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

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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 Raziali (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’ (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 Raziali (Racial Laws) in 1938 to re-energise Fascism in Italy and to strengthen Italy’s alliance with Hitler.\(^{455}\) In October 1936, Mussolini along with Hitler signed the agreement establishing the ‘Asse Roma-Berlino’ (the Rome-Berlin Axis) alliance between Italy and Germany.\(^{456}\) ‘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.\(^{457}\) Mussolini issued the Racial Laws in 1938.

\(^{454}\) De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, pp. 27-29.
\(^{455}\) Ibid., p. 239.
\(^{456}\) Reale, pp. 19-20.
\(^{457}\) 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. 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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458 Zimmerman, p. 77.
Delasem evidence supporting the appeasement argument

According to one of the major genocide players, ‘Mussolini supported the biological bases of anti-Semitism’ and that ‘for five years, from 1938 to 1943, Jews in Italy were subject to harsh, complex and even more perilous persecution.’ 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’. 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. 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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459 Sarfatti, The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy: from equality to persecution.
460 Ibid., p. 133.
461 Ibid., p. 161.
462 Ibid.
463 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. 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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464 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.465 As a result of the laws, those who consider Mussolini as no different to Hitler466 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.467 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.468 Racial discrimination based on

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465 Voigt, pp. 346-347.
466 Ibid.
467 Ibid.
468 Reale, p. 50.
political, cultural and religious character articulated the Racial Laws, while promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws by Nazi Germany in 1935 occurred to defend, at all costs, the Aryan race – no matter the circumstances.

Sarfatti and Picciotto argue 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. 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,

469 Reale, p. 50.
470 Ibid.
471 Picciotto, L’alba ci colse come un tradimento: gli ebrei nel campo di Fossoli 1943-1944.
472 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.  

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 on 22 August 1938 that was in the long term lethal to some Jewish people in Italy. Picciotto condemned Mussolini’s authorisation of the census, accusing him of causing the Holocaust in Italy. However, Delasem’s existence challenges Picciotto’s and Collotti’s 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. 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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473 Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome’s Jewish Community, pp. 1-2.
475 Ibid., p. 854.
476 Ibid.
477 Collotti, p. 58.
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 Jews 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.479

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.480 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-

479 Zimmerman, p. 20.
480 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.\textsuperscript{481} 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.\textsuperscript{482} 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.\textsuperscript{483} 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

\textsuperscript{481} Zimmerman, p. 187.
\textsuperscript{482} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{483} 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.484 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.

484 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.\(^{485}\) In contrast, the Fascist government’s behaviour suggests that Italian internment camps were an instrument to isolate and protect Jewish people, and\(^ {486}\) were usually away from large population areas.\(^ {487}\)

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.\(^ {488}\)

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.

\(^{485}\) Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the President of Rome’s Jewish Community, pp. 1-2.
\(^{486}\) Ibid.
\(^{487}\) Ibid.
\(^{488}\) 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.\footnote{Delasem, Office Communication Document, 17 November 1941, pp. 1-6.} 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.\footnote{Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Jewish communities, p. 1.} 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.\footnote{Ibid., p. 2.} 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.\footnote{Almansi, Delasem, Letter to the Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-2.} Furthermore, Jewish people in any form of accommodation were permitted to continue their religious and cultural
practices. 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. 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.

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, 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. Furthermore, Delasem, the Italian Aid Commission for Jewish Refugees operated openly, supported by the Italian government. 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.

494 Ibid.
496 Sarfatti, Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi, p. 23.
498 Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents of Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-6.
499 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.\textsuperscript{500} 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.\textsuperscript{501} 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.\textsuperscript{502} 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.\textsuperscript{503} The legislation – the Duce’s policy – aligns with what Delasem had been doing since the end of 1939.\textsuperscript{504} 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.\textsuperscript{505} Furthermore, after Italy entered the Second World War, Delasem increased its work moving non-Italian Jews from Italian territories.\textsuperscript{506} 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.\textsuperscript{507} If Mussolini had wished, he could have stopped Delasem’s aid activities and at any moment

\textsuperscript{500} Collotti, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{501} Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{502} Sarfatti, \textit{Le leggi antiebraiche spiegate agli italiani di oggi}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{503} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{504} Valobra, Delasem, Letter to the Presidents of Italian Jewish communities, pp. 1-6.
\textsuperscript{505} Ascoli, Delasem, Letter to the President Jewish Community of Rome, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{506} Delasem, Minutes of Delasem’s meeting Genoa, 8-9\textsuperscript{th} November 1941, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{507} Ibid.
facilitated the non-Italian Jewish people’s genocide by sending them back to German occupied countries. 508 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.509

Villari argues510 that Mussolini authorised measures that worsened the situation for Jewish people in Italy.511 Others like Bernardini and Ledeen 512 condemned Mussolini for turning against Jewish people by joining Hitler with the Pact of Steel in 1939.513 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,514 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.515 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.516

508 Delasem, Minutes of Delasem’s meeting Genoa, 8-9th November 1941, p. 39.
510 O’Reilly, p. 11.
511 Ibid.
512 Ibid.
513 Ibid.
514 Michaelis, pp. 277-290.
515 Ibid.
516 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’.\footnote{Michaelis, p. 274.} 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.\footnote{Ibid., p. 294.}

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.\footnote{Sarfatti, Picciotto, Zuccotti, Stille, Momigliano & Collotti.} 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.
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 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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520 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.
The commonly mentioned statement\(^{521}\) 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\(^{522}\) – 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.\(^{523}\) 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

\(^{521}\) Sarfatti, Picciotto, Zuccotti, Stille, Momigliano & Collotti.
\(^{522}\) Finaldi, pp. 93-98.
\(^{523}\) 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.