

Righteous Italian Heroes

Grades: 9-12

World History, Character Education

New Jersey Curriculum Standard 6.3—World History

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

1. Analyze Italian gentiles who risked all to save Italian Jews and other Jews from Nazi concentration camps.
2. Identify character traits of a hero

Key terms:

Concentration Camps	Labor and Death camps organized by the Nazi to concentrate slave labor and those destined for systematic execution.
Gentile	A non-Jew
Holocaust	The attempted extermination of the Jewish population and other “undesirables” of Europe by the German Nazis.
Nazi	The force called The National Socialist German Workers’ Party in Germany under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. They ruled Germany from 1933 to 1945.
Righteousness	In accordance with virtue or morality.

Background:

Historically, Italy’s treatment of its resident Jewish population, though by no means stellar, compares well when juxtaposed with many of its neighbors to the north and east. In 1848, the independent Italian Kingdom and Sardinia and Piedmont under the House of Savoy emancipated Jews from their confinement in special ghettos. The Jews were given civil and political equality with Catholic Italians. They no longer had to hide their ethnic and religious identities in the Savoy kingdom, nor later in the subsequent descendent Kingdom of Italy.

By the time Benito Mussolini (*Il Duce*) and the Fascists took control of Italy in 1924, Italian Jews had nearly assimilated into Italian society. Many Italian Jews had even joined the Fascist Party, had participated in the March on Rome to take power, and had held high government posts.

In 1929 Mussolini entered into the Italian Concordant with the Vatican; thus, Italy then recognized Roman Catholicism as the official state religion. Subsequently, in 1930 Mussolini’s government passed the Falco Laws that sanctioned the idea of a type of entente (or understanding) between Italy and non-Catholic religions. These laws contradicted article 8 of the Italian constitution that had allowed freedom of religion.

After he had later entered into an alliance with Nazi Germany in 1938, Mussolini produced his *Manifesto of Italian Racism*. He asserted that Italians were part of the "pure race" along with the Aryans. Italy then expelled Jews from all public services, such as the army and public schools. Many Jews quickly looked to escape Italy, in case the environment for Jews denigrated to the deleterious situation that fellow Jews were experiencing in Germany.

In 1940 Italy joined the German war against France and the Allied nations. To show solidarity with his German ally, Mussolini then ordered the Italian army to attack the Jewish ghettos throughout Italy. After *Il Duce* was overthrown in 1943, Germany marched into northern Italy, reinstated Mussolini, and quickly began to round up Italian Jews for deportation to Nazi concentration camps. Many Jews fled hoping to find shelter in the Alps, or in Roman Catholic convents, and monasteries. Others joined the resistance movement.

Nearly 8,000 Jews were taken from Italy and sent to the Nazi death camps, where over 95% of them were put to death. Forty thousand Italian Jews, however, were spared the horrors of Nazi death camps because courageous Italian citizens, Catholic clergy and religious orders, government officials, and even military officers daringly helped Italian Jews escape to southern Italy, then under Allied control. Many Italian individuals risked their lives and property to save their Jewish countrymen. Over 80% of the Italian Jews survived the Holocaust, in most cases, because of the heroic efforts of their gentile fellow citizens.

Procedure:

- I. Give students some background regarding the actions of many Italians during World War II and their relationships with their Jewish Italian neighbors, both before and during the war.
- II. Show students a copy of a brochure as a model.
- III. Break students up into seven equal groups.
- IV. Assign students the following names:
 - a. Mother Donata
 - b. Giorgio Perlasca
 - c. Don Arrigo Beccari
 - d. Cardinal Dalla Costa
 - e. Don Raimondo Viale
 - f. Padre Ruffino Niccacci
 - g. Mother Mary Xavier Marteau
- V. Instruct students to research their assigned person's role in rescuing Jews from Nazi concentration camps.
 - a. Each group will prepare a tri-fold brochure that advances their particular person as a true, courageous hero.
 - b. On the first page:
 - i. Title
 - ii. Picture or symbol
 - iii. Subtitle

- c. On the second page:
 - i. Have students write a paragraph or two about how the Nazis had put German Jews and Jews from conquered and Axis countries into concentration camps.
 - ii. Include a picture and caption.
 - d. On the third page:
 - i. Have students write a paragraph describing the Italian government's treatment of Jewish citizens prior to Fascist Italy's alliance with Nazi Germany.
 - ii. Include a picture and caption.
 - e. On the fourth page:
 - i. Have students write a paragraph about how the Nazis began to send Italian Jews to concentration camps once they occupied Italy in 1943.
 - ii. Include a picture and caption.
 - f. On the fifth page:
 - i. Students will introduce their hero and tell how he or she contributed to saving Italian Jews from the concentration camps, at grave risk to his or her own safety or prosperity.
 - ii. Include a picture and caption.
 - g. On the sixth page:
 - i. Have students explain why their hero was courageous and why he or she should serve as a model of a heroic person.
- VI. Have students present their brochure to the class and in their presentation, explain why their person is truly a heroic courageous figure.

Homework

Have students write a letter to the present Italian government (**Il Ministro dell'Interno**), requesting that they take measures to acknowledge their particular person as a national hero.

Some Resources

Father Brunacci, Holocaust Hero

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/stor.php?storyId=1803895>

Holocaust Heroes

<http://www.holocaust-heroes.com/convents.html>

Italy and the Holocaust

http://vrm.vrway.com/issue11/ITALY_AND_THE_HOLOCAUST.html

Jewish Memoirists: The Role of Memory in the Discourse of Identity.

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/modlang/carasi/articles/memorialistica2.html>

Jews in Italy

<http://www.initaly.com/regions/ethnic/jewish.htm>

Yeshiva Hosts International Historical Conference on Italian Jewry and the Holocaust

<http://yuweb.addr.com/v67i4/culture/conf.html>

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibr.org/jsource/anti-semitism/piusdef.html> This site presents documentary evidence regarding the Catholic Church's actions in regard to the Holocaust. The students should, of course, review this and other sources to reach his/her own conclusions about this subject.

Margherita Marchione. *Yours Is a Precious Witness: Memoirs of Jews and Catholics in Wartime Italy*, Paulist Press, 1997;