Jewish Experiences in Italy During WWII

experienced increased integration into Italian society, dismantling the institutionalized segregation seen in the Ghettos.[10] So when Mussolini adopted the Racial Laws, Jews were shocked at the growing antisemitism of the fascist government. They had con-

race. However, the Manifesto of Race asserted that “the Jews do not belong to the Italian race,” because their population in Italy never assimilated, being composed of non-European racial elements fundamentally di f erent from those which gave rise to the Italians.[15]

A “good Jew,” one not considered inferior to Italians, was de f ned by their good conduct and assimilation into society. According to this train of thought, antisemitism is something the Jews either bring about or prevent through their own behavior.[16] The major theme that emerged from this propaganda was the notion of a certain “good status” ascertained through the conduct of Jewish Italians. The perfect Jewish model, according to antisemitic Fascist Italian writings, would be someone fully integrated into Italian life beyond recognition by others. In this scenario, Jewishness would be practiced internally and not publicly, and Jews would instead become overly patriotic and openly support fascism. Interestingly, many did.

Political cartoons, created in the context of rising antisemitism and the threat of allied intervention, encapsulate the fascist narrative written under Mussolini. These sources shed light on fascist propaganda circulating in Italy during WWII.[17] The images depict a powerful fascist state—a new Roman empire—and portray the allied powers as enemies. Interestingly, there are no documents that discuss the treatment of Jews in Italy. Nevertheless, the primary sources allow us to better understand the political environment of Italy during the war and the resulting treatment of Jews, as indicated by the testimonials of survivors.Top of FormBottom of Form

The broadside picture titled, “The new barbarians invaded the city and camped among the great vestiges, moving expressions of the human civilization,” circulated around Italy in 1937 after Mussolini’s Fascist troops entered Rome and announced the creation of the second empire.[18] The passage re f ects an Italian Fascist perspective on Mussolini’s 1937 declaration of what they called the new Roman Empire. The language used is dramatic and emotive, expressing a mix of pride and nostalgia. The text starts with a metaphorical reference to “new barbarians” invading the “Urbe,” a term often used to refer to Rome. “New barbarians” refers to the Fascist troops entering Rome—barbarians not in a negative sense but rather as a nationalistic outlook on the power of the new warriors defending Italy. The text expresses a deep faith in the “shining /Lang (en-US)/MCID 1990 BD7u.]TJ warriotment of Jews, as

the Fascist regime. A mention of the power of Rome being reborn under the sign of

experiences of both foreign and native Jews. These experiences follow general themes that are often unexpected and surprising to read. But it is important to note that these experiences do not represent all experiences of Jewish people. My collection of sources is limited to those that are transcribed or translated into English and focuses solely on Italy. The sources are also heavily biased in many ways because they all express

in Leipzig, Germany, leading up to the war.[24] At the age of 20, Weissman left Berlin to work in the fur trade in Milan. Weissman had planned to leave Germany, stop in Italy, and then head to France or Chile, but he was arrested and taken to internment camps in Macerata and then Ferramonti di Tarsia.

During his time in Milan, there had been rumors circulating that the Germans had asked the Italians to send foreign Jews to Germany, on the basis that they were enemies against the war e f ort. The Italians instead interned the Jews in camps in Italy. According to Weissman, no atrocities took place there, and the Red Cross took care of the prisoners. The internees could even send twenty- f ve-word letters.[25] According to

terrible stories of Jews packed inhumanely into cattle-cars or the forced death marches they took in Germany. He was lucky to have received the treatment he did, relative to the experiences of Jews in the rest of Europe. In Ferramonti, Weissman described the living conditions as beautiful, with plenty of leisure time.[29]

Walston discusses how although the Ferramonti camp did have barbed wire and constrained the individual's freedom, the internees enjoyed a large degree of self-government. At the beginning of its construction, the Ferramonti camp often lacked food and the conditions were harsh, but eventually life in the camp was tranquil and good relations existed between the internees and the Italian authorities.[30] In Weissman's time at the camp there were roughly over a thousand people interned: all non-Italians, nearly all Jews, with the exception of a few Yugoslavs. They had a clinic run by doctors who were also internees, and work at the camp was optional. Weissman discusses how the internees were obviously not granted the freedom to go where they wished, but if they did work, they could walk to the woods and build a canal. He describes it as a refreshing and peaceful experience, where the work was hard, but they could buy goods with their earnings, saying, "I believe we were better of than people of our own age in any other country at that time."[31]

Boyana Yakovlevich, a Jewish woman born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, was also sent to the Ferramonti di Tarsia camp. Her father wanted to get their family out of Yugoslavia, away from German persecution. At the time, they had no concept of

kitchen; it was larger and more sanitary; families had their own rooms with stoves; and men and women were separated.[34] She explains the curfew that was in place, until which the Jews could move around all day. At the time that Yakovlevich was interned there, there was a school where she could teach children, and a choir.[35] She resided in Ferramonti for 11 months.[36]

The experiences of the camps so far follow the theme laid out by James Walston: two camps, one typically outside of Italy, intended to subdue uprisings by foreign people, and the second, meant to save Jews from the persecution of Nazi Germany. The camps in Italy, as seen in the two primary sources, were more humane and cleaner, and prisoners had cordial interactions with the Italian police. However, these more peaceful and free concentration camps were not always the experience of Jews in Italy, speci f cally in the case of Trieste, which held the only extermination camp in Italy. The camp, Risiera di San Sabba, was f rst used as a transit camp in 1943, an

On 16 August 1944, Clara Menasce arrived at Auschwitz after a trip of 20 days, left as one of the only survivors from Rhodes.[39] When they arrived, she remembers being shaved, completely undressed, and showered. They were given dresses with no shoes, leaving them unable to recognize one another. The miseries she experienced included roll call at 3 AM when it was cold and raining, soup and coffee thrown into their faces, sharing food in a bowl with four people and sleeping three people to a blanket, carrying bricks from one place to another, and being beaten by soldiers if there was dust on their dresses.[40] These are only a few of the inhumane actions against Jews in Nazi-run work camps like Auschwitz. In Hitler's eyes, Jewish people were inferior to Germans in every capacity, and thus treated like they were not human, rather as if they were animals. Menasce was forced to continue to other camps as the allies drew closer to Germany, and she almost died. Luckily, she was liberated by the Americans in Turkheim and saved.[41] The conditions of these German-run camps drastically contrast to experiences at the Italian ones, not specifically because Italians were nicer or better people, but because the Italian population was rarely in support of antisemitism and the atrocities rumored to occur abroad.

As previously discussed, the actions of the Italian government towards Jews

cial Laws. Others felt sympathy and friendship towards their Jewish neighbors, having bonded over millenniums of shared history, or they simply were doing what they felt was right and could see the threatening measures implemented by the Germans. Two distinct groups of Italians who aided Jews emerge from archival testimonials. First, government workers and Carabiniere, and second, normal Italian citizens. Clara Menasce, a Jewish Holocaust survivor born in Rhodes, Italian-occupied Greece, discusses the treatment by Italians she experienced growing up in Rhodes. The Italians in Rhodes, according to Menasce, "were not antisemitic."[42] In fact, according to the author Anthony McElligott, the German authorities had been complaining that the Italians were preventing the implementation of anti-Jewish policies by providing little to no cooperation.[43] McElligott's work is one of few sources that discusses in detail scholarship on Jewish experiences in Rhodes leading up to and during the Holocaust. As Germans began to fully occupy Greece and its islands, they treated the Italian Jews in Rhodes as if they were Greek Jews. The Germans gathered the Jews in Rhodes into

The aid of not only anti-fascist members of government but the di f erent Italian soldiers demonstrates a shared community and understanding between the Italians and Italian Jews. The Italian resistance emerged after the fall of Mussolini's Fascist regime and the imposing threat of German occupation in the North. These partisan groups consisted of many Italians against the Fascist and Socialist policies and actions

to escape to Rome.[56] Their Italian friends helped them obtain identity cards and fee Borgotaro.[57]

the fluidity of ideologies, the varied responses of individuals and communities, and the intricate web of factors that shaped the destinies of those caught in the storm of war. As we reflect on this historical epoch, it becomes clear that Italy's wartime history is far from a monolithic tale, and the voices of Italian Jews serve as crucial threads in the intricate tapestry of World War II narratives.