust. As Germans began to fully occupy Greece and its islands, they treated the Italian Jews in Rhodes as if they were Greek Jews. The Germans gathered the Jews in Rhodes into the Italian aviation barracks where they were kept for three days. Menasce remembers one Italian Bishop who was willing to put his job on the line in order to protect the Jewish people of Rhodes, taking them under his responsibility.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, the Italians were outnumbered and held no power against the Germans in Rhodes. The governor had no way of saving those Jewish lives. His effort to, however, represents one of many Italian actions and sentiments towards the persecution and mistreatment of the Jews. Menasce describes how after the war, once she had been liberated, she resided at Innsbruck, Austria in a refugee camp. At the camp there were no survivors from Rhodes, only two sisters from Milan, one woman from Florence, and a few political prisoners.⁴⁵ Menasce remembers the Italian war prisoners protecting the Jewish women because they were the only Jews. There was a specific night where drunk American soldiers tried to bother the Jewish women, but the Italian soldiers protected them.⁴⁶ The bonding of the Italian prisoner soldiers and the Italian Jewish women brings to light a narrative not commonly discussed in scholarship on the history of Jews in Italy. Laura Varon, born in Rhodes, also discusses the aid of the Italian army, not for herself but her sister, Stella. Stella was left locked inside a cattle cart by Nazis in 1945, and many people froze and died inside the carts. She was lucky because there were Italian soldiers looking for survivors. Because Stella spoke Italian, she was able to draw their attention and communicate with them to let her and others still alive out of the cart.⁴⁷ Once free, she explained her story to the soldiers, who felt compassion for her and brought her back to Italy with them.⁴⁸

42 Menasce, “Testimony Clara,” 3.

43 Anthony McElligott, “The Deportation of the Jews of Rhodes, 1944: An Integrated History,” *The Holocaust in Greece*, ed. Giorgos Antoniou and A. Dirk Moses (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 71.

44 Menasce, “Testimony Clara,” 8.

45 Menasce, “Testimony Clara,” 17.

46 Menasce, “Testimony Clara,” 20.

47 Varon, “Testimony Laura,” 54.

48 Varon, “Testimony Laura,” 55.

The aid of not only anti-fascist members of government but the different Italian soldiers demonstrates a shared community and understanding between the Italians and Italian Jews. The Italian resistance emerged after the fall of Mussolini's Fascist regime and the imposing threat of German occupation in the North. These partisan groups consisted of many Italians against the Fascist and Socialist policies and actions of Mussolini and Hitler. The Carabinieri was different from the "Camicie Nera" in the eyes of both Italian and foreign Jews. The Carabinieri was a law enforcement and military force generally involved in maintaining public order, carrying out criminal investigations, and providing support during wartime. Their actions concerning Jews varied, but only in some instances did individual Carabinieri members assist in enforcing anti-Semitic laws. The Carabinieri traditionally had a closer relationship with the civilian population, as they were involved in day-to-day policing and law enforcement activities. This may have contributed to a more positive public perception of the Carabinieri soldiers. The Camicie Nera, on the other hand, were the paramilitary force associated with the National Fascist Party. They were involved political violence and the enforcement of fascist policies, specifically in the implementation of discriminatory laws against Jews. As the Fascist era progressed and Italy faced internal challenges and military defeats, the influence of the regular military and police forces, including the Carabinieri, grew, while the significance of the Blackshirts diminished. Jewish Italians and foreigners were able to recognize the different treatment by the Italian police forces, specifically the Carabinieri, versus that of the Camicie Nera. Boyana Yakovlevich, a Jewish woman from Yugoslavia mentioned previously, vaguely defined the difference between the two. After being deported from Yugoslavia to a concentration camp in Albania, the Italians who occupied Albania at the time decided to move the Jews in the camp to Rome. Yakovlevich recalls the carabinieri commander giving a speech: "'You will cross the Adriatic, on the other side, and you will see a country known for its culture, for its humanity' and so on and so on..."⁴⁹

The speech given by the Carabinieri is patriotic, nationalistic, and clearly asserting the better and safer treatment of Jews in Italy. As mentioned earlier, the concentration camps in Italy had two purposes. In the context of the commander's speech, the movement of Jews into Italy was meant for protection. Meanwhile in Ferramonti, the concentration camp Yakovlevich was transported to, an Italian black-shirt Fascist made a speech on the "safety" of the Jews in Italy: "When this commissar came, we tried to avoid the fascist way to raise the right hand. I remember his speech: 'What do you want? It is an honor for you that we allow you to have our salute. What would be with Germans? They would throw you down. You would go through the chimney.'"⁵⁰

The values conveyed in this speech by a Fascist commander align more with Mussolini's approach to the treatment of Jews rather than the principles demonstrated by the Carabinieri. While the theme of protection by the Carabinieri is not universally applicable, it is also evident in the testimony of John Weissman. He distinctly recalls

49 Yakovlevich, "Testimony Boiana," 46.

50 Yakovlevich, "Testimony Boiana," 53.

that while in Castel Neuvodi Farfa (northeast of Rome) the Germans occupied the whole of Italy. The Carabinieri, or the Royal Police, were anti-fascist and protected the Jews in the camp.⁵¹ Weissman also makes an interesting distinction between the Italian soldiers and the Germans. He says the Italians were not as obedient as the Germans, being very different in culture and values.⁵² Author Michael A. Livingston explores two majorly mistaken beliefs when discussing the Racial Laws and the increased persecution of Jews in Italy in 1943 through his writing. Livingston identifies common reasons as to why the treatment of Jews in Italy was so different from other places. He argues that the difference between Italy and other places in Europe in terms of the treatment of Jews resulted from institutional differences in the organization and implementation of anti-Jewish campaigns. Italian culture, according to his research, has a history of disrespect for central authority and inconsistency in the implementation of laws.⁵³

While this is a broad assumption of the people of Italy, elements of this character hold true. Weissman felt that the Italians who helped, knowing he was Jewish, did so because they were just helping against the threat of the Germans, regardless of what Mussolini wanted. In his experience, the people who helped him would have helped anyone in danger from the Germans. He had a unique experience in Italy because he lived among Italian people in Toffia, another small commune northeast of Rome. Weissman had received fake documents from a kind Italian family in Rome that stated he was “a volunteer working for the German Labor Service as a male nurse in the polyclinic in Rome.”⁵⁴ These papers gave Weissman considerable freedom compared to other foreign Jews in Italy, and because he spoke both Italian and German, he was asked to be an interpreter for the Germans in Toffia. The town did not know Weissman was Jewish, but he trusted two Italians specifically, Martini and Blasi. He notes how he didn’t understand why these men, and the couple who helped secure his illegal documentation, helped him: “All of them tried to help us all of the time, as much as possible. I don’t know if this was because of political understanding, or because of a general feeling of ‘help the underdog’. I don’t think there was the idea of ‘he is a Jew, we have to help him’, it was more that of helping other human beings.”⁵⁵

This trend of aid on the part of Italian citizens, especially those with whom the Jews had grown close friendships, is also present in Yakovlevich’s move to a “libero confino.” In Borgotaro, situated in the North of Italy, Yakovlevich recalls Italian treatment of Jews. They were nice, especially with the young people who would go to parties and play games with them. Yakovlevich even gave French lessons to an Italian friend, until the Germans took control of the city and Yakovlevich and her family had

51 Weissman, “Testimony Theophile,” 12.

52 Weissman, “Testimony Theophile,” 24.

53 Michael A. Livingston, “Introduction: On the Historical Significance of the Leggi Razziali,” *The Fascists and the Jews of Italy: Mussolini’s Race Laws* (Studies in Legal History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1-2.

54 Weissman, “Testimony Theophile,” 16-17.

55 Weissman, “Testimony Theophile,” 22.

to escape to Rome.⁵⁶ Their Italian friends helped them obtain identity cards and flee Borgotaro.⁵⁷

The exploration of Italian Jewish experiences during World War II in this paper provides a complex perspective on the interplay between fascism, antisemitism, civilian resistance, and the plight of a community caught in the turmoil of historical events. In contemplating the intricate narrative of Italian Jews during the rise of Nazism and fascist antisemitism, the themes of disbelief, assimilation, and the shattering of identity emerge as central motifs. The assimilation of Jews into Italian culture underscores a deep-rooted connection to the nation. The abrupt removal of Italian Jews from various spheres of life, the imposition of discriminatory measures, and the forced redefinition of their identity as solely Jewish shattered the perceived harmony and integration they had long experienced.

Further, the experiences of Jewish individuals in Italian concentration camps during World War II present an increasingly complex narrative of oppression, varying significantly from the brutalities witnessed in Nazi Germany. The testimonials of survivors, such as John Weissman, shed light on the nuanced nature of the Italian concentration camps. Weissman's experiences, from internment in Macerata and Ferramonti to the relative freedom and self-government in Ferramonti, highlight the diversity of conditions within these camps. The camps were categorized into those intended for repression and those for protection, with the latter serving as a refuge for Jewish individuals from the persecution orchestrated by Nazi Germany. The diverse experiences within Italian concentration camps reflect the varying approaches taken by the fascist regime.

The treatment of Jews by the Italian government during World War II was complex and evolved over time. Despite the challenging circumstances, numerous instances of aid and support from Italians, both ordinary citizens and government workers, are evident in survivor testimonials. Italian soldiers, especially the Carabinieri, demonstrated varying degrees of resistance against anti-Jewish policies, contributing to a more positive perception of their actions compared to the Blackshirts associated with the Fascist Party. The shared community and understanding between Italians and Jews became evident in various instances of assistance. The diversity of motivations among Italians who assisted Jewish individuals reflects the complexity of the historical context. The testimony of individuals like Clara Menasce, John Weissman, and Boyana Yakovlevich illustrates the multifaceted nature of Italian aid during this period. The Italians' resistance against anti-Jewish policies and their efforts to protect Jewish individuals contributed to a narrative of shared humanity in the face of persecution.

In essence, the history of Jews in Italy during this period reflects a spectrum of experiences, ranging from discrimination to acts of compassion and resistance. Ultimately, the study of Italian Jewish experiences during WWII underscores the need for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of history—one that acknowledges

56 Yakovlevich, "Testimony Boiana," 58.

57 Yakovlevich, "Testimony Boiana," 61.

the fluidity of ideologies, the varied responses of individuals and communities, and the intricate web of factors that shaped the destinies of those caught in the storm of war. As we reflect on this historical epoch, it becomes clear that Italy's wartime history is far from a monolithic tale, and the voices of Italian Jews serve as crucial threads in the intricate tapestry of World War II narratives.