

Patalucci, shadows cast on the life of the “Italian Schindler”

Said to have saved over 5,000 Jews in a region where there were not even half that number. Myth or sensational fraud?

From our correspondent ALESSANDRA FARKAS



Stamp commemorating Giovanni Palatucci issued by the *Poste Italiane* in 2009 (Ansa)

NEW YORK – His Wikipedia page remembers him, in at least ten different languages, as “the Italian police commissioner who saved thousands of Jews from being deported to Nazi extermination camps during the Second World War and for this was deported to the Dachau Concentration Camp, where he died.” “For his actions, Giovanni Palatucci was decorated with the ‘Medaglia d’oro’ award for civil merit, and honored as one of the ‘Righteous Among the Nations’ by Yad Vashem (September 12, 1990) and ‘Servant of God’ by the Catholic Church,” according to the free encyclopedia.

ITALIAN SCHINDLER OR FRAUD? – But if we heed the growing chorus of historians and scholars who for years have been studying the most celebrated of “righteous” Italians, the myth of Palatucci is nothing more than a sensational fraud orchestrated by the alleged hero’s friends and relatives who claimed he had saved over 5,000 Jews in a region where there

lived less than half that number of Jews. The hypothesis of a massive rescue mission by Palatucci had already been categorically denied by the Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs in a memorandum dated July 1952 and later by Yad Vashem’s Institute of the Righteous commission in 1990. At a round table discussion organized by the Centro Primo Levi at the Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò in New York, the ex-director of Yad Vashem, Mordecai Paldiel explained that under his supervision, in 1990, Palatucci was recognized “Righteous Among the Nations” for having helped “just one woman,” Elena Aschkenasy, in 1940, and that the commission “did not find any evidence or testimony that he might have assisted anyone outside of this case.”

PRIZES, RECOGNITIONS AND BIOGRAPHIES – And yet in 1955 the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities recognized him and in 1995 the Italian government decorated him with the “Medaglia d’oro” award for civil merit. During the ecumenical ceremony for the Jubilee on May 7, 2000, Pope John Paul II included him among the martyrs of the 20th century. In 2004, the

diocesan phase of the canonization process concluded officially naming the hero who died in Dachau in 1945, at the age of 36, a “Servant of God.” But who conducted the historical research on which these recognitions were based? What spawned the myth of the “Italian Schindler”? The official biographies – the latest of which, *Giovanni Palatucci: un giusto e martire cristiano* by Antonio De Simone and Michele Bianco with a preface by Cardinal Camillo Ruini – speak of thousands of Jews being sent to the internment camp in the town of Campagna where they would have been protected by Bishop Giuseppe Maria Palatucci, Giovanni’s uncle. The notorious internment camp that the Bishop himself, in 1953, called a “vacation spot.” “Impossible,” replies Anna Pizzuti, editor of the database of foreign Jewish internees in Italy (www.annapizzuti.it), “no more than forty Fiume residents were interned in Campagna. A third of the group ended up in Auschwitz.”

THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED – The biographies then recall the 800 Jewish refugees who in 1939 secretly boarded a Greek ship, the *Agia Zoni*, that departed from Fiume on March 17, 1939 headed for Palestine and that is said to have been personally organized by the heroic commissioner. But from the diary of the group’s guide preserved at Yad Vashem and the documents of the port authority collected in the Italian State Archives, it becomes clear that it was actually an operation of the Jewish Agency of Zurich, carried out under the strict watch of Palatucci’s superiors who not only exacted a painful process of extortion but also sent back to the border the neediest refugees, the stateless and those who came from Dachau.

FROM REALITY TO MYTH – From the archives we find that Palatucci was an officer of public security at the police headquarters in Fiume from 1937 to 1944, where he worked in the immigration bureau and was in charge of the census of Jewish citizens on the basis of which the Prefecture applied Mussolini’s Racial Laws. Precisely in Fiume the census was conducted so thoroughly and the laws applied with such zeal that it provoked international protests and a reaction from the Ministry of Internal Affairs itself. According to the monograph by Silva Bon *Le Comunità ebraiche della Provincia italiana del Carnaro Fiume e Abbazia (1924-1945)* and the data collected in the *Libro della Memoria* by Liliana Picciotto, during Palatucci’s brief regency the percentage of Jews deported from Fiume was among the highest in Italy. The family portrait recently published by Silvia Cuttin, *Ci sarebbe bastato*, clearly and accurately depicts the tragic experience of the Jews of Fiume.

A ZEALOUS AND WILLING FASCIST – In *Giovanni Palatucci, Una Giusta Memoria* Marco Coslovich reconstructs the ambiguous professional profile of a vice commissioner of police who at just thirty years of age swears loyalty to the Republic of Salò. “Palatucci never served as chief of police in Fiume,” Coslovich reveals, “but as an adjunct vice commissioner under the control of superiors who were notoriously anti-Semitic.” As opposed to being in conflict with them, documentation shows that he was considered a model public servant. Considered to be “irreplaceable” by the prefect Testa, he fully enjoyed the favor of his superiors. Between April

and the beginning of September 1944, he was regent and directly dependent to the upper echelon of Salò, Tullio Tamburini and Eugenio Cerruti. Even the historian Michele Sarfatti in the episode of the television program *La storia siamo noi* dedicated to Palatucci, in 2008, expressed doubts as to the plausibility of the disproportionate numbers attributed to a community that numbered just over a thousand people, furthermore, who between immigration and internment were reduced to little more than 500 by October 1943.

AN AD HOC HERO FOR ITALY IN THE AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR II – According to the Venetian historian Simon Levis Sullam, the Palatucci affair is tied to the broader problem of how anti-Semitic persecution in Fascist Italy – and the role Italians played in it – has been represented in the 68 years since the end of the war. Co-editor of the most recent important study on the Shoah in Italy published by UTET (2012), Sullam explains: “The myth of the good Italian has constituted a source of collective self-absolution after the Second World War regarding the support offered to anti-Semitic and racist politics in the period 1937-1945, in which thousands of Italians participated directly.” Coslovich emphasizes how more than half of Palatucci’s personal dossier reflects the efforts carried out by his father, Felice, and his uncle, the Bishop, aimed at completely rehabilitating the reputation of the commissioner with respect to ethnic cleansing. Additionally, the concession of a war pension accorded by law only to widows and orphans of the casualties of war (Palatucci was a bachelor) indicates the involvement of the Italian government in designating their relative as a “savior of Jews.”

HIS UNCLE, THE BISHOP – Between 1952 and 1953, bishop Giuseppe Maria Palatucci availed himself of the written collaboration of Rodolfo Grani, a Jew from Fiume of Hungarian origin whom he had met during Grani’s brief internment in Campagna. However, the historian Mauro Canali, expert in the history of the fascist police system at the University of Camerino, maintains that in the copious documentary evidence regarding Grani there is no indication that he ever met Giovanni Palatucci. Someone who did, however, meet Palatucci was the Baron Niel Sachs de Gric, also a Fiume-based Jew of Hungarian descent, a lawyer in the ecclesiastical court and representative of the Holy See for the Concordat with Yugoslavia. In 1952, the bishop sent De Gric an article for publication in the periodical *Osservatore Romano* with an “invitation” to take credit for its authorship. The documents attributed to Grani and Sachs, whose authenticity demands to be verified and neither of which received the commissioner’s assistance, are the origin of the Palatucci epic. The last piece of the legend to fall is the one connected to the circumstances of his death. The arrest warrant signed by Herbert Kappler and deposited in the Central Archives of State leaves no doubt: Palatucci was accused of treason by the Germans for having transmitted to the enemy (the British) documents of the Social Republic of Salò requesting negotiations for Fiume’s independence. Not for having protected the Jews of that city.

ALESSANDRA FARKAS

Translated by STEVE BAKER



Fiume, Via Roma, Postcard, circa 1935



Fiume, Riva Emanuele Filiberto, Postcard, 1930s



Giovanni Palatucci between the prefect Temistocle Testa and Police Chief Vincenzo Genovese,
Fiume Police Archive, State Archive of Rijeka, Croatia

Der Befehlshaber
der Sicherheitspolizei u. des SD
in Italien
Ufficio di Collegamento.
B. Nr. 450.

Bitte in der Absicht auszuschließen. Geschäftswörter u. Daten streichen.

№ 45000
10 gennaio 1945
CENTRALSTAB

fell. a me

Appunto per il Capo della Polizia Repubblicana.

Con riferimento all'appunto del 2 Novembre 1944
si comunica che il Palatucci fu arrestato
per aver mantenuto contatti col servizio informativo nemico
per il quale motivo trovosi in un campo di concentra-
mento.

Rossi

D. Colonnello delle SS.

*Mancomunato
alla Dir. Personale*

Memo regarding the arrest of Giovanni Palatucci, *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*, Rome

N.H. Barone Avv. Niel Sachs di Gric

R O M A

J.M.J.Fr.

Solamente oggi riesco a inviarLe l'articolo che mi chiese per "L'Osservatore Romano" riguardo a mio nipote.

Anzi, Gliene mando due copie, con preghiera di farlo pubblicare anche da "Il Quotidiano". "Il Quotidiano", però, dovrebbe pubblicarlo in una pagina che vada per tutte le regioni, come, per es., la 4ª pagina, e non nella pagina regionale, che è la seconda.

Com'è scritto, credo che vada benissimo, poiché abbiamo detto la verità senza esagerazioni; anzi io avrei potuto aggiungere che, in quel tempo che gli Ebrei erano a Campagna, misi a loro disposizione e con le mie scarse e le mie casucce! Senza ripeterLe ciò che Le dissi a voce, che in quei quattro anni che durò l'internamento io diedi a essi, in danaro e in generi, circa centomila lire, somma già importantissima per quei tempi. Infatti, spesso pagavo il viaggio a cui partiva, una volta anche a uno che partiva per l'America, e dovevamo vari per varie necessità. Non dico quasi tutte, ma moltissime pratiche degli Ebrei le trattai io o per lettera o mandando il mio Segretario e andando io stesso a Roma, ai Ministeri, specialmente al Ministero dell'Interno. Ma non cose che le sa il Signore!..

Dopo la guerra venne una Commissione della Croce Rossa Internazionale a ringraziarmi dell'opera che io avevo svolta per gli Ebrei internati a Campagna. E, durante la guerra, essendo cui vicino a me, a Eboli, il Sig. Rotmild Ed-onda, allora capitano di artiglieria, fece da me varie volte per ringraziarmi di quanto avevo fatto per i suoi correligionari; e nel settembre 1944 mi accompagnò a Roma, e volle venire con me dal S. Padre per ringraziarlo di quanto l'Augusto Padre fece aveva fatto per gli Ebrei.

.....
L'articolo, se vuole, può farlo suo, e firmarlo come cosa sua. Ci tengo, però, che Ella lo faccia pubblicare integralmente sia a "L'Osservatore" sia a "Il Quotidiano".

E quando sarà pubblicato, La prego di compiacersi mandarmene alcune copie dell'uno e dell'altro giornale.

Con ringraziamenti e ossequi, La benedico cordialmente.

AFF/NO IN GESU' SACRAM. E MARIA IMMACOLATA

"L'Incontro" l'ho ricevuto; e ringrazio Lei. In quanto al giornale che debbo darle? Va bene la critica su tutto e su tutti; ma in fatto di religione non possiamo ragionare e valutare sentenze razionalisticamente!

REPUBBLICA SOCIALE ITALIANA

MINISTERO DELL'INTERNO
DIREZIONE GENERALE POLIZIA REPUBBLICANA

Foto da Campi 721 30/1/45 XIII

Al la Divisione del Person.
di Polizia

Valdagne

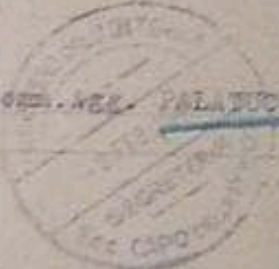
Prot. N. 555/647

Allegati

Espresso al foglio del

Dir. Sez. N.

OGGETTO: ~~Comm. ABB. PALATUCCI dr. Giovanni.~~

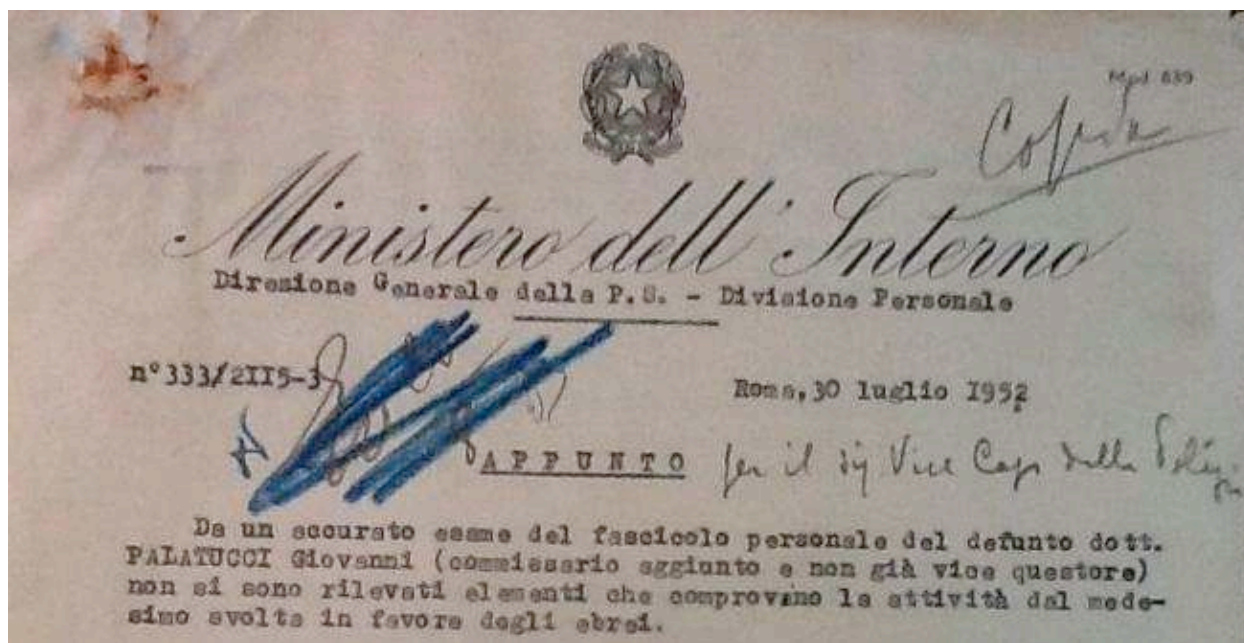


Per competenza, si trascrive quanto il Cel. Rappier, interessato nei riguardi del funzionario in oggetto, già reggente la Questura di Fiume, ha comunicato in merito:

"" Con riferimento all'appunto del 2 novembre 1944 si comunica che il Palatucci fu arrestato per aver mantenute contatti col servizio informativo nemico per il quale motivo trovò in un campo di concentramento. ""

IL CAPO DELLA POLIZIA

Letter regarding the arrest of Giovanni Palatucci, *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*, Rome



Ministry of Internal Affairs Report in response to the request of Bishop Giuseppe M. Palatucci for a further investigation into the alleged rescue of Jews by his nephew, Giovanni Palatucci,
Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome



Giovanni Palatucci with his colleagues in the Fiume police headquarters,
Fiume Police Archives, State Archives of Rejika, Croatia

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OSVĚDČENÍ POPIS
SIGNALEMENT / PERSONNESCHREIBUNG

Manželka
Femme - Ehegatte

Zaměstnání Profession Beschäftigung	<i>vdaná a v domácnosti en ménage</i>
Kodičtí a datum narodzeni Lieu et date de na- issance Geburtsort und Da- tum ihrer Geburt	<i>Fialmei 25. 8. 1911.</i>
Bydliště Domicile Wohnort	<i>Fiume</i>
Obilí Vlasť Gesicht	<i>obly vlně</i>
Barva očí Couleur des yeux Farbe der Augen	<i>modrá</i>
Barva vlasů Couleur des cheveux Farbe der Haare	<i>černá počítá blonde</i>
Zvláštní znamení Signes particuliers Bemerkenswerthe	<i>/</i>

DĚTI - ENFANTS - KINDER

Jméno Nom - Name	Stáří Age - Alter	Pohlaví Sex - Geschlecht
<i>/</i>	<i>/</i>	<i>/</i>

Manželka
Femme - Ehegatte

Fotografie



Podpis Manželky
SIGNATURE DU TITULAIRE - UNTERSCHEIBUNG DER FRAUEN

A JEHO MANŽELKY
ET DE SA FEMME - UND SEINER EHEGATTIN

Podpis státního vyřizovacího úřadu
Signature de l'agent délivrant le passeport.
Unterschrift des des Pass ausstellenden Beamten

[Signature]

REPUBLIKA ČESKOSLOVENSKÁ

Elena Berger Ashkenasy's passport, Fiume Police Archives, State Archives of Rejika, Croatia



Ceremony in honor of Giovanni Palatucci, (Bishop Giuseppe M. Palatucci, Father Alfonso Palatucci, Rodolfo Grani, representatives of the city of Ramat Gan and of the police of Montella), Ramat Gan, Israel, 1953, City Archive of Ramat Gan