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

Laura Bava

*University of Notre Dame Australia*

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# **‘Aiding gli Ebrei’ - Delasem under Fascism, 1939 to 1945**

This thesis is presented for the degree of Master of Arts

University of Notre Dame Australia

2016

Submitted by Laura Bava

## **Declaration of Authorship**

This thesis is the candidate's own work and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other institution.

To the best of the candidate's knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Laura Bava

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Date

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>                                       | IV  |
| <b>FIGURES</b>   | VI  |
| <b>ABSTRACT</b>  | VII |
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>  | 1   |
| <i>The Jews in the Italian peninsula</i>                       | 1   |
| <i>Mussolini's ambition for an Italian Empire</i>              | 8   |
| <i>The beginning of the Italian Holocaust</i>                  | 9   |
| Research question and aims                                     | 19  |
| Research Design  | 21  |
| <b>CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW</b>                           | 23  |
| The appeasement group  | 23  |
| The genocide group   | 33  |
| <b>CHAPTER 2 - DELEGAZIONE ASSISTENZA EMIGRATI EBREI</b>       | 41  |
| Delasem's operations between December 1939 and June 1940       | 43  |
| Delasem's role between June 1940 and December 1941             | 54  |
| Italian internment camps                                       | 58  |
| The decreasing of Delasem's exodus activities                  | 68  |
| Changes in Delasem's structure                                 | 69  |
| Delasem's activities between June 1941 and September 1943      | 76  |
| <i>Delasem's clothing appeal</i>                               | 76  |
| <i>Medical assistance provided by Delasem</i>                  | 77  |
| <i>Delasem's aid appeal for non-Italian Jews children</i>      | 78  |
| Delasem: re-establishing its role                              | 81  |
| Summary of Delasem's role between June 1941 and September 1943 | 83  |
| Delasem September 1943 to May 1945                             | 85  |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>CHAPTER 3 - INTERPRETATION</b>   | 91  |
| Genocide versus appeasement   | 92  |
| <i>Delasem evidence supporting the appeasement argument</i>                           | 94  |
| <i>Evidence supporting the genocide group</i>   | 96  |
| Delasem's documents in the context of Fascist government attitudes to Jewish people   | 98  |
| <i>The tabling of the Racial Laws in 1938</i>   | 98  |
| <i>The 1938 census of Jewish people</i>   | 100 |
| <i>Foreign Jewish people in Italy post 1939</i>                                       | 101 |
| <i>The establishing of internment camps</i>   | 103 |
| Summary: the Fascist government's attitude to Jewish people through Delasem documents | 106 |
| <i>The Fascist government compared with the Nazis</i>                                 | 109 |
| <i>Summary – the appeasement and genocide debate</i>                                  | 110 |
| <i>Finally, Delasem's existence due to Fascist help</i>                               | 111 |
| <i>Nazi and Italian Fascist anti-Semitic policies</i>                                 | 113 |
| <b>CHAPTER 4 - CONCLUSION</b>   | 115 |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>   | 121 |

# Figures

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Figure 1: Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, Rome May 1938   | 12 |
| Figure 2: Pietro Badoglio, the Italian Prime Minister from September 1943  | 16 |
| Figure 3: The signing of the armistice between Italian and Allied representatives, Cassibile, 3 September 1943                           | 18 |
| Figure 4: A group of internees play stringed instruments in the Campagna internment camp. Walter Wolff is standing second from the right | 32 |
| Figure 5: The Historical Archives of the Jewish community of Rome (ASCER, centre) Rome 2012  | 40 |
| Figure 6: Dante Almansì, President of Delasem Genoa, 1939  | 43 |
| Figure 7: Lelio Vittorio Valobra, Vice-President of Delasem Genoa, 1939  | 44 |
| Figure 8: The location of the Jewish communities in 1938   | 45 |
| Figure 9: Delasem's Office, Lungotevere Sanzio, Rome 2012  | 49 |
| Figure 10: Genoa port, 1940  | 54 |
| Figure 11: The location of internment camps in Italy and occupied territories  | 59 |
| Figure 12: Foreign Jewish and local police on the steps of San Bartolomeo internment camp, Campagna 1940                                 | 62 |
| Figure 13: Jewish refugees in Lisbon boarding a ship transporting them to the United States, June 1941                                   | 74 |
| Figure 14: Pupils and teachers at Ferramonti di Tarsia internment school, 1941   | 81 |
| Figure 15: Convento dei Capuccini, Via Sicilia 159, Rome, 1943   | 87 |
| Figure 16: Joint Distribution Committee representatives visit childcare facilities at a displaced persons camp, Europe, 1945             | 90 |

# Abstract

This study investigated how the organisation Delasem ('Delegazione Assistenza Emigrati Ebrei') operated unrestricted in their support of Jewish people under Mussolini's Fascist regime between 1939 and 1943. It includes a brief historical background of Italy that focuses on the life of Jewish people since their first arrival in Italy about 2000 years ago. This historical section was presented so that the reader could understand Italian culture and its changing attitude to Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy. This section outlined the circumstances of Italian Jews under Mussolini's Fascist regime that resulted in Delasem's formation and the flood of Jewish refugees into Italy from parts of Nazi occupied Europe.

The result of this thesis' research question is that Delasem operated as an aid agency for Jewish people from 1939 to 1943 because of direct and indirect assistance from Mussolini and his Fascist regime.

The study of Delasem's documents allows one to understand what happened in Italy to Jewish people from the promulgation of the 'Leggi Razziali' in 1938 to the fall of Mussolini's Fascist regime in 1943. It complements and contributes to other research on the topic of the dichotomy that exists between Mussolini and the Jews in Italy. There is a division between those believing that Mussolini was ambivalent to the issues of Jewish people in Italy and those who consider Mussolini to be little different to the more infamous Nazi individuals associated with the murder of about six million Jewish people.

This research complements and contributes to the study of Jewish people in Axis countries during the Second World War. Furthermore, it shows how Mussolini allowed Delasem to exist and to operate in an environment supposedly hostile to pro-Jewish views after the Fascist government tabled the Racial Laws in 1938.



## **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,<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

### *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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 synagogues<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 21- 48.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, conditions deteriorated for Jewish people in Italy. The Roman Catholic Church, pressured by the Protestant Reformation, had to re-establish control.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

Jewish people experienced prejudice, but during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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;

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

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Zimmerman, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19-30.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

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

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.<sup>15</sup> The abolishment of the ghettos in 1871 further initiated integration of Jewish people into the general Italian community.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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

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<sup>14</sup> Zimmerman, pp. 19-30.

<sup>15</sup> Salvatorelli, pp. 456-466.

<sup>16</sup> Zimmerman, pp. 24-25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

corps: everything is open to them...Jews for us are full-blown Italian'.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Jews considered themselves Italians – and the Christian Italians considered them Italian. In Italy during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> Most Italian Jews were wealthy and few were classified as poor.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Michaelis, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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

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

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

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Michaelis, p. 5.

Jewish freedom and the Italian Risorgimento drove Jews to Italian patriotism. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> The awarding of many medals of valour to Italian Jewish soldiers acknowledged and recognised their courage.<sup>27</sup> These examples further demonstrate that Italian society accepted and assimilated Jewish people.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, while the cost of living increased, wages stagnated, and as a result, workforce strikes were common.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> 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

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<sup>26</sup> Michaelis, p. 5.

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

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> 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].

<sup>32</sup> 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’.<sup>33</sup>

In 1921, the Fascist Movement was renamed the Fascist National Party.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> The Duce realised the asset the Jewish people constituted in the realms of culture, finance and politics in Italy.<sup>36</sup> 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’.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> Mussolini’s first cabinet included the Jewish Aldo Finzi, who between 1925 and 1928 held the portfolio of Undersecretary of the Interior.<sup>39</sup> In addition, Mussolini’s mistress and official biographer during this period was Margherita Sarfatti who was Jewish.<sup>40</sup> Between 1928 and 1933, 4920 Jews, representing more than 10% of Italy’s total Jewish population, joined the Fascist

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<sup>33</sup> Michaelis, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> Reale, p. 12.

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

<sup>36</sup> 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](http://www.jta.org/1928/02/21/archive/fascist-regime-is-not-unfriendly-to-italian-jews), [11 July 2014].

<sup>37</sup> 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](http://pdfs.jta.org/1928/1928-02-21_1000.pdf), [12 July 2014].

<sup>38</sup> Michaelis, pp. 5-6.

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

<sup>40</sup> Zimmerman, p. 26.

Party.<sup>41</sup>

*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.<sup>42</sup> Italian possessions gained during the 'Scramble for Africa' that began in 1881 comprised land in the Horn of Africa and Libya.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

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

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

<sup>42</sup> 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].

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 142-143.



the successful establishment of the Fascist Italian Empire's vision.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

*The beginning of the Italian Holocaust*<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup> 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*).<sup>51</sup>

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'.<sup>52</sup> 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*

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<sup>47</sup> De Grand, pp. 142- 144.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>49</sup> 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.

<sup>50</sup> Zimmerman, p. 28.

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

<sup>52</sup> Hilberg, p. 46.

*Ausmerzung*).<sup>53</sup>

The Nazi government engaged and developed this ideology in a context of exclusion, with the ideology spreading in European countries under Nazi power.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup>

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,<sup>56</sup> with Italians with anti-Semitic views following mostly Cuza’s mantra.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Preziosi, a fanatical Italian nationalist, attempted to organise an anti-Semitic league in Italy.

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

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Zimmerman, p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup>

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,<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup>

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

<sup>59</sup> 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](http://www.jta.org/1928/02/21/archive/fascist-regime-is-not-unfriendly-to-italian-jews), [11 July 2014].

<sup>60</sup> 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).<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup>

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.<sup>64</sup> 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

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<sup>61</sup> Reale, pp. 19-20.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, Rome May 1938, [http://www.pacificwar.org.au/webgraphics/historicalbackground/Hitler\\_Musso.jpg](http://www.pacificwar.org.au/webgraphics/historicalbackground/Hitler_Musso.jpg) [05 September 2015].

<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup>

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> However, despite the Racial Laws of 1938, the Italian Fascist government did not stop non-Italian Jewish people from entering the country.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup>

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

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

<sup>66</sup> 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](http://pdfs.jta.org/1928/1928-02-21_1000.pdf), [12 July 2014].

<sup>67</sup> Reale, p. 35.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-37.

<sup>69</sup> Peter Egill Brownfeld, 'The Italian Holocaust: The Story of an Assimilated Jewish Community', Autumn 2003, [http://www.acjna.org/acjna/articles\\_issues.aspx](http://www.acjna.org/acjna/articles_issues.aspx), [19 November 2014].

<sup>70</sup> 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)<sup>71</sup> formed in Genoa the ‘Delegazione Assistenza Emigrati Ebrei’ – abbreviated to Delasem – to assist as an aid organisation for Jewish refugees in Italy.<sup>72</sup> Lelio Vittorio Valobra, vice-president of the UCII to Almansi, was chosen as Delasem’s inaugural leader.<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup>

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.<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup>

The Italian internment camps were holding facilities and different to the German concentration camps that were for the extermination of humans or work related.<sup>77</sup> 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

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<sup>71</sup> UCII (Unione Comunità Israelitiche Italiane).

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

<sup>73</sup> Reale, p. 147

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

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

<sup>76</sup> Reale, p. 61.

<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> All of Delasem's activities were under the direct supervision of the Fascist regime.<sup>80</sup>

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.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Reale, p.148.

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

<sup>80</sup> Reale, pp. 147-149.

<sup>81</sup> *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.<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup> 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, but<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup>

Figure 2 Pietro Badoglio, the Italian Prime Minister from September 1943<sup>86</sup>

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

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<sup>82</sup> Reale, p. 20-21.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>85</sup> Salvatorelli, pp. 505-514.

<sup>86</sup> 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].



Salerno<sup>87</sup> (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.<sup>88</sup> 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.<sup>89</sup>

The German occupation of northern Italy, combined with the fall and then reinstatement of Mussolini's Fascist regime<sup>90</sup> as a puppet government controlled by the Nazis, resulted in a toxic environment for those with pro-Jewish attitudes.<sup>91</sup> Consequently, Delasem was forced underground to continue its activities.<sup>92</sup>

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

<sup>88</sup> Reale, pp. 21-22.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-22.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> 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 <sup>93</sup>

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.<sup>94</sup>

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.

<sup>93</sup> 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].

<sup>94</sup> Herzer, p. 155

The German anti-Jewish policy – ‘Final Solution’ – established after the *Grossen Wannsee* conference on the 20 January 1942,<sup>95</sup> became active in Italy and it applied to Italian and non-Italian Jewish people.<sup>96</sup> 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.<sup>97</sup> In Italy, of 32,000 Jewish people deported, 8300 became victims of the ‘Shoah’ (the Holocaust).<sup>98</sup> 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.<sup>99</sup>

### **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

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<sup>95</sup> Reale, pp. 60-61.

<sup>96</sup> Zimmerman, p. 28.

<sup>97</sup> Reale, pp. 21-22.

<sup>98</sup> Zimmerman, p. 28.

<sup>99</sup> *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.

# Chapter 1

## Literature Review

A perusal of previous research on the topic of the attitude of Mussolini's Fascist regime towards Italian and non-Italian Jewish people is critical for understanding Delasem's role as the Italian Aid Commission for Jewish Refugees. Immediately, one sees a contradiction in that an organisation formed by Jewish people existed under an anti-Semitic Fascist regime. Despite this, many still consider Mussolini's Fascists as anti-Semitic, but others disagree. The result is a large corpus of research that exists on the relationship between Mussolini and the Jewish people of Italy, with a dichotomy forming between researchers championing 'appeasement' or 'genocide'. This chapter describes the evidence and the views formed by the two camps.

### The appeasement group

Many consider Italy a haven for Jewish people from the time of the Italian State's formation to 1943. Roth wrote <sup>100</sup> that 'after 1870 there was no country in either hemisphere where Jewish conditions were or could be better'<sup>101</sup> than in Italy. Roth argued that Italy had no legal differences between non-Jewish and Jewish citizens before 1938 – a statement backed by legislation enacted by consecutive liberal thinking governments.<sup>102</sup> Roth emphasised that Italian Jewish people were a part of the wider Italian community of the period. They identified themselves as both Jewish

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<sup>100</sup> Cecil Roth, *The history of the Jews of Italy*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1946.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 474-475.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

and Italian. Croce stated <sup>103</sup> that in Italy ‘there was no sign of that folly which goes by the name anti-Semitism’. <sup>104</sup>

Hilberg reinforced<sup>105</sup> Roth’s view stating that in Italy the relationship between Italian Jews and Italian Christians developed to a point where persecution of Italian Jewish if it were to occur was psychologically and administratively difficult.<sup>106</sup> This was because the Jews in the Italian peninsula had been absorbed entirely into Italian life and culture. From the elimination of the ghettos in Rome in 1870 until 1938, the integration of the Jews in Italy had been greater and more successful than almost any other country in the world.<sup>107</sup>

Bookbinder <sup>108</sup> stated that while the Nazi Regime from 1941 intensified its campaign against Jewish people in other parts of Europe, Italy, despite being an ally of Germany, was secure for Jewish refugees from other European nations and for Italian Jews.<sup>109</sup> This was possible only because most of the Italian population accepted and respected Jewish people. Bookbinder<sup>110</sup> made the significant comment that

The Holocaust is to a considerable extent a study in the potentialities of human evil and inhumanity. However, within all the horror; there were still sparks of good hope...Italy was one of these sparks which illuminated human good, compassion and tolerance...While the evil [of the Holocaust] cannot be forgotten,

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<sup>103</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Storia d’Italia dal 1871 al 1915*, Adelphi, Bari, 1991.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>105</sup> Hilberg, pp. 421- 432.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 421.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Zimmerman, p. 2.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*



its darkness all the more serves to contrast with the light of the Italian response.<sup>111</sup>

In his work, Bookbinder highlighted the positive attitude of Italians to Jewish people stating that Italians did not hesitate to take risks in order to help Italian and non-Italian Jewish people.<sup>112</sup>

In his approach to the topic, Renzo De Felice looked carefully at the mindset of the Italian leader Mussolini, concluding<sup>113</sup> that Mussolini wanted ‘discriminare ma non perseguitare’<sup>114</sup> (to discriminate, but not to persecute) Jewish citizens of Italy. De Felice supported the concept that Mussolini issued the Racial Laws to re-energise Fascism in Italy and to strengthen his alliance with Hitler.<sup>115</sup> De Felice considered that Mussolini did not personally harbour any real prejudice against Jewish people, but he believed that the adoption of anti-Semitic Laws in Italy resulted primarily from the growing importance of the Rome-Berlin Axis alliance to Italy.<sup>116</sup> De Felice affirmed that giving credibility to the Axis motivated Mussolini who saw it as a necessity to align Italian and Nazi German policies closely.<sup>117</sup> He also argued that Mussolini’s Racial Laws were alien to the Italian’s mentality and sensibilities;<sup>118</sup> and that Italian Christians embraced Italian Jewish people as their own. Therefore, De Felice reinforced the concept that Italian people overall were unfavourable of the anti-Semitic campaign and aims.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Zimmerman, p. 2.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, Einaudi, Torino, 1993.

<sup>114</sup> De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, p. VIII.

<sup>115</sup> De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, p. 239.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-29.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p.252.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

Kirkpatrick<sup>120</sup>, Gregor<sup>121</sup> and Michaelis<sup>122</sup> follow a similar argument to De Felice's interpretation that Mussolini's decision to ostracise the Jewish was due to his desire to cement the Axis alliance by eliminating any strident contrast in the policies of the two powers.<sup>123</sup> There is, however, variation in opinion. Michaelis, for example, maintained that Mussolini had many grievances against Jewish people but only one reason for persecuting them; namely, his alliance with Adolf Hitler who he referred to as the 'Jew-baiter'.<sup>124</sup> Mussolini needed to reinforce the alliance with Hitler, but at the same time, he did not want to provoke opposition amongst his fellow Italians who were for the most part not anti-Semitic.<sup>125</sup>

Michaelis wrote<sup>126</sup> that since 1919, Italy had made 'no distinction' between Jewish people and other religious and cultural groups in the Italian peninsula. Anti-Semitism was alien to Italians and he said, 'likely to remain so'.<sup>127</sup> It was Michaelis' opinion that the Jewish people who lived in Italy had no reason to move to Palestine at a time when other countries' Jewish populations were immigrating to the Middle East. For the Jews in Italy, their 'New Zion' was where they were located presently.<sup>128</sup> Michaelis supported his thesis by referring to the Duce's conversation in June 1932 with the Austrian Vice Chancellor Ernest Rudiger Starhemberg. Mussolini said to the Austrian that 'We too have our Jews. There are many in the Fascist Party, and they are good Fascists and good Italians. A country with a sound system of government has no Jewish problem'.<sup>129</sup> This statement, made six-years before the tabling of the Racial Laws and therefore possibly unencumbered with the necessary politics to

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<sup>120</sup> Ivone Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini: A Study in Power*, Hawthorn Books, Inc (NYC), 1964.

<sup>121</sup> A. James Gregor, *Mussolini's Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

<sup>122</sup> Michaelis.

<sup>123</sup> Zimmerman, pp.126-127.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> Zimmerman, p. 7.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Michaelis, p. 56.

appear supportive of another country's policies to Jewish people, is an important window to Mussolini's opinion and value of Jewish people in Italy.

Mussolini appears ambivalent regarding Jewish people even after the passing of the Racial Laws. Michaelis mentioned Mussolini's conversation with the Italian Foreigner Minister Ciano di Cortellazzo at the Grand Council meeting on 6 October 1938,<sup>130</sup> where he stated in the context of the Racial Laws that 'In Italy racialism and Anti-Semitism were being made to appear as politically important even though they are unimportant in their real substance'.<sup>131</sup> Morley's view is similar to Michaelis, stating<sup>132</sup> that Italy's tabling of the Racial Laws in November 1938 occurred 'even though there was no racial problem in the country at the time'.<sup>133</sup> Morley claims that 'Jews were well assimilated in Italian society and numbered only 57,000; about 0.1 percent of the total Italian population'.<sup>134</sup> Morley also compared Italy with other European countries. He argued that in other European nations under German influence where the Nuremberg Laws were enacted like Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and parts of France, many Jewish people were deported and subsequently murdered. In Italy, however, the Racial Laws never went beyond the stage of anti-Jewish legislation.<sup>135</sup> Jewish people were only deported – and then only from northern Italy – after the Germans occupied the area in 1943 after the Italians sued for peace from the Allies.<sup>136</sup>

Voigt, who wrote about Jewish refugees in Italy from 1933 to 1945, follows a similar view to Morley<sup>137</sup> about Jewish refugees from German occupied Europe. Voigt

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<sup>130</sup> Michaelis, p. 56.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>132</sup> F. John Morley, *Vatican Diplomacy and The Jews During the Holocaust 1939-1943*, KTAV Publishing House INC, New York, 1980, p. 166.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Klaus Voigt, *Il Rifugio Precario, Gli Esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945, Volume II*, La Nuova Italia Editrice, Firenze, 1996.

reinforced the topic that the country continued to tolerate Jewish refugees from German occupied Europe inside its territory even after Italy entered the war in June 1940.<sup>138</sup> In Italy, the number of Jewish refugees doubled between 1940 and 1943, reaching eventually about 10,000 people.<sup>139</sup> He said that until September 1943, when the German occupation of northern Italy took place, that the Italian Fascist government spared the deportation of Jewish refugees and Italian Jewish people. The government's non-deportation stance applied to Italy but also to the areas under Italian jurisdiction like coastal areas of Yugoslavia and parts of southern France.<sup>140</sup> Voigt and Morley are just two of many who consider that the Italian Fascist government had an anti-deportation stance when it came to Jewish people. Carpi stated<sup>141</sup> that 'there is widespread agreement among scholars, writers and thinkers that Italy was a country (or even 'the only country') where 'anti-Semitism did not strike roots'<sup>142</sup> before and during the Fascist regime.<sup>143</sup> The Racial Laws were 'fundamentally foreign to the social and cultural fabric of Italy...this also explains the lack of response by Italian diplomats and military personnel'<sup>144</sup> when told to arrest and deport Italian and foreign Jewish people living in Italy.<sup>145</sup> Carpi points out that Italian authorities were aware of the Nazi's aim of exterminating Jewish people in Europe, 'express[ing] their deep revulsion and their unwillingness to be partners to this despicable crime'.<sup>146</sup> He considered that Italy and the attitude of the Fascist government was a ray of light for many Jewish people in the south of France, Yugoslavia and Greece.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Voigt, p. IX.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. X.

<sup>141</sup> Daniel Carpi, *Between Mussolini and Hitler, The Jews and the Italian Authorities in France and Tunisia*, University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1994, p. 241.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. p. 249.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

Reale compared and contrasted<sup>148</sup> racism in the ultra-right governments of 1930s Europe. He found that racism in Fascist Italy was not characterised by annihilation of those affected by racism, but that extermination was a characteristic of German Nazism. He also noted that the Italian Racial Laws of 1938 and the German Nuremberg Laws of 1935 had similar wording but were not the same.<sup>149</sup> Reale argued that the Italian Racial Laws had ethnic discrimination grounded on political and cultural characteristics, while the German Nuremberg Laws had the Aryan race myth as the main component. The Nuremberg Laws protected the supposed purity of the German race at any cost,<sup>150</sup> while Mussolini's Racial Laws aimed at avoiding ethno-cultural contamination not only with the largest minority group in Italy but also in Libya and the Dodecanese Islands.<sup>151</sup> In addition, the Nuremberg Laws were worded to assist Germans avoiding contamination with their largest alien group, not only from an ethno-cultural viewpoint, but also and most importantly from a biological interpretation.<sup>152</sup> Reale stated:

In this way it becomes possible to achieve an understanding of why German Nazism evolved into the concept and the reality of extermination camps in order to find a solution to genetic contamination of German blood, while in Italy, between 1940 and 1943, Fascist concentration camps were created with the goal of isolating and removing all civilian rights from their largest minority group, the Jews.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Reale, p. 50.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Reale, p. 50.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

Walston supported <sup>154</sup> Reale's opinion with his research on the Italian internment camps established in 1940 for the Jewish, calling them 'a scopo protettivo' (for the purpose of protection). For the most part, the Jewish internees were protected inside the camps, avoiding possible deportation to Nazi concentration camps. Unfortunately, for those in camps in northern Italy, this arrangement remained until German occupation on 8 September 1943 after which many were transported to concentration camps in Germany and Poland. <sup>155</sup>

In the internment camps, the Italian government detained Jewish people who were citizens of countries allied or enemies of Italy like Germans and Polish, or Jewish people who had taken Italian citizenship within the previous twenty years. <sup>156</sup> Walston outlined the fact that these Jewish people were not exposed to the same conditions as those in Nazi concentration camps. He described accounts of Jewish people who stayed in Italian internment camps, <sup>157</sup> stating that they maintained good relationships with the Italian army near the camp and how they were like an oasis compared to German camps. <sup>158</sup> The Italian camps were not for extermination; the camps saved Italian and non-Italian Jewish people from deportation and possible death like what occurred in German concentration camps. Italian Jews survivors of the Holocaust who experienced conditions in Italian internment camps and German concentration camps mainly remember the Italian internment camps as peaceful and secure places where they, as internees, experienced the same heat, cold and distress as the local free Italian population who resided nearby. <sup>159</sup> Walter Wolff and his brother Bruno experienced conditions in German and Italian camps. They arrived in Italy in June 1940 having escaped from the German Dachau concentration camp in upper Bavaria. They wanted to continue their exodus to Shanghai in China, but when

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<sup>154</sup> James Walston, 'History and Memory of the Italian Concentration camps, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 40(1), March 1997, pp. 169-183. [Accessed from JSTOR database, September 2013].

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>156</sup> Walston, p. 171.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

they arrived in Genoa, the Fascist militia arrested them, sending Walter Wolff to Campagna camp and Bruno Wolff to Ferramonti di Tarsia internment camp.<sup>160</sup> Walter Wolff (Figure 4) described his life in the camp, stating that Italian internment camps were hotels compared to German concentration camps. In addition, Walter Wolff confirmed that because of the Fascist government directive that tried to keep Jewish refugee families interned together, he spent only one year in Campagna after he was interned before moving to Ferramonti di Tarsia internment camp where he was reunited with his brother Bruno.<sup>161</sup> During his stay at Campagna and Ferramonti, Walter Wolff expressed an almost unshakeable belief in the internees' conviction of the fundamental goodness of Italians.

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<sup>160</sup> Elizabeth Bettina, *It Happened in Italy, Unfold Stories of how the people of Italy Defied the Horrors of the Holocaust*, Thomas Nelson Inc., Nashville, 2009, pp. 30-38.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 4 A group of internees playing stringed instruments in the Campagna internment camp. Walter Wolff is standing second from the right <sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> A group of internees playing stringed instruments in the Campagna internment camp. Walter Wolff is standing second from the right, photo, [http://idamclient.ushmm.org/PUBLICIMAGES/IDAM\\_USHMM/Image.aspx?qfactor=2&width=800&height=800&crop=0&size=1&type=asset&id=1141522](http://idamclient.ushmm.org/PUBLICIMAGES/IDAM_USHMM/Image.aspx?qfactor=2&width=800&height=800&crop=0&size=1&type=asset&id=1141522) [02 September 2015].



## **The genocide group**

Up to this point in this chapter, the literature analysed suggests that Mussolini's Racial Laws were a front to appease the Nazi German regime after the forming of an alliance between Italy and Germany. However, opposing opinions exist suggesting that the Italian government's treatment of Jewish people was no different to that of Nazi Germany. Contrasting the views of the 'appeasement' group outlined above, Sarfatti stated<sup>163</sup> that 'Mussolini supported the biological basis of anti-Semitism'.<sup>164</sup> Further, he argued that 'for five years, from 1938 to 1943, Jews in Italy were subject to harsh, complex and ever more perilous persecution'.<sup>165</sup> It was Sarfatti's belief that Mussolini issued the Racial Laws deliberately to persecute Jewish people and not just to intern or protect them.<sup>166</sup> Sarfatti also considered that Mussolini made a definitive decision to eliminate Jewish people from Italy<sup>167</sup> and 'as a way to achieving this final aim of creating an Italy without Jews, Fascism harassed the Jewish with a myriad of prohibitions covering all aspects of personal life'.<sup>168</sup>

Italian researchers of the Holocaust in Italy, particularly Zuccotti and Picciotto, supported Sarfatti's propositions and argued that the Fascist government betrayed its Jewish citizens and the Jewish refugees in Italy before German occupation in 1943.<sup>169</sup> Zuccotti contended<sup>170</sup> that focus in the existing literature on episodes of heroism in Italy during the Second World War had diverted attention away from negative aspects of Italian-Jewish relations.<sup>171</sup> Furthermore, Picciotto – who

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<sup>163</sup> Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: from equality to persecution*, The University of Wisconsin press, 2006, pp. 133-161.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>168</sup> Zimmerman, p. 77.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>170</sup> Susanna Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, Peter Halban, London, 1987.

<sup>171</sup> Zimmerman, p. 8.

researched <sup>172</sup> the deportation of Italian Jewish people to the German concentration camps after 1943 when the Germans occupied northern Italy <sup>173</sup> - claimed <sup>174</sup> that the persecution of Jewish people started with the tabling of the Racial Laws in 1938 and that conditions only worsened in 1943. Picciotto suggested that the census of Italian Jewish people on 22 August 1938<sup>175</sup> - done under the guise of improving the government's knowledge of the identities and characteristics of Jewish Italians – was evidence for Jewish discrimination before the issuing of the Racial Laws.<sup>176</sup>

The 1938 census that Picciotto discussed was deleterious for the future and survival of Jewish people in Italy.<sup>177</sup> The census in the long-term had lethal consequences for Jewish people after 1943 with Nazi occupation of northern Italy. The census data allowed the Germans to locate and deport Jewish people from Italy to German concentration camps.<sup>178</sup> Picciotto, consequently, stated that from 1943 the Italian authorities in collaboration with the Nazis initiated similar actions against Jewish people that were as cruel as those applied by German Nazis to Jewish people in Germany and other European countries they occupied.<sup>179</sup>

Picciotto and Collotti stated <sup>180</sup> that the 1938 census of Italian Jewish people was a political act and not an administrative measure. They purport that the racist actions of Fascist Italy against the Jewish were endemic and that Hitler did not push Mussolini to launch an anti-Jewish crusade.<sup>181</sup> This opinion was based on Italian Foreign

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<sup>172</sup> Liliana Picciotto, *Il libro della memoria: gli ebrei deportati dall'Italia (1943-1945)*, Mursia, Milano, 1991.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>174</sup> Liliana Picciotto, *L'alba ci colse come un tradimento: gli ebrei nel campo di Fossoli 1943-1944*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano, 2010.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 854.

<sup>176</sup> Picciotto, *Il Libro della Memoria, Gli Ebrei deportati dall'Italia (1943-1945)*.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.16-27.

<sup>180</sup> Enzo Collotti, *Il Fascismo e gli ebrei, Le Leggi Razziali in Italia*, Editori Laterza, 2003, p. 58.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

Minister Ciano di Cortellazzo's<sup>182</sup> diary entry of 12 November 1938, saying that Mussolini gave his approval regarding the Pogroms (Kristallnacht or Night of Crystal), when Nazis attacked Jewish people and destroyed their property in Germany and Austria.<sup>183</sup> The Duce stated that 'If I would be in the same situation as the Germans I would act in the same way or worse'.<sup>184</sup> Di Cortellazzo's diary entry suggests that Mussolini and the Fascist regime understood and agreed with Hitler's and the Nazi's campaign against the Jewish people in Europe.<sup>185</sup>

Momigliano is another who considered that the Italian government was involved in the genocide of Jewish people. His more philosophical view claimed<sup>186</sup> that a statement had to be made about the period where Fascists and Nazis were allied and collaborated in sending millions of Jewish people to concentration camps.<sup>187</sup> The Jewish genocide would never have occurred if Italians, French and Germans did not become, over the centuries, indifferent and apathetic to the destiny of their fellow citizens of the Jewish faith.<sup>188</sup>

Stille is another in the 'genocide' camp. He agreed in support of and reinforced<sup>189</sup> Sarfatti's opinion about how 'the Italian Racial Laws...were applied with considerable severity and had devastating effects on Italian Jewry'.<sup>190</sup> He points out, as Sarfatti did also, that the Racial Laws in several aspects were the same as the Nuremberg Laws.<sup>191</sup> The expulsion of Jewish adults from businesses and professions and children from Italian schools made many outcasts in their own country, forcing

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<sup>182</sup> Foreigner Minister of Fascist Italy (1936-1943).

<sup>183</sup> Collotti, p. 79.

<sup>184</sup> Galeazzo Ciano, *Ciano's Diary 1937-1943*, Phoenix Press, London, 2002, pp. 155-156.

<sup>185</sup> Collotti, p. 79.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Zimmerman, p. 20.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

many to seek refuge in other countries.<sup>192</sup> Stille stated that ‘Although it is not comparable to genocide, it is hardly a chapter of which Italy can be proud’.<sup>193</sup>

Stille maintained that lists containing information about Italians of Jewish ancestry compiled by the Italian government in 1938 would not have occurred if the Racial Laws had not existed. The lists contained information on Italian Jewish communities, while the compulsory annotation of ‘Razza Ebraica’ (Jewish Race) on identity cards of Italian Jewish people<sup>194</sup> made it easy for the Germans after their occupation of northern Italy in 1943 to identify those who were Jewish.<sup>195</sup> In addition, Toscano wrote regarding the Italian Jews identity under the Mussolini regime:

Jews became the negative model par excellence in the creation of the new Fascist Italian. Jewish identity stripped of its rich variety; was reduced by law to the least common denominator of biological affiliation. The Fascist regime thus undertook the eradication of the rich and variegated identity that had been created by Italian Jews over the course of the centuries-long process of original acculturation.<sup>196</sup>

Villari supported Toscano’s view, arguing<sup>197</sup> that ‘Mussolini’s regime brutalized Italy’s Jews’.<sup>198</sup> He underplayed Hitler’s authority on what happened in Italy and its colonies. Villari claimed that while the existence of a Jewish problem demanding a solution was admitted, the measures enacted by the Italian government did not help<sup>199</sup> and actually aggravated the situation for the Jews in Italy.<sup>200</sup> Villari argued

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<sup>192</sup> Zimmerman, p. 20.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>197</sup> Charles T. O’Reilly, *The Jews of Italy, 1938-1945, An Analysis of Revisionist Histories*, McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, Jefferson, North Carolina & London, 2007.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

that the Racial Laws in 1938 revealed Mussolini's aversion for Zionism and International Jewry.<sup>201</sup>

Bernardini and Ledeen supported Villari's argument. Bernardini wrote in 'Il popolo d'Italia'<sup>202</sup> (the people of Italy) that Mussolini was 'a ruthless pragmatist in matters political and a charismatic master showman like Hitler'.<sup>203</sup> The Duce, however, was 'too practical to turn cynically against the Jews until he joined Hitler's vision of Europe as the junior partner in the Patto D'Acciaio (Pact of Steel)'.<sup>204</sup> Notwithstanding, Villari thought that the effort of De Felice and others (whose views are mentioned above) to be more 'objective' about Mussolini's legacy were pointless. There was no way to revise the fact that il Duce was responsible for the actions taken towards Jewish people in Italy and for a war that cost the lives of at least 330,000 Italian men and women.<sup>205</sup>

Villari stated that Mussolini destroyed Italy and that his Fascist policies and decisions resulted in the death of many Italian citizens including fellow Jewish Italians who were sent to death camps.<sup>206</sup> The Italian Jewish community of 45,000 lost 45 percent of its members due to emigration before the war and mass murder during the war.<sup>207</sup>

Paolo D'Ancona in 'Ricordi di Famiglia'<sup>208</sup> (Families Memories) wrote about his personal experiences of the loss of his Italian citizenship as a result of the 1938 Racial Laws. He recounts that 'suddenly all my pursuits as a citizen and as a scholar

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<sup>200</sup> O'Reilly, p. 10.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

had been broken off'.<sup>209</sup> It was D'Ancona's opinion that Mussolini wanted anti-Semitic fascism, while Annalisa Capristo<sup>210</sup> examined the loss of Jewish Italian citizenship and identity resulting from fascist policies. She argued that anti-Semitism in Italian culture was dictatorial with a prime objective of removing Jewish Italian citizens from the Italian intellectual scene.<sup>211</sup> Furthermore, Vittorio Foa wrote on the same topic stating that 'Indifference was the most evident fact', and that there was no noticeable protest by intellectuals.<sup>212</sup>

The various opinions of the 'genocide' group are galvanised by the concept that Italian citizens of the Jewish faith were treated as enemies in their own country and that they suffered for eight years from 1938 to 1945 as a consequence of the Fascists Racial Laws.<sup>213</sup> The members of the genocide group and others argue that the persecution of Jewish people began in 1938 in Italy, but they do stress and acknowledge the difference in the more blatant anti-Jewish incidents after Germany occupied northern Italy between September 1943 and May 1945. It is important to consider the propositions of their views in relation to the polarity of opinion of other scholars who consider that Mussolini protected Italian and foreign Jewish between 1938 and 1943.

Each of the sources mentioned above – whether from the 'appeasement' or 'genocide' schools – devote considerable space to discussing Delasem as an organisation involved with Jewish people in Italy before and during the Second World War. They write about Delasem, but they do not use a wide range of primary sources from the organisation to frame their opinion in their studies. De Felice<sup>214</sup>,

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<sup>209</sup> Zimmerman, p. 75.

<sup>210</sup> Annalisa Capristo, *L'espulsione degli ebrei dall'accademia Italiana*, Silvio Zamorani Editore, Torino, 2002.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Zimmerman, p. 86.

<sup>213</sup> Picciotto, *L'alba ci colse come un tradimento: gli ebrei nel campo di Fossoli 1943-1944*, p.16.

<sup>214</sup> De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, pp. 417-433.

Sarfatti<sup>215</sup>, Zuccotti<sup>216</sup>, Reale<sup>217</sup> and Herzer<sup>218</sup> highlight that Delasem was permitted to operate and that the Fascist government supported the organisation. They also recognise that Delasem provided help and protection to thousands of Jewish people between 1939 and 1945.<sup>219</sup> However, many of their arguments were based on secondary sources that did not engage in extensive exploration of the organisation and its role. This imperfection is this research's platform – the analysis of primary sources associated with Delasem's operation between 1939 and 1945, with a particular emphasis on the period before German occupation of northern Italy in 1943.

An intensely researched and more comprehensive study of how Delasem operated unobstructed in spite of the Racial Laws under the Fascist regime between 1938 and 1943 is important for Italian and World history. In addition, the organisation operated while Italy was allied with a regime born with anti-Jewish fervour. The aim in this research is to fill current gaps in the knowledge of Delasem's involvement in the lives of Jewish people in Italy under the Fascist regime. From the literature reviewed in this chapter, it is apparent that Delasem's aid activities were of great significance but are under researched. Analysing Delasem's documents should achieve a fuller and clearer understanding of the experiences of Italian Jewish refugees in Italy between 1938 and 1943, the lives of Italian Jewish people during the same period and, importantly, add to the debate regarding Fascist attitudes to people of the Jewish faith between 1938 and 1943. The primary documents from Delasem's archives in Rome will be the vehicle for this research (Figure 5), and an analysis of them occurs in the next chapter.

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<sup>215</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: from equality to persecution*, pp. 261-269.

<sup>216</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, pp. 65-67.

<sup>217</sup> Reale, pp. 147-150.

<sup>218</sup> Herzer, pp. 154-158.

<sup>219</sup> De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, p. 427.



Figure 5 The Historical Archives of the Jewish Community of Rome (ASCER; centre of photograph)  
Rome 2012 <sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> ASCER (Historical Archives of the Jewish Community of Rome), Rome, July 2012, Authors Collection.



## Chapter 2

### **‘Delegazione Assistenza Emigrati Ebrei’**

This chapter analyses Delasem’s (Italian Aid Commission for Jewish Refugees) work from 1939 to its liquidation in 1948. It describes the formation and operation of the organisation whose primary purpose was to assist foreign and Italian Jewish people in Italy and its territories. To provide an accurate and detailed account, this chapter uses mostly primary sources retained by the Historical Archives of the Jewish Community of Rome (ASCER). The material comprises internal correspondence between various Delasem offices; external communiqués between Delasem and a myriad of companies and organisations in Italy and outside the country; minutes of meetings, internal memorandums, informal notes and photographs. Many of the organisation’s files were destroyed when the Germans occupied Italy in 1943, but much was saved.

The chapter is divided into four sections. Demarcating the chapter will assist with the chronology of events in Italy, and importantly, make clearer the changing roles of Delasem between 1939 and 1948 when the organisation closed. It is apparent that the lives of Jewish people and the role of Delasem changed greatly between 1939 and 1948.

After 17 November 1938, the lives of Jewish people in Italy changed.<sup>221</sup> On this date, Mussolini issued the ‘Leggi Razziali’ (Racial Laws) which altered the Fascist government’s social and political attitude to Jewish people.<sup>222</sup> The Leggi Razziali aimed to limit the rights of Italian Jewish people and to isolate them from social,

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<sup>221</sup> De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, p. 368.

<sup>222</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, p. 36.

public and political life. The Racial Laws defined Jewishness and excluded Jewish people from the civil service, the armed forces and the Fascist Party.<sup>223</sup> There were restrictions on Jewish people owning certain industries, and rural, urban, and farming property. Marriages between people of the Jewish faith and other religions were prohibited.<sup>224</sup> In 1938 when the Racial Laws were introduced, there were 57,000 Jewish people in Italy representing about 0.1 percent of the total Italian population.<sup>225</sup> Of these, 10,000 were Jewish people from outside of Italy.<sup>226</sup> Since 1911<sup>227</sup>, Jewish people from other European countries had entered Italy with tourist, business, health, and in-transit visas.<sup>228</sup> However, from 1933, there was an increase in the number of foreign Jewish people entering Italy and its territories with many coming from Germany. Later in the mid and late 1930s, most refugees came from countries occupied and annexed by Nazi Germany.<sup>229</sup>

The Racial Laws when tabled in 1938 had regulations that were applicable to foreign Jewish people. One was that non-Italian Jewish people had to leave Italy and its territories by 22 March 1939. However, by this date, of the 10,000 foreign Jewish people in the country in 1938 only 3720 had left Italy and its territories.<sup>230</sup> In addition, and completely contrary to the Racial Laws' regulations that forbade Jewish people entering Italy, between November 1938 and March 1939, 2486 extra foreign Jewish refugees with different visas had entered Italy and its territories.<sup>231</sup> To stop this influx of Jewish refugees into Italy from other parts of Europe, on 19 August 1939 the Italian government officially forbade the entry into Italy of Jewish people coming from Poland, Hungary, Romania and Germany.<sup>232</sup> However, despite

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<sup>223</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: from equality to persecution*, pp. 125-129.

<sup>224</sup> Morley, p. 167.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, p. 368.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., p. 369.

<sup>231</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: from equality to persecution*, p. 369.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

this regulation, non-Italian Jewish people still continued to flood into Italy and its territories from areas occupied by or threatened with occupation by the Nazis.<sup>233</sup>

### **Delasem's operations between December 1939 and June 1940**

In an environment of insecurity, on 1 December 1939, the Rome based Union of Italian Jewish communities or UCII (Unione Comunita' Israelitiche Italiane)<sup>234</sup> founded Delasem<sup>235</sup> in Genoa.<sup>236</sup> Vice-chief of Italian Police Dante Almansi – who had retained his State based position despite the Racial Laws forbidding it – was the organisation's first and, as it transpired, only president (Figure 6). Genoese lawyer Lelio Vittorio Valobra – who was the vice-president of UCII – was the organisation's vice-president (Figure 7), while Arturo Leoni was elected responsible for the treasurer's office. Enrico Luzzato was nominated Delasem's secretary.<sup>237</sup>



Figure 6 Dante Almansi, President of Delasem Genoa, 1939.<sup>238</sup>

In 1930, the Jewish people in Italy formed the 'Unione delle Cumunita' Israelitiche Italiane' (Union of the Italian Jewish communities) that provided communication links

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<sup>233</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, p. 41.

<sup>234</sup> Reale, p. 147.

<sup>235</sup> Lelio Vittorio Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome's Jewish Community, ASCER Rome, 03 January 1940, pp. 1-2.

<sup>236</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, p. 64-67.

<sup>237</sup> Voigt, p. 336.

<sup>238</sup> Dante Almansi, President of Delasem Genoa, 1939, [https://encrypted-tbn2.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQaUNCLEcaajKy7VVmum-DSg92\\_VyixKwofFQKWiwSVwJsl-KMy](https://encrypted-tbn2.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQaUNCLEcaajKy7VVmum-DSg92_VyixKwofFQKWiwSVwJsl-KMy) [22 August 2015].

between members of the Italian Jews' population. In Italy in 1938, there were 23 Jewish communities, with each community having its own president. The communities were autonomous in their administrative competencies.<sup>239</sup>

Each Jewish community had a Rabbi who taught the Torah, performed marriages, and was responsible for the community's religious well-being. Furthermore, each Jewish community in Italy had its own administrative and social structure, providing



religious, cultural and educational services to Italian Jewish people of the region. Additionally, all Italian citizens considered Jewish by Jewish law automatically belonged to one of the Italian Jewish communities (Figure 8).

Figure 7 Lelio Vittorio Valobra, Vice-President of Delasem Genoa, 1939<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome's Jewish Community, pp. 1-2.

<sup>240</sup> Lelio Vittorio Valobra, Vice-President Delasem Genoa, 1939, <http://www.fondazionevillaemma.org/wp-content/uploads/collage.jpg>, [12 September 2015].

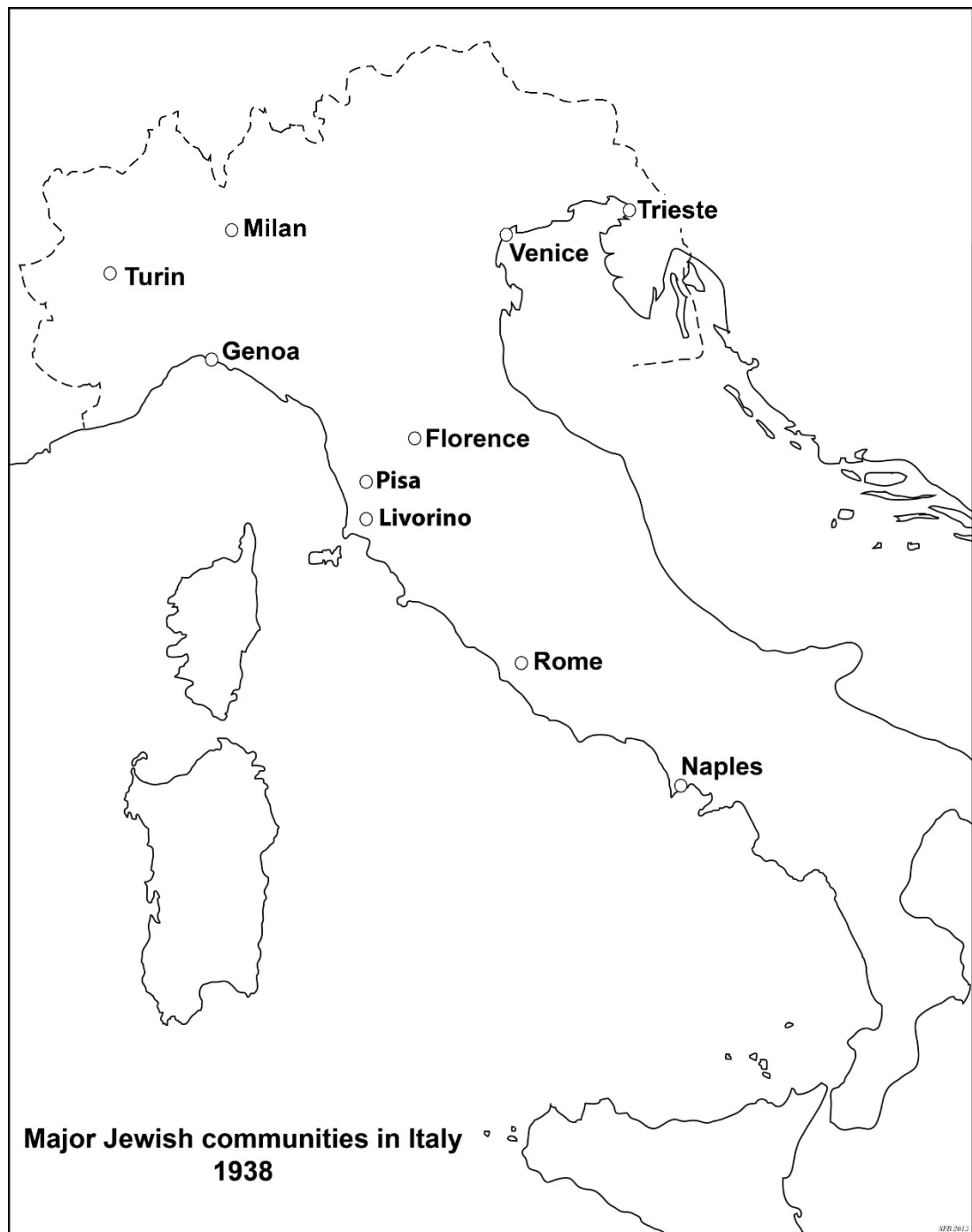


Figure 8 The location of Jewish communities in 1938<sup>241</sup>

<sup>241</sup> Major Jewish communities in Italy in 1938, map adapted from Michele Sarfatti, *Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi*, Einaudi, Torino, 2002, p. 56.

Until Mussolini displayed anti-Semitic views with the promulgation of the Racial Laws in 1938, Italians of the Jewish and Christian faiths lived peacefully in the Italian peninsula. If there was such a thing as anti-Semitism in Italy, it was confined to a few extremist people.<sup>242</sup> However, after 1935 with the declaration of the Nuremberg Laws by Nazi Germany that established the anti-Semitism of the Nazis government, Jewish refugees from parts of Europe under the Nazi regime began arriving in Italy.<sup>243</sup> The Italian Jewish community in general become worried, for the refugees brought reports regarding the Nazi's attitude to Jewish people. Nazi maltreatment of Jewish people also came to the Italian Jews' population from other sources, such as from Vatican diplomats and the International Red Cross. Nevertheless, the Italian Jewish communities strongly believed that Mussolini would not allow what was happening in Nazi occupied Europe to occur in Italy.<sup>244</sup>

In 1939, the Italian government and the Italian Jewish community for different reasons grew increasingly concerned regarding the many European Jewish refugees who continued to flow into Italy from Nazi held countries. For the Italian government, concern revolved around providing the necessary support for these people, but there was also the potential strain it could place on Italy's infrastructure. For the Italian Jewish community, concern was twofold. First was the desire to assist individuals of their faith in a time of need, but secondly there was the worry that the issues faced by the refugees arriving in Italy could reflect the plight of Jewish people in Italy in the near future.

The refugees in Italy needed support, and the Italian Jewish community aimed to provide assistance for the Jewish people. However, the Italian Jewish community knew that they would be required to work with and be supported by the Fascist

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<sup>242</sup> Ray Mosely, *Mussolini: the last 600 days of Il Duce*, Taylor Trade Publishing, Lanham USA, 2004, PP. 42-45.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

government for aid work to be successful.<sup>245</sup> Given the economic and political climate, the Italian Jewish community was pessimistic about support from the government, but on the 29 October 1939, they wrote to the Fascist government outlining their wish to assist and organise aid support for European Jewish refugees arriving in Italy and its territories.<sup>246</sup> There was, however, a ray of optimism in the request, for the letter included not only details about establishing a support organisation but also the potential financial benefits the Fascist government would receive if they supported the proposal. The Jewish community stated to the Italian government that if they supported the proposal, they could obtain foreign financial help to fund the scheme from international Jewish associations such as HIAS-ICA Emigration Association (HICEM) and the American Joint Distribution Committee (Joint) based in New York. Joint had its main European office in Lisbon, while HICEM had its main European office in Paris. It was to HICEM's office in Paris that Delasem sent all details related to Jewish refugees in Italy. The letter to the government also stated that these Jewish finance organisations had in the past supported Jewish people in need and that they were prepared to provide financial support to Jewish refugees arriving in Italy from other parts of Europe. Significant in the context of the Italian government possible granting of permission to establish a Jewish support organisation was the comment that establishing a support programme would mean that large sums of foreign currency from overseas funding agencies would reach Italian banks.<sup>247</sup> The Italian government most likely viewed this point favourably, with Italy at this time in financial stress and needing extra funds.

As a result of the communiqué, the Italian government agreed with the proposal put forward by the Italian Jewish community leaders to allow the establishment of a Jewish aid organisation in Italy and the Italian territories.<sup>248</sup> For the government, the

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<sup>245</sup> Italian Jewish community, Letter to the Italian Fascist government, ASCER Rome, 29 October 1939, pp. 1-3.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

Italian Jewish community was helping solve an immigration crisis while simultaneously assisting the country's financial situation because of the favourable foreign exchange rate between the Lira and the American dollar.<sup>249</sup> For the Italian Jewish community, they had permission to establish a Jewish aid organisation with the blessing of the Fascist government.

On 15 December 1939, the president of the Union of Italian Jewish communities Dante Almansi wrote to the various Italian Jewish communities to acknowledge Giorgio Zevi as Delasem representative in their Rome office (Figure 9). Almansi stressed that his and Zevi's role as Delasem's major directors was to assist Jewish refugees in Italy and its territories.<sup>250</sup> He continued, adding that Delasem was now operating as the Jewish aid organisation for foreign and Italian Jewish people who had had their Italian citizenship withdrawn in 1938 when the Racial Laws became effective. The *Leggi Razziali* stated in the 'Provvedimenti nei confronti degli ebrei stranieri Art. 3 (Action against the Foreigner Jews Art. 3) that the concession of Italian nationality, given to foreign Jewish people before 1 January 1919, was effectively revoked.<sup>251</sup> Almansi requested each of the Italian Jewish communities to report to Delasem the number and condition of Jewish refugees in their jurisdictions.

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<sup>249</sup> Italian Jewish Community, Letter to the Italian Fascist government, 29 October 1939, pp. 1-3.

<sup>250</sup> Dante Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Jewish communities, ASCER Rome, 12 December 1939, p. 1.

<sup>251</sup> Sarfatti, *Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi*, p. 74.



The December 1939 letter from Almansì to the various Italian Jewish communities started a string of on-going communiqués between representatives of Delasem and the 23 Italian communities. On 3 January 1940, Delasem's president Lelio Valobra wrote to all of the presidents of the Italian Jewish communities with a programme for assisting Italian and foreign Jewish people in Italy. There was no doubt that Valobra considered that helping Jewish people was to be a combined effort between his organisation and the Jewish communities. For the still fledgling Delasem to work efficiently, however, he needed information, asking from each Jewish community for a financial and statistical breakdown regarding activities carried out by the Jewish communities between 26 November and 25 December 1939 for foreign Jewish people in their district.<sup>252</sup>



Figure 9 Delasem's Office, Lungotevere Sanzio, Rome 2012.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome's Jewish Community, pp. 1-2.

<sup>253</sup> Delasem's Office, Lungotevere Sanzio, Rome 2012, Author Collection.

Valobra stressed to the community presidents that Delasem was enthusiastic to help foreign Jewish people in Italy and its territories. He stated that many Jewish communities, especially those of Milan, Trieste and Rome, were very interested in the programme because of the many foreign Jewish people in their jurisdiction needing support.<sup>254</sup> The document by Valobra aimed to highlight the urgency of prompt aid for foreign Jewish people by Delasem in full collaboration with Jewish communities spread through the Italian peninsula.<sup>255</sup> Delasem intended to make Jewish communities aware that the organisation understood the intentions of the Fascist government. The letter stated that the government was not in favour of sending Jewish refugees already in Italy and Italian territories back to their countries of origin.<sup>256</sup>

Valobra's letter to the presidents continued by outlining Delasem's two main purposes and in so doing providing the presidents of the communities with directives. First, it was essential to facilitate the emigration of foreign Jewish people from Italy and the Italian territories.<sup>257</sup> Secondly – and linked closely to the first directive – was the importance of providing Jewish people with the necessary assistance while they waited for emigration to occur.<sup>258</sup> Valobra stated that both directives were 'in perfetta armonia'<sup>259</sup> (in perfect harmony) and with the 'desiderio delle autorità'<sup>260</sup> (desire of the Italian authorities) to achieve a rapid migration of non-Italian Jewish people from Italy and its territories so that they would not be an encumbrance on Italian infrastructure. He also commented that Italian Jewish communities had to avoid returning foreign Jewish people to the European countries of their birth.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Lelio Vittorio Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents of Italian Jewish communities, ASCER Rome, 03 January 1940, pp. 1-6.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

For the programme to operate smoothly, Valobra explained that Delasem required a representative in each Jewish community to achieve the organisation's aims.<sup>262</sup> The representatives were to pass information from Delasem to Jewish refugees and to organise the communities to help non-Italian Jewish refugees morally and economically. Additionally, the representatives were to assist Jewish people in completing the necessary documents for emigration but to also make arrangements so that their temporary stay in Italy was as comfortable as possible.<sup>263</sup> All this was to occur while maintaining constant contact with Italian government authorities.

Other specific tasks for Delasem's representatives in the communities included the maintenance of relationships between Delasem and the Italian Jewish communities,<sup>264</sup> representing Delasem to the Italian authorities,<sup>265</sup> organising, gathering, and distributing funds to non-Italian Jewish people,<sup>266</sup> organising local assistance,<sup>267</sup> and providing Delasem with all the statistical data relating to non-Italian Jewish refugees in their jurisdiction.<sup>268</sup>

It was vital for Delasem to know the precise location – including residential addresses – and circumstances of Jewish refugees in Italy. The process of emigration for Jewish refugees from Italy occurred from the port of Genoa, the city where Delasem had its headquarters (Figure 10). Jewish refugees had to be notified and then moved from all over the country to Genoa for departure – a process difficult if the whereabouts of refugees was unclear.<sup>269</sup> To assist in the emigration process, Delasem established at Genoa railway station and at Genoa port a special service for Jewish people coming from Germany, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Between December 1939 and May 1940, Delasem on a monthly average helped with

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<sup>262</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents of Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-6.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, ASCER Rome, pp. 1-42.

the embarkation from Genoa of 200 Jewish refugees on ships of the Italia Società di Navigazione and Lloyd Triestino lines that sailed to non-European foreign countries. For the Jewish people on-board, it was a voyage to freedom.<sup>270</sup>

Valobra's letter to the presidents concluded by informing the Italian communities about the securing of financial assistance from two foreign organisations – Joint and HICEM.<sup>271</sup> Both finance organisations aimed to allocate and equally distribute<sup>272</sup> funds to assist non-Italian Jewish people in Italy. Valobra stated that it was vital that Jewish refugees in Italy centralise to allow Delasem to provide efficient financial and logistic assistance.<sup>273</sup> Valobra's letter highlights Delasem's foundations and the important roles the Italian Jewish communities and the Fascist government were to play during the organisation's entire operation.

On 6 May 1940, Giorgio Zevi, Rome's Delasem representative, wrote to Aldo Ascoli who was the president of Rome's Jewish community. In the letter, he stated that in Rome there were around 300 Jewish refugees.<sup>274</sup> Since 25 December 1939 and to 25 May 1940, Delasem had spent Lire 150,000 of which Lire 39,000 was provided by Delasem and the rest from the charity of Rome's Jewish community.<sup>275</sup> In the letter, Zevi reinforced the 'condizioni disastrose' (disastrous conditions) of Delasem's Rome office because of the lack of capital. Zevi further emphasised the importance of sending newsletters to Rome's nearby Jewish communities stressing to them the need for extra funds to help the non-Italian Jewish refugees in Rome and elsewhere.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, ASCER Rome, pp. 1-42.

<sup>271</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents of Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-6.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Giorgio Zevi, Delasem, Letter to President of Rome's Jewish Community, Aldo Ascoli, ASCER Rome, 7 June 1940, pp. 1-2.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

Despite the request from Delasem's representative, it was difficult for Italian Jewish people to find further funds. In addition, it was very difficult for Jewish communities to identify the exact number of Jewish people in their jurisdictions because of the transitory nature of Jewish refugees' movement in Italy. Ascoli stated that it was difficult providing a list of the Jewish people in his jurisdiction that had emigrated because many did not formally report their departure from Italy to the Jewish community.<sup>277</sup> Ascoli stated that between 1938 and 1940, about 187 Jewish people had left the country from the region in Rome, but he could not provide an exact number.<sup>278</sup>

Until Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940, Delasem focused on helping non-Italian Jewish refugees emigrate from Italy. The organisation worked with the Italian government, the Italian Jewish communities, and other countries like Spain and Palestine to provide a quick and safe exodus of Jewish refugees from Italy. However, a letter dated 22 March 1940 by Dante Almansi to the Italian Jewish communities suggested that Italy's possible entry into the Second World War was recognised as detrimental to Delasem's present mode of activities. In the letter, he requested presidents to 'sollecitare alcuni importanti elementi relativi all'espatrio dei nostri corregionali' (act quickly to an important issue relative to the expatriation of non-Italian Jews), suggesting that he was aware of upcoming events – but without stating precisely the event – that was to alter Delasem's abilities to assist non-Italian Jewish people leaving Italy.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Aldo Ascoli, Delasem, Letter to the Jewish Community of Rome, ASCER Rome, 10 May 1940, p.

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Dante Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents Italian Jewish communities, ASCER Rome, 22 March 1940, p. 1.

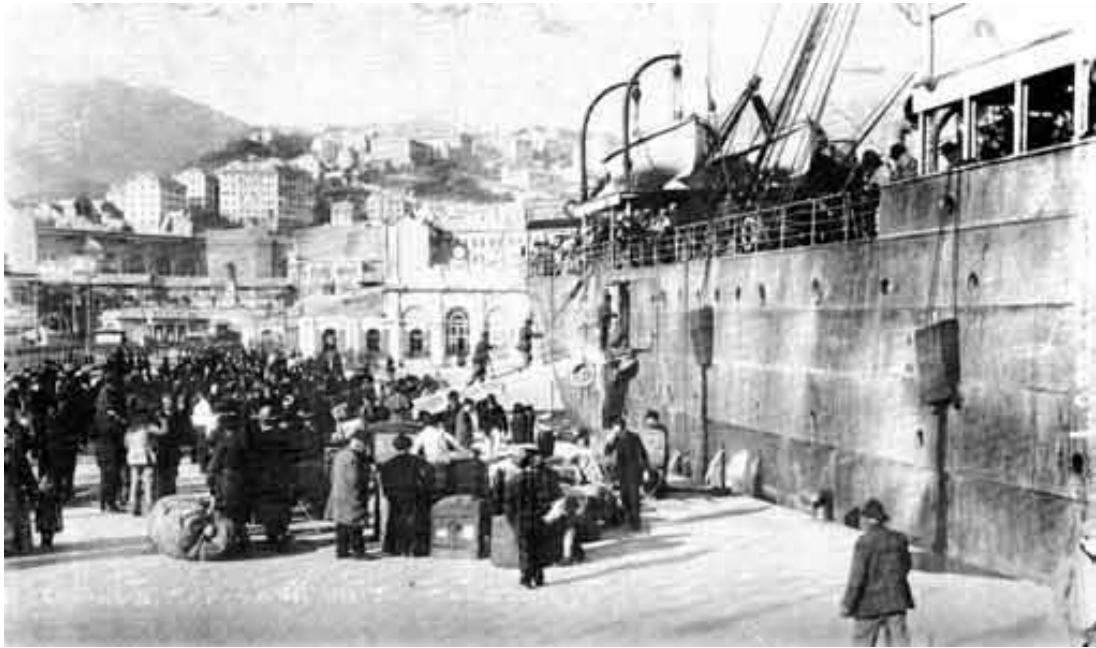


Figure 10 Genoa port, 1940<sup>280</sup>

### **Delasem's role between June 1940 and December 1941**

Dante Almansi's comment to the Italian Jewish communities that they should hasten their expatriation of non-Italian Jewish people from the country suggests that he was aware that Italy would soon be entering the Second World War. He was obviously also aware of the ramifications the decision would have on the organisation's activities. As it eventuated, on 10 June 1940 Italy entered the Second World War allied with Germany.<sup>281</sup> The next day, Almansi wrote to all Italian Jewish communities regarding the implications for Jewish refugees of Italy's entry into the war.<sup>282</sup> Almansi confirmed Delasem's sentiment to the Italian government, stating 'sentimenti di illuminata devozione degli israeliti italiani' (feelings of enlightened of Italian Jews), and that Delasem and Jewish Italians were ready, like in the past, to

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<sup>280</sup> Genoa Port, 1940,  
<http://www.roccadevandro.net/images/emigranti%20partono%20da%20Genova.jpeg> [10 September 2015].

<sup>281</sup> Sarfatti, *Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi*, p. 61.

<sup>282</sup> Dante Almansi, Delasem, Letter Italian Jewish communities, ASCER Rome, 11 June 1940, p. 1.

serve and honour the homeland.<sup>283</sup> He emphasised the point that all Italian Jewish people should work together with the Fascist government toward achieving the nation's objective in the war.<sup>284</sup> This was an action of commitment and a sign of Delasem's loyalty and devotion to the Fascist government, but the letter's tone is muted and contains hackneyed phrases. It is contradictory to Almansì's letter of March that encouraged Italian communities to move rapidly on removing non-Italian Jewish refugees from Italy.

Delasem was optimistic that Italian citizens of the Jewish faith would assist Italy in the war, similar to the support they provided during the First World War. However, within days of declaring war, the Fascist government took several steps against Italian and non-Italian Jewish people. On 14 June 1940, the Italian Minister of Internal Affairs sent a document to each of the prefects of the Italian provinces demanding that they arrest and intern Jewish people of foreign origin (including Italian Jews who had lost their Italian citizenship with the introduction of the *Leggi Razziali*).<sup>285</sup> The reasons given for the arrest warrants were that non-Italian Jewish people were enemies of the Italian government. It was this action by the government that Almansì was fearful of eventuating in his March 1940 letter to the Jewish communities. According to Delasem's data, at about this time there were 1340 Jewish refugees not interned in Italy who still received assistance from the organisation and who were now under threat of arrest. In Milan, there were 852 Jewish refugees, in Rome 173, and in Trieste 157.<sup>286</sup>

As a consequence of the government's decision to arrest Jewish people, internment camps to house both refugees and Italian Jewish people were established in Italy and

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<sup>283</sup> Dante Almansì, Delasem, Letter Italian Jewish communities, ASCER Rome, 11 June 1940, p. 1.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>285</sup> Michaelis, p. 291.

<sup>286</sup> Voigt, pp. 346-347.

Italian territories.<sup>287</sup> Jewish people interned in Italy were held in two ways – ‘Campi d’ Internamento’ (internment camps) or ‘Internamento Isolato’ (restricted internment) camps.<sup>288</sup> The ‘Confinati’ (the interned) of the internment camps had to remain inside the camp’s compound, while those in restricted internment camps had more freedom but were constrained to a town or village centre. Sometimes they were limited to a small location within that area.<sup>289</sup> There were about 2000 Jewish people interned in the Italian internment camps and 1000 held in the restricted internment category, while another 2000 non-Italian Jewish people were still not interned and instead living with Italian Jews’ families. The interned non-Italian Jewish people in both types of camps had financial help from the Italian government – despite the order for their arrest – and from Delasem, while the 2000 non-interned individuals had only Delasem’s help.<sup>290</sup>

The Fascist government continued to tell prefects to arrest foreign Jewish people and to gather as much data about them as possible. On 19 September 1940, the Italian government sent telegrams to all Uffici Prefettura (Prefectures Offices) in Italy stating that it was important for the government to know ‘con precisa entita’ numerica’<sup>291</sup> (precisely the number) of male and female foreign Jewish people in Italy and Italian territories. As non-Italian Jews, they had no right to stay in Italy,<sup>292</sup> and in another telegram to the Prefectures Offices, the Italian government stated that non-Italian Jews in Italy had to be arrested and interned in ‘appositi campi di concentramento’<sup>293</sup> (specific internment camps). Furthermore, all ‘beni mobili ed

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<sup>287</sup> Sarfatti, *Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi*, p. 61.

<sup>288</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem’s meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 9.

<sup>289</sup> Reale, p. 56.

<sup>290</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem’s meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 9.

<sup>291</sup> Italian Government, Telegram to the Prefectures Offices, ASR, Archivio di Stato di Roma, Prefettura, Rome, 19 September 1940, p. 1.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Italian Government, Telegram to the Prefectures Offices, ASR, Archivio di Stato di Roma, Prefettura, Rome, October 1940, p. 1.



immobili<sup>294</sup> (assets and real estates) of non-Italian Jewish people had to be ‘immediatamente confiscati’ (immediately confiscated) in the interests of Italy.<sup>295</sup>

For four months, the Italian government were openly hostile to the rights and privileges of foreign Jewish people in Italy. However, on 14 October 1940, the Minister of Internal Affairs sent another letter ‘riservata ed urgente’<sup>296</sup> (confidential and urgent) to Italy’s Prefectures Offices. The subject of the letter was about ‘gli Ebrei stranieri nel Regno’<sup>297</sup> (foreign Jews in the Italian Kingdom). The communiqué began by stating that the minister had heard that sometimes ‘vengono frapposti ostacoli’<sup>298</sup> (obstacles exist) that prevent the exodus of foreign Jewish people from Italy and its territories, but that ‘sia facilitato al massimo l’esodo’<sup>299</sup> (the maximum exodus) had been facilitated of non-Italian Jewish people from Italy. The minister stated that deportation particularly applied to interned foreign Jewish people. The letter is a complete reversal in attitude and policy to previous memos since June, and suggests that the Italian government had backed down about arresting non-Italian Jewish people as stated in the letter dated 14 June. The October letter instead affirmed that non-Italian Jewish people were permitted to leave Italy and its territories and that they were allowed to send information to foreign consulates, the Jewish delegation for emigration (Delasem), and to relatives or acquaintances with knowledge about their passports or documents that were essential for their departure from Italy and Italian territories.<sup>300</sup> The volte-face can only be speculated on, but will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>294</sup> Italian Government, Telegram to the Prefectures Offices, ASR, Archivio di Stato di Roma, Prefettura, Rome, October 1940, p. 1.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid

<sup>296</sup> Minister of Internal Affairs, Letter to Prefectures offices, ASR, Archivio di Stato di Roma, Prefettura, Rome, 14 October 1940, p. 1.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Minister of Internal Affairs, Telegram to Prefectures offices, ASR, Archivio di Stato di Roma, Prefettura, Rome, 16 October 1940, p. 1.

Despite the backflip, progressively more Jewish refugees were interned in Italian internment camps while the exodus from Italy that occurred mostly from Genoa port and other parts of the Italian peninsula continued under Delasem's directive. Furthermore, Delasem established a 'Servizio Ricerche' (Research Service) to assist Jewish refugees in finding relatives in Italy and overseas lost during their exodus from their European countries of origin or during their allotment to Italian internment camps.<sup>301</sup>

### **Italian internment camps**

Letters contained in Rome's Jewish archive suggest an on-going vagary of government policies regarding what to do with foreigners of Jewish faith in Italy. Furthermore, in January 1941, there was a stinging telegram from Buffarini – the Minister of Internal Affairs – to Italy's Prefects stating that clearly, many Italian Jewish people did not understand what was happening regarding the events affecting their country.<sup>302</sup> He stated that Italian Jewish people were 'costituzionalmente avversi'<sup>303</sup>(constitutionally hostile) to national sentiment. Therefore, he requested that anyone suspected of being against the Italian government by word or deed had to be sent to internment camps.<sup>304</sup> The letter was most likely a threat to Italian Jewish people that they were also under notice and not to cause trouble, but Buffarini's telegram also highlights the development of a key physical feature of the debate regarding the treatment of Jewish people in Italy between 1940 and 1943 – the internment camp.

There were 40 Italian internment camps until the German occupation of northern Italy in September 1943.<sup>305</sup> The civil authorities controlled them from June 1940,

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<sup>301</sup> Minister of Internal Affairs, Telegram to Prefectures offices, 16 October 1940, p. 1.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

and they were eventually for Italian and non-Italian Jewish people and Italians of any other faith or belief that was against the Mussolini Fascist regime.<sup>306</sup> The camps were often in renovated or converted structures like barns, castles, and town houses, former convents, prisons, schools and factories, but despite the diverse range of buildings used, all camps were in areas of Italy with a low local population.<sup>307</sup>



Figure 11 The location of internment camps in Italy and occupied territories.<sup>308</sup>

<sup>306</sup> Collotti, pp. 105-107.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> The location of internment camps in Italy and occupied territories, Map adapted from Sarfatti, *Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi*, p. 56.

Campagna internment camp was an example of a camp established by the Fascist government from buildings built for another purpose. The camp was in the Picentine Hills, 30 km east of the city of Salerno. The Fascist government used the already extant Dominican monastery of Saint Bartolommeo and the convent of the Observant of the Immaculate Conception. Both facilities had use as training facilities and accommodation for Italian officer candidates in the Italian army, but this function occurred for only one month in the year and the structures therefore were ideal for use for other purposes.

The Campagna camp operated as a Fascist internment camp from 15 June 1940 to September 1943.<sup>309</sup> The first internees were 430 Jewish refugee men from Germany, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Many of the interned were businessmen, doctors, artisans, office workers and intellectuals. The camp could hold 750 people. Campagna internment camp, like other Italian camps, received aid from Delasem for a number of different functions, such as establishing a library, a school, a theatre and a small synagogue. Moreover, after the library and the school were established, a camp bulletin was printed and distributed to keep the interned informed on camp news.<sup>310</sup>

To encourage socialising and to improve morale, those interned formed soccer teams that played other teams formed in the camps. In addition, Bogdan Zins, a famous Polish pianist who was interned at the Campagna camp, was seconded by the local Catholics to play the organ at the parish Mass on Sundays.<sup>311</sup>

Medical assistance for the internees at Campagna was under the surveillance of the local doctor Fiorentino Buccella and helped by many interned Jewish doctors.

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<sup>309</sup> Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *I Campi del Duce, l'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista (1940-1943)*, Einaudi, Torino, 2006, pp. 227-229.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Paul O'Shea, 'Campagna: the Camp, the Bishop and the Archives', December 2009, [http://archive.adl.org/interfaith/20091116\\_articlecampagnathebisho\\_and\\_the%20archives.pdf](http://archive.adl.org/interfaith/20091116_articlecampagnathebisho_and_the%20archives.pdf) [15 April 2015].

Furthermore, from September 1940, those interned managed the camp's canteen. The internees had permission to move around the town of Campagna daily for six hours. Local police, led by police commissioner Eugenio de Paoli and supported by 30 Carabinieri (police officers of a lower rank), maintained camp surveillance, but <sup>312</sup> the relationship between the internees in Campagna camp and the local population was good – sometimes too good, with black market dealings flourishing between internees and the people of Campagna (Figure 12).

Only a few internment camps were built specifically to house this mix of people of different cultures and languages but with a commonality of having a high proportion of Jewish people. Ferramonti di Tarsia's internment camp in the Calabria region of southern Italy was one such camp, and the largest<sup>313</sup> internment camp in Italy.<sup>314</sup> The camp was established in an area of 16 hectares. There were 92 dormitories built, each in a distinctive 'U' shape. Fireplaces heated the dormitories and each had a separate kitchen where the internees cooked and consumed their meals.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Capogreco, pp. 227-229.

<sup>313</sup> Francesco Folino, *Ferramonti, Il Campo, Gli Ebrei e Gli Antifascisti*, Edizioni La Scossa, Roggiano Gravina (CS), 2009, pp. 7-42.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.



Figure 12 Foreign Jewish and local police on the steps of San Bartolomeo internment camp, Campagna 1940<sup>316</sup>

Other buildings at the camp were erected for administration roles, while the camp's Fascist Commander-in-Chief lived with his family in a separate house.<sup>317</sup> There was a school, a theatre, and a library,<sup>318</sup> while a nursery looked after the many young children interned. And, of course, there was a synagogue. The camp had all the amenities of a typical European town, but the sinister was still present in the form of eight guard boxes located around a perimeter of barbed wire.<sup>319</sup>

Despite the incarceration of Jewish people in internment camps and the government's inconsistent view of foreign Jewish people in Italy, Delasem's work intensified after June 1940. Before Italy entered the war, Delasem had requested that non-Italian Jewish people – like, for instance, Ivan Bloch at Ferramonti di Tarsia

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<sup>316</sup> Foreign Jews and local police on the steps of San Bartolomeo Concentration Camp, Campagna 1940, photo, <http://www.italyandtheholocaust.org/siteimages/Photos/21-Main-976623492-01-jews-police-on-steps.jpg> [04 November 2015].

<sup>317</sup> Folino, pp. 7-42.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

internment camp, Hugo Wantoch at Campagna internment camp and Walter Reichmann at Isola Gran Sasso internment camp to name a few - <sup>320</sup> remain known to Italian Jews authorities and, as much as possible, to remain centralised to allow Delasem minimal communication disruption.

Despite arrests of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people as a result of Italy's entry into the Second World War, the government continued to support Delasem in their role of emigrating Jewish people from Italy.<sup>321</sup> However, Delasem still had to follow Italian government directives and it was in the refugees' interest that the Jewish communities provided financial assistance to increase the number of non-Italian Jewish people leaving Italy by aeroplane to Portugal or Greece before the later too was occupied by German forces.<sup>322</sup>

On 1 August 1940, Dante Almansi wrote to the Italian Jewish communities affirming that he had received a personal account of the experiences of a Jewish internee<sup>323</sup> who was lodged eventually at the Campagna internment camp.<sup>324</sup> The letter provides a rare, detailed description of the events that most non-Italian Jewish people experienced while refugees in Italy. The unnamed man of unknown nationality wrote that he and others left Genoa's Piazza Principe railway station on 12 July at 1.55 pm. When they stopped at Rome's railway station a Mr Kleimann, who was part of the group, phoned the local Jewish community office and Delasem but did not succeed in getting through to either.<sup>325</sup> They therefore continued their journey by train from Rome, and overnight, their carriage was placed in a siding that allowed the group to sleep soundly.<sup>326</sup> They arrived at Eboli next day at 3.40 pm. Their trip was pleasant

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<sup>320</sup> Settimo Sorani, Delasem, Letter to Jewish Community of Rome, ASCER Rome, 11 July 1940, p.

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Dante Almansi did not state the internee's name.

<sup>324</sup> Dante Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Jewish communities, ASCER Rome, 01 August 1940, pp. 1-3.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

and the Italian police that they came into contact with politely. They left the train and boarded a bus to Campagna, each paying Lire 2 for their luggage. The handling of the paperwork in Campagna police station occurred quickly and they were then taken to Saint Bartolommeo's convent that acted as the internment camp at Campagna. They paid between Lire 1 and Lire 3 to have their luggage carried between Campagna and the camp, the unnamed internee considering the price appropriate considering the steepness of the road to reach their final destination.<sup>327</sup>

According to Almansi, the writer of the letter described the surrounding landforms, the accommodation for the group at the camp, the food they ate, the weather, and the treatment they received from others. Each member of the group on arrival received an iron-framed bed, a new mattress, two sheets, a pillow and pillowcase, a warm woollen blanket and a rack where they could place their clothes. The internee reinforced that all those items were new – not second hand.<sup>328</sup> In addition, he stated that the group received a daily allowance of Lire 6.50 from the Italian government that was sufficient<sup>329</sup> considering that they could eat where they wanted and that local food was relatively cheap. Fruit was priced between Lire 0.80 and Lire 1, potatoes at Lire 0.60, bread Lire 1.95 and milk Lire 1.30.<sup>330</sup> The local population and the police in charge of the camp treated them kindly while the conduct of the other internees was very good. The climate and weather was healthy, and they had magnificent views from their accommodation.<sup>331</sup> There was a short roll call at 8 am, 12 pm and 8 pm, and they had a place to bathe and a room where they could pray in the morning and evening.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Dante Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Jewish communities, ASCER Rome, 01 August 1940, pp. 1-3.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.



Nina Weksler was another non-Italian refugee who wrote about her journey through Italy from Milan to Ferramonti di Tarsia internment camp on 13 February 1941.<sup>333</sup> Similar to the unnamed man's journey to Campagna, Weksler stated how the trip to Ferramonti di Tarsia was pleasant and how the authorities treated her and the eleven other Jewish internees with respect during their journey.<sup>334</sup> Weksler stated that Ferramonti was a place to inter people, but it was very different to the Nazi concentration camps, suggesting that she or someone she knew had experience with German concentration camps. She stated with some mirth that the internees at Ferramonti camp laughed and cried, that people married, and that they made items with the various trades' tools available. She called it a little town where people lived together and tried to lead normal lives far away from their homelands and the reality of war.<sup>335</sup>

These letters and the information they hold are significant for comprehending Delasem's role after June 1940. It was important for Delasem to keep the Italian Jewish communities informed of the foreign Jewish people's situation from their first arrival in a new land and their journey through Italy to the internment camps.

One must always critique sources such as the two letters described, especially the journey of the unnamed man travelling to Campagna because Delasem could have fabricated it to achieve their aim of distilling more funds from Italian Jewish communities. However, the fact that the description of another journey (Weksler's) exists that was not mentioned in documents held by Delasem suggests that the treatment of Jewish refugees was good in Italy despite the anti-Jewish rhetoric from Italian government ministers. The letters also suggest the appropriate use of funds and donations to improve the standard of living for the refugees inside the internment camps.

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<sup>333</sup> Nina Weksler, *Con la Gente di Ferramonti, Mille giorni di una giovane ebrea in un campo di concentramento*, Editoriale Progetto 2000, Cosenza, 1992, p. 34.

<sup>334</sup> Weksler, p. 26.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

On 2 August 1940, a Delasem representative wrote <sup>336</sup> to Ascoli of Rome's Jewish community. The letter stated that the Italian government's solution to hold non-Italian Jewish people in camps was actually a positive outcome for Delasem, because the Italian government was providing the Jewish refugees with immediate aid for survival and the people needing assistance were centralised. However, the situation was serious on the financial front.<sup>337</sup> About 35 non-Italian Jewish individuals were interned in Rome's jurisdiction, but there were a further 100 Jewish refugees in Rome's region still requiring assistance. Delasem had to provide a daily allowance and give refugees vouchers to buy soup, bread, and milk. Moreover, the aid organisation had to give non-Italian Jewish people extra money for consular and transit visas.<sup>338</sup> To make the financial situation worse, Joint had suspended funding to Delasem; in fact, Joint had not sent their usual Lire 5000 for the month of July.<sup>339</sup> Delasem reinforced the need from the Italian Jewish communities for financial help, hoping for a better outcome for August and trusting that Joint's funding would arrive shortly. Despite financial difficulties, Delasem hoped that the number of foreign Jewish people interned in Italy and its territories would increase. Providing safety to Jewish people coming from countries occupied by Nazis was a very urgent issue, and Italian Jewish people had to work together 'per salvare tanti disgraziati'<sup>340</sup> (to save the life of many unfortunate) Jewish men, women, elderly people and children.<sup>341</sup>

Unfortunately for Delasem and the Jewish refugees in Italy, the financial situation did not immediately improve. On 7 August 1940, a further letter stated that Delasem would have to close its offices, beginning with their branch office in Rome, if the financial situation did not recover.<sup>342</sup> Delasem stated in the letter that 200 Jewish

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<sup>336</sup> Delasem, Letter to the President Jewish Community of Rome Aldo Ascoli, ASCER Rome, 02 August 1940, pp. 1-2.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Delasem, Letter to the President Jewish Community of Rome Aldo Ascoli, ASCER Rome, 07 August 1940, pp. 1-2.

refugees in Rome would be desperate if closure of their office occurred, hinting that Italian Jewish people in Rome would most likely witness refugees on their doorsteps begging for food if funds to maintain Delasem's activities were not found immediately.<sup>343</sup> However, there were positives. On 9 August 1940, Almansi wrote to the president of the Rome's Jewish community describing the encouraging circumstances of Jewish people interned in Campagna camp.<sup>344</sup> Almansi said 'nella sostanza'<sup>345</sup> (in substance), contrary to the negative news of the financial struggle, he was affirming that the material situation of the internees was better because Delasem had given the internees an additional Lire 3.50 per day to supplement the Italian government's standard Lire 6.50 daily.<sup>346</sup> Ascoli responded,<sup>347</sup> confirming that Rome's Jewish community 'accoglie con entusiasmo'<sup>348</sup> (embrace with enthusiasm) the idea of financial aid for the interned Jewish people in the Italian internment camps. Ascoli hoped that the Jewish community of Rome could be used as an example for other Italian Jewish communities, and that maybe other communities could also organise aid collections.<sup>349</sup>

Despite the positives, internees needed more money to survive. Salvatore Gabbai, an internee at Campagna's internment camp,<sup>350</sup> stated that there were 400 foreign Jewish and 100 Italian Jewish people at the camp. Gabbai confirmed in the letter that all received the Italian government's Lire 6.50 daily stipend and accommodation,<sup>351</sup> but funds were needed for a camp infirmary and for the purchase of books. Extra money was also needed for clothes and personal expenses, and to assist internees

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<sup>343</sup> Delasem, Letter to the President Jewish Community of Rome Aldo Ascoli, ASCER Rome, 07 August 1940, pp. 1-2.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Salvatore Gabbai, Delasem, Letter to Delasem office of Rome, ASCER Rome, 08 August 1940, pp. 1-2.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

with corresponding with internees in other Italian internment camps.<sup>352</sup> Gabbai finished the letter by discussing the necessity to obtain permission from the Italian authorities for his requests – before Delasem could fulfil them – indicating that the internees were also aware of the politics and processes of their stay in Italy.<sup>353</sup>

The worsening financial crisis for Delasem and its effect on their ability to assist Jewish refugees resulted in Ascoli contacting<sup>354</sup> the Italian government and asking for permission to send prayer books in Hebrew to the authorities of Italian internment camps for distribution to the internees.<sup>355</sup> Ascoli reinforced the importance for interned Jewish people to be able to celebrate the autumn's celebrations of 'Capo d' Anno e Digiuno di Espiazione'<sup>356</sup> (New Year – Rosh Hashanah and Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur) and therefore maintaining key aspects of their culture and religion. The government gave permission,<sup>357</sup> but the letter to the government was also most likely a subtle hint to the government by Delasem that funds were lacking and more support was needed.

### **The decreasing of Delasem's exodus activities**

Delasem's aid activities altered after Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940. Italy's declaration of war against France and the British Empire came at a time when the fortunes of the Allies were at their lowest ebb, with France on the verge of surrender and the British Expeditionary Force besieged at Dunkirk and unlikely to survive. If Britain sued for peace the war would have ended with Italy allied with the victorious Germans – but Britain and its Commonwealth did not surrender. Despite being severely weakened, Britain's survival made aid activities much harder for

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<sup>352</sup> Gabbai, Delasem, Letter to Delasem office of Rome, pp. 1-2.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Aldo Ascoli, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Government, ASCER Rome, 05 September 1940, pp. 1-6.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

Delasem. In particular, British bases in the west, central and east Mediterranean Sea at Gibraltar, Malta and Egypt respectively and the Royal Navy's strong Mediterranean fleet made the previously safe removal of Jewish people on ships flying the Italian flag now dangerous, particularly those passing through the Straits of Gibraltar and into the Atlantic.

### **Changes in Delasem's structure**

When the organisation was established on 1 December 1939, Delasem had about 3000 Jewish refugees to assist in Italy. During the first six months of Delasem's aid operations until 31 May 1940, an average of 2000 Jewish refugees had emigrated monthly. Furthermore, another 2000 Jewish refugees had entered Italian territories seeking assistance. Most of these were from German occupied countries.<sup>358</sup> Their hope was to use Italy as a transit platform, waiting in Genoa to embark overseas towards countries not under German domination. From December 1939 to June 1940, when Italy entered the Second World War as Germany's ally, the number of Jewish refugees in the Italian peninsula and territories in transit was about 15,000 people. These Jewish refugees successfully emigrated from the country before June 1940 when Italy entered the war.<sup>359</sup>

Italy's entry into the war resulted in Delasem having to find alternative efficacious exodus routes from Italy for foreign Jewish people. Furthermore, the war caused a shift in Delasem's focus to assisting non-Italian Jewish people in Italian internment camps. The political climate had changed, but it was essential that Delasem produced a positive outcome for the retention of finding safe countries for Jewish refugees to emigrate to as well as focusing on better accommodation for Jewish people in the internment camps. Refugees had seen Italy as simply a place along the route to

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<sup>358</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, ASCER Rome, 17 November 1941, pp. 1-6.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

freedom – a stopover – but now there was a strong possibility that they would be staying in Italian camps indefinitely.

Delasem had been established before the war to help foreign Jewish people emigrate from Italy to foreign countries and safety after they had arrived in Italy as refugees. This role continued with Italy's entry into the war, but now Delasem had to readjust its aims. To maximise its aid activities, Delasem had to divide its organisation into different departments to achieve better aid output. Delasem's retooling began with establishing six internal departments catering specifically for emigration, finance, clothing, health, education, and morals.<sup>360</sup>

The departments were able to assist the increasing number of Jewish people now residing indefinitely in Italy. One trend of more foreign Jewish people in Italy was the increased amount of mail to Delasem. Most came from the Jewish people interned, but there was a large amount from overseas.<sup>361</sup> Those interned wanted information about their stay in the camps and news about emigration from the country. Many of these communiqués had an air of concern, for camp internees were aware that the number of Jewish refugees emigrating was decreasing because of the difficulty of Italian ships using the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>362</sup> Delasem now had to deal not only with organising the increasingly difficult migration of Jewish refugees from Italy, but also supporting the thousands of Italian and foreign Jewish people held in internment camps. Every month, Delasem on average received 3500 to 4000 letters and 300 to 400 telegrams while sending between 4000 and 5000 letters and 300 to 400 telegrams. Delasem also made 100 international telephone calls.<sup>363</sup>

Letters or telegrams were the only forms of communication between Delasem and the interned Jewish refugees who were waiting to emigrate from Italian territories.

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<sup>360</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, ASCER Rome, 17 November 1941, pp. 1-6.

<sup>361</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 9.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

As a consequence of this increase of correspondence from Jewish refugees in internment camps that often asked for extra support and assistance, Mussolini granted Valobra and Delasem's secretary Enrico Luzzato permission to visit internment camps in Italy and to establish better channels of communication between Delasem and Italian and non-Italian interned Jewish people. Valobra and Luzzato visited Ferramonti di Tarsia, Campagna, Isola Gran Sasso, Civitella del Tronto and Urbisaglia internment camps in July 1941.<sup>364</sup>

Over two days in October 1941, Delasem wrote a long report addressed to all Italian Jewish communities summarising the work performed since the organisation's establishment. The report also discussed what Delasem still needed to do. It stated that in Italy there were presently 5000 non-Italian Jewish people,<sup>365</sup> of which 3000 were accommodated in internment camps. All received financial support from the Italian government. The remaining 2000 non-Italian Jewish people, however, were financially dependent on Delasem. This Delasem document is important in this research because it details the history and the present situation of non-Italian Jews emigration from Italy and Italian territories. The report stated<sup>366</sup> that Delasem's operations had expanded to include 65 foreign correspondents who collaborated with Delasem. These people were in European countries,<sup>367</sup> Africa (Morocco), North America (United States), Central America,<sup>368</sup> South America<sup>369</sup> and Asia.<sup>370</sup> Delasem's foreign representatives had, as their first task, to help Delasem facilitate emigration activities in their country.

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<sup>364</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, ASCER Rome, 17 November 1941, pp. 1-6.

<sup>365</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, pp. 1-9.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>367</sup> The countries included Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Sweden, Switzerland, Poland, Portugal and Spain.

<sup>368</sup> The countries included Mexico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

<sup>369</sup> The countries included Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.

<sup>370</sup> The countries included the Philippines and China.

The letter outlined the continued importance of the two foreign funding organisations in Joint and HICEM.<sup>371</sup> The mention of the two major financial and emigration support organisations in the letter suggests the solving of the financial crises that Delasem experienced with Joint in 1940, but it is unclear how this was achieved. Joint was still in charge of the general financial coordination of all the funds collected and distributed for the Jewish emigration assistance. In order to understand the financial importance of Joint, the report mentioned that in 1940 the organisation had collected and distributed worldwide 10 million American dollars.<sup>372</sup> The role of HICEM, which at one stage had their headquarters in Paris, then Brussels, and finally Lisbon in neutral Portugal when the report was drafted, remained unaltered in having the task of finding various emigration opportunities for internees. They, along with Delasem's correspondents, had the important task of determining a country's suitability for Jewish refugees. They also assisted with obtaining consular visas for transit and emigration.<sup>373</sup> HICEM also helped with transport, and if needed, organised financial support for Jewish people. Delasem worked on the emigration task strictly with HICEM, suggesting that they trusted HICEM in this important task.<sup>374</sup>

Italy's entry into the war and the difficulties this action posed to transporting refugees in Italian registered ships resulted in Delasem having to find alternative routes out of Italy for refugees. Lisbon and Portugal was pivotal to Delasem's emigration activities, for it provided an Atlantic seaboard for the departure of Jewish people, while Portugal itself was neutral (Figure 13).<sup>375</sup> However, it was unreachable by sea because the voyage took ships past British Gibraltar that controlled the western entry to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>376</sup> However, after June 1940, Delasem established two alternative routes to Lisbon from Italy. First was by railway from

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<sup>371</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, pp. 30-31.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., p. 40.



Turin into Vichy controlled southern France, then to Spain, and then finally Portugal. The other route was by aeroplane with the airline company ‘*Ala Littoria*’ from Rome to Madrid in Spain and then proceeding to Lisbon by train.<sup>377</sup> Between 1939 and 1941, Spain permitted 30,000 Jewish refugees to enter its territories from all over Europe.<sup>378</sup> Most of these Jewish refugees crossed into Spain from France, where they were then permitted to cross Spain and then into Portugal to safety.<sup>379</sup>

Despite Delasem finding alternative routes to Lisbon, at the end of 1941 the emigration programme to the Portuguese city became extremely difficult. Delasem’s function – arguably their most important function – of transferring Jewish people to Portugal via Spain was terminated as a result of Nazi Germany pressuring Spain regarding the transit of Jewish people through the country. Despite its neutrality during the Second World War, Spain under Fascist dictator Francisco Franco remained in gratitude to the Nazis for the military help his forces received during the Spanish Civil War between 1936 and 1939. The German and Italian military directly assisted in a fascist victory. Between 1942 and 1944, the number of Jewish refugees allowed entry into Spain fell, with only 7500 reaching Portugal via Spain.<sup>380</sup> However, despite the partial closing of the Spanish frontier to Jewish refugees, Delasem and HICEM continued to discover ways to remove Jewish people from Italy to safety. However, with the war’s continuation and foreign countries under varying amounts of pressure to stop Jewish people across their borders, it became increasingly difficult for Delasem and HICEM to provide channels of exodus for non-Italian Jewish people from Italy and its territories.<sup>381</sup> However, as the emigration task decreased, there was a noticeable increase in the mission of helping non-Italian

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<sup>377</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem’s meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, pp. 40-42.

<sup>378</sup> Marrus, pp. 164- 165.

<sup>379</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, ‘Escape from German occupied Europe’, Washington DC, 20 June 2014, [http:// www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005470](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005470) [11 January 2015].

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

<sup>381</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem’s meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 41.

Jewish people now effectively trapped in Italy in either camps or residing with Italian Jews families.

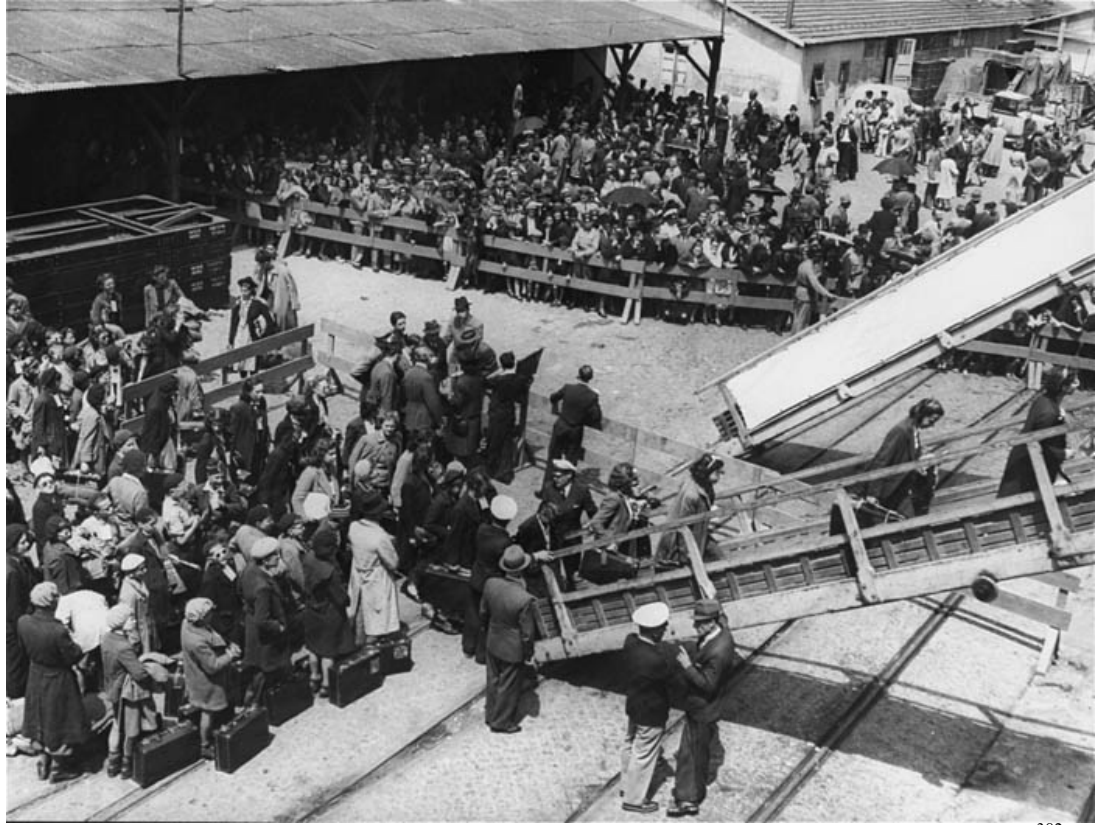


Figure 13 Jewish refugees in Lisbon boarding a ship taking them to the United States. June 1941<sup>382</sup>

Delasem's main roles during this period mask a number of smaller tasks that improved the lives of Jewish refugees. One assignment was to reunify Jewish families who had arrived in Italy in an uncoordinated manner and subsequently accommodated in different internment camps. This undertaking – which necessitated up to date information regarding the whereabouts of people, had the full approval of the Fascist government.<sup>383</sup> The Fascist government also assisted and supported Delasem regarding the securing of documentation like passports and visa permits for interned Jewish refugees. The Italian internment camp authorities submitted

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<sup>382</sup> Jewish refugees in Lisbon boarding a ship that will transport them to the United States, Lisbon, Portugal, June, 1941, <http://www.ushmm.org/lcmedia/photo/lc/image/16/16213.jpg> [22 October 2015].

<sup>383</sup> Dante Almansi, Letter to the Minister of Interior, ASCER Rome, 22 July 1940, pp. 1-10.

passports and visas of Jewish refugees to Delasem just before emigration. This arrangement between the Fascist government and Delasem facilitated Delasem's activities of finding ways for Jewish refugees to emigrate, for often chances to leave Italy appeared in very short windows of opportunity, and slowly organised paperwork could have resulted in internees missing their opening to depart Italy.<sup>384</sup>

In January 1941, Delasem published a bulletin 'Comunicazioni d'Ufficio' (Office Communications).<sup>385</sup> The bulletin's function was to keep Italian Jewish communities and Delasem representatives around Italy better informed and up-to-date with the situation of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in the country. The first printing ran to 1200 copies, and there were 62 further releases of the bulletin over the course of the next three years. Harry Klein was the bulletin's director of editorial staff.<sup>386</sup> Each number of the bulletin contained essential information that Jewish people interned in Italian camps had to know about emigrating from the country. This information varied depending on Italy's stance in the war, the Italian government's latest policies, and the attitude surrounding countries had to Jewish people from Italy passing through their frontiers. The bulletin contained updates on Delasem's aid activities in Italy, and acted to remind Jewish people of upcoming religious events. Riccardo Pacifici, the Rabbi of Genoa, usually wrote this section of the bulletin.<sup>387</sup> The bulletin was Delasem's voice that kept all Jewish people – either interned or free – informed of events relating to Italian and foreign Jewish people during this period.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> Almansi, Letter to the Minister of Interior, p. 8.

<sup>385</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, 17 November 1941, pp. 1-6.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, pp. 21-30.

<sup>388</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, 17 November 1941, pp. 1-6.

### **Delasem's activities between June 1941 and September 1943**

The downsizing of Delasem's emigration task at the end of 1941 did not see the organisation's assistance to Jewish people diminish. Instead, Delasem concentrated more on the well-being of Jewish people – Italian and foreign – in Italy itself. Requests for clothing from Italian Jewish people increased dramatically in 1941 and 1942, while the forced stay of non-Italian Jewish people in Italy required special consideration because they frequently did not have enough essentials.<sup>389</sup> When non-Italian Jewish people arrived in Italy, they often had few possessions because of the hasty manner in which they had left their homeland. In addition, many thought their stay in Italy would be short and that they would emigrate from the country shortly after arrival. Many had suitcases with their own clothing, but their wardrobe was insufficient for an indefinite stay and for the replacement of items due to normal wear and tear. Consequently, Delasem intensified its appeal to all its offices for clothing.<sup>390</sup>

#### *Delasem's clothing appeal*

One of Delasem's major projects outside of securing transit from Italy was the acquiring of clothing for Jewish refugees. It was the Jewish Ladies' Committees in the many Italian Jewish communities who took the mantle of gathering clothing.<sup>391</sup> In June 1941, the Ladies' Committee of Genoa, guided by Naomi Fajrajzen, wrote to Italian Jewish people in their jurisdiction asking for help to achieve the task of finding sufficient clothing for Jewish refugees. With their help, Fajrajzen collected a

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<sup>389</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, 17 November 1941, p. 42.

<sup>390</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, pp. 21-30.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

large amount of clothing along with Lire 4500 for use to purchase clothes. The leader of the Jewish Ladies' Committee in Venice, Vanda Sonino, wrote a report to Delasem stating that her region collected a reasonable quantity of clothing but also Lire 500 for the purchase of new or second hand clothes.<sup>392</sup>

The situation for non-Italian Jewish people in the Venice region was poor, but the drive by the city's Jewish community is a good example of how different communities around Italy tackled the problem of refugees having insufficient clothing. The Jewish community of the city helped 64 non-Italian Jews families with between three and six members in each family with not only clothing but also the essentials needed to survive while in Italy. The Jewish Ladies' Committee of Firenze also took up Delasem's clothing appeal and was able to send a large quantity of clothing, money, religious books and food for religious purposes to Gran Sasso's internment camp. However, despite the drive, refugees were still short of essentials. Furthermore, it was unlikely that further clothing collections or donations of money for clothing would be as successful as the first appeal given the worsening economic conditions experienced in Italy. The Allies, now joined by the United States and the Soviet Union, were making inroads into Axis held territory in North Africa and the Soviet Union where Italian forces were located resulting in resource shortages affecting Italian civilians.<sup>393</sup>

#### *Medical assistance provided by Delasem*

Medical assistance to Jewish people was another task encumbered to Delasem. Delasem appointed Dr Laura Cavaglione as director for the collection of medicine and medical related equipment.<sup>394</sup> Cavaglione urged Delasem to ask doctors to donate supplies of medicine. She also suggested that Delasem ask Jewish doctors to

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>393</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, pp. 11-13.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

produce some of the medicines that non-Jewish doctors could not make. Cavaglione also suggested making Delasem's office at Genoa the country's medical repository centre. According to Cavaglione, having Genoa as the hub for medical supplies would allow her and her assistants to coordinate medical support to the entire country. It would also allow the substitution of one medicine for another depending on the need and availability of medicine when there was a shortage.<sup>395</sup>

All Italian Jewish communities helped in the task of gathering medicine and medical equipment, for it was recognised universally that medical support was important for the survival of non-Italian Jewish people in camps or for those billeted with Italian Jews families. Giulio Bemporad from the Jewish community at Turin wrote to Delasem's medical department stating that fifty local Jewish doctors could supply a large amount of medicine.<sup>396</sup> Elena Sonino, from the Jewish community in Rome, wrote to Delasem stating that they had also collected a reasonable amount of medical supplies and that they had sent them to the Agnone and Ferramonti di Tarsia internment camps.<sup>397</sup> However, some of the larger internment camps were better off than smaller camps. For example, there were many pharmacists and doctors interned at Ferramonti di Tarsia who established their own camp surgery.<sup>398</sup>

#### *Delasem's aid appeal for non-Italian Jews children*

On 17 November 1941, Delasem received a letter from Dr Israele Kalk regarding the collection of aid for foreign Jewish children interned in various Italian internment camps. His letter related to the general population of children in all camps, but was associated specifically with children at Ferramonti di Tarsia (Figure 14).<sup>399</sup> Kalk wanted to make the organisation aware that he was helping a group of Jewish

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<sup>395</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 12.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-13.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Israele Kalk, Delasem, Letter to Delasem, ASCER Rome, 17 November 1941, p. 1.

children in Milan.<sup>400</sup> As a result of the letter, Delasem urged all Jewish communities to help Kalk assist young Jewish internees and their families. The appeal was successful, with the children receiving extra food and clothing.<sup>401</sup> Kalk personally provided support for the children's education by employing teachers and providing scholastic material in the classrooms of the internment camps.<sup>402</sup> He also provided funds to heat the classroom at Ferramonti di Tarsia, a feature particularly appreciated by the children with winter approaching.<sup>403</sup>

In May 1942, six months after his initial letter, Kalk wrote again to Delasem about his visit to Ferramonti di Tarsia internment camp.<sup>404</sup> He described the improvements made inside Italy's largest camp. He also described a tragic incident. According to Kalk, 514 Jewish people had arrived in the camp from the ship *Pentcho* that had capsized in the Aegean Sea in 1940.<sup>405</sup> Of the 514, 35 were very young children, one only three weeks old and born during the trip to the camp. At the camp, all the children from the *Pentcho* were provided with evaporated milk, warm clothes and toys. Kalk continued, saying that 'la gioia dei piccoli e' indescrivibile' (the joy of the children was hard to describe) because for most of them it was the first occurrence that they had received toys.<sup>406</sup>

Kalk made Delasem aware that Ferramonti di Tarsia needed more aid. He attached a postcard to the letter to Delasem for sending to Italian Jewish people requesting extra help. The postcard showed the *Pentcho's* sinking and some of the horrible conditions experienced by the Jewish survivors.<sup>407</sup> He also attached a photograph showing students and teachers at Ferramonti di Tarsia's school to demonstrate the

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<sup>400</sup> Israele Kalk, Delasem, Letter to Delasem, ASCER Rome, 17 November 1941, p. 1.

<sup>401</sup> Delasem, Letter for aids appeal to Italian Jewish communities, ASCER Rome, 1 December 1941, pp. 1-2.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Israele Kalk, Letter to Delasem, ASCER Rome, 25 January 1942, pp. 1-3.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

achievements of the previous financial support to the camp from Italian Jewish people, suggesting that further financial assistance would be used in a similar way.<sup>408</sup>

Delasem and Kalk worked together and achieved good results for the children inside the internment camps. In October 1942, Delasem and Kalk were able to send aid parcels to all Jewish children and their families interned in the Italian camps.<sup>409</sup> Each parcel contained a pair of shoes, clothes, linen, jumpers, socks, toothbrushes, toothpaste, children's games, a bag of candy and books. These items had a practical component and were suitably appropriate for the approaching winter and the camp's location,<sup>410</sup> but the gifts also had enormous psychological value, boosting the spirit of the children and their families alike.<sup>411</sup> Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Pope Pius XII gave Lire 3500 with the papal nuncio, Francesco Borgoncini, to the Jewish interned at Ferramonti di Tarsia.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Israele Kalk, Letter to Delasem, ASCER Rome, 25 January 1942, pp. 1-3.

<sup>409</sup> Israele Kalk, Letter to Delasem, ASCER Rome, October 1942, pp. 1-3.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> Padre Callisto Lopinot, *'La carita' della Santa Sede nel campo di concentramento di Ferramonti'*, luglio 1941-1944 (ACDEC, Fondo Kalk, VII/2, Milano, p. 2).





Figure 14 Pupils and teachers at Ferramonti di Tarsia internment school, 1941.<sup>413</sup>

### **Delasem: re-establishing its role**

Since the beginning of 1942, Delasem had remodelled its activities. The Fascist government operated the internment camps, but Delasem strongly influenced the conditions experienced by internees. The organisation provided assistance for 8000 Jewish people interned in 170 Italian camps.<sup>414</sup> These people needed not only material support but also religious and morale assistance.<sup>415</sup> Despite Delasem's help, and primarily because they now had little possibility of emigration, morale was low

<sup>413</sup> Pupils and teachers at the camp school, Ferramonti di Tarsia, 1941, [http://collections1.yadvashem.org/arch\\_srika/3001-4000/3390-3435/3413\\_2.jpg](http://collections1.yadvashem.org/arch_srika/3001-4000/3390-3435/3413_2.jpg) [01 September 2015].

<sup>414</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, ASCER Rome, 9 February 1942, pp. 1-6.

<sup>415</sup> Delasem, Letter to the President Jewish Community of Rome Ugo Foa', ASCER Rome, 17 May 1942, pp. 1-2.

for foreign Jewish people in Italy.<sup>416</sup> However, Delasem raised morale by providing Jewish prayer books in Hebrew.<sup>417</sup> In addition, Delasem wrote directly to those in authority at the camps asking them to find religious artefacts needed by Jewish internees in their services.<sup>418</sup> The authorities in charge of internment camps provided a room for Jewish people to pray and to celebrate various religious events, particularly the rites associated with the Passover.<sup>419</sup> Furthermore, the Fascist government gave Delasem approval to allow Rabbis and vice-Rabbis to visit or to stay for short periods in internment camps. Here, they provided Jewish internees with extra morale support. Consequently, some of the camps – Ferramonti di Tarsia an example – also had a synagogue and a full time Rabbi who guided the Jewish internees in their religious life.<sup>420</sup> Ferramonti di Tarsia's synagogue was 35 metres long and had internal timber benches for 400 people.<sup>421</sup>

Despite the harrowing conditions for all Jewish refugees in Italy, normal life events still occurred, such as traditional Jewish wedding ceremonies.<sup>422</sup> Non-Italian Jewish people not only married with full Jewish ritual, but also celebrated the event with members of the local Jewish communities.<sup>423</sup>

Delasem also provided material for recreational activities. The largest internment camps had libraries with Jewish literature with books in Hebrew – mostly provided by Delasem<sup>424</sup> – numbered in order ready for use by the internees on different topics. The libraries – where internees could read and continue their religious life – were used daily by the Jewish internees and managed and supervised by Italian guards. It was a place with materials provided by Delasem, and internees had painting classes

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<sup>416</sup> Delasem, Letter to the President Jewish Community of Rome Ugo Foa'.

<sup>417</sup> Delasem, Letter to Delasem office Rome, ASCER Rome, 27 September 1940, pp. 1-2.

<sup>418</sup> Reale, p. 150.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>422</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, ASCER Rome, 9 February 1942, pp. 1-6.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*

in some of the camps. Michel Fingstein, a painter interned at Ferramonti di Tarsia, helped with painting activities for children and adults.<sup>425</sup>

Delasem funded the equipment for various sports. The organisation aimed to improve Jewish people's morale and to help them enjoy, even in uncertain circumstances, their time while in Italy. Jewish internees – mainly those in the internment camps – established table tennis and soccer teams.<sup>426</sup> Internees trained daily, while competitions were organised against teams inside camps and from sides made of local non-Jewish Italians. To make their sport activities more interesting and stimulating, Delasem provided the winning sides awards and certificates.<sup>427</sup> The financial and morale support that Delasem provided was vital for non-Italian Jewish refugees.

### **Summary of Delasem's role between June 1941 and September 1943**

From its foundation on 1 December 1939, Delasem operated as the Italian aid commission for non-Italian Jewish people.<sup>428</sup> The original prime task of Delasem was to find channels of exodus for Jewish refugees from Italy to other countries that would welcome them.<sup>429</sup> However, in June 1940, seven months after the organisation's establishment, Italy entered the Second World War and the task of assisting Jewish people with emigration from Italy diminished because of unsafe conditions in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>430</sup> It was impossible for foreign Jewish people

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<sup>425</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, ASCER Rome, 9 February 1942, pp. 1-6.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome's Jewish Community, pp. 1-2.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-6.

<sup>430</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 18.

to leave safely and reach countries that were not under the Nazi Regime. The success of Delasem's aid activities depended on collaboration with the Italian Jewish communities but also with the Italian Fascist government who established and operated internment camps shortly before Italy went to war.<sup>431</sup>

The task of assisting Jewish people to emigrate was wound down at the beginning of 1941, but Delasem's role of helping non-Italian Jewish people located with Jewish families and inside internment camps increased.<sup>432</sup> Delasem had to help 6000 non-Italian Jewish people now trapped in Italy but, importantly, at the same time the organisation collaborated with the Italian government for helping those refugees to stay in Italy.<sup>433</sup> Despite losing its ability to serve its most important role of removing Jewish refugees from an increasingly hostile European continent, Delasem operated from January 1941 – without pause – in embracing different aid tasks. The most important was financial assistance for Jewish refugees, providing clothing, medicine, educational supplies and morale support.<sup>434</sup> Delasem undertook these tasks in a precise and direct manner unhindered by the Fascist government. Thanks to this cooperation, Delasem supplied an extensive functional aid role for the survival of non-Italian Jews families who could not return to their country of birth but who at the same time were unable to emigrate from Italy to other countries.<sup>435</sup>

Delasem's letter to Joint dated 7 June 1943 – about three months before Mussolini lost power on 3 September 1943 – detailed that there were 10,000 Jewish refugees in Italy mostly interned in Italian camps. The number increased from 6000 to 10,000 when Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940 as Germany's ally. Delasem specified the citizenship of the Jewish refugees, stating that there were 5000 Yugoslav Jewish, 2000 Polish Jewish and a combined total of 750 among

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<sup>431</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 18.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents of Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-6.

<sup>435</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 9.

Czechoslovakian Jewish, German Jewish and Austrian Jewish. In total, there was a population of 35,000 Jewish people in Italy in 1943.<sup>436</sup>

### **Delasem September 1943 to May 1945**

In January 1943, the Allies made plans to invade Italy and in July 1943 they landed in Sicily and at Salerno on the west coast of the Italian mainland just south of the city of Naples. Following the Allies' landing, the Grand Fascist Council took power from Mussolini and immediately agreed, on 3 September 1943, to sign an armistice with the Allies under the newly elected Italian Prime Minister General Pietro Badoglio.<sup>437</sup> At the same time, the Germans resisted the Italian surrender, with Hitler withdrawing SS divisions from the Soviet front, France and south of Germany, and redeploying them in the occupation of northern Italy. The Germans disarmed the Italian army, and by October 1943, Italy was divided politically and militarily. Southern Italy, including the regions of Sicily, Calabria, and Campania e Puglia, was occupied by the Allies comprising American, British, Canadian, and New Zealander forces. It was here that Badoglio and the Italian King had fled to from Rome after the Germans occupied northern Italy. The northern two thirds of the Italian peninsula, inclusive of the city of Rome, was occupied by the Germans with Mussolini as leader after his re-establishment to Prime Minister by the Germans. However, Mussolini's new Fascist regime was only a puppet government, meaning that the new political environment was no different to any other European country occupied by the Nazis. It was therefore lethal to those with pro-Jewish views.<sup>438</sup>

Following the Allies' invasion, Jewish people in southern Italy's internment camps including Ferramonti di Tarsia were released, but those in German occupied Italy were less fortunate. The new Fascist government conducted raids on Jewish people's

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<sup>436</sup> Lelio Vittorio Valobra, *Delasem*, Letter to the Joint, ASCER Rome, 7 June 1943, pp. 1-2.

<sup>437</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Breve Storia Del Fascismo*, Oscar Mondadori, Milano, 2002, pp.113-124.

<sup>438</sup> De Felice, *Breve Storia Del Fascismo*, pp. 113-124.

homes, including those in Rome with its very large Jewish community. These actions by German SS soldiers resulted in the rounding up and transportation of thousands of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people to Fossoli di Carpi internment camp – established previously by the Fascist government for Allied prisoners of war – near the city of Modena.<sup>439</sup> The camp also served as a gaol for Italians who refused to serve under the puppet Fascist government. Deportation to Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz Nazi concentration camps in northern Germany and occupied Poland respectively followed for these people.

The Nazis' occupation of northern Italy severely affected Delasem's operations. Communication between Delasem's most important centres of Genoa and Rome was impossible. Nonetheless, despite concentrated efforts by the Nazis to capture Jewish people and eliminate those who assisted them, Delasem in Nazi occupied Italy was still able to rescue and organise hiding places for non-Italian Jewish people. Delasem also managed to supply food to these people.<sup>440</sup> Also important was Delasem's morph into a clandestine network, which was necessary if it was to survive as an organisation. It had to go underground after 8 September 1943 because the Fascist government – who had supported the organisation from 1939 – was fundamentally a puppet government of the Nazis and therefore anti-Semitic.

The Nazis began manhunts for Jewish people in occupied Italy. Delasem continued its role as a Jewish aid organisation in this area, but its aid operations from this time required great courage, psychological intuition and knowledge of different foreign languages. Their activities occurred with the real understanding that their Jewish aid operations could result in the deportation or execution of Delasem officers by the Nazis.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, pp. 1-42.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, pp. 114-115.

In Rome, the new Nazi-Fascist government occupied Delasem's offices. The organisation's documents were removed for analysis or destroyed. Much of the information Delasem had gathered since 1939 to support Jewish people was now most likely used to capture Jewish people, while the census data collected by the Italian government in 1938 gave the Germans unfettered information about the number and location of many Jewish people. With their offices occupied, Delasem – with the assistance of the Roman Catholic Church – was provided access in secret to the Catholic Church's 'Convento dei Cappuccini' (Convent of Capuchins) office in Via Sicilia 159 Rome to perform their operations (Figure 15). Working in secret from the convent, Delasem assisted 1500 non-Italian Jewish people – a remarkable achievement given the circumstances.<sup>442</sup>

The threat of Nazi persecution applied now not only to Jewish refugees but also to Italian Jewish people. They had lived under the Racial Laws since 1938 but there had been no real threat, but they were now in mortal danger from the Nazi regime. What had occurred to Jewish people in other Nazi occupied European countries was now reality in northern Italy.<sup>443</sup>



Figure 15 Convento dei Capuccini, Via Sicilia 159, Rome, 1943<sup>444</sup>

To maintain connections with foreign countries that supported and funded Delasem (like Joint in the United States) before Nazi occupation, the president of Delasem Lelio Vittorio Valobra and some of his staff moved to neutral Switzerland. The Nazi-Fascist

<sup>442</sup> Tagliacozzo, p. 114.

<sup>443</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>444</sup> Convento dei Cappuccini, Via Sicilia 159, Rome, 1943,  
<http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/typo3temp/pics/be1a08c019.jpg> [02 March 2015].

government also raided Delasem's Genoa office. However, despite the raids, many of Delasem's staff retained their freedom and continued to work uninterrupted but in secret in Genoa.<sup>445</sup> Because of Delasem's continuous commitment, the aid work, despite the insecure circumstances in Switzerland, Genoa and Rome, continued. Father Maria Benedetto of the Roman Catholic Capuchin Franciscan order was pivotal during this time for the movement of money and false documents required for Jewish refugees to escape from Italy.<sup>446</sup>

From Switzerland, Genoa and Rome, Delasem continued its aid work with the support of Christian religious communities, the Italian partisan movement that was formed and who operated against the Nazis, and Italian civilians until the end of German occupation in May 1945.<sup>447</sup> During the Nazi occupation, Delasem provided Lire 25,000,000 to support 4000 Jewish people of which 1500 were foreigners and 2500 Italians. As a result of Delasem's aid programme and the support of the above-mentioned organisations, from 1939 to after the Nazi occupation, Italy had one of the highest Holocaust survival rates of any occupied Nazi nation.<sup>448</sup>

At the end of April 1945, only a few days before the finish of the European war, Delasem organised a conference for all Italian Jews leaders in Zurich. The meeting was called to decide, for the first time after the promulgation of the Racial Laws, the important decisions to be taken regarding problems and the uncertainty for Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in post war Italy. On 8 May 1945, Germany surrendered to the Allies, ending six-years of bloodshed. However, Italy was shattered as a nation and considered a defeated enemy in the eyes of the Allies. As a result, Valobra as an Italian citizen needed permission from the Allies to leave Switzerland on 10 July 1945 and to return to his native Italy. Delasem never stopped operating in Italy during the Allied occupation, but with the return of their president, there followed at first in Genoa and then Rome over the following months a

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<sup>445</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: persecution, rescue and survival*, pp. 113-115.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

<sup>448</sup> Zimmerman, *Jews in Italy under the Fascist and Nazi Rule 1922-1945*, p. 1.



reorganisation of the institution ready to begin operations as an aid organisation similar to pre-1943 circumstances. Comparable to the period between 1939 and 1945, Delasem had to adapt to different environments – in this case, its new post-war role to establish contact with and organise help needed for Italian and foreign Jewish people who survived the Second World War.

In May 1946, Delasem decided to wind down its function as a Jewish aid organisation. The liquidation of Delasem was to occur slowly, with the first action the handing to Arthur Greenleigh, the Joint representative for Italy, of a document hidden during the Nazi occupation. It contained the names of 35,000 Jewish refugees that Delasem had helped since the organisation's establishment in December 1939 (Figure 16).<sup>449</sup> However, despite plans to conclude their operations, Delasem continued to assist in organising all requests for Jewish refugees' emigration from Italy. At first, Delasem was charged to find suitable accommodation for Jewish refugees, needed by those waiting to emigrate back to their home countries and for Italian Jewish people before they could move to their hometowns or cities. In addition, the organisation had to arrange documentation and coordinate people's departure.<sup>450</sup> In many ways, Delasem reverted to a role they enacted in the first six-months of their operation from December 1939 to June 1940. In addition, the Allied military government in Italy after May 1945 created the Displaced Persons Sub-Commission for organising the aid needed by the Jewish refugees in internment camps where most were still living. Later, the Sub-Commission was replaced by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitations Administration (UNRRA) that took on the role of managing internment camps until all Jewish and non-Jewish refugees were relocated. The above organisations slowly adsorbed Delasem's aid tasks.<sup>451</sup> Many of Delasem's most experienced staff transferred to assist first the Sub-Commission and later UNRRA. May 1948 witnessed the last movement of Jewish refugees from Italy,

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<sup>449</sup> Delasem, *Attività Assistenziali della Delasem di Roma al Maggio 1946*, ASCER Rome, May 1946, pp. 1-3.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>451</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, ASCER Rome, June 1948, pp. 1-3.

with the Italian ship, *Luciano Marana*, departing for Palestine with 844 Jewish refugees. The ship's departure saw the end of Delasem after nine years of activity.<sup>452</sup>



Figure 16 Joint Distribution Committee representatives visit childcare facilities at a displaced persons camp, Europe, 1945<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, ASCER Rome, June 1948, pp. 1-3.

<sup>453</sup> Joint Distribution Committee representatives; visit childcare facilities at a displaced persons camp, Europe, 1945, <http://www.ushmm.org/lcmedia/photo/lc/image/02/02617.jpg> [22 October 2015]

## **Chapter 3**

### **Interpretation**

The previous chapter described the changing circumstances of Jewish people in Italy between 1939 and 1945 using primary sources associated with the operation of Delasem. The material in these documents on a range of topics provides ample evidence to assess the research question about how Delasem – the Italian Aid Commission for Jewish Refugees – existed and operated despite the Leggi Razziali (Racial Laws) under Mussolini’s Fascist regime between 1938 and 1943 and when Italy was allied with Nazi Germany from June 1940.

One obvious result that is paramount to this research is that Mussolini and members of the Fascist government were aware of Delasem’s activities. This detail is repeated in different ways throughout Delasem documents. First, it was broached by members of the Italian Jewish community when directly asking the Fascist government for permission to establish an organisation in 1939. Then, Delasem contacted the government from time to time asking for financial support, or for arranging exit visas for deportees. However, the copious number of documents from the government requesting information from Delasem about a range of topics is the final conclusive proof of the government’s awareness of Delasem. As others have already stated, the government knew of Delasem’s activities – and the primary sources used in this research support previous claims.

How then does this research add to the knowledge already presented on the topic of Jewish people in Italy between 1939 and 1945? The following topics that have been examined by others are in this case examined again using data from Delasem’s records. What the Delasem documents provide is a reassessment of events that in some cases present the Fascist regime in a different light to previous interpretations

regarding attitudes to Jewish people. By default, an analysis of these topics accounts for why Delasem existed during this time.

The first topic is an examination of Delasem's data in the context of the debate between those who consider Mussolini no different to Hitler in attitude to Jewish people, and those who feel that Mussolini and his government's negative attitude to Jewish people was a political façade to reinvigorate Fascism in Italy – the debate between the genocide versus appeasement groups.

### **Genocide versus appeasement**

A major component of this research into the existence of a Jewish aid organisation's existence in a Fascist regime was the debate about Mussolini's attitude to Jewish people. Chapter 1 discussed the two opinions about the Fascist regime's attitude to Jewish people, but it is beneficial to revisit and condense the arguments. The appeasement group followed De Felice's view of a Mussolini wishing to 'discriminare ma non perseguitare'<sup>454</sup> (to discriminate but not persecute) the Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy. De Felice, Michaelis, Hilberg, Morley, Voigt, Carpi and Reale place themselves with the view that Mussolini issued the Leggi Razziali (Racial Laws) in 1938 to re-energise Fascism in Italy and to strengthen Italy's alliance with Hitler.<sup>455</sup> In October 1936, Mussolini along with Hitler signed the agreement establishing the 'Asse Roma-Berlino' (the Rome-Berlin Axis) alliance between Italy and Germany.<sup>456</sup> 'Pro-discriminare ma non perseguitare' researchers believe that it was after this pact that Mussolini felt pressured to give credit to the alliance with Hitler and lessen the differences between the policies of Nazi Germany and the Italian Fascist regime.<sup>457</sup> Mussolini issued the Racial Laws in 1938.

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<sup>454</sup> De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, pp. 27-29.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>456</sup> Reale, pp. 19-20.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*

Antagonistic to the appeasement group's opinion are members of the genocide group that followed Sarfatti's view of a Mussolini who issued the Racial Laws deliberately to eliminate Jewish people from Italy and its territories. Zuccotti, Picciotto, Collotti, Momigliano and Stille support Sarfatti stating that the final aim for Mussolini's Racial Laws was to remove Jewish people from every aspect of Italian life and physically from Italy and its territories.<sup>458</sup> Researchers that follow the appeasement or genocide school in their work widely discuss Mussolini and his relationship with the Jewish people in Italy. However, as the literature review examined, the researchers of both groups use the same evidence but develop differences of opinion. The view of Mussolini and the Jewish people between 1938 and 1943 is often conflicted.

The documents described in Chapter 2 clearly demonstrate that Delasem's aid activities assisted Jewish refugees in Italy by having a partnership with Mussolini's Fascist regime, and that the Fascist government was fully aware of the organisation's actions. There is no doubt that this agreement and arrangement existed. However, Delasem's documents also present evidence that Mussolini's positive behaviour to Jewish people in Italy was possibly economically driven. Evidence supporting the views of the appeasement group and the genocide argument exist in Delasem's files. An assessment of the debate in light of new information in Delasem's documents clarifies the interpretation of Mussolini and Jewish people, and provides reasons for Delasem's existence.

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<sup>458</sup> Zimmerman, p. 77.

*Delasem evidence supporting the appeasement argument*

According to one of the major genocide players, <sup>459</sup> ‘Mussolini supported the biological bases of anti-Semitism’<sup>460</sup> and that ‘for five years, from 1938 to 1943, Jews in Italy were subject to harsh, complex and even more perilous persecution.’<sup>461</sup> The evidence from Delasem’s files described in Chapter 3 questions the accuracy of this statement. Certainly, Sarfatti’s statement applies specifically to the actions of Mussolini, but the establishment of a pro-Jewish organisation *did occur* under his dictatorship. Given the politics existing between Germany and Italy regarding racial inferiorities, it is highly *unlikely* that Mussolini was oblivious to Delasem’s establishment. Truth is that the Fascist regime promulgated the Racial Laws – an anti-Semitic piece of legislation – in 1938, but the establishment the following year of Delasem by the same government that tabled the Racial Laws suggests a weak alignment with their Nazi partner on Jewish people in Europe.

Sarfatti argued that ‘Mussolini had made a definitive decision to eliminate the Jewish people from Italy’.<sup>462</sup> The results of this research suggest otherwise. One must ask the question – if Mussolini as the leader of the Fascists wished to eliminate Jewish people from Italy, why did he provide access to Italy for Jewish refugees from other European countries? Furthermore, after Italy entered the war, why did the Fascist government establish camps to inter Jewish refugees instead of simply deporting or – as their allies did – exterminating them? What Mussolini *did not do* undermines the opinion of Sarfatti and others.<sup>463</sup> This research proposes that Mussolini could easily have sent Jewish refugees back to their countries of origin – all controlled by Nazi Germany – or have instigated an Italian style version of the Nazi’s ‘final solution’. The result would have been most likely the same for Jewish people but, instead,

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<sup>459</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy: from equality to persecution*.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*

Mussolini established internment camps. Internment camps will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, but as both groups use their establishment as evidence supporting their claims, they will be discussed here in the context of the genocide versus appeasement debate.

Many have linked the camps with those operated by the Nazis where millions lost their lives, but in reality, the Italian camps are incomparable. Delasem's documents suggest that Mussolini's decision to establish the camps helped people in Italy. Furthermore, the daily stipend from the government for Jewish refugees and the allocation of warm clothing and bedding to the people in the camps are unmatched compared with the conditions experienced by those in Nazi operated concentration camps. Despite the removal of some civil liberties, most Jewish refugees in camps in southern Italy survived the war.

Delasem's documents also reinforce the idea that the Fascist government wanted to help the organisation's operation by trying to reunite family members interned in different camps or who had earlier emigrated overseas.<sup>464</sup> Delasem's documents in Rome stated that the organisation established a 'Servizio Ricerche' (Research Service) that had as its aim to find, where possible, information about lost family members of those interned. This evidence reinforces the idea that the Fascist government did not want to separate Jewish families. In addition, Mussolini's government facilitated Delasem's actions of reunifying families and allowed Delasem's Research Service to exist and to operate without obstruction. In addition, even if the internment camps were not ideal accommodation for Jewish refugees, Delasem with the support of the Fascist government worked to enhance the camp's facilities that improved the living conditions at the camps for Italian and non-Italian Jewish people. This occurred despite the economic hardships that Italy increasingly experienced during the Second World War.

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<sup>464</sup> Voigt, pp. 346-347.

The location of camps also suggests that Mussolini and the Fascists did not want the Germans to know of the generally good conditions experienced by Jewish refugees. The camp's siting in isolated areas in the more rural southern parts of the Italian peninsula suggest deliberate concealment. It is not conclusive, but there is no record of any Nazi German visits of the camps, and one must question whether concealment occurred to shield the camps from the eyes of the Italian enemy or its main Axis partner.

*Evidence supporting the genocide group*

The evidence suggests that Delasem was permitted to assist Jewish people because the Italian Fascist government was supportive of Jewish people or at least ambivalent to the plight of Jewish refugees flooding into Italy from other European countries. It is clear from the evidence that the Fascist government established Delasem to act as a third party between the Italian government and non-Italian Jewish refugees. The evidence also clearly indicates that Delasem operated in full collaboration with Joint of New York and HICEM – organisations that helped Delasem aid non-Italian Jews activity by providing financial and logistic support. Joint and HICEM assisted with non-Italian Jews emigration from Italy and helped Delasem and the Italian government establish contacts with countries not aligned with Germany. In addition, they facilitated the provision of visas to Jewish refugees in Italy. Their pro-Jewish acts – and their links with the Italian government – undermine the foundation of the argument from those who consider Mussolini and the Italian government anti-Semitic. However, the financial support provided by HICEM and Joint in particular and the financial gains the influx of American dollars gave the Italian economy is a possible reason for why Delasem operated with immunity. Unlike the clearly described support the government provide Delasem, there is no mention in Delasem's papers of the organisation's leaders believing that their existence occurred purely due to money coming from the United States that funded their support



programme but from which the Italian government also benefitted. However, a series of incidents suggests that US cash into Italian banks did influence some aspects of the Fascist government's behaviour to Jewish refugees.

Almansi and Valobra were pessimistic about receiving approval when initiating contact with the Fascist government regarding establishing a support organisation, but despite their doubt the government gave them permission. Key to the proposal was the mention that US based funding agencies were prepared to support the move and eager to funnel money into Italian banks for the purpose. Between January and July 1940, Joint placed a monthly deposit of Lire 5000 into Italian banks for use by Delasem, but in August 1940, the funding stopped. The cessation of funds made the support programme difficult for Delasem, but the timing of Joint's rebuke is important, for it corresponds with the period of the Italian government's decision to arrest all foreign Jewish refugees in Italy just after the country's declaration of war. For September and October 1940, no funds were deposited into Italian banks from Joint, and Delasem was close to liquidation as a result. Then, on 17 October 1940, there was the sudden reversal of government policy, where Italian refugees were now supported in their emigration from Italy as quickly as possible. Shortly after, Joint reinitiated the depositing of funding into Italian banks.

There is no written evidence in Delasem files saying that Joint stopped funds during the period because of the government's attitude to Jewish people, but the timing of the halting and then starting of deposits suggests that Joint was clearly unimpressed with the Italian government's behaviour towards Jewish refugees between June and September 1940. Whether the loss of foreign funds into Italian coffers causing the Italian government's volte-face can be considered sufficient evidence to support the genocide argument is arguable, but the sudden change in government behaviour – if linked to the stopping of funds – suggests that the Mussolini Fascist government were not as pro-Jewish as some of the assessment group have suggested.

### **Delasem's documents in the context of Fascist government attitudes to Jewish people**

The documents accumulated as a result of Delasem's operations between 1939 and 1948 also provide evidence about other historical events in Italy's history affecting Jewish people during Mussolini's Fascist regime. The tabling of the Racial Laws in 1938, the Jewish census of 1938, allowing Jewish refugees into Italy and assisting them finding refuge outside of Europe, and the establishment of internment camps are events and actions that Delasem's documents mention. The information contained in the files can be used to reassess these events in the context of Delasem's existence under a Fascist regime.

#### *The tabling of the Racial Laws in 1938*

Many consider that the Italian government's Racial Laws had a destructive outcome for Jewish people in Italy.<sup>465</sup> As a result of the laws, those who consider Mussolini as no different to Hitler<sup>466</sup> stress that Jewish people were expelled from Italian schools, businesses and professions, and that the anti-Semitic legislation enacted by the Fascist government made the Italian Jewish people feel like foreigners and outcasts in their own country.<sup>467</sup> This study does not deny that the Racial Laws affected Italian Jewish people negatively, but their tabling does reinforce the idea that the Italian government had to demonstrate some legislation similarities to its ally, Nazi Germany. The promulgation of the Racial Laws was one vehicle used by the Italians to show similarity with the Germans. Their enacting isolated Italian Jewish people and persecuted them, but there were many dissimilarities between Italian and German anti-Semitic legislation.<sup>468</sup> Racial discrimination based on

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<sup>465</sup> Voigt, pp. 346-347.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Reale, p. 50.

political, cultural and religious character articulated the Racial Laws,<sup>469</sup> while promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws by Nazi Germany in 1935 occurred to defend, at all costs, the Aryan race – no matter the circumstances.<sup>470</sup>

Sarfatti and Picciotto argue<sup>471</sup> that the persecution of Jewish people began with the promulgation of the Racial Laws by Mussolini's Fascist government in 1938. They claimed that the situation deteriorated further in 1943 when Nazi Germany occupied northern Italy. The Racial Laws of 1938 are the key attribute of the paradox that exists between the Fascist government and Delasem's operation. However, this study shows that the circumstances for Jewish people in Italy really degenerated only after Nazi Germany invaded and then only in the region of northern Italy the Germans occupied. The Holocaust in Italy began when the north of the country was occupied and not when the Fascist regime tabled the Racial Laws in 1938.

This research emphasises the point that the Fascist government saw the Racial Laws as an instrument allying Italian policies with Nazi German procedures. The Racial Laws were not established to deport Italian and non-Italian Jewish people from Italy to German concentration camps or for the development of similar extermination camps on Italian soil. Delasem's existence and the documents associated with the running of the organisation confirm that Mussolini wanted to avoid the deportation of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people to Nazi concentration camps.<sup>472</sup> Mussolini wanted to appease Hitler, but was unprepared to murder Jewish people.

As a result of tabling the Racial Laws, the Italian government at least on paper initiated plans to remove social rights from Italian Jewish people. However, as government action that supported Jewish refugees shows, backing of the Laws was insincere and mostly verbal expressions of the agreement without any real action,

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<sup>469</sup> Reale, p. 50.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Picciotto, *L'alba ci colse come un tradimento: gli ebrei nel campo di Fossoli 1943-1944*.

<sup>472</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents of Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-6.

support or practice. Delasem's existence and its operation by Jewish people, and Jewish people holding government positions in a Fascist regime, is evidence supporting this claim.<sup>473</sup>

*The 1938 census of Jewish people*

Many consider that the 1938 census on Jewish people in Italy shows Mussolini's anti-Jewish attitude. Picciotto is one, basing her opinion on Mussolini's order for a census<sup>474</sup> on 22 August 1938 that was in the long term lethal to some Jewish people in Italy.<sup>475</sup> Picciotto condemned Mussolini's authorisation of the census, accusing him of causing the Holocaust in Italy.<sup>476</sup> However, Delasem's existence challenges Picciotto's and Collotti's<sup>477</sup> similar views. There is no question that Delasem assisted Jewish people in a stressful period, and that their work before and during the Second World War saved thousands of refugees and native Italian Jewish people. Yet, Delasem in 1939, like Mussolini in 1938, also wanted to know the location and number of foreign Jewish people in Italy. Furthermore, Delasem itself asked for help from Jewish communities to identify quickly and precisely the location and number of non-Italian Jewish people in Italy so that Delasem could provide assistance. In addition, Delasem providing the Italian government with data collected by its various branches across the country suggests a symbiotic relationship between Delasem and the Italian government. Delasem and the local Jewish communities wanted to know this information because they wished to accelerate and improve their aid to foreign Jewish people.<sup>478</sup> Delasem's actions of combining location and number of non-Italian Jewish people in Italy for assisting Jewish people is little different to those performed by the Fascist government, but Delasem's activities are not questioned by Picciotto and Collotti.

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<sup>473</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome's Jewish Community, pp. 1-2.

<sup>474</sup> Picciotto, *Il Libro della Memoria, Gli Ebrei deportati dall'Italia (1943-1945)*.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 854.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>477</sup> Collotti, p. 58.

<sup>478</sup> Ascoli, Delasem, Letter to the President Jewish Community of Rome, p. 1.

This study supports the suggestion that one of Mussolini's objectives in authorising the Jewish people's census was to assist Jewish communities. In 1939, one year after the census, his Fascist government permitted the establishment of Delasem whose work was obviously pro-Jewish. It was better logistically for Delasem and the Italian government to know the whereabouts and number of non-Italian and Italian Jewish people in Italy. Furthermore, Delasem's documents confirm that the Fascist government provided not only administration support to Delasem, but after the establishment of internment camps in Italy, it supplied financial support for each non-Italian Jew person interned. Financial support by the Fascist government was vital for the well-being of Jewish refugees and it was not an act associated with an anti-Semitic mindset. These actions are stark against those that occurred in countries occupied by the Nazis and where Jewish people were interned and murdered in extermination and concentration camps.<sup>479</sup>

*Foreign Jewish people in Italy post 1939*

As detailed in this study, during the Second World War thousands of non-Italian Jewish people immigrated to Italy from other European countries where the Nazi regime had been promulgated. A special census by the Italian government to determine the actual number of Jewish people in Italy in August 1938 recorded 10,173 from countries other than Italy.<sup>480</sup> These Jewish people were in Italy to escape the Nazi persecution that existed in their homeland, and they hoped to find passage out of Europe to a country not under the German yoke. However, Jewish people coming to Italy away from German persecution is an obvious contradiction given the pact made between Germany and Italy in 1936. Adding to the conundrum is the Italian government's decision on 1 December 1939 to establish Delasem as the Italian Aid Commission for Jewish Refugees. The decision by a supposedly anti-

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<sup>479</sup> Zimmerman, p. 20.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

Semitic government to establish an organisation whose existence was purely *to assist* Jewish people is an important landmark for determining the Fascist government's true feelings towards Jewish people with the country tied politically with Nazi Germany, and accounts for why Delasem was able to operate unconstrained between 1939 and 1943.

The manner in which Jewish refugees sought refuge in Italy suggests that there was an awareness amongst those in Jewish communities in European countries that Italy was a safe haven despite the Racial Laws and its alliance with Nazi Germany.<sup>481</sup> This can be the only conclusion for why Jewish refugees sought passage to Italy knowing that the country had a pact with the regime that had forced them from their homes. This study of Delasem's documents held in Rome suggests that the Italian government was supportive or at least ambivalent towards Jewish refugees, and that the government – through Delasem – allowed the population of local Italian Jews to help Jewish refugees.<sup>482</sup> This conclusion suggests that Italian anti-Semitic views existed only on paper, and that the Fascist government's beliefs were incomparable with their German ally.

The Italian government through Delasem helped not only foreign Jewish refugees in Italy but assisted them to emigrate from Italy and its territories to countries not under the Nazi regime.<sup>483</sup> However, there was always fragility with some aspects of this arrangement. One of those aspects – the movement of Jewish people outside of Italy – was dependant on Italy's relationship with other European countries. In addition, Delasem was unsure about Italian government policy to refugees after Italy became an ally of Nazi Germany. Delasem's members – like many other Europeans at the time – predicted Italy's entry into the war and the negative influence that would bring to the organisation's activities. Delasem's members were correct in their

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<sup>481</sup> Zimmerman, p. 187.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome's Jewish Community, pp. 1-2.

concerns, for Italy's entry into the Second World War did severely influence their ability to move Jewish people to safety, but after some confusion, the Italian government continued to support refugees by assisting Delasem until September 1943.

*The establishing of internment camps*

The Italian government assisted Delasem in helping Jewish people seek asylum outside of Italy, but its role altered with the partial closing of Italy's borders after June 1940. The inevitable result of the inability of Delasem to transfer Jewish refugees from Italy was the accumulation of Jewish refugees in Italy. The establishing of internment camps by the Fascist government for those now having to wait longer before possible emigration from Italy saw an increase in Delasem's involvement in finding suitable accommodation for Jewish refugees. The Fascist government assisted and supported Delasem in their new role of establishing assistance for the refugees in internment camps. The primary sources are clear regarding this point – Delasem's involvement in helping Jewish refugees inside internment camps was in complete collaboration with the Fascist government.<sup>484</sup> Not only has this study provided evidence strongly suggesting that Mussolini did not want to eliminate Jewish people from Italy, but it also reinforces the proposal that Mussolini wished ultimately to protect Jewish people from German persecution. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the Italian government still allowed non-Italian Jewish people to emigrate from Italy after the establishment of camps if Delasem found a safe route of exodus. Jewish emigration from Italy after 1940 happened at a smaller scale until September 1943 when Germany took power in northern Italy. It is true that with Italy entering the Second World War, the exodus from Italy for Jewish refugees became more difficult and arduous, but Delasem, assisted by the Fascist government, did not cease continuing its emigration aid work.

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<sup>484</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome's Jewish Community, pp. 1-2.

The Nazis conceived and constructed concentration camps as a device to achieve the ‘final solution’ against Jewish people. The Nazis eventual aim was to avoid genetic contamination of German blood by removing the contaminate.<sup>485</sup> In contrast, the Fascist government’s behaviour suggests that Italian internment camps were an instrument to isolate and protect Jewish people, and<sup>486</sup> were usually away from large population areas.<sup>487</sup>

Italian internment camps served a dual purpose. Their existence avoided upsetting Hitler and the Germans who thought that the Italians had a similar mindset to themselves regarding Jewish people. The camps – at least on paper – therefore assisted in maintaining the pact made between Germany and Italy, but at the same time, they provided the Italian government a humane method of assisting Italian and non-Italian Jewish people who were interned. For the Italian Jewish people interned in them, the camps removed their civil rights and they were most likely extremely basic with what they had experienced before Italy’s entry in the Second World War. However, for Jewish refugees from foreign countries, they were places of refuge and relative safety compared with conditions experienced by Jewish people after the Nazis occupied their homelands or for a few who underwent living in German concentration camps and later escaped.<sup>488</sup>

This study proposes that the purpose of the Fascist government’s internment camps was to protect non-Italian Jewish people from the Nazis. However, the camps also served the purpose of demonstrating to Nazi Germany that Italy’s anti-Semitic policy was supposedly the same as the Nazis. However, the camps were not like German concentration camps, and therefore one can assume that Germans never visited them before 1943 and were unaware of their method of operation.

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<sup>485</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome’s Jewish Community, pp. 1-2.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-3.



Non-Italian Jewish people were interned in the camps shortly after their establishment. Delasem's documents highlight the internees' situation and describe the help Jewish people received from Italian soldiers and police officers – members of organisations with direct links to the government. Soldiers and police acted on behalf of the Fascist government in managing and supervising the non-Italian Jewish people's journey to the internment camps. At the camps, Italian civil servants directed and controlled the daily life of Jewish people in the camps. Furthermore, documents held by Delasem reinforce the fact that Delasem and Mussolini's government worked together to facilitate and to improve life in the camps for the interned Jewish. Delasem's papers confirm that the organisation obtained permission from Mussolini allowing the organisation's leaders Valobra and Luzzatti to visit the camps.<sup>489</sup> With these visits, Delasem established a personal relationship with the Jewish people interned and they could assess and decide on the situation and resolve the most compelling aid actions to take for the interned. What all data indicates is that to facilitate Delasem's work, the organisation had to obtain permission first from the Fascist government.

The Italian government's non-aggressive approach to Jewish people shown by the behaviour of members of government-controlled institutions such as the police and army helped internees to settle reasonably comfortably in internment camps.<sup>490</sup> The Jewish refugees were able to live a normal daily life – as normal as possible under the circumstances – inside the camps or when billeted with Italian Jews families.<sup>491</sup> Internees felt safe in the internment camps, in contrast to German concentration camps where hundreds of their friends and family members were executed. Non-Italian Jews families were permitted to live together whether they were in an internment camp or outside with Italian Jews families.<sup>492</sup> Furthermore, Jewish people in any form of accommodation were permitted to continue their religious and cultural

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<sup>489</sup> Delasem, Office Communication Document, 17 November 1941, pp. 1-6.

<sup>490</sup> Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Jewish communities, p. 1.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>492</sup> Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-2.

practices.<sup>493</sup> This action further destabilises opinion that the Italian government treated Jewish people badly.

It is clear from this research that the establishment of internment camps showed that Mussolini and his government wished to isolate Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy. However, at the same time, the Fascist government wanted to make Italian and non-Italian Jewish people aware of what was occurring on the political and social front in Italy outside the internment camps.<sup>494</sup> This study suggests that the Italian government made the Jewish people as comfortable and secure as possible, so that they could live decently and respectfully, until the European situation changed.<sup>495</sup>

### **Summary: the Fascist government's attitude to Jewish people through Delasem documents**

The Fascist government deprived Italian and non-Italian Jewish people of their legal rights,<sup>496</sup> but this research suggests that at the same time Italy, despite having an anti-Semitic policy, protected thousands of Jewish people from German concentration camps. This protection existed until Mussolini's removal from power in 1943.<sup>497</sup> Furthermore, Delasem, the Italian Aid Commission for Jewish Refugees<sup>498</sup> operated openly, supported by the Italian government.<sup>499</sup> This study suggests that the Italian government's approach to Italian and non-Italian Jewish people was a bluff of racial intolerance to serve the purpose of allying with Germany, but was realistically humane and ultimately helped save Jewish people's lives.

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<sup>493</sup> Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-2.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Israele Kalk, Letter to Delasem, 25 January 1942, pp. 1-3.

<sup>496</sup> Sarfatti, *Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi*, p. 23.

<sup>497</sup> Reale, pp. 148-153.

<sup>498</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents of Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-6.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

Some have argued that Mussolini and the Italian government were in perfect agreement with Hitler's inhumane anti-Jewish campaign. Collotti maintained that the Duce would have acted as brutally if he was in the same powerful position as Hitler.<sup>500</sup> Momigliano argued that the Fascists and Nazis were closely allied regarding their view of Jewish people and that they cooperated in deporting millions of Jewish people to German concentration camps.<sup>501</sup> The documents from Delasem contradict Collotti and Momigliano's wide ranging views. The theme of cooperation between Delasem and the Italian government in Delasem's documents suggest that Mussolini had no intention of acting in the same way as Hitler. On the contrary, Mussolini – after Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940 as Hitler's ally – promulgated a law stating that all foreign Jewish people had to leave Italy and its territories.<sup>502</sup> Importantly, the legislation did not state that non-Italian Jewish people had to return to their country of origin, but could go to any country as long as they left Italian territory.<sup>503</sup> The legislation – the Duce's policy – aligns with what Delasem had been doing since the end of 1939.<sup>504</sup> Effectively, Delasem was already acting under the Fascist government directive in helping non-Italian Jewish people leave Italy and Italian territories safely and travel to countries unoccupied by the Nazis.<sup>505</sup> Furthermore, after Italy entered the Second World War, Delasem increased its work moving non-Italian Jews from Italian territories.<sup>506</sup> The exodus of non-Italian Jewish people was unhindered and supplemented with emigration papers required for a Jewish person to legally leave Italy and emigrate to another country. All paperwork was organised in collaboration with the Fascist government and as a result, 100 non-Italian Jewish people departed the country monthly.<sup>507</sup> If Mussolini had wished, he could have stopped Delasem's aid activities and at any moment

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<sup>500</sup> Collotti, p. 79.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>502</sup> Sarfatti, *Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi*, p. 61.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents of Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-6.

<sup>505</sup> Ascoli, Delasem, Letter to the President Jewish Community of Rome, p. 1.

<sup>506</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 39.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

facilitated the non-Italian Jewish people's genocide by sending them back to German occupied countries.<sup>508</sup> This did not occur, and this detail undermines the arguments of those suggesting a comparable German/Italian ethos with Jewish people. Mussolini and his government, through Delasem, helped Jewish refugees survive.<sup>509</sup>

Villari argues<sup>510</sup> that Mussolini authorised measures that worsened the situation for Jewish people in Italy.<sup>511</sup> Others like Bernardini and Ledeen<sup>512</sup> condemned Mussolini for turning against Jewish people by joining Hitler with the Pact of Steel in 1939.<sup>513</sup> This study cannot deny that Mussolini joined Hitler in the Pact of Steel and that in 1940 Italy entered the Second World War as Germany's ally,<sup>514</sup> but these actions cannot be used to demonstrate Mussolini and the Italian government's attitude to Italian and non-Italian Jewish people. Mussolini had a vision of conquering southern Europe, and he thought that he would achieve this aim by aligning Italy with Germany at a time when France was close to surrender and Britain in disarray.<sup>515</sup> However, his vision did not include the extermination of Jewish people like Hitler's mantra. Delasem's work does not deny that during the war many Italian and non-Italian Jewish people died, but Mussolini's approach to the Jewish people's plight was very different to Hitler's. Mussolini's attitude saved many Italian and non-Italian Jewish people from extermination, and it is for these reasons that Delasem existed as an aid agency.<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Delasem, Minutes of Delasem's meeting Genoa, 8-9<sup>th</sup> November 1941, p. 39.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid., pp. 37-40.

<sup>510</sup> O'Reilly, p. 11.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Michaelis, pp. 277-290.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> Reale, pp. 147-153.

*The Fascist government compared with the Nazis*

This study's focus on how Delasem existed under a Fascist government supports Michaelis statement that 'Mussolini's anti-Semitic laws were little more than a smokescreen, a cover under which the Fascist authorities continued to aid and protect the Jews'.<sup>517</sup> Furthermore, Michaelis stated that, 'behind the façade of racialist intransigence, however, the Duce and his henchmen continued to play their usual double game. Axis partners were pursuing diametrically opposed policies towards the Jews, the alleged common struggle against the Jewish peril notwithstanding'. In many ways, Michaelis would consider the financial gains Italy made from US funds coming into Italian banks as a worthy example of the Fascist leader and his henchmen playing their usual double game.<sup>518</sup>

Many relate the Italian Racial Laws to the Nazi Nuremberg Laws and Mussolini and the Fascist government as anti-Jewish as Hitler and the Nazis. The Duce, as Hitler's ally, is depicted as a murderer supporting Hitler's Jewish genocide. However, Delasem's documents suggest that the Fascist government used a different approach to Jewish people in Italy. The examination of Delasem's documents support a different and less harsh judgment against Mussolini and the Fascist government, and presents a different approach from others.<sup>519</sup> This research suggests that when Mussolini became Prime Minister in 1922 to the time of his removal as effective leader of the Fascist government in 1943, no extermination of Jewish people occurred in Italy. Mussolini's liberal approach (at least compared to his German allies and other European countries) towards Jewish refugees even after the promulgation of the Leggi Razziali in 1938 saved thousands of non-Italian Jewish people from deportation and possible extermination.

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<sup>517</sup> Michaelis, p. 274.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>519</sup> Sarfatti, Picciotto, Zuccotti, Stille, Momigliano & Collotti.

How could Delasem, the Aid Commission for Jewish refugees, effectively exist and operate uninterrupted despite the Racial Laws under Mussolini's Fascist regime from 1939 to 1943? The answer is that Delasem was an aid organisation that Mussolini and the Fascist regime supported. Delasem was established to help the Italian government find a way of removing from Italy non-Italian Jewish people that were arriving from European countries under Nazi control. It effectively existed and operated unhindered because the Italian government supported and allowed its foundation and consequently its aid activities for non-Italian Jewish people. Delasem's work during 1939 and 1940 when Italy entered the Second World War focused on providing and organising safe channels of emigration for Jewish refugees in Italy. After Italy's entry into the war on 10 June 1940, Delasem's role changed to providing aid to Jewish people in newly formed internment camps. This situation remained in place until German invasion of northern Italy in September 1943.

*Summary – the appeasement and genocide debate*

Until this research into Delasem's documents, one could justify and understand the debate between the appeasement and genocide scholars. All had different views on Mussolini and the Fascist government regarding their political and morale conduct toward Italian and non-Italian Jews that lived in Italy between 1939 and 1945. It is well defined in this research, however, that scholars who examined this period of Italian history took limited consideration of Delasem's documents and the context of Delasem's aid activities. This study states clearly that Delasem could exist and operate as a Jewish aid organisation only with the full support of Mussolini and his Fascist government.

Some researchers propose <sup>520</sup> that Delasem operated and put into effect all its aid activities between 1939 and 1943 without the help and well-being of the Italian

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<sup>520</sup> Sarfatti, Picciotto, Zuccotti, Stille, Momigliano & Collotti.

government. However, the analysis of Delasem's documents have exposed the falsity of this opinion and provided a recalibration of this chapter in Italian history. The opinion of researchers that much done by the Fascists in relation to Jewish people was as evil as the Nazis is accepted, but the results of this research on primary sources held at the Jewish Archives in Rome are at such polar opposites to the genocide opinion that one seriously questions the historiography of some approaches. This research demonstrates that the situation for Italian and non-Italian Jewish people was difficult in Italy, but that the Fascist government was not as murderous as the Nazi regime. The Fascists in their years of power never deported Jewish people from Italy to Nazi territories even after 1940 when Mussolini's Fascist government was an ally of the Nazis. After Italy's entry into the Second World War, the Fascist government established internment camps in the southern parts of the peninsula not as a response to mimic Nazis concentration camps, but instead to avoid the Nazis pushing Italy to deport Jewish refugees from Italian territories.

*Finally, Delasem's existence due to Fascist help*

The Duce was the mastermind of the actions against the Jewish with the promulgation in 1938 of the Racial Laws in Italy. He wanted to promote a political alignment between Italy and its German ally. Therefore, if anti-Jewish policies in Italy were implemented like in the territories under German influence, in short time Italy would witness a total expulsion of Jewish people from the country. Instead, Delasem's documents reinforce the fact that the number of European Jewish refugees in Italy continually increased in contrast to the mantra of the anti-Jewish policies. Italy maintained open borders with the stratagem of allowing tourist visas to foreign Jewish people. This research makes it clear why Italy maintained an open border to Jewish people, with the researcher's findings reinforcing the view of the appeasement group; a view that argued that the Fascist government wanted to discriminate but not persecute the Italian and non-Italian Jews in the Italian

peninsula. Furthermore, when Italy entered the Second World War, Delasem was presented with another, more stressful job. However, the deportation of Jewish people from Italy did not occur until Mussolini was removed from power in September 1943. The Fascist government created Italian internment camps to avoid Jewish deportation and to intern Jewish refugees who had not yet emigrated from the country. Delasem's documents supported the appeasement opinion that Italian internment camps worked as a legal instrument for the Jewish refugees to escape Nazi persecution.

The relationship between the various Delasem aid departments and the Italian government and countries willing to receive refugees clearly show the positive approach of the Italian government towards the Jewish people in Italy and account for why Delasem operated during this period. Italian government officers supervised all the documents and activities regarding Delasem. Additionally, liaisons that occurred and the documents preserved that exist between Delasem and overseas aid agencies such as Joint and HICEM show the unobstructed and full collaboration of Delasem with the approval of Mussolini's Fascist government.

A study of Delasem's activities through its documents recounts day-to-day stories about the organisation but also of events affecting Jewish people in Italy. Delasem's documents provide additional evidence about the complexity of relationships that unfolded until the fall of Mussolini's Fascist regime in 1943 and the clandestine workings of the organisation between September 1943 and May 1945. The documents add to the story of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy between 1939 and 1945.



*Nazi and Italian Fascist anti-Semitic policies*

The commonly mentioned statement <sup>521</sup> that Italian and German anti-Semitic policies were the same because they were allies is a falsehood. Fascist and Nazi anti-Semitic policies were very different. The use of anti-Semitic violence in Fascist Italy never reached the level and the extent of what occurred in Nazi Germany. The Duce followed the philosophy of nationalism in a political and cultural logic, the supremacy of the state over the individual and the return of the past glories of Ancient Rome. Instead, Hitler's nationalism centred on race. Hitler worshiped the Germanic Aryan race, and it was his wish to liberate German society of all people of non-Aryan and foreign origins. The Racial Laws included amongst its prohibitions the banning of mixed marriages and having separate schools for Jewish people. The Italian approach on anti-Semitic laws was based on separating Jewish and non-Jewish people in Italy, and trying to exclude Jewish people from important roles <sup>522</sup> – which overall was unsuccessful – but until 1943, the Fascist government committed no physical genocide.

The Racial Laws of the Italian Fascist government were enforced with less vigour when compared to the Nuremberg Laws.<sup>523</sup> As an outcome of the clear distinction between Fascist anti-Semitic policies and Nazi anti-Semitic policies, Delasem was established in Italy and was supported by the Italian government. The Nazis funding an equivalent organisation in Germany at this time is unthinkable.

Delasem's existence is the window allowing historians to understand and to study the life of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy under the Fascist regime from 1939 to 1943. Furthermore, Delasem's aid activities – that had to continue

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<sup>521</sup> Sarfatti, Picciotto, Zuccotti, Stille, Momigliano & Collotti.

<sup>522</sup> Finaldi, pp. 93-98.

<sup>523</sup> Hilberg, p. 425.

underground as a consequence of the new Fascist-Nazi government between 1943 and 1945 – clarify when Jewish persecution and deportation actually started in Italy. This research focused on the reasons for why Delasem existed in Italy when the country had anti-Semitic policies. The events that occurred in Italy and elsewhere in Europe from 1933 to 1945 are fresh in some people’s minds and close in time. It is therefore likely that the interpretation presented by those espousing the genocide opinion – and it must be noted that many with this opinion are Italian – are tied inextricably with some trauma and an air of guilt. This study, using mostly primary sources, did not begin with a mantra of genocide or appeasement, but aimed to examine new material that could present a new and different story about the lives of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people under the Fascist regime.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conclusion**

This research aimed to account for how ‘Delegazione Assistenza Emigrati Ebrei’ (Delasem) – the Italian Aid Commission for Jewish Refugees – existed and operated effectively and unimpeded between 1939 and 1943 despite the Racial Laws during Mussolini’s Fascist regime. In this research, I investigated and analysed Delasem’s role as Aid Commission for foreign Jewish Refugees and Italian Jewish people. The study outlined the significance of Delasem’s aid activities, and its role as a bona fide aid organisation. It also presented reasons for how the organisation existed in Italy from 1939 to 1943 despite laws introduced by the Italian government in 1938 that should have made the organisation’s activities illegal.

This study achieved its aims and answered the research question by examining Delasem documents held in Rome’s Jewish Archive (ASCER). Before this research, Delasem’s documents had not been accessed extensively before. The analysis of Delasem’s documents in this research provided a contemporary and reasonably unbiased source of data about Delasem’s aid work. This study on Delasem’s aid activities provides contemporary evidence related to Italian and non-Italian Jewish people, Mussolini’s government policies and Italian people between 1938 and 1943.

It was impossible to do such research without also examining Italian culture and Italians of all creeds leading up to the late 1930s and 1940s. Jewish people had lived in Italy since the time of the Roman Empire. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish and Christian Italians were culturally inseparable – they formed marriage bonds, worked together, and fought together for their country. Therefore, the establishing of the ‘Leggi Razziali’ in 1938 was not based on cultural division – it was not tabled because of a social problem that existed in Italy at the time. Instead, it was proposed

to make the alliance between Italy and Germany stronger, with the Duce prepared to risk isolating and discriminating some Jewish people in Italy as a result. However, Mussolini could not exterminate Jewish people because non-Jewish Italian people – and simply put, the ethos of Italian culture – would not permit such atrocity. The Duce was aware of the principles and values of Italian people and acutely aware of the backlash that would result that may have affected his dictatorship. Non-Jewish Italians supporting Jewish Italians before – and particularly after the occupation by the Nazis when providing help was very dangerous – emphasise the groups' closeness in culture.

The study analysed the lives of Jewish people, including Jewish refugees who fled to Italy when Mussolini's Fascist regime was arguably at its strongest. Their time spent in Italy as refugees, despite the trauma of uprooting from their homeland, assisted in answering the research question. It was their survival, and in some cases their emigration from Italy to safety, that provided the best guide to how Italian and non-Italian Jewish people survived in Italy under the Fascist government. The treatment of Jewish refugees, which was under examination by the Fascist government at all times, is the best barometer to demonstrate how Delasem was able to operate unrestricted in the support of the Jewish people between 1938 and 1943.

This study's contribution to Italian history is important because using the primary sources from Delasem developed a different interpretation compared to the opinion of some scholars that have researched and debated the attitude to Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy under the Mussolini's Fascist regime. The historians who studied and interpreted the lives of Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy between 1938 and 1943 are divided in this research into the groups of appeasement<sup>524</sup> and genocide.<sup>525</sup> However, while the two groups debate the events

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<sup>524</sup> De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*.

<sup>525</sup> Zimmerman, p. 77.

that affected Italian and non-Italian Jewish people in Italy under Mussolini's Fascist regime, they did not undertake a thorough study of Delasem's role as the Italian Aid Commission for Jewish refugees.

This study about Delasem's existence exposes new information that refocuses a view that conflicts with other assessments and current knowledge about the history of non-Italian and Italian Jewish people in Italy under Mussolini's Fascist regime. This research subsequently contributes to and broadens current understanding, views and knowledge of this era. By thoroughly researching Delasem's activities, this study explained the enigmatic fact that in Italy, eight out of every ten Italian Jewish people survived the Second World War.<sup>526</sup> This study also explained the reason why Delasem was established and operated unobstructed after the promulgation of the Racial Laws and Mussolini's Italian anti-Semitic politics.<sup>527</sup>

Until this thesis, Delasem's work as an aid organisation for non-Italian Jewish people was unstudied, and the results suggest that a reappraisal of the Jewish experience in Italy during the Second World War is necessary. Due to the work of Delasem – that operated in full collaboration with the Fascist government – European Jewish refugees and Italian Jewish people were supported and protected from deportation to a Nazi held region.

The study's aim was to analyse and examine unpublished documents and letters relating to the activities of Delasem from 1939 to 1943, and to understand and interpret how an organisation could exist and operate despite a supposedly anti-Semitic Fascist regime. This study has provided a distinctive, unique and inclusive approach to understanding how Mussolini's and the Italian community's relationship with Jewish people affected the existence and work of Delasem. When commencing this study, it was apparent that many scholars had researched and published on the

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<sup>526</sup> Zimmerman, p. 1.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

Fascist regime and the Jewish people in Italy between 1938 and 1945. However, what was also apparent was that there had been no previous research focused on the operations of Delasem. This study has filled this vacuum – examined and interpreted the primary sources in the Jewish Archive in Rome that have provided a detailed understanding regarding the activities of Delasem. In addition, secondary sources were analysed from various scholars who had studied the Jews in Italy and the same historical period. This study wished to present a thorough analysis of the information obtained to complement the different opinions, evidence, accounts and perspectives on the research question's topic.

When studying Delasem's role as a Jewish aid organisation through its documents, it was like the telling of a new and different chapter on the lives and stories of non-Italian Jewish refugees and Italian Jewish people in Italy. Their story unfolded. Before this study, it was unclear how large a role Delasem played. Now it is clear – Delasem's function was massive in saving European Jewish refugees from deportation from Italy to Nazi held areas and a possible death.

It was initially difficult comprehending what Delasem's documents were suggesting and supporting, but when it became clear what Delasem's aid role in Italy comprised and that it involved collaboration with the Fascist government, it was obvious that their actions and existence contradicted some people's views of what happened in Italy between 1938 and 1943. It was initially difficult to study and interpret documents that supported and suggested something that was at polar opposites with what Italy as a country wished to establish politically and socially in the present era.

This study analysed, described and investigated the aid activities of Delasem as the Jewish aid organisation since its establishment in 1939. Delasem was founded in Genoa and accomplished its aid tasks throughout Italy and its territories. The Fascist regime recognised and supported its establishment and aid assignments. Delasem was established as a consequence of Nazi persecution of Jewish people in other parts

of Europe. Hitler ascended to power in Germany in 1933 and the Nazis tabled the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws in 1935. Furthermore, the Nazi occupation of Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938 and the rest of Czechoslovakia in 1939 resulted in a flood of Jewish people escaping the Nazi yoke. Many of these refugees, with different languages and cultures but united by religion, arrived in Italy with the aim of using the country as a safe haven before departing Europe. The Italian government did not send these European Jewish refugees back to the countries of their origin but helped them in an indirect way by establishing and supporting Delasem.

The results of this study about Delasem suggest a need for a different approach to how Mussolini and the Italian government dealt with Jewish people in Italy. This study achieved its aim because it concentrated on evidence in primary documents, and had an interpretation driven by this evidence alone without succumbing to personal emotion. It is understandable given the revulsions of the period, but some interpretations about Jewish people in Italy during the Second World War appear based generally on the horrors of the Holocaust in other parts of Europe. This research – which is specific – supports that the Italian government's dealings with Jewish people were complex, but at the same time, these dealings reflected a humane approach to providing assistance to Italian and non-Italian Jews. This research supports a Mussolini and a Fascist government that wanted to appear to discriminate against non-Italian and Italian Jewish people, but in reality supported these same people. The Fascist government deprived the Jewish people of their rights, but its soft approach towards foreign Jewish people in Italy enabled Delasem to exist and to operate unhindered under its government.

There are limitations in this research. Due to limited time, one only had access to Delasem's documents in the Jewish Archive of Rome and material held at Ferramonti di Tarsia internment camp. A deeper review can be achieved if more documents from other Jewish archives – like those held at Genoa's Jewish Archive – and other internment camps can be assessed and interpreted. However, the material

accessed in the archive at Rome contained documents from other Delasem offices such as Genoa that discussed similar issues and carried a similar tone, suggesting that an analysis of one office's documents would most likely only add specific regional case studies. The time restrictions to assess documents limited a thorough investigation, but at the same time, it allowed a deep and comprehensive analysis of the available material at Rome and Ferramonti di Tarsia on the subject. The lack of time did not prevent this study from obtaining a robust interpretation about Jewish people in Italy during 1939 and 1945, Delasem's existence, and the Fascist government. Delasem's documents had rarely been examined until now which allowed one to come to a conclusion and a perspective on the subject that other scholars had not considered during the construction of their interpretations.

There is no doubt that other limitations exist, but at the same time, this study has opened a new approach to the situation of Jewish people in Italy during Mussolini's Fascist regime. This study is significant in assisting other scholars researching the Holocaust.

This study on Delasem as a Jewish aid organisation answers the question about how an anti-Semitic country allowed a Jewish aid organisation to exist legally. Mussolini's Fascist regime endorsed Delasem because it was not at its roots anti-Semitic. In reality, with Delasem's establishment, Mussolini and the Fascist government hoped to find ways to support and help Jewish refugees survive in Italy.



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A group of internees play stringed instruments in the Campagna internment camp.

Walter Wolff is standing second from the right, photo,

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