

# **The Jews of Italy: A Personal Reflection**

**By Maria J. Falco, PhD**

After the booksigning (“It Happened in Italy”) an extraordinarily moving lecture by Elizabeth Bettina and that of one of the holocaust survivors, Ursula Korn-Selig, at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans on May 6, I began to wonder why everyone seemed surprised that Italians had saved over 30,000 Jews during the holocaust. After all, I, a student at a Catholic College in Pennsylvania over fifty years ago, had read Primo Levi’s book “Se questo e un huomo” (If this is a Man), later translated as “Survival at Auschwitz”, and even more appropriately, Carlo Levi’s book, “Cristo si e’ fermato a Eboli”, (Christ Stopped at Eboli), during a class in Italian literature taught by a native Italian speaker. Primo had related how well he had been treated while at “internment” at Fossoli near Modena in northern Italy, and Carlo had described his treatment while in exile for being an “anti-fascist” in Lucania. Primo had, in fact, been spared imprisonment as an anti-fascist by revealing that he was a Jew, so that Fossoli was a much better outcome for him during the war than it was for those who were non-Jews.

When I mentioned these two authors after the lecture, my comments were dismissed as somewhat irrelevant—after all, Bettina was describing only the events that had taken place at her Grandmother’s village based on a picture and some documents she had discovered when she had visited a few years back. Her extensive research and determined efforts to track down actual survivors of that experience, are what make her book truly inspiring. So, to some extent, my remarks were beside the point. But I still couldn’t help wondering.

Later, I spoke to one of the Jewish men present who was wearing a skull cap. When he heard me speak about these two authors, he replied that they were

**Italian Jews, not German Jews. What was remarkable was that the Italians had treated German Jews so well! That left me flabbergasted! It never occurred to me that people would think that Italian Jews are different from other Jews, no matter where they come from. I personally had had Jewish friends all my life, had attended Bar Mitzvah's, Synagogue and Seders, so why should Italians be different?**

**I tried to tell him that Italy had been a haven for Jews for millennia—especially Sephardic Jews escaping the Inquisition in Spain after 1492 who found refuge in Venice on the island which had served as a foundry or “ghetto” where metallic slag had been piled up in heaps for years. He was amazed at that, and found it difficult to believe that whole areas of Sicily and Calabria in the south, as well as Ferrara, and Milan in the north had also welcomed Greek, Sephardic, and later Ashkenazi Jews over the centuries. (1)**

**All through Italian history Jews had been welcomed as merchants, doctors, and bankers (in feudal times only Christians were permitted to be land owners, so Jews had to find some other way to support themselves), and were even given permission to charge interest on loans—something forbidden to Christians, until the Medici established their own international banks and ignored the prohibition. Jews had supported certain rulers (Theodoric), been oppressed by others (especially the Spanish when they took control of the Two Sicilies), had been allied to some (The Normans), and persecuted by others, including Popes, (forced to wear the yellow star of David on their clothing and even yellow hats from time to time), befriended by some religious and civic figures (Cardinal Alexander Farnese of Rome and the D'Este family of Ferrara) against Papal Edicts at a time when it was said that Jews practiced “ritual murder”, fought bravely in certain battles (Naples, against Justinian), and fled north when the Inquisition came to the south.**

**The fact that Mussolini had been reluctant to persecute the Jews prior to his exile and the invasion of the Americans from the south and the Germans from the north, and that his government had even paid for the upkeep of the German Jews who had fled to Italy to escape the holocaust, was no secret, although it is good to be reminded of it. What many people are not aware of however, is that in 1910, Italy had had a Jewish Prime Minister, Luigi**

**Luzzati, who was not an apostate (Leon Blum in France, Benjamin Disraeli in England) but a practicing Jew.**

**Nevertheless, I think it important to remember, once again, those two outstanding authors who came to my mind immediately after hearing the Bettina lecture: Primo Levi and Carlo Levi (not related, it seems, although both came from Turin).**

**No one, not even Eli Wiesel, has described so eloquently what it was like to be a prisoner at Auschwitz, as Primo Levi has. Anne Frank's book is remarkable for its perspective of a young teenager hiding out in an attic before being transported to a death camp, but only Primo actually described the daily soul numbing banality and the horrendous cruelty of the deprivations and inhumanity of the conditions of the Lager. But even there, the kindnesses of some of the Italian non-Jewish forced laborers (Lorenzo, for one) in sharing their food with him and his "hut-mate" Alberto, comes through loud and clear. So much so that Anthony Sher wrote a monolog/play based on the book, which he and Richard Wilson (Director) presented in London in 2004. The DVD of Sher's performance is a remarkable one that has been shown on television a number of times and has been available on line ever since.**

**In 1983 a video was made of Primo's train ride back to Auschwitz, accompanied by a journalist, to revisit the place where he had barely escaped death only because he had been too sick with scarlet fever to leave the hospital when Alberto and the others were ordered to march away from the invading Russians. He survived but Alberto did not. That video may be seen on Youtube today, complete with English subtitles. Primo died four years later when he fell off a balcony at his home in Turin. Some biographers thought he was a suicide, but evidence exists that he had been suffering dizzy spells and simply fell to his death. He was 67 years old. It is difficult to believe that a man who had survived what he had, and had spoken so calmly and dispassionately about it afterwards, would have deliberately taken his own life, so many years after the event.**

**While Primo had been a Chemist and had used this fact to his benefit at Auschwitz, Carlo was a medical doctor who preferred to be an artist, and had**