

Defenders of [Giovanni Palatucci](#), a police official heralded as the Italian Schindler for saving thousands of Jews during [World War II](#), have pushed back at researchers who have recently characterized the heroic tale as a myth and described him as a Nazi collaborator.

Historians have said one reason the Palatucci story gained momentum was that it seemed to bolster the reputation of the Roman Catholic Church and Pope Pius XII, whom Jewish groups have described as having been indifferent to genocide.

But Palatucci supporters, particularly within the church and among those who have promoted him for sainthood, have criticized the debunkers, saying the charges are really a veiled attack on the pope.

Others say they personally knew Jews who were saved by him.

In a recent article in the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, [Anna Foa](#), a historian at La Sapienza University in Rome, suggested that “in targeting Palatucci, the intention was essentially to hit a Catholic involved in rescuing Jews” and “a well-known figure whose cause of beatification was under way.”

Ms. Foa also objected to the characterization of Palatucci — a police official in Fiume, a port city once ruled by [Italy](#) that is now called Rijeka and is part of Croatia — as a collaborator.

She conceded that Palatucci may have saved only a few dozen lives instead of the 5,000 attributed to him. Even so, she wrote in the newspaper, which often reflects the Vatican's thinking, the reduced number certainly does “not transform him from a savior into a persecutor of Jews.”

In the United States, *First Things*, a conservative journal about religion and public life, published [an article](#) last week condemning the new reports about Palatucci as an attempt to use the “alleged ‘discovery’ as a platform from which to make sweeping and unfair allegations against Italians, the papacy, and even parts of the Jewish community itself.”

Part of the debate is over what kind of conclusions can be drawn from the available documentation.

The Primo Levi Center, a nonprofit organization in New York, said researchers came upon newly available documents from Croatia in the course of doing a comprehensive review of the fate of Fiume's Jews.

“Palatucci was celebrated for being a powerful man who used his power to help Jews,” Natalia Indrimi, the executive director of the center, said in an e-mail response to questions last week. But the documents contradict the exploits attributed to him, she said. “Records of his activity

under the Germans indicate that he continued to obey orders to locate Jews in the months during which the majority of Fiume's Jews was rounded up and deported to Auschwitz.”

She dismissed suggestions that the center was in any way trying to smear the Catholic Church. The center's sole “interest is in clarifying the historical record of a case in which popular memory and historiography were in evident conflict,” she said.

The center has issued a report that it has shared with some organizations, including Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Israel. Yad Vashem is reviewing Palatucci's status as one of the [Righteous Among the Nations](#), an honor roll of those who rescued Jews. Last month, the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington](#) removed a mention of him from an exhibition about complicity and opposition, and the Anti-Defamation League said that an award named in honor of Palatucci would be given a new title.

Ms. Foa reviewed the center's report and not the original records on which it was based. “Did Palatucci save Jews or not? Did Palatucci denounce Jews or not?” she asked. “To these questions alone do we await an answer from the documents. The rest is commentary.”

She said there may not be more documents that testify to Palatucci's efforts simply because there was a need for secrecy among those who were helping Jews escape.

The Rev. Angelo Maria Oddi, president of the [Giovanni Palatucci Association](#) in Italy, wrote a defense of Palatucci on the group's Web site and said the association had documentation from people whose lives he had saved.

Edna Selan Epstein, a 75-year-old survivor who now lives in Chicago, sent an e-mail to Yad Vashem to defend Palatucci. “My parents,” she said “both independently told me on a number of occasions that we survived in large part thanks to the help of Giovanni Palatucci. My mother also told me that Giovanni Palatucci was perfectly aware that the Germans ‘would get him’ as a result of his actions in that regard.”

Palatucci died in the Dachau concentration camp in 1945 after he was accused by the Germans of passing plans for Fiume's postwar independence to the Allies.

Ms. Indrimi, who coordinated the research, said, “Those who claim to have documented a few dozen cases of rescue by Palatucci should share their findings with the scholarly community and participate in the research.”

She noted that the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities and the Italian Police have established research committees to review the documents and position, which is what the center wanted. “What matters is that this data can no longer be ignored,” she said.