

A group of Italian doctors save Jews during the Holocaust: an ingenious ploy

המציל נפש אחת כאילו הציל עולם ומלואו

Talmud (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)

Chi salvo uno solo persona e come se salvase un mondo intero (Italian)

Whoever saves one life, it is as if he has saved a whole world

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Persecution is a repeated element in world history, none more so than concerning the Jewish people. Their persecution has been constant, progressive in intensity, and in the 20th century quite devastating. Those oppressive regimes throughout history would not have succeeded without the support of their subjects. Nonetheless, there have been numerous righteous people, who with courage and ingenuity and at risk to their own lives did save Jews.

During the Holocaust, one particularly resourceful group of four Italian physicians at Ospitale Fatebenefratelli on the island of Tiberina in central Rome, Italy, exemplifies this.

The Fatebenefratelli Order was the brainchild of a Portuguese man, Camillo de Lettis. The order was initiated in Granada in 1538 with the intention of offering material and spiritual aid to the infirm, the needy and the poor, irrespective of ethnic, social or religious differences. The Order expanded the network of hospitals in Italy, Spain, and Africa, and even included one in Nazareth, Israel.

The Tiberina Hospital was established in the mid-19th century in an old monastic building on a small island in the Tiber river that coursed through Rome. The island was possibly the site of the Temple of Aesculapius, the Greek God of Medicine, in the 3rd century BCE. The hospital is located about 100 meters from the Great Synagogue, which is on the mainland, at the edge of the Jewish ghetto. Today it is a fully equipped medical facility.

Visitng in August 2016, I was guided through the hospital by a priest, who directed my attention to a plaque on the wall. The plaque read “Casa de Vita,” erected in the memory of “innocent people persecuted by the Nazis.” This plaque was located in a very busy hospital, which is in the center of the bustling capital where frequent ambulance sirens announcing emergency cases can be heard. While we were standing in the portico of the hospital building, surrounded by religious monuments, the priest recounted the story of how the Jews were saved from the SS during the Second World War.

The four members of the hospital staff involved in the ruse were Vittorio Sacerdoti, Giovanni Borromeo, Adriano Ossicini and Fra Bialik. It began when Sacerdoti, a Jewish physician working under an assumed name in the hospital, convinced the director Borromeo and his assistant Adriano Ossicini, with the support of Fra Bialik, a Polish priest, to instigate the “K-syndrome” plan. The plan was to infect Jews with the fictitious, highly contagious “K syndrome.” This syndrome was the salvation of Jews, who were either admitted to an isolated department in the hospital or provided with a “K-syndrome” certificate. The “K” officially denoted Koch tuberculosis, but

in fact it really stood for Kesselring, general of the occupying German Army, and Kappel, head of the SS in Rome.

The exact number of Italian Jews saved by K syndrome is unknown. Accounts range from dozens to hundreds. The majority of Jews infected by the “K syndrome” survived, although some were betrayed to the SS and deported.

Dr. Borromeo was recognized as a Righteous Gentile by Yad Vashem (Holocaust memorial institute in Jerusalem) in 2004. In June 2016, at the age of 96, Dr. Ossicini was present at a commemoration at the hospital. Joining the commemoration was a woman, who in 1944 had been a 16 year old girl hidden in the hospital.

To close a series of articles in which I recalled Jewish physicians who had been persecuted, I consider it fitting to also pay tribute to the Righteous Gentiles who saved Jewish physicians as well as patients [1,2].

References

1. Weisz GM. Remembering Jewish physicians. *IMAJ* 2015; 17: 203–5.
2. Weisz GM. Remembering More Jewish physicians. *IMAJ* 2016; 18 (5): 247–9.

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