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'Aiding gli Ebrei' - Delasem under fascism, 1939 to 1945

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Introduction

This research explores the work of the Jewish aid organisation ‘Delegazione Assistenza Emigrati Ebrei’ (hereafter Delasem) in Italy before and after the country entered the Second World War in June 1940. The research examines the quandary about how Delasem – an Italian organisation established to support Jewish people – operate unhindered between 1939 and 1943 during Mussolini’s Fascist regime. Jewish people in Italy have always been a topic of singular attention among scholars who study Jewish history despite the community’s small size,¹ and this research complements and contributes to the study of Jewish people in Axis countries during the Second World War. Due to the work of Delasem between 1939 and 1943, Jewish refugees who arrived in Italy from other European countries were assisted in their day-to-day lives. In addition, along with Denmark, Italy had the largest number of survivors of their pre-war Jewish population of any other European nation.² This occurred at a time when Italy was an ally of Germany and under Mussolini’s anti-Semitic government between 1938 and 1943 or when Nazi Germany occupied sections of the country between 1943 and 1945.³

The Jews in the Italian peninsula

Pagan and Christian inhabitants of Italy treated Jewish people badly for most of the 2000 years that Jewish people have lived in the Italian peninsula. Rarely have Jewish people of Italy been considered as Italians. The reasons for this are simple – the Italian Jewish community was inclusive and therefore seen as insidious, as well as

¹ Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews, German Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy 1922-1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, p. 3.

² Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust In History*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1988, pp. 71-75 & 104-107.

³ Joshua D. Zimmerman, *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule 1922-1945*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2005, p. 1.

portrayed as a group of people associated with a religion that assisted in crucifying the son of the Italian Christian community's God.

From historical texts, people of the Jewish faith are known to have left Palestine and settled in Ancient Rome in 161 BCE.⁴ Over the years, despite poor treatment, the Jewish people in Italy developed strong bi-cultural roots. The Jews in Italy moved around the peninsula and established communities in Naples and in other cities like Cosenza, Palermo, Messina and Agrigento in the south of Italy. Jewish people in Italy were very active in maintaining their faith and following their religion's traditions. The Jewish population in Rome and in other parts of Italy flourished, and consequently, 13 synagogues⁵ were built over the years and many Jewish cemeteries established. Slowly, integration occurred with Christian Italians and as a result, Jewish communities were established by 313 CE in cities such as Ferrara, Venice, Genoa and Milan in the north of Italy.⁶

The Western Roman Empire fell in 476 CE, but the life of Jewish people in Italy continued peacefully even if the safety of the Jews in Italy depended on the attitude of the new invaders of the Italian peninsula.⁷ In 493 CE, the Ostrogoths from eastern Europe conquered the Italian territories; the Lombards in 458 CE followed them. The Ostrogoths and Lombards did not threaten the Italian Jews, but in 775 CE, when the Christian Byzantines took Italy, Jewish people did suffer persecution. During the early Middle Ages (beginning in about 800 CE) under Charlemagne, Jews lived without threat. Charlemagne – despite being Christian – gave Jewish people in Italy their civil and commercial rights that allowed Jewish communities in all of Italy to prosper and develop.⁸

⁴ Franca Tagliacozzo, *Gli ebrei romani raccontano la propria Shoah*, Giuntina, Firenze, 2010, p. 21.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 21- 48.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

During the 16th century, conditions deteriorated for Jewish people in Italy. The Roman Catholic Church, pressured by the Protestant Reformation, had to re-establish control.⁹ The Church was unable to stop the spread of Lutheranism in northern Europe, but it could influence the spread of Protestantism within the Papal States, and Jewish people suffered in the backlash. In 1513, the Papal States were formed in the territories that today cover the Italian regions of Lazio, Marche, Umbria, Romagna and parts of Emilia in the Italian peninsula. One of the Catholic Church's new acts, as a method of countering the Reformation was to force members of non-Catholic religions to submit to strict regulations.¹⁰ In 1555, Pope Paul IV confined Jewish people in walled areas of cities that had its gates locked between dusk and dawn. This was the beginning of the geographic feature called the ghetto. In the ghettos, Jewish life was regulated and restricted in almost every aspect, but the forced enclosure also fortified the insular behavioural characteristics of Jewish people.¹¹

Jewish people experienced prejudice, but during the mid-19th century, they were slowly absorbed into Italian society. During the Italian 'Risorgimento' (the Resurgence), the shaping of an Italian national awareness was comparable to the moulding of a national consciousness by the Piedmontese, the Neapolitans, or the Sicilians; national awareness was a common feeling amongst all Italian citizens – Jews and Christians.¹² The values of Christian Italians amalgamated seamlessly with Jewish values. This integration amongst Jews and Christians distinguished Italy as an emancipated country between 1840 and 1920.¹³ Italy became a successful new nation with Christians and Jewish people respecting and reaffirming each other's cultural backgrounds. The amalgamation between the two groups was patently obvious, because Jewish people were normally family orientated and typically loyal;

⁹ Joshua D. Zimmerman, *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule 1922-1945*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2005, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Zimmerman, p. 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19-30.

¹³ *Ibid.*

characteristics also shared by Christian Italians. In Italy, Christian and Jewish people had religious tolerance – their values of equality and respect shared.¹⁴

In 1848, King Carlo Alberto (of the House of Savoy that later became the Italian Royal Family), signed a decree granting people the freedom to worship any religion. Shortly after, Jewish people – like other Italians at the time – took part in the Italian Risorgimento that involved fighting for the unification of Italy. In 1860, General Giuseppe Garibaldi with the ‘Spedizione dei Mille’ (Expedition of the Thousand) that included Italian soldiers of the Jewish faith sailed to liberate Sicily from Bourbon domination.¹⁵ The abolishment of the ghettos in 1871 further initiated integration of Jewish people into the general Italian community.¹⁶ The Jewish Italian community was small, but Italian Jewish people became valued citizens of Italian society. This was unlike the actions of other European countries at this time where restrictions, like living in ghettos, still existed and Jewish people were ineligible to serve in leadership roles.

In 1874, there were 11 Jewish deputies in the Italian parliament, and in 1894, the number increased to 15.¹⁷ The Italian deputies had legislative power in the Italian parliament. The seat of the Chamber of Deputies was at the Palazzo Montecitorio in Rome, where the deputies had met since 1871 shortly after the capital of the Kingdom of Italy moved from Palazzo Carignano in Turin to Rome at the successful conclusion of the Italian Risorgimento movement.¹⁸

In 1904, the King of Italy, Victor Emanuel III, affirmed that there was to be no political or legal distinction between Jewish people and Christians in Italy. He said, ‘Jews may occupy any position...the army, the civil service, even the diplomatic

¹⁴ Zimmerman, pp. 19-30.

¹⁵ Salvatorelli, pp. 456-466.

¹⁶ Zimmerman, pp. 24-25.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

corps: everything is open to them...Jews for us are full-blown Italian'.¹⁹ These comments opened further opportunities for Jewish people of Italy. In 1906, and then in 1909 and 1910, Luigi Sonnino – half Jewish by birth but protestant by religion – was Prime Minister of Italy, while the Jewish Luigi Luzzatti was Prime Minister a few months later in 1910.²⁰ These political appointments, and the growing Italian middle class that contained many Jewish people, showed the rapidity of the emergence of Jewish people in Italy from the ghetto to acceptance in Italian society.²¹

Jewish people succeeded in many professions such as medicine and politics. An increase in mixed marriages between people of the Christian and Jewish faiths suggests further acceptance between members of the two religions.²² Furthermore, Jews considered themselves Italians – and the Christian Italians considered them Italian. In Italy during the first decade of the 20th century, only 0.1% of a population of 42,000,000 were Jews, with most Jewish people coming from the Sephardim branch of the Jewish faith who were exiled from Spain at the time of the Reyes Católicos in the 15th century.²³ Most Italian Jews were wealthy and few were classified as poor.²⁴ Most of the Italian population were unable to read and write during the time of the Italian Risorgimento; in contrast, most Italian Jews were well educated, and they used their education in the Italian cause for unification. Many Italian Jews were also bilingual, speaking the Germanic Yiddish or Latin Ladino and the local Italian dialects of the cities and regions where they lived.²⁵

¹⁹ Michaelis, p. 3.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Luigi Salvatorelli, *Sommario della storia d'Italia dai tempi preistorici ai nostril giorni*, Einaudi Editore s.p.a., Torino, 1974, pp. 476-492.

²² Susanna Zuccotti, *Under his Very Windows: the Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*, Yale University Press, London, 2002, pp. 16-18.

²³ The *Reyes Católicos* was an Edict of Expulsion of the Jews from Spain, promulgated by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain on 29th April 1492. It declared that no Jewish people were permitted to live within the Spanish Kingdom. Michaelis, p. 5.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Michaelis, p. 5.

Jewish freedom and the Italian Risorgimento drove Jews to Italian patriotism. During the early 20th century, they were loyal soldiers for Italy during the First World War against the Central Powers. For Italy, the war began in May 1915 and continued until the armistice in 1918.²⁶ The awarding of many medals of valour to Italian Jewish soldiers acknowledged and recognised their courage.²⁷ These examples further demonstrate that Italian society accepted and assimilated Jewish people.²⁸

Despite the Allies' success in the First World War, Italy witnessed a socio-economic crisis at the war's end and many soldiers returning home after the war were unable to find employment.²⁹ Furthermore, while the cost of living increased, wages stagnated, and as a result, workforce strikes were common.³⁰ The Fascist movement was not only a consequence of the Duce's ascent to power but was a result and a repercussion of Italian experiences during the First World War. Fascism was mostly a social expression of the Italian middle classes; a group that was growing stronger and who was involved in the Fascism under Mussolini that aimed for the establishment of an Italian state that would acquire its own autonomy as a newly organized political force.³¹

The general feeling of discontent amongst the lower middle class after the First World War, which included many disillusioned ex-officers and non-commissioned soldiers of Italy's army and navy, provided the ideal environment for the birth and growth of the ultra-right Fascist movement in Italy.³² Despite Italy's economic crisis and social unrest, Italian Jews did not consider moving to the Hebrew's religious home of Palestine at this time like Jewish people from other parts of Europe. A

²⁶ Michaelis, p. 5.

²⁷ Luigi Reale, *Mussolini's Concentration camps for Civilians: an insight into the nature of Fascism regime*, Vallentine Mitchell, London, 2011, p. 8.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Emilio Gentile, 'Fascism and the Italian Road to Totalitarianism', *The Author Journal Compilation*, Blackwell Publishing ltd, 2008, pp. 294-295. [Accessed from JSTOR database May 2016].

³² Ibid., pp. 7-8.

comment that summarises their loyalty is that ‘Their New Zion [was] right here...in Italy...which many of them...heroically defended with their blood’.³³

In 1921, the Fascist Movement was renamed the Fascist National Party.³⁴ When Benito Mussolini (also called the Duce), an Italian politician, journalist and leader of the National Fascist Party ascended to power as Prime Minister in 1922, 746 Jewish people from a total of 300,000 supporters were members of the Fascist National Party. This means that there was a higher percentage (0.25%) of Jews in the Fascist organisation than in the general Italian population.³⁵ The Duce realised the asset the Jewish people constituted in the realms of culture, finance and politics in Italy.³⁶ Mussolini, during an interview with the chief Rabbi of Rome, Professor Sacherdatti, declared ‘Fascism has to contend with too many problems to desire to create more. For us Fascists, there can be no antagonism to Jews’.³⁷

Further events demonstrated Jewish people’s sympathies with the serving Mussolini government. In October 1922, 200 Jewish people participated in the symbolic ‘Marcia su Roma’ (March on Rome) by Mussolini supporters, an event that helped the National Fascist Party to power.³⁸ Mussolini’s first cabinet included the Jewish Aldo Finzi, who between 1925 and 1928 held the portfolio of Undersecretary of the Interior.³⁹ In addition, Mussolini’s mistress and official biographer during this period was Margherita Sarfatti who was Jewish.⁴⁰ Between 1928 and 1933, 4920 Jews, representing more than 10% of Italy’s total Jewish population, joined the Fascist

³³ Michaelis, p. 13.

³⁴ Reale, p. 12.

³⁵ Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, Peter Halban, London, 1987, p. 24.

³⁶ JTA The Global Jewish News Source, ‘Fascist regime is Not Unfriendly to Italian Jews’, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency 2014*, www.jta.org/1928/02/21/archive/fascist-regime-is-not-unfriendly-to-italian-jews, [11 July 2014].

³⁷ Rome Correspondent, ‘Fascist regime is Not Unfriendly to Italian Jews’, *Jewish Daily Bulletin Jubilee Issue*, New York, 21 February 1928, p. 8, http://pdfs.jta.org/1928/1928-02-21_1000.pdf, [12 July 2014].

³⁸ Michaelis, pp. 5-6.

³⁹ Giuseppe Finaldi, *Mussolini and Italian Fascism*, Routledge, Oxon, 2014, pp. 45-48.

⁴⁰ Zimmerman, p. 26.

Party.⁴¹

Mussolini's ambition for an Italian Empire

Mussolini and the Fascist movement inherited a strong Italian colonialist ideology when they took power in Italy in 1922.⁴² Italian possessions gained during the 'Scramble for Africa' that began in 1881 comprised land in the Horn of Africa and Libya.⁴³ The colonialist ideology aligned perfectly with the Fascist government's ambition to establish an Italian Empire. Mussolini and the Fascists intended to form a new Italian state making Rome the capital with domination of the Mediterranean and North Africa – just as Italy had been at the centre of the Roman period.⁴⁴ Imperialism – such an important component of Fascist ego – was imperative for Mussolini. Mussolini's Fascism regime believed the expansion and the occupation of other countries was a sign of national strength.⁴⁵ As a result, under the Fascist regime, Italian occupation of African countries such as Somalia, Eritrea and Abyssinia caused massive conflict between Italians and African natives. Italy also ruffled the feathers of other European nations who had allegiances with the people of some of the occupied lands. Mussolini and the Italian government had a racial Fascist ideology where in the occupied lands Italians would command, direct, and would be serviced while indigenous Africans would obey, work and serve the Italians.⁴⁶

The racial statement by the Italian Fascist government in Africa clarified and asserted the domination of Italian hierarchy and authority. Race designated who ruled in the African colonies, with Italians as whites in power over the colonized black native people. The racial Italian policy towards Africans was fundamental to

⁴¹ Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, pp. 24-27.

⁴² Alexander De Grand, 'Mussolini's Follies: Fascism and Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935 – 1940', *Contemporary European History* Cambridge University Press, Vol. 13(2), May 2004, pp. 128-130. [Accessed from JSTOR database May 2016].

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 142-143.

the successful establishment of the Fascist Italian Empire's vision.⁴⁷ The Fascists considered the establishment of colonies as the beginning of the Italian Empire, but to rival and replace the British Empire in Africa could only be accomplished but allying Fascist Italy with other fascist regimes such as Nazi Germany.⁴⁸

*The beginning of the Italian Holocaust*⁴⁹

Mussolini and the Fascist government had a racial ideology towards the indigenous Africans in the newly established Italian colonies, but the Fascist regime did not show anti-Semitic racial attitudes to Italian Jews.⁵⁰ When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, European Jews were targeted as long-established enemies of the Nazis. In the German ministry decree of April 1933 they divided the German population into 'Aryans' – people with no Jewish ancestry – and non-Aryans who were Jewish or other faiths who had a minimum of one Jewish parent or grandparent. Nazi reporters named the decree the 'Racial Laws' (*Rassengesetze*).⁵¹

In September 1935, on the occasion of the Nazi party meeting at Nuremberg, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler ordered a decree called 'Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour'.⁵² The law was issued because the Nazis believed strongly that the blood in their veins had been contaminated and that it was Nazi priority to remove the contaminate – the Jews – from the German gene. For the Nazis this meant 'physical regeneration through eradication' (*Aufartung durch*

⁴⁷ De Grand, pp. 142- 144.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

⁴⁹ The term *Holocaust* comes from the third century B.C. Greek translation *Holokaustos* of the Old Testament, signifying "the burnt sacrificial offering dedicated *exclusively* to God". Historians use the term *Holocaust* to describe the systematic mass murder of European Jewry by the Nazis.

Marrus, pp. 1-8.

⁵⁰ Zimmerman, p. 28.

⁵¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Quadrangle Books Inc., Chicago & London, 1961, p. 45.

⁵² Hilberg, p. 46.

Ausmerzung).⁵³

The Nazi government engaged and developed this ideology in a context of exclusion, with the ideology spreading in European countries under Nazi power.⁵⁴ However, the anti-Semitic policies of one ultra-right regime were not integrated into another country – in Italy, anti-Semitic views did not occur in the 1930s because Jews were an integral part of the Italian community and their participation in all walks of life was extremely important and highly valued. The Fascist racial declaration to indigenous Africans in the Italian colonies created racial discrimination, but while Fascists were racists towards Africans inhabitants they were not to Jews in Italy or possibly elsewhere. The Fascist government did not show any anti-Semitic behaviour to Jews when they ascended to power. However, even if Mussolini and its government considered Jews in Italy Italians, a minor group of extremist people did spread anti-Semitic thoughts in the peninsula.⁵⁵

These anti-Semitic views came from Italians influenced by the Hakenkreuzler, the pro-Nazi groups mostly based in German speaking parts of Europe that used the swastika as an emblem and who had an anti-Semitic platform amongst other racial policies. Also, members of the far right ‘Hungarian Awakening’ that developed amongst the Magyars after First World War stressed the negative differences between Jewish people and Christians. Christian superiority over Judaism was also emphasised by the followers of the Romanian Professor A. C. Cuza,⁵⁶ with Italians with anti-Semitic views following mostly Cuza’s mantra.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Preziosi, a fanatical Italian nationalist, attempted to organise an anti-Semitic league in Italy.

⁵³ Omer Bartov, *The Holocaust, Origins, implementation, Aftermath*, Routledge London and New York, 2000, pp. 65- 66.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Zimmerman, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Henry Eaton, *The Origins and Onset of the Romanian Holocaust*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2013, p. 55.

So that Italians could read about the supposed dangers of Jewish people, Preziosi translated into Italian the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, a document stating that Jews allegedly collaborate to control all of the world’s governments. The Protocols also stated that Jewish people worked together to extinguish Christian civilisation so that Jews could control and govern the world.⁵⁸

All of the efforts to agitate against people of the Jewish faith in Italy came to nought – by the late 1920s, none of the anti-Semitic groups or individuals had been successful in establishing an anti-Semitic mindset amongst Italians. Mussolini’s Fascist government had assisted in halting all anti-Semitic activities,⁵⁹ but despite the government’s intervention, Italian Jews were cautious about the future, for they had witnessed sections of the Italian society – and in some cases right wing Fascist colleagues – associate themselves with anti-Jewish activists. This suggested trouble on the horizon for Jewish people in Italy.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Sergiei Nilus, *The Jewish Peril, Protocols of the Learned Elders Zion*, Martino Fine Books, Scotts Valley CA USA, 2009.

⁵⁹ JTA The Global Jewish News Source, ‘Fascist regime is Not Unfriendly to Italian Jews’, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency 2014*, www.jta.org/1928/02/21/archive/fascist-regime-is-not-unfriendly-to-italian-jews, [11 July 2014].

⁶⁰ Zimmerman, p. 28.



In October 1936, Mussolini, along with the German Chancellor Adolf Hitler (Figure 1), signed an agreement establishing the ‘Asse Roma-Berlino’ (the Rome-Berlin Axis).⁶¹ To add credibility to the pact, Mussolini was implicit that it was necessary to lessen the policy differences between the German Nazi and the Italian Fascist regimes.⁶² This involved issuing laws in line with the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws of the Nazis.

Figure 1 Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, Rome May 1938.⁶³

The Nuremberg Laws classified people with German or related blood as racially acceptable, but those who were Jewish or of other ancestry groups as impure. The Nuremberg Laws deprived and prohibited Germans of Jewish faith and other non-Aryans of German citizenship of having sexual relations and marrying racially acceptable Germans. Italy had no comparable regulations, and consequently, to show his support for Hitler and the Nazi Party’s anti-Semitic platform, Mussolini issued the ‘Leggi Razziali’ (Racial Laws) in 1938 that changed the social and political standing of Jewish people in Italy.⁶⁴ The Racial Laws aimed to limit the rights of Jewish people and to isolate them from social, public and political life. The laws forbade mixed marriages, and many Jewish people lost their jobs and were excluded

⁶¹ Reale, pp. 19-20.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, Rome May 1938, http://www.pacificwar.org.au/webgraphics/historicalbackground/Hitler_Musso.jpg [05 September 2015].

⁶⁴ Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, p. 36.

from aspects of Italian life. The integration between Christians and Jewish people in Italy that had developed since the 1840s had – at least on paper – finished.⁶⁵

Until the tabling of the Racial Laws, Italy had not witnessed and had no concept of any anti-Semitism from the Fascist government. The Jewish people's rights had been respected under Italy's liberal governments of the early 20th century and the Fascist regime of the 1920s and 1930s. The 'Risorgimento' had successfully blurred the distinction between Italian Jews and Italian Christians. Furthermore, the many marriages between members of the two religions had enhanced the uniformity between members of the two faiths.⁶⁶ However, despite the Racial Laws of 1938, the Italian Fascist government did not stop non-Italian Jewish people from entering the country.⁶⁷ Moreover, the arrival of Jewish refugees into Italy increased from Germany and from eastern European countries after Germany's occupation of Austria, Sudetenland, the rest of Czechoslovakia, and finally the invasion of Poland in September 1939. Despite the tabling of the Racial Laws, the Italian peninsula was a bastion for Jewish refugees.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the Fascist government not only allowed Jewish people into Italy, but when Italy entered the Second World War and occupied parts of France, Greece, and the Balkans, they did not persecute the local Jewish populations in these areas using decrees in their own Racial Laws or the Nazi Nuremberg Laws.⁶⁹

Despite the 'Asse Roma-Berlino' pact and the 'Leggi Razziali', in 1939 the Duce's government provided aid to Jewish people in Italy.⁷⁰ Additionally, and contradictory to the Racial Laws, the Italian government allowed the vice-chief of police Dante

⁶⁵ Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: from equality to persecution*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2006, pp. 125-129.

⁶⁶ Rome Correspondent, 'Fascist regime is Not Unfriendly to Italian Jews', *Jewish Daily Bulletin Jubilee Issue*, New York, 21 February 1928, p.8, http://pdfs.jta.org/1928/1928-02-21_1000.pdf, [12 July 2014].

⁶⁷ Reale, p. 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-37.

⁶⁹ Peter Egill Brownfeld, 'The Italian Holocaust: The Story of an Assimilated Jewish Community', Autumn 2003, http://www.acjna.org/acjna/articles_issues.aspx, [19 November 2014].

⁷⁰ Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: from equality to persecution*, pp. 125-129.

Almansi – a Jewish man – to maintain his high government position. Under Almansi's directive, the Rome-based Union of Italian Jewish communities (UCII)⁷¹ formed in Genoa the 'Delegazione Assistenza Emigrati Ebrei' – abbreviated to Delasem – to assist as an aid organisation for Jewish refugees in Italy.⁷² Lelio Vittorio Valobra, vice-president of the UCII to Almansi, was chosen as Delasem's inaugural leader.⁷³ As a consequence of Nazi persecution of Jewish people in German occupied Europe and Delasem's establishment, Jewish refugees sought asylum in Italy, with Delasem's main priority a commitment to assisting with emigration for foreign refugees to countries in Europe unoccupied by Germany like Spain, or to proceed overseas to the United States.⁷⁴

In June 1940, Italy entered the Second World War allied with Nazi Germany. As a result of Italy entering the war, internment camps were established for European Jewish refugees and Jewish Italian citizens on the Italian peninsula and later in countries occupied by Italian forces.⁷⁵ The Italian government established the camps in an effort to create the image of a stronger alignment between German and Italian anti-Jewish policies, while at the same time most likely wanting to avoid the deportation of Jewish people from Italy to German concentration camps. The internment camps established by the Italians were away from large cities and in relatively inaccessible locations. Italian Fascist civil authorities controlled the camps and provided financial support to the interned Jewish people.⁷⁶

The Italian internment camps were holding facilities and different to the German concentration camps that were for the extermination of humans or work related.⁷⁷ The general conditions in Italian camps compared to other camps in Europe were good. Furthermore, Delasem continued its role providing aid to Jewish people after

⁷¹ UCII (Unione Comunità Israelitiche Italiane).

⁷² Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, pp. 64-67.

⁷³ Reale, p. 147

⁷⁴ Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, pp. 64-66.

⁷⁵ Michele Sarfatti, *Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi*, Einaudi, Torino, 2002, p. 61.

⁷⁶ Reale, p. 61.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the camps were established in Italy. Extra financial support was provided to internees to supplement their food allocation and to purchase other items that were needed. Improving morale was instigated by allowing internees to find missing family members separated in the exodus from their homelands, or by contacting other family members who had been interned. In addition, Delasem increased the material support to internees by providing extra clothing and linen, while supplying religious icons so that internees could continue their journey of faith and maintain Jewish traditions. Medical supplies were also available in the camps, purchased with funds secured by Delasem, and children's education provided and libraries established.⁷⁸ Between 1939 when first established and 1943 when it was forced underground, Delasem was responsible for supporting more than 15,000 Jewish people, most detained in internment camps.⁷⁹ All of Delasem's activities were under the direct supervision of the Fascist regime.⁸⁰

In 1941, the Italian army was struggling in campaigns in North Africa and Greece and Mussolini had to ask for assistance from Hitler and the German military machine. From this point onward, Italian military operations were dependent on German support, and consequently, Hitler influenced the Duce. Assistance from Germany was essential for the Italian war effort, but ordinary Italians did not appreciate the dependency on the German military. Support for the Italian Fascist regime began to wane.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Reale, p.148.

⁷⁹ Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, pp. 64-65.

⁸⁰ Reale, pp. 147-149.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

At the Casablanca Summit in January 1943, the Allies discussed amongst other topics an invasion of Italy. Apart from taking the fight to the Axis powers in their own land, the proposed invasion of Italy and the opening of a second front was necessary to take pressure from the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front.⁸² In July 1943, the Allies landed in Sicily and faced strong resistance from Italian and German forces, but the Allies met little resistance from local Italian civilians.⁸³ The Allied invasion of Sicily put further pressure on the Italian government that was already experiencing strong anti-fascist opposition from Italian people. The Allied invasion made the Italian monarchy aware that it was impossible to continue the war, a stance



supported by moderate Fascists. On 3 September 1943, Italy sued for peace from the Allies, but⁸⁴ before this occurred, the Fascist Grand Council voted Mussolini from power on 25 July 1943. After the Fascist Grand Council removed the Duce from his office, Mussolini was arrested and General Pietro Badoglio (Figure 2) became the new Italian Prime Minister.⁸⁵

Figure 2 Pietro Badoglio, the Italian Prime Minister from September 1943⁸⁶

The armistice between the Allies and Italy occurred on 3 September 1943 in the Sicilian city of Cassibile after that day's Allied landing on the Italian mainland at

⁸² Reale, p. 20-21.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁸⁵ Salvatorelli, pp. 505-514.

⁸⁶ Pietro Badoglio, Italian Prime Minister, Italy, September 1943, <http://i.res.24o.it/images2010/SoleOnLine5/ Immagini/Notizie/Italia/2013/09/Badoglio-olycom-258.jpg?uuid=69ab67d2-188b-11e3-a0d5-d911e77dc1b8> [06 August 2015].

Salerno⁸⁷ (Figure 3). Simultaneously, the German army crossed from southern France in numbers to support their forces fighting the invading Allies. Eventually, the German army occupied northern Italy.⁸⁸ The German's military action caused Badoglio and the Italian King to flee to Sicily where they were placed under Allied military protection. By early October 1943, the Allies had occupied southern Italy including the regions of Sicily, Calabria, Puglia and Campania, with the rest of the Italian peninsula occupied by the Germans. The German occupation of northern Italy saw Mussolini released from prison and reinstated as Prime Minister, but he was basically a puppet under German instructions.⁸⁹

The German occupation of northern Italy, combined with the fall and then reinstatement of Mussolini's Fascist regime⁹⁰ as a puppet government controlled by the Nazis, resulted in a toxic environment for those with pro-Jewish attitudes.⁹¹ Consequently, Delasem was forced underground to continue its activities.⁹²

⁸⁷ Philip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 2007, pp. 85- 92.

⁸⁸ Reale, pp. 21-22.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 20-22.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ivo Herzer, *The Italian Refuge: rescue of Jews during the Holocaust*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 1989, p. 155.



Figure 3 The signing of the armistice between Italian and Allied representatives at Cassibile, 3 September 1943 ⁹³

Delasem's president Lelio Vittorio Valobra and most of his colleagues fled to Switzerland, but nonetheless, Delasem still continued their work in Italy with the support of the partisan movement. It rescued and organised hiding places for thousands of European Jewish refugees and Italian civilians and supplied them with food and support until the end of the German occupation of Italy in 1945.⁹⁴

From September 1943 until the end of the European Second World War in April 1945, Italy experienced the brutality of the Nazis. The Germans were violent with Italian soldiers and civilians who opposed them, and despite Delasem's now clandestine support for Jewish people, the Germans and Italians supporting them still deported Italian Jewish people from Italy to German controlled concentration camps.

⁹³ Italian representatives signing the armistice with the Allies, Cassibile, 3 September 1943, <http://www.corriere.it/Media/Foto/2011/11/30/cassibile--620x420.jpg> [11 July 2015].

⁹⁴ Herzer, p. 155

The German anti-Jewish policy – ‘Final Solution’ – established after the *Grossen Wannsee* conference on the 20 January 1942,⁹⁵ became active in Italy and it applied to Italian and non-Italian Jewish people.⁹⁶ The Germans searched houses, and Jewish people were arrested and deported. Most of the Italian Jewish people deported to Auschwitz concentration camp did not survive; they finished their life journey in a country not their own.⁹⁷ In Italy, of 32,000 Jewish people deported, 8300 became victims of the ‘Shoah’ (the Holocaust).⁹⁸ Their deaths were horrible, but the ratio of victims to survivors in Italy is high compared to other countries occupied by the Nazis, with Italy and Denmark having the highest ratio of Holocaust survivors of any occupied Nazi nation.

Comparatively more Jewish people in Italy surviving the Holocaust was achieved thanks to Delasem’s aid programme from 1939 to 1943 and the support, after the fall of Mussolini’s Fascist regime, of the partisan movement, Italian civilians and Christian religious communities. However, the support they received from the Fascist government between 1938 and 1943 provides the main reason for why many Jewish people survived.⁹⁹

Research question and aims

As the brief historical section above discusses, Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy from 1939 to 1943 were supported by Delasem who in turn were assisted by the Fascist government. However, the same Fascist government had enacted Racial Laws against Jewish people in 1938. There is a clear ambiguity – the government, with anti-Semitic laws, assisted Jewish people. Therefore, this study aims to

⁹⁵ Reale, pp. 60-61.

⁹⁶ Zimmerman, p. 28.

⁹⁷ Reale, pp. 21-22.

⁹⁸ Zimmerman, p. 28.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

determine how Jewish people survived in Italy during this period and how Delasem operated between 1939 and 1943 unimpeded in the support of these people under Mussolini's Fascist regime. I will do this by:

1. Examining Delasem documents mostly from the 1939 to 1943 period but also a few papers from 1945 and 1946 in the Jewish Archive in Rome. These documents have not to the author's knowledge been used greatly in previous research. The examination of these documents will provide a contemporary and reasonably unedited view of Delasem's aid activities. This analysis of Delasem's aid work will provide the reader with contemporary evidence related to the lives of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people, Mussolini's government policies and Italian people between 1939 and 1943;
2. Examining Italian culture. Delasem's activities occurred in a country with a distinct culture that most likely influenced the organisation's activities and the Fascist government's support;
3. Analysing the lives of Jewish people in Italy during this period. This includes Italian and non-Italian Jewish people who had fled to Italy as refugees. Their treatment in Italy is the best barometer to gauge how it was possible for Jewish people to exist in Italy during this period and how Delasem operated unhindered in the support of these people under Mussolini's Fascist regime between 1939 and 1943.

This study explores the lives of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy between 1939 and 1943 through the study of Delasem's documents. Furthermore, this research will determine how Mussolini allowed Delasem to exist and to operate with the support of the Fascist government after the Duce took a clear anti-Semitic approach with the promulgation of the 'Leggi Razziali' in 1938.

Research Design

This study analyses the work by Delasem as an Italian Jews aid organisation for Italian and non-Italian Jews between 1939 and 1945 but specifically between 1939 and 1943. The introduction contains a brief historical background of Italy that focuses on the life of Jewish people in Italy since their first arrival on the peninsula about 2000 years ago. This section is purely contextual for it is important for the reader to understand the circumstances of Italian Jewish people under Mussolini's Fascist regime that resulted in Delasem's formation and later the arrival of Jewish refugees from parts of Nazi occupied Europe. The introduction also states the research question and aims.

The first chapter is a literature review. The literature review also presents an important component of the general story of Jewish people in Italy during the Second World War – the dichotomy that exists between historians about the relationship that occurred between Mussolini and the Jews in Italy. Historians are divided into those who believe that Mussolini was ambivalent to the issues of Jewish people in Italy; called in this document the 'appeasement' group; and those who considered Mussolini to be little different to the more infamous Nazi individuals associated with the murder of about six million Jewish people – referred to here as the 'genocide' group.

The research in this thesis differs from other investigations on the position of Italian Jewish people under the Fascist regime because it focuses on Delasem, an organisation whose formation and operation revolved around assisting Jewish people in Italy. Many have written widely about Jewish people in Italy, but the literature review highlights the lack of research about Delasem's involvement. A perusal of the literature by scholars is essential to understanding the Italian Jews situation during Mussolini's Fascist era.

The second chapter describes documents associated with Delasem housed at the Italian Jews Archive of Rome. These primary sources provide an in-depth analysis of the organisation's operation, and by default, what the institution did to assist Jewish people between 1939 and 1945. The chapter presents data not often used before by others when examining the lives of Jewish people in Italy. Delasem sources begin in 1939 – a year after the promulgation of the Racial Laws in Italy – and continued until the fall of Mussolini's Fascist regime in 1943. After that date, Delasem was forced to operate in secret that severely restricted the keeping of records. However, a small collection of material from post-war 1945 and 1946 exist that provide a retrospective analysis of the 1943 to 1945 period of Delasem's clandestine activities. The documents are in Italian – the first language of the writer of this thesis – and mostly typed.

The third chapter presents reasons for why Delasem existed contrary to the Racial Laws. This chapter answers the research question about Jewish people living in Italy from 1939 to 1943 and how Delasem operated supporting these people under Mussolini's Fascist regime. The fourth and final chapter is the conclusion. This chapter summarises the thesis objectives and presents clearly to the reader the aims and conclusions of this study on how Italian and non-Italian Jewish people lived in Italy under Mussolini's Fascist regime and how it was possible for Delasem to exist and operate as an organisation to assist Jewish people under the anti-Semitic Italian Fascist government.