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

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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 19th 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 appeasement⁵²⁴ and genocide.⁵²⁵ However, while the two groups debate the events

⁵²⁴ De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*.

⁵²⁵ 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.⁵²⁶ 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.⁵²⁷

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

⁵²⁶ Zimmerman, p. 1.

⁵²⁷ 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.