



Book Reviews

Some Holocaust Stories Had Happy Endings

Memoirs of A Fortunate Jew: An Italian Story. Dan Vittorio Segre; translated from the Italian by the author. Adler & Adler, 4550 Montgomery Avenue, Bethesda, MD 20814. 1987. 273 pages. \$16.95.

The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, Survival. Susan Zuccotti. Basic Books, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022. 1987. 320 pages. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Joseph Aaron

If you're looking to read a story with a happy ending, you probably don't turn to a book about the Holocaust.

But now, along come not one, but two new books about the Holocaust that not only tell a Jewish story but that do have happy endings.

The reason is that both books tell the story of Italian Jews, who suffered far less and ended up far better than Jews in other countries during World War II.

One of those Italian Jews, Dan Vittorio Segre, in his *Memoirs of A Fortunate Jew*, gives a personal account of life in Italy before the war and of his voyage of escape to and discovery in Palestine.

Susan Zuccotti's *The Italians and the Holocaust* takes a more objective approach to what made Italy dif-

ferent, and to how and why its Jews fared as well as they did.

The modern tale of Jewish life in Italy goes back to the 19th century when Jews fully supported the movement of national unification and, in turn, were fully integrated into Italian governments. Anti-Semitism was never a problem.

Indeed, Jews were in the forefront of support for Benito Mussolini's assumption of power in 1922. Highly assimilated, well educated, affluent and patriotic, Jews lined up to join the Fascists. Among them was Segre's father, a wealthy landowner.

His son, born one month after Mussolini took over, tells the story of his sheltered childhood, one in which he had little contact with his Judaism and much with his father's Fascism. "As a totally assimilated Jew," Segre writes, "and as an Italian raised under a political regime of which my family and all my friends approved without reservation, I, too, saw Fascism as the only natural form of existence."

That philosophical acceptance, however, would run into hard reality when, in 1938, Mussolini enacted his anti-Semitic Racial Laws. It was then that Segre realized he had "lived in the belly of the monster, totally unaware of its existence."

And so, though totally unaware of what he was getting into, Segre decided to

MEMOIRS OF A FORTUNATE JEW An Italian story by Dan Vittorio Segre



emigrate to Palestine.

It is the story of why he did that and what happened as a result, that are at the heart of his beautifully written, emotionally expressive book. Segre takes us along on this voyage of self-discovery of both his Jewish heritage and of himself, describing his disorientation in his new country, his feeling of being "in exile in the motherland to which I had chosen to return."

We are there as Segre, now a professor of Zionism and Jewish political thought at Haifa University, moves from kibbutz to agricultural school to an intelligence unit in the Palestine Regiment of the British Army. And we are there to witness with him the incredible energy, vitality, contentiousness and pressure

that permeated Palestine as it moved toward becoming the first Jewish state in 2,000 years. Segre lets us not only see but feel, gives us not only a sense of place but of mood, supplying both historical details and intimate personal reactions.

Meanwhile, back home, it is the story of the countrymen Segre left behind that Zuccotti looks at. Though official discrimination existed, Zuccotti, a New York-based historian, tells how life for the Jews went on, with most of the anti-Semitic laws not being put into practice.

She tells, too, how that changed in 1943 when the Germans occupied the north and central parts of Italy. The late entry into the country helps explain why fully 85 percent of Italian Jews survived the war. But Zuccotti says there's more to it than that.

And in that more, Zuccotti provides a rare, heartening look into behavior during the Holocaust that was both moral and courageous.

Using both unpublished recollections of survivors and her own impressive research, Zuccotti relates how Italians did much to help the 6,000 Jews who escaped to Switzerland and how they did little to help in the Nazi round-up of Jews.

The explanations for such

actions, Zuccotti shows, can be attributed to the traditional Italian emphasis on individualism and mistrust of government; the long Jewish presence in the country; the lack of anti-Semitic tradition; the Italian distaste for the Germans; and pure, simple altruism.

All of which is not to present an unblemished picture. Zuccotti is unsparing in pointing out that 20 percent of Italian Jews were deported to concentration camps, that almost 7,000 Jews did die, and that many Italians were brutal partners of the Nazis.

Overall, however, here is a fascinating account of how the people of one country held on to their humanity.

Together with Segre's account of how one man did the same, the two books provide not only happy endings, but an encouraging beginning for how decent human beings can be, even under the most trying of circumstances.

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