

It Happened in Italy

Ambassador chats with author Elizabeth Bettina about her new book detailing the experiences of Holocaust survivors in Italy.

By Michael Luongo

Photos courtesy of Elizabeth Bettina

Elizabeth Bettina is the author of the book, "It Happened in Italy: Untold Stories of How the People of Italy Defied the Horrors of the Holocaust." Released by Thomas Nelson Publishers in 2009, the book tells the virtually unknown and almost unbelievable story of Jews who survived World War II in Italy.

Bettina began researching the story in 2003 after being inspired by an old photograph of Jews standing on the steps of her maternal grandmother's church in the town of Campagna, near Salerno, Italy. Her research led to her book and additionally furthered the development of Campagna's Museum of Memory and Peace, which is dedicated to the experiences of Italian Jews in the Holocaust, located in the former convent of San Bartolomeo.

Fluent in Italian, Bettina grew up in Long Island and has degrees in economics and Italian from Smith College. Today she lives in Manhattan and works in marketing. Bettina is now working with renowned Holocaust educator Vincent Marmorale to co-produce a documentary, tentatively titled "Italy and the Holocaust: The Hidden Story," featuring many of the survivors interviewed for her book.

More information on "It Happened in Italy" is available on her Web site, www.elizabethbettina.com.



A police officer, priest and rabbi pose on the steps of the Church of San Bartolomeo in Campagna. The sight of this historic photo prompted author Elizabeth Bettina to further investigate the experiences of Jews in Italy during the Holocaust; her work led to the release of a book, "It Happened in Italy."



See Related Story: Page 24
"Ferramonti di Tarsia: Calabria's
Forgotten Internment Camp"
A university professor visits the
World War II remains of one Italian camp

Ambassador: Explain the book's focus on what seems a paradox – that Benito Mussolini, Hitler's strongest ally in the war, refused to help carry out the extermination of the Jews?

Bettina: The survivors have said that they do not believe that Mussolini really wanted to harm them – that, otherwise, he would have had them deported to Germany at the beginning of the war. The foreign Jews believe that Mussolini put them in the camps as a “*via di mezzo*” to appease Hitler without harming them. The Italian Jews lived in their homes, and the racial laws took away many of their civil liberties, such as having a civil servant job, going to school, etc., but they were not deported.

It was after September 8, 1943, when Italy was under German occupation, that the Jews went into hiding. As the survivors have said, “The Italians thought that we were human beings, like they were. There was no difference between us and the Italians.” As Walter Wolff [one of the survivors] said, they believed in “Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Ambassador: What was your process for getting documents for this book?

Bettina: The pictures and documents were mostly in the possession of the Holocaust survivors. The pictures are extraordinary. Imagine pictures of synagogues in concentration camps. The Jews in the camps in Italy were able to practice their religion. Imagine a wedding, children in school. These pictures are in Italian concentration camps. Unbelievable – but true.

I speak Italian fluently. That was instrumental in organizing four trips to take the survivors back to Italy and in speaking with the locals. My Italian fluency also allowed me to consult on the museum in Campagna.



Former internees and survivors of the Holocaust and some of their family members visit the camp in Campagna with author Elizabeth Bettina. Bottom row: Bettina, Gerda Mammon, Ursula Korn Selig, Edith Birns, Eva Lepehne Rosenfeld and Eric Rosenfeld. Top row: Helen Kempin, Max Kempin, Walter Kleinmann, Teddy Tobias, Ruth Goldman Tobias, Elaine Kleinmann, Vince Marmorale and Alec Pollak.



Standing in front of a recreated room at Campagna's Museum of Memory and Peace, Edith Birns explains the differences between conditions at the Campagna camp and those during her stay at Auschwitz. Her husband, Alfred, was interned in Campagna and Ferramonti.

Ambassador: What first piqued your interest in doing a book like this?

Bettina: The picture of an Orthodox rabbi, bishop and police officer [in Campagna] started me on this very unexpected journey. I wondered: What was a rabbi doing in my grandmother's village, standing on the steps of the church where she was married – in 1940? I began meeting Jews who survived because they were in Italy and wanted to acknowledge the people of Italy for saving their lives. Their gratitude towards Italy and its people is extraordinary.

Ambassador: Tell me more about these amazing stories from some of these people – like playing cards with policemen, family visits, and trips to spas, all while in a concentration camp.

Bettina: When I heard these things, I couldn't believe them myself. They did not occur in only one place in Italy. Survivor after survivor had similar stories about their treatment, no matter where they were in Italy, north, middle, south – whether they were in a camp with barracks or if they were “*internati liberi*,” internees that were free in a village.

Their stories are so different from those told by survivors of German-run concentration camps. As one survivor said, “there is no comparison, and I refuse to say I was in a concentration camp – I was in an internment camp.” In fact, Walter Wolff compared his camp in Campagna to a hotel. He should know the difference because he was in Dachau.

Ambassador: What were some of the more extraordinary moments you experienced while researching this book?

Bettina: The private audience some of the survivors had with Pope Benedict XVI. While there, they acknowledged the clergy who helped save their lives. [Another moving experience was watching] Walter Kleinmann meeting his “*fratello di latte*” – his “milk brother” from Potenza. When Walter was born, his mother could not breast-feed him, and Giulia Ruggieri became his wet nurse. Rocco, Giulia's son, saw us on the news and came to find us the next day at the hotel. Walter and Rocco bonded immediately, and Walter and his wife Elaine have visited Rocco and his family in Potenza twice this year! ➤



A plaque in Rome's Jewish quarter marks October 16, 1943 – the day that 1,259 Jews were deported from the newly German-occupied city and sent to German concentration camps. Prior to German occupation of the country, Italian Jews had been allowed to live in their homes.



Group picture of Jewish internees in front of Campo di San Bartolomeo, in Campagna. Survivor Walter Wolff is seated in the fifth row next to the man with the guitar. Note that the internees are wearing their own clothes, not uniforms, and they are not wearing Jewish stars.



Author Elizabeth Bettina was amazed by a wedding photo (left) taken at Ferramonti, with the barracks in the background. Survivor Max Kempin's mother is on the far right; his father is directly over the bride's right shoulder.

Ambassador: Tell me more about Giovanni Palatucci.

Bettina: Giovanni Palatucci was the Questore di Fiume [Police Chief of Fiume] and his uncle was the Bishop of Campagna. He helped save 5,000 Jews. Unfortunately, his actions were discovered by the Germans, and he was sent to Dachau, where, at age 36, he died the death of the 5,000 people he had saved. Palatucci was honored by the Yad Vashem [Israel's Holocaust survivors and heroes remembrance authority] in 1990; in 2002, he was beatified by Cardinal Ruini. In Campagna, there is now a museum with a section dedicated to him.

Ambassador: I expected a dry, academic book, but this is entertaining, as if talking to a friend, almost a memoir. How did you decide to approach putting together the book? How long did it take?

Bettina: The approach came from stories I told people and from questions that I received from Holocaust survivors and others. The first being, "How did you get interested in this story?" They also wanted to know the back story and asked me to tell it along with the survivors' stories. Research for the book began more than five years ago, and it took about two years to write the book.

Ambassador: The Vatican has been blamed for a turning blind eye to the Holocaust. Does information in this book change anything?

Bettina: Many of the survivors in this book were saved by priests and nuns throughout Italy. In addition, I recently received copies of papers showing

that money was sent to Campagna from the Vatican to help the Jews.

Ambassador: What is the book's message about today's war refugees? Iraq has four million war refugees and we are seeing other war zones ignored, like the Sudan.

Bettina: My message is, "If you are not indifferent – things can be different." This book shows that because people were willing to risk their lives for others, the others lived. You have choices – even in the worst of times.

Ambassador: What do the survivors tell you about the message this book created and the legacy of that time period?

Bettina: This is a story that needs to be told – because stories of those rescued and the rescuers are important. During the worst of times there can still be humanity. As Walter Wolff said, "Bad times, good people."

There are so many stories about the Holocaust but very few about what happened in Italy. The survivors in this book are grateful to be alive today and happy that their stories will live on after them. They believe that, before this book, the Italian story was not known by the general public.

Michael Luongo's writing and photography have appeared in Bloomberg News Muse Division, The New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, Conde Nast Traveler, and National Geographic Traveler among other publications. ▲