

The 800 Jewish Holocaust orphans of Selvino

The story of an abandoned estate in Italy, and the 800 traumatized orphaned Jewish children who were treated there from 1945-48 before going to Palestine.

by Phyllis Chesler



Poland's "dignity" is offended by the truth—but only when that truth exposes a Polish official or citizen for having [persecuted Polish Jews](#) during the Nazi occupation. The Polish government has never tried any Polish historian or journalist for having described Polish individuals and clergy who fed, hid, and saved Polish Jews.

The honor of Poland is at stake and the Poles are deeply invested in presenting themselves as "victims"—of the Russians and of the Nazis, never also as the perpetrators of Jew-hatred and pogroms long before the Nazi armies came to town, and after they were driven out (Jewabne, Kielce).

Down the decades, I have learned bitter but complex truths about the French, Dutch, Belgian, Spanish, Hungarian, Greek, Croatian, Norwegian, and Ukrainian complicity in the Holocaust. Somehow, because I loved Italy (the art, the opera, the landscape, the cinema), I never looked too closely at their role during World War Two. Once, when I hired a guide to take me on a tour of Jewish Italy, she gave me a book which contained a fairly gruesome history of 2,000 years of Italian Jewish sorrows. And once, when I was living in Venice, it hit me hard when I learned that Venice–Venice! had also turned over its Jews to Hitler, albeit, not until 1943.

When I looked into the matter further, I understood that Italy had begun to disenfranchise its Jews in 1938, before Kristallnacht took place in Germany. Jewish children were no longer allowed to attend private schools, Jewish professors were exiled from all universities, from government and military service, as well as from banking and insurance industries. In 1939 and 1940, Jewish peddlers and shopkeepers' licenses were revoked and all Jews who held stocks and bonds were required to turn them over to "Aryans." If possible, matters worsened once Germany occupied Italy in 1943. According to Ms. Ilaria Pavan, a former Italian official investigating the "looting of property of Jewish Italian citizens," as of 2010, such looting "[about the orphaned](#) "children of Selvino," and relates the true story of the 800 traumatized Jewish children who were rescued from concentration camps and ghettos all across Europe, who had no parents, no families, and who were physically, psychologically, spiritually, and sexually wounded, as well as educationally deprived.

From 1945-1948, the Milanese Jewish community, the municipality of Milan, soldiers of the Jewish Brigade (Moshe Ze-eri and Teddy Be'eri), the Jewish Agency, the Joint Distribution Committee, Youth Aliyah, and former anti-fascist partisan fighters, and Jewish and non-Jewish youth workers all

took care of these children in an abandoned estate in northern Italy. They tried to heal them well enough so that they could make the journey to Palestine on those heroically “illegal” immigrant ships that the British stopped, fired upon, and forced to land in Cyprus. Eventually, some of these children joined Kibbutz Tze’elim in the Negev.

In 2019, after a [museum](#) opened in Selvino to commemorate this heroic rescue operation.

The [Israel National News](#).