

Italian Praised for Saving Jews Is Now Seen as Nazi Collaborator

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He has been called the Italian Schindler, credited with helping to save 5,000 Jews during the Holocaust. Giovanni Palatucci, a wartime police official, has been honored in Israel, in New York and in Italy, where squares and promenades have been named in his honor, and in the Vatican, where Pope John Paul II declared him a martyr, a step toward potential sainthood.

But at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the tale of his heroic exploits is being removed from an exhibition after officials there learned of new evidence suggesting that, far from being a hero, he was an enthusiastic Nazi collaborator involved in the deportation of Jews to Auschwitz.

A letter sent this month to the museum's director by the Centro Primo Levi at the Center for Jewish History in New York stated that a research panel of more than a dozen scholars who reviewed nearly 700 documents concluded that for six years, Palatucci was "a willing executor of the racial legislation and — after taking the oath to Mussolini's Social Republic, collaborated with the Nazis."

The letter said that Italian and German records provided no evidence that he had helped Jews during the war and that the first mention only surfaced years later, in 1952. Researchers also found documents that showed Palatucci had helped the Germans identify Jews to round up.

There is no established explanation for how the account of Palatucci's heroics took hold, but some experts say its persistence owed much to the flattering light it shed on Italy after the war. Scholars said the new evidence surfaced in recent years as they gained access to documents. The goal of their research, they said, was to understand the role of Fiume, the city where Palatucci worked, as a breeding ground for fascism; the documents that undermined the account of Palatucci's selfless heroism were a byproduct of that investigation.

Palatucci has been credited with saving thousands of Jews between 1940 and 1944 while he was police chief in Fiume, an Adriatic port city that was considered the first symbol of Italy's new Fascist Empire. (It is now called Rijeka and is part of Croatia.) When the Nazis occupied the city in 1943, for example, Palatucci was said to have destroyed records to prevent the Germans from sending Fiume's Jews to concentration camps. His own death at age 35 in a camp at Dachau seemed to corroborate his valor.

But Natalia Indrimi, the executive director of the Centro Primo Levi, said historians have been able to review these supposedly destroyed records in the Rijeka State Archives.

What they show, said Dr. Indrimi, who coordinated the research, is that Fiume had only 500 Jews by 1943, and that most of them — 412, or about 80 percent — ended up at Auschwitz, a higher percentage than in any other Italian city. The research on Palatucci found that rather than being police chief, he was the adjunct deputy commissary responsible for enforcing Fascist Italy's racial laws. What's more, his deportation to Dachau in 1944 was not related to saving Jews but to German accusations of embezzlement and treason for passing plans for the postwar independence of Fiume to the British.

The report said it was possible that Palatucci had helped a handful of people, although it was unclear whether he had done this on the orders of superiors.

Dr. Indrimi said “the myth” surrounding Palatucci started in 1952 when his uncle Bishop Giuseppe Maria Palatucci used the story to persuade the Italian government to provide a pension for Giovanni Palatucci's parents. The account, she said, gained momentum because it seemed to bolster the reputation of Pope Pius XII, whom Jewish groups have described as being indifferent to genocide.

“If anything, Giovanni Palatucci represents the silence, self-righteousness and compliance of many young Italian officers who enthusiastically embraced Mussolini in his last disastrous steps,” Dr. Indrimi wrote in her letter to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Some of the evidence was presented at [a conference at New York University](#) last year.

Perhaps the greatest recognition Palatucci received was being named in 1990 by Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to the Holocaust, as one of the [Righteous Among the Nations](#) — an honor roll of those who rescued Jews that also includes Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist who helped 1,200 Jews avoid the death camps.

After receiving the historians' report, Yad Vashem said it had “commenced the process of thoroughly examining the documents,” Estee Yaari, the foreign media liaison, wrote in an e-mail.

The narrative of Palatucci's selflessness became the subject of articles, books and a television movie. Last month the [Giovanni Palatucci Association](#) credited his otherworldly intervention for the miraculous disappearance of a man's kidney tumor as part of the case being made for sainthood.

The Anti-Defamation League awarded Palatucci its Courage to Care Award on May 18, 2005, which Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg in turn declared to be Giovanni Palatucci Courage to Care Day. The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation has a paean to him on its Web site.

The Rev. Federico Lombardi, a Vatican spokesman, said in an e-mail that the Vatican was aware of the questions raised and had asked a historian to study the matter.

An estimated 9,000 Jews were deported from Italy during World War II. But experts have noted that, although the 45,000 Jews in Italy were persecuted, most survived the war.

Still, many scholars portray the belated claims of some Italians that they went out of their way to save Jews as part of an attempt to recast Italy's Fascist past. "The default statement of every Fascist leader after the war was that 'I helped the Jews,' " Dr. Indrimi said.

Alexander Stille, a professor at the Columbia University journalism school who has reviewed some of the documents, said the Palatucci case was a result of three powerful institutions, all with a vested interest in publicizing what appeared to be a heroic tale: "The Italian government was anxious to rehabilitate itself and show that they were better and more humane than their Nazi allies. The Catholic Church was eager to tell a positive story about the church's role during the war, and the State of Israel was eager to promote the idea of righteous gentiles and tell stories of right-minded ordinary people who helped to save ordinary Jews."

Mr. Stille, whose recent family memoir, "The Force of Things," includes a tale about his Jewish grandfather in Fiume, said, "Palatucci was the beneficiary of that."

An article last month in the Italian newspaper Corriere Della Sera said that a growing chorus of historians and researchers had called the Palatucci rescue "a blatant scam orchestrated by friends and relatives." The Palatucci association dismissed that account in an outraged letter to the newspaper.

The decision to remove the information about Palatucci from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's exhibition, "Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration and Complicity in the Holocaust," came last week, Andrew Hollinger, the museum's director of communications, said. The information has already been removed from the exhibition's Web site, he said, and the museum is working on removing it from the physical display as well.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 21, 2013

An article on Thursday about Giovanni Palatucci, an Italian who had been praised for helping to save Jews during the Holocaust but who, according to the Centro Primo Levi, was in fact a Nazi collaborator misstated part of the name of an organization with which the Centro Primo Levi is affiliated. It is the Center for Jewish History, not the Center for Jewish Studies.