

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this research is to tell the unknown story of the Italian occupation of the south part of the French territory during the Second World War, more precisely between November 1942 and September 1943. Such occupation did not have only military consequences, because the Italian presence guaranteed an almost safe place to stay for many persecuted Jewish. The main objective of this paper is consequently, after having summarized the main events happened between 1933 and the end of the Second World War, to deeply analyze international relations among the involved countries and report particular experiences and stories of survived Jewish that lived in that area.

After the crisis following the German occupation of France (1940), Philippe Pétain became Prime Minister and the French territory was divided into two parts. The north was directly occupied by the German army, while the south, called “free zone”, was administered by the Vichy government. However the south was only formally free and in 1942, with the “Anton Operation”, the joint German and Italian army occupied even the south of France. Regarding the “Jewish treatment”, while the Vichy French were following the German directives, helping them in the realization of the “final solution”, the Italian attitude towards Jewish was already clear from what happened in Croatia in 1941, where the Jewish were persecuted by the so called “Ustasha”, a nationalist Croatian group. During such persecution Italian soldiers tried to help Jewish in many different ways, in particular organizing specific military action. Italian officials refused to follow any kind of influence from Germany in the territory that they have occupied. The scorn of both the population and the high officials of the Italian diplomacy after the emanation of the laws on race purity was a clear indication of the necessity to act in a very different way. A letter from the Foreign Affairs Ministry underlines that the behaviour that Italian officials are supposed to have towards Jewish has already been decided by their superiors; they are not supposed to be ordered by someone else to deport Jewish. It is clear, however, that the feelings of these officials were decisive in order to implement such dispositions.

Jewish are coming to Nice from everywhere: they know they have different perspective over there. In particular they have an important man, the Italian banker Angelo Donati, that devoted its life to realize the objective of saving all the Jewish that were living in Nice. He organized a committee that welcomed the Jewish arriving in Nice and helped them when Vichy officials were trying to arrest them. The main activity of such a committee was to create fake documents for the persecuted; documents where at least the word Jewish was absent. Donati was a honoured man: he played a decisive role in connecting the French and the Italian army during the First World War and he

obtained the “Legion d’Honneur” in France. Being smart, full of energy, without a Jewish surname and prestigious, neither Vichy nor Berlin were aware of its activity.

After a while, however, the Italian obstructionism became clear both to Vichy and Berlin and a reaction was unavoidable. Rubière, prefect of Nice in that period, was expecting full collaboration from Italy and its government; on the contrary he was receiving only orders and reprimand letters by Italian officials. Knochen, the head of the Gestapo of Paris, passed to Berlin a polemic report of Rubière, in which the prefect stated that any time he was trying to follow the orders coming from Vichy (that is, to transport Jewish in German controlled zones and impose the yellow star) he faced the Italian opposition. Moreover, he underlined that such a situation was strongly increasing the harmony between the local population and Italian occupation army. As a consequence, German government sent the Foreign Affairs Minister Von Ribbentrop to talk directly to Benito Mussolini, who was made aware of the “final solution” dossier. However, even after this diplomatic action, the situation was the same as before: ambassador Mackensen presented to Mussolini a report containing 24 cases of Jewish protection by the Italians. The undersecretary of the Foreign Affairs Ministry Bastianini tried to convince Mussolini both of the big responsibility he would have taken by following German government indications and of the reason that were addressing the behaviour of the Italian officials in the occupied territory of France. Mussolini tried to convince the Nazi regime of its intention by giving to an Inspector, named Lospinoso, the task to control the situation in the residential neighbourhood of Nice. A fascist inspector, arrived to manage the racial Italian police, immediately generated fear and worries in the population; Donati organized a meeting between Lospinoso and the priest Marie-Benoit: they found an important agreement, that was consisting basically in the idea that Lospinoso was still officially the inspector in Nice, but actually he was always unavailable for the Gestapo. The situation stayed consequently the same as before, until the Gestapo got suspicious about this solution and only in the beginning of June understood that behind Lospinoso and his behaviour there was the tactic of an Italian Jew, Donati, who was already known because of Knochen’s report.

At a certain point, however, in order to accomplish several requests from the Nazi government, many Jewish were moved from the coast to villages on the Alps. In such villages, that usually were vacation destinations, life was going on normally: there were churches where to pray, dining halls for lonely people, schools for children, weddings. Italian police was controlling all this villages, protecting their new inhabitants. One of these villages, Saint-Martin Vésubie, was completely surrounded by mountains and, in case of a raid organized by the Nazi, it would have been very

difficult to escape. Different possible routes were studied and the only feasible one was through the “Window Mountain” and the “Cherry-Tree Mountain”. The 8<sup>th</sup> of September the government headed by Badoglio decided to switch the role of Italy in the world: now Italy will fight with the Allies against the Reich. It was almost certain that the Italian army did not have the possibility to ward off an attack from Germany, in particular in the south part of France. It is the moment, for many Jewish, to escape towards Italy through the mountains. It was a real exodus: columns of people walking in the cold night in order to reach freedom. Almost 350 were captured by the SS, facing an horrible destiny. In addition to these extemporaneous escapes, Donati organized with the support of the Allies navy the transportation of 20000 Jewish from France to the North of Africa. After Mussolini’s fall, it was evident the necessity of protecting the Jewish living in this zone, due to the progressive retire of the Italian army. Donati multiplied its efforts in order to have success with his plan, that would have saved all the Jewish of Nice. However, there was not enough time: due to the delays and the hesitation of the Allies diplomacies and due to the anticipation of the armistice (in Donati’s mind, this fact has to be attributed to a big error of Eisenhower), the plan has never been applied, despite both Donati and Marie-Benoit made big pressure on the Allies diplomats.

The Italian army finally left Nice and for the Gestapo was easy to find and deport all the Jewish that were still there. “Finally on the Promenade des Anglais benches are free, because they are not occupied by that good-for-nothing Jewish” was written in a Gestapo report. During the Italian occupation there was time for the Jewish to organize themselves; despite of this, when arrived in Nice, the German were already aware of everything: they knew who and where to search; they knew that Jewish in this region were showing fake identity card. They were not asking anymore for documents or information: they were used to arrest directly. A Jew lawyer, Serge Klarsfeld, who was only 8 years old at the time of such events, has given testimony of the terrible events that were happening: 30-40 Jewish a day were deported, despite the important help coming from the local population that prevented a catastrophe of bigger dimension, considering that there were at least 25000 Jewish in Nice. He was saved by the smartness and braveness of his father: when the Gestapo soldiers entered his house, the father closed Serge, his wife and his daughter behind a false wood wall and then gave himself up, saying that the other members of the family were in the countryside due to an extermination, in order not to let the soldier discover the refuge. Klarsfeld underlined that all the persecuted Jewish would have been enormously thankful to the Italian soldiers, which have guaranteed them at least a period of hope. The Italian population has helped Jewish people not only in Nice, but also in Croatia, Greece and on its own territory: even if

Mussolini was a real anti-Semite, it is possible to claim that the Italians had a specific and particular role in the Shoah; and such role, as it is shown in such stories, was not so negative at all.

There are many other stories very similar to the one of Klarsfeld. Unfortunately it is not possible to tell all of them in such a short work; however very touching is the one of Marianne Spier Donati, 12 years old, and her little brother, 10 years old, whose parents were deported to Auschwitz, from where they never came back. The family was living in Efurt; after a long escape through Europe, they got stabilized in south part of France, where they felt safe. However, when the Italian army had to retire, the Vichy policy immediately arrested them and it was just due to a miracle and the smartness of their parents that the two children avoided to be deported. They have finally been adopted by Angelo Donati, who took care of them like if they were his children.

It is good question to wonder why Italians did behave this way. This question has been struggling historians many times; one possible answer can be retrieved by a letter sent by Pellegrino Ghigi, ambassador in Athens, to Luca Pietromarchi, an official of the Foreign Affairs Minister, in which it is clearly stated that the deportation of Jewish from Greece should be avoided “for thousand of reasons, ranging from our humanity to our prestige”. This sentence explains only two reasons on one thousand, but could give at least a general idea. In any case, the humanity of the Italian population is not only an historic data, but a fact. Regarding prestige, it was important for the Italians to appear, in the territory occupied by its army, different from the German Reich; they wanted to be allies with same duties and rights and not just a satellite-state, always ready to execute Hitler’s orders. Moreover, it should be underlined that Italy had a huge economic and political interest in maintaining the Italian-Jewish community in the North of Africa and in Salonico, because they were essential in representing Italian interests in such zones.

The aim of the stories and facts summarized in this paper is to try to understand, or at least explain, the role the Italian population had in the Jewish persecution. Humanity and economic interests seem to be the main reasons of their charitable behaviour. Probably the best explanation is the one given by Ernesto Braun, whose parents were deported and died in Auschwitz and who participated in the resistance movements on the Cuneo mountains. He was asked to say why Italians have been so benevolent and the answer was straightforward: “Probably because they are Italians, because they do not manage to accept that something is taken until its most extreme consequences, probably because they are Italians”.