



Interviewee: Alexander Stille

Title: The life and death of Jews under Mussolini

Duration: 8 minutes, 9 seconds

Introduction

Because the Nazi occupation of Poland was catastrophic for the Jewish people, we tend to associate the Holocaust with Eastern Europe. Of course the Jews of other European countries, especially Italy, also suffered devastating losses.

In this episode of Bookpod, Alexander Stille talks about *Benevolence and Betrayal*, the book he wrote in the early 1990s to convey the experience of five Jewish families under Mussolini's fascism. Here he talks about three of them.

Presentation

There were a couple of things that were really distinct and unique about that Jewish experience in Italy that I wanted to capture.

One was the fact that Italy was the only country where fascism had come to power before the arrival on the international scene of Hitler.

And in fact Italian fascism was not in its initial incarnation antisemitic. So one of the things that I wanted to do was to reorient readers' thinking. We tend to, as people who grow up after World War II, to think of fascism and antisemitism as synonymous, and in fact they were not.

Italian fascism came to power and governed for eleven years before Hitler took power in Germany, and for sixteen years, before Mussolini allied himself politically with Hitler and aligned his racial policies with Hitler's. So you had the 16-year period where Jews and fascists co-existed and in some cases co-existed quite harmoniously.

So the first story is the story of a Jewish fascist family, people who were deeply patriotic, as Italian Jews in general were, whether they were on the left politically or on the right politically.



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I knew I wanted to find a family from Ferrara. Ferrara is a small Italian city with a very rich Jewish past. It was also the setting for the famous novel and then movie the *Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and has an interesting history to it.

So, for example, I was interviewing a woman who lived in Milan because she was from Ferrara. I asked her at the end of the interview, "Who else from Ferrara do you know that I might talk to?" And she said, "Well, there's a man here in Milan who has a very interesting story if he'll tell it to you." And she said he was deported to Buchenwald with his mother and father.

So I called him up and he very graciously agreed to see me.

I went to see him at about 6:00 in the evening after he got off work. And luckily I brought a lot of tapes with me and a lot of batteries, because I simply turned on the tape recorder, and he began talking.

And this extraordinary story that he had never told anybody, including his own wife and children, came tumbling out. It was as if he had experienced this the day before or the week before, and he described it with just incredible precision, remembering exact dates and days of the week and so forth. And then I went and checked them afterwards. Everything that he told me checked out in terms of the historical record. And he described this extraordinary experience of this family from Ferrara. They were middle class people, not particularly privileged. Because they didn't have much in the way of money, they didn't flee at the time of the German occupation. They didn't believe anything bad would happen to them. They were deported. And quite incredibly, they had a number of things that turned out to be very important in their story that I wanted to get at.

First, he was a half Jew. His father was Jewish and his mother was not. And the half-Jews were treated differently



than Jews. Whereas, the full Jews were deported to Auschwitz from the concentration camp in Italy, they used a transit camp that they used to decide who would go where. And these people worked in this transit camp for a period of months, essentially organizing the deportation of others, which itself was an extremely important story to tell.

And then when the Germans decided to get rid of them, they sent the three of them to two different camps, the mother to Ravensbrook, which was a woman's camp, and the father and the son to Buchenwald, which was not an extermination camp like Auschwitz, and was a mix of Jews, political prisoners and other undesirables of the Nazi regime. And whereas at Auschwitz, you know, 90-plus percent plus of people died, at Buchenwald maybe 50 percent died, so you had a greater chance of survival, although Jews probably survived at lower percentages than that because they were treated worse.

But incredibly this young man and his father both survived and were not separated, which itself was also an extraordinary experience.

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The systematic roundup of Jews began with this famous roundup in Rome, the 16th of October of 1943. And because that was such a key event, I wanted to have a family that would allow me to tell that story. The Roman Jewish community was the largest Jewish community in Italy. It was the oldest Jewish community in Italy.

We do know that there were Jews in Rome back in Roman times. Some Italian Jewish families in Rome believe that they are the descendants of those early Roman Jews.

Moreover, because Rome was also the center and is also the center of the papacy, the relationship between the Church and the ghetto of Rome is highly significant and a very important story to get into if you want to explain the history of Italian Jews. So to have a family based in Rome



and living in the ghetto allowed me to tell this 2,000-year history that the reader needs to know through the life of a single family, and then this family happens to be in the ghetto the day of the big roundup on the 16th of October, and one of the children in the family whom I interviewed was in fact captured that day and deported to Auschwitz and miraculously survived, and others managed to escape that particular day.

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One of the greatest gifts for me in working on this book was meeting many of the people that I interviewed. For example, Vittorio Foa, who[m] I write about in the second story in the book, became a very close friend for all the years after I worked on the book until his death a year ago at the age of ninety-eight. He was an antifascist Jew from Turin who spent eight and a half years in fascist prisons because of his anti-fascist activity having nothing to do with being Jewish and then worked in the Resistance during the war.

Meeting him, somebody who had spent eight and a half years in prison for his beliefs, who could have gotten out of prison by simply writing a[n] apology to Mussolini at any time, it was a great experience to meet someone who had experienced firsthand and on their own flesh what freedom means, what lack of freedom means, what democracy means, what racial persecution and fascism mean.

Dealing with these people was a real human education for me as well as an historical political education.

Valedictory

You can read more about Alexander Stille on his Columbia University Journalism School faculty page.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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