

RIGHTEOUS'S STORIES OF IMOLA

Good Evening

My name is Sara Tomba from form 5° A of Liceo Scientifico "Rambaldi-Valeriani" in Imola.

Our city is particularly linked to Poland because, during the Second World War the Second Polish Corps released it, on the 14 April 1945, from the Germans that attacked it. In memory of this event in 2005 a memorial was raised.

During this year we have studied the situation of the Jews who lived in Imola or fled from it and of those who helped them to safety, whether they were recognised as righteous or not.

In 1938 with the enactment of racial laws the shameful persecution of Italian Jews began in Italy but only at the end of 1943 the possibility of being deported to extermination camps emerged. Also the situation of the citizens of Imola was difficult: in Italy there was a civil war that divided Italian fascists, who were allied with the Nazis, and Italians who were involved in the Resistance. Hunger was felt after three years of war and the threat of bombings, which pushed many to take refuge in the hills, was ever present. In a similar situation it was easy to feel justified in thinking exclusively to themselves.

In addition to the Fiorentinos who lived in Imola, many Jews passed through the town seeking refuge. Many families showed generosity and courage in front of the difficulties of persecuted men, opening their houses to accommodate Jews who sought help. Similarly, the Christian community opened its monasteries and parish houses. If righteous is the man who personally risks to save even only one Jew, there are many citizens who should have this title. We have noticed that their freedom and solidarity are a precious heritage we do not want to lose.

We wondered what the origin of their courage and generosity was, and with this question we met the witnesses. We were answered: friendship, love and the decision not to accept the absurdity of evil.

This is how Don Giulio Minardi explained his act after 1945: "But what have we done of extraordinary? We behaved in the right way. It was our duty. Life is like that. So it was necessary to resist in order to live. Living in order to go on. It is a human as well as Christian duty."

In 1943 Don Giulio Minardi was a priest of the Parish of the Carmine in Imola and director of St. Catherine, a charitable institution that hosted about 250 orphans, exercising the two ministries with great passion.

From 8 September 1943 until the end of the War, Don Giulio offered asylum to deserters, partisans and Jews in the rectory of his parish and in other places associated with it, without ever worrying about the anticlerical ideas of his guests and constantly running the risk of being arrested by the nazis. Don Giulio helped as many as 275 people.

The testimony of this very risky deed is contained in a booklet, printed in July 1945, entitled "Carmine of Imola in time of war" written by one of the Jews saved by Don Minardi: Paolo Schweitzer. He was full of gratitude and willing to let everyone know what he had lived, so he had decided to tell the courageous initiatives through which he was saved, conscious of the fact that Don Giulio, because of his great modesty, would not take the merit for this great action. So Paolo Schweitzer describes him: "He was a man who always talked little and did a lot, without any ambition to be praised and without bending before any threat or violence." He "always had a place" for everybody and "said no" to no-one. He never asked for anything and knew how to instill courage in the minds of the disheartened. Speaking about himself, Paolo said: "After escaping from my house [...] with great risk for my life [...] I went to Don Giulio's, who I had never met before [...], he did not have a moment of hesitation and welcomed me into his home." His mother Anna Baruch was received with him. He continues: "The measures taken by Don Giulio were so many and so different, that if you think about them, you feel dizzy and you can hardly explain how a single man could do so much, so effectively and modestly, with such delicacy, with a lot of

wisdom, with great caution. "Paolo Schweitzer describes "the thousand tricks and expediences" and all the initiatives which provided security and food and allowed Don Giulio to govern that great family, despite the difficulties; he always had a good word for everybody and loved to compare them to Noah's ark. But if we are impressed by the practical spirit and inventiveness of such a shy man, we are even more touched by the heart of Don Giulio and by the passionate gratitude, esteem and admiration of Paolo Schweitzer, pulsing in each page. Nothing can extinguish the extreme evil that has been perpetrated in the world, but there is the perception of having seen and lived a great manifestation of good. The saved people experienced what Hanna Arendt described: "Even in the darkest times we have the right to expect some illumination. And it is very likely that it will come not from theories and concepts, but from the light [...] that some men and women have turned on in all sorts of circumstances, spreading it in the time they were allowed to spend on Earth."

A family of Jewish origin, wealthy and educated, lived in Imola, well inserted in the restricted elite of the local bourgeoisie: the Fiorentinos. The tranquillity of the family was disturbed by the anti-Jewish campaign, carried on by the mass media in 1937 and by the formulation of the racial laws of 1938. The Fiorentinos, displaced in Imola's countryside, suffered the looting of their home by the Germans, and after changing several houses, met Amedeo Ruggi. Born in Imola, he deeply hated the fascists, since they had beaten his father to death; then he would actively engage in a communist brigade of Imola's Resistance. Impressed by the plight of the Fiorentinos, Ruggi, with great courage, took upon himself the risk of helping them, accompanying them to Switzerland. Many dramatic moments were experienced during the journey, but they were overcome thanks to the readiness of Ruggi. A particularly sordid episode was the blackmail of the driver who had to carry them to the Swiss border: he threatened to report them to a military barracks, if they didn't pay a large sum of money. Ruggi protested indignantly, but the head of the family decided to pay in order to continue without problems and reach Switzerland safely. All this could not have been accomplished without the intervention of Ruggi, who refused to accept a cash reward, and who was really able to say yes in front of the need for humanity dictated by the events.

Among all those who helped the Jews in Imola during the Second World War, the only family recognized as "righteous among the nations" are the Bizzis.

Mr. Edmondo Bizzi welcomed the Padovanis, a family of Jews from Bologna, - to protect them from the threat of arrest and deportation.

This decision was prompted by Edmondo Bizzi's reaction in front of the tragedy of the Padovanis, who didn't know where to take refuge with their newly born daughter Serena.

The memory of the story, which sees as protagonists Mr. Edmondo, his wife Nerina and the two daughters Bianca and Laura, was told us by Edmondo's grandchildren and by the report submitted to the Commission for the designation of the righteous, by Serena Padovani.

Mr. Edmondo, the patriarch of the family, was a man full of life and with a strong personality, animated by great passions, as the love for cars and motorcycles, the taste for the table, and the cult of friendship; he had never told this exceptional story.

The memory of what had happened stresses the naturalness of his choice.

The Bizzis lived near the railway station, an area tormented by bombings, especially after 8 September 43 when the front began to move forward and also in Imola the German administration was imposed. After an enemy commando had occupied the first floors of their home, the family was forced to live in the cellar, a very large, quite airy and welcoming room, felt as a refuge in front of the danger of bombings.

The presence of the Padovanis caused anxiety because the danger that their identity would be discovered was constant; moreover the name of the baby made some doubts arise in the mind of the soldiers, because it didn't have catholic origins. The Padovanis were presented as displaced people, accepted for the friendship that linked them to their grandfather.

Nerina's role, who thanks to her intelligence and her common sense was always able to find an agreement with the German command in the difficult cohabitation, is not less significant than Edmondo Bizzi's one.

Wanda Padovani, the mother of the family, recalls in a letter written to Mrs Bianca : "We thought back (..) to the affection all of you felt for us, and Mrs Nerina in particular. And "we won't forget her goodness, her serenity, her strength, and particularly her sweetness. " The cohabitation of the two families in the cellar lasted more than a year.

After the final defeat of the Germans, the house became home to an Anglo-Polish command.

So Serena Padovani recalls the experience: "The risk which Edmondo Bizzi and his family ran to offer us a refuge was enormous. The reception we received in those tragic circumstances was extraordinary. We were always surrounded by a 'cordial atmosphere of friendship and protection without any word of intolerance of the danger that our presence set ever escaped them, although they were well aware of it.

That is why Mrs. Wanda Padovani, recalling those years, will speak of "a dramatic and however positive time in her life."

Also for us the memory of the good accomplished in such a dramatic case, in which evil seemed to prevail, is a sign of hope and reminds us of our responsibilities and of the possibility of restoring dignity to humanity.

As Hillesum wrote: "To believe in man we need only one person worthy of the name."