

Dear Ms. Irena Steinfeldt:

I am sure you are aware of the recent controversy regarding Giovanni Palatucci's role in whether he did or did not save Italian and refugee Jews in the Fiume police district of Italy during the war.

I am an almost 75 year old survivor, a Yugoslav Jew, born in Zagreb, who found refuge in 1941-1943 in Lovrana (?) located a few miles east of Oppatia (Fiume?) long the Adratic Coast. I was born in July 1938 in Zagreb thus my knowledge is mainly from what my parents shared with me in later years.

My parents 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. She also told me that Palatucci advised her and my father not to try to make it to Switzerland since the Swiss would in all likelihood have turned us over to the Germans, but instead to try to wend our way toward Rome which was an Open City and because the allies would be coming up from the foot of Italy.

I have spent some time trying to get the Primo Levy Center to accept the testimony of survivors in Italy who are not detractors of the role of the Italians during WWII. I have concluded that the Primo Levi Center is not interested in an even handed history of the period or even of obtaining testimony to the few remaining survivors in Italy who are grateful to the Italians for their role in that survival. The individuals at the Primo Levi Center, I have sadly concluded have an historical ax they are grinding and are gathering only evidence they believe supports their very accusatory perspective.

Whether Giovanni Palatucci deserves beatification is something I have no opinion on whatsoever. Indeed I could care less. Whether the role of the Catholic Church was deplorable during WWII but nonetheless justified on "real politik" grounds is also a far larger controversy in which I have not the expertize to become embroiled. I do not think the memory of Giovanni Palatucci should be sacrificed in that larger historical revision agenda. I can say that my mother always said that the Catholic priests in Yugoslavia behaved in a thoroughly deplorable fashion and that the Vatican helped many escape on their ratlines to Latin America. She also thoroughly distrusted the Vatican hierarchy and refused to allow us to be registered with them for food coupons or anything else when we arrived in Rome.

That said, I do not know a single Jew who survived in Italy during the war who does not repeatedly speak of the kindness of ordinary Italians and the active and tactic protection many of them accorded to us. None of us would be alive today without the simple, human kindness...as the anonymous strangers who left milk at the door for my younger cousin. And the many ordinary Italians who knew we were refugees and never betrayed us.

Finally one fact stands out. There were no deportations to death camps until after September 1943 when it was the Germans and not the Italians who took over implementing the final solution in Italy. The numbers speak for themselves.

I have had a long debate with Ms Indrimi that we must recognize acts of kindness and generosity and bravery as much as the deplorable to know, in the future, that decency is possible. She disagrees with me about the uses of history.

If our long correspondence on this issue is of any assistance or of any use in your archives, I am glad to forward it.

Edna Selan Epstein