

The Rescue of Jews in the Italian Zone of Occupied Croatia

Daniel Carpi

I would like to begin with several general remarks which, although of a somewhat personal nature, can be useful in illuminating the substance of my lecture as well as the methods I used in my research.

I began research on the fate of the Jews in the Italian zone of occupied Croatia several years ago. I also conducted a seminar on the topic in the Jewish History Department at Tel Aviv University. At that time, my students and I sought to use as wide a range of documents as possible – both from the standpoint of the type of documents as well as their origin – including those from German, Croatian, Italian, and Jewish sources. Our aim was to attempt to understand all the various aspects of the events of the period. For various reasons I did not complete my research as planned. Now, however, having been invited by Yad Vashem to participate in this conference, I will present one part of that research – the chapter dealing with the role played by the Italian civilian and military authorities in rescuing the Jews who had found refuge in the districts of Croatia under Italian control. This is obviously only one aspect of the total rescue effort in which many bodies participated – including Jewish bodies, such as the leadership of the Jewish communities in Croatia and Dalmatia, the Union of Jewish communities of Italy, and DELASHEM (Delegazione Assistenza Emigranti), the organization established by the latter to assist refugees. Moreover, the picture will not be complete without a description of the contribution made by each and every one of them. I believe, however, that the activities of the Italian civilian and military authorities should be dealt with independently of the other for several reasons: because of the significant direct role played by the Italian occupation authorities in the rescue effort; the fact that it was their attitude which created the favorable conditions which enabled the other bodies – whose activities were dependent on the Italian occupation authorities – to take such actions as providing travel documents and vehicles, transferring funds, etc.; and the

uniqueness of the phenomenon when contrasted with the stark events of the Holocaust period.

It should be noted that we are dealing with an operation carried out by a foreign element – an occupation army in enemy territory – which acted as it did not for the sake of any rewards, on behalf of Jews with whom it had no cultural or emotional ties, such as those which might exist between a local population and their Jewish neighbors (as was the case in countries such as Holland, Denmark, Italy and Bulgaria). Moreover, these actions were undertaken despite the unsympathetic attitude of most of the native population, and the opposition of the authorities of the “Independent State of Croatia”, and in spite of their German allies who spared no effort to sabotage their activities.

For these reasons, and for others which cannot be outlined here, I believe that this subject should be dealt with despite the methodological limitations which I have noted above. I hope that this discussion will aid researchers who in the future will attempt to deal with the entire range of activities undertaken at that time by the various bodies in question.

I would like to make one additional comment, regarding bibliography, before I begin the main part of the lecture. This topic was dealt with for the first time in a short article which appeared in 1944, a few months after the liberation of Rome by the Allied armies.¹ The author, who concealed his true identity behind the pen name Verax,^{1a} relied upon the documents of the Italian Foreign Ministry. He apparently was a member of the group of high-ranking officials who planned and initiated the major rescue operations. For this reason, his article should be regarded as eyewitness testimony, which reflects the atmosphere of that time. As is common with testimonies of this sort, however, his articles suffers from a lack of historical perspective. Following the appearance of this brief essay, a few months after the end of the war, the Italian Foreign Ministry published a memorandum, which for some reason was classified as “restricted” (Riservato), on its activities “to protect the Jewish

¹ Verax, “Italiani ed ebrei in Jugoslavia”, *Politica Estera*, I, Rome, 1944, pp. 21-29 (hereafter – Verax).

^{1a} After this article was already in print, I learned that “Verax” is Roberto Ducci, at that time head of the “Croatian Office” in the Foreign Ministry and today the Italian ambassador to the United Kingdom.

communities during the years 1938-1943”.² At the time, this memorandum aroused some interest – perhaps because of its Riservato classification – and it is possible that it contains some previously unknown information about rescue efforts in several countries, particularly in Southern France. The chapter on Croatia,³ however, is basically a synopsis of the article by Verax, and does not contain any new information of significance. In 1951, a short article was published by Jacques Sabille on “The Attitude of the Italians Toward the Persecuted Jews of Croatia”.⁴ The article was later translated into several languages, albeit with a fairly large number of changes.⁵ Appended to Sabille’s article were eleven documents relating to the period from July 24, 1942 – April 10, 1943. All of these documents were taken from the archives of the German Foreign Ministry, and are undoubtedly important. In fact, until now they were the only documents available for research on this topic. Yet they contain few details on the general diplomatic campaign launched to save Jews, and they certainly do not accurately describe the activities carried out in Croatia.

I am now able, for the first time, to present a broad survey of the subject, base upon several hundred documents, which while they are all from the archives of the Italian Foreign Ministry, include copies of correspondence with the General Headquarters in Rome and the military commands in Croatia and Dalmatia, as well as the correspondence between these two commands. These documents, which date from the period from 1941 until Italy’s surrender in September 1943, shed new light on the subject under discussion, which constitutes a unique chapter in the annals of the rescue attempts undertaken during the Holocaust.

Following its defeat in the Blitzkrieg of April 1941, Yugoslavia was occupied by the Axis powers, and divided into various sectors. Several districts were annexed to the neighbouring countries – Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Axis

² Relazione sull’opera svolta dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri per la tutela delle Comunità Ebraiche (1938-1943), n.p., n.d.

³ Ibid., pp. 18-22.

⁴ Jacques Sabille, “L’Attitude des Italiens envers les Juifs persecutes en Croatie”, *Le Monde Juif*, August-Septembre 1951, pp. 5-8; October 1951, pp. 6-10.

⁵ A slightly altered version was appended to Léon Poliakov’s book on the Jews under Italian occupation in Southern France, *La condition des Juifs en France sous l’occupation Italienne*, Paris, 1946. The book was also published in Yiddish (Paris, 1952), English (Paris, 1955) and Italian (Milan, 1956) (hereafter – Poliakov-Sabille).

states – while two separate states, which were supposed to eventually become independent – Serbia and Croatia – were created from the remaining parts of Yugoslavia. Serbia never gained independence, even ostensibly, and throughout the war was under German military rule. Croatia, on the other hand, was declared an “independent state” (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska). The Italians helped establish the Croatian state in the hope that it would be an Italian satellite and a base for expanding Italian political and cultural influence in the Balkans. Ante Pavelić, the leader of the Ustaša, the Croatian fascist party, was appointed head of state. He had spent many years in Italy as a political exile, and had established close ties with the Fascist Party and its leaders. Indeed, a few days after the establishment of the new Croatian state, Pavelić came to Rome, and on May 18, 1941, signed a series of agreements with Mussolini, which were designed to serve as a basis for the friendly relations between the two states. They agreed that a monarchy ruled by a descendant of the Italian royal family would be established in Croatia and the Duke of Spoleto was chosen for this post. They also agreed upon the boundaries between the two countries, and Croatia ceded part of the Dalmatian coast – between the cities of Zadar and Split – as well as most of the islands off the coast to the Italians.

It soon became clear, however, that these initial successes of Italian diplomacy were meaningless. From the very beginning, the Italians were prevented from extending their influence over all the territory of the Croatian state because of the opposition of the Germans, who considered this state a vital base for maintaining their influence in the Danube Basin even after the end of the war. This conflict of interests between the two Axis powers led to a compromise, a sort of “partition agreement” which was signed by Ciano and Ribbentrop in Vienna on April 21 and 22, 1941. According to the agreement, “independent” Croatia was to be divided into two – the northeastern section was to be controlled by the German Army and the southwestern section by the Italian Army. Moreover, the agreement was supposedly signed only due to the current security situation and merely for the duration of the war.

Thus even prior to the summer of 1941, three distinct regions were created in the territory which was to be included in the “Independent State of Croatia” – a

region which was annexed to Italy (commonly referred to as Sector A); a region occupied by the Italian Army (Sector B); and a third region which was controlled by the German Army. In the latter two areas, the civil administration was handed over to the Croatian authorities. As early as August 1941, however, the Italian Army was forced to take over administrative duties in parts of Sector B – in effect throughout a strip about 50 kilometers wide along the coast – in order to stop the atrocities committed by bands of the Ustaša against the Serbian minority. Thus sector B was divided into two: an area in which all civilian and military authority was in the hands of the Italian Army, and an area in which the Italian Army controlled only the major strategic points. The former was usually referred to as Sector C.

This complex breakdown into sectors, with borders which were never completely delineated, set the stage for the great tragedy which befell the Jews of Croatia. It was also the framework within which the conditions, which in several respects were exceptional, were created for the rescue of some of these Jews.

The persecution of the Jews of Croatia began shortly after the establishment of the Croatian state, and information regarding their plight reached the Italian Foreign Ministry early in the summer of 1941. The reports included descriptions of the brutal behavior of the Ustaša and of Croatian government officials toward Jews and Serbs, and these documents also express deep revulsion at these inhuman acts. One gets the impression, however, that the reports were still fairly routine. Even the two long and detailed memoranda sent by Jews to the Italian Foreign Ministry – one by a group of refugees from Sarajevo⁶ and the other by the Chairman of the Union of Jewish Communities of Italy – did not make an impact. In any event, we have no evidence of any changes which took place as a result. According to the documents of the Foreign Ministry, a change took place in the spring of 1942, when the first reports on “masses” of Jewish refugees who were fleeing Croatia, and even Serbia and Bosnia, in order to seek refuge in the sectors under the control of the Italian Army, began reaching the Italian Foreign Ministry. The first report was sent on May 15 by Giuseppe Bastianini, the civilian governor of Dalmatia,

⁶ Daniel Carpi, “Le Toledot ha-Yehudim be-Split u-be-Sarayevo (Te’udot Hadashot min ha-Shanim 1941-1942)”, *Yalkut Moreshet*, No. 10, 1969, pp. 109-121.

who was particularly concerned over this development because, in his words, thousands of Jewish refugees had already settled in Dalmatia. He asked the Foreign Ministry and the Command of the Italian Army in Croatia to act quickly to find an immediate solution to this problem.

Thus, within a short time, most of the elements destined to play a role in this episode and in the rescue activities were activated: the Foreign Ministry in Rome and its liaison office attached to Italian Army Headquarters in Croatia and Dalmatia; the Italian Legation in Zagreb; the Italian civilian governor of Dalmatia, and the headquarters of the Second Army in Croatia and Dalmatia. Bastianini initially believed that due to considerations of logistics, internal security, and politics, thousands of refugees should not be allowed to remain in Dalmatia. He therefore ordered the army to block the entry of additional refugees and to expel those who had already arrived. This step, which at first was apparently taken on his own initiative, was quickly confirmed by an “order by higher authorities”, which he received from Rome (apparently from the Ministry of Interior), and which directed him to carry out the expulsion immediately. Nevertheless, this directive was not implemented – with the exception of a few isolated cases – because all those involved in the matter quickly realized that under no circumstances could the refugees be given over to the Croats, a step tantamount to condemning them to persecution, torture, and even death.

While there was general agreement on this principle, there was, however, no unanimity as to what the best solution would be. Bastianini insisted that the refugees not remain in Dalmatia. He suggested concentrating them in an area in Croatia, which would be selected in consultation with the Croatian Government, on the condition that the Italian Foreign Ministry obtain “guarantees” from the Croats in advance that these Jews would be treated humanely and given decent living conditions. If this condition were not guaranteed in advance, Bastianini wrote, that it would “be impossible for me to carry out the instructions I mentioned above” regarding the extradition of the refugees (see Appendix – document no. 1).

The Foreign Ministry was not all enthusiastic about Bastianini’s suggestion and it in turn proposed – in a document signed by Ciano, even though the

initiative came from the Italian Legation in Zagreb – that the refugees be concentrated in Sector B, i.e. in the area of Croatia occupied by the Italian Army. In this way, the problems of the Governor of Dalmatia would be solved, and no one would have to depend upon the good will – if indeed it could be thus labeled! – of the Croatian authorities. The Italian Army was in charge of Sector B and it would guarantee the welfare and safety of the refugees.

Even this solution, which at first glance seemed exceedingly simple and practical, was fraught, however, with serious and almost insurmountable difficulties. By the middle of 1942, the control exercised by the Italian Army over most of Sector B had weakened – either because of the pressure of the Ustaša or because of the activities of the Communist partisans – to such an extent that it became highly doubtful whether the Italians would be able to take on the additional and unconventional task of guarding the Jewish refugees. For this reason, General Marion Roatta, the Commander of the Second Army, rejected the suggestion. He noted that in Sector B (Crkvenica-Cirquenizza) there was already a small concentration of approximately 300 Jews whom the Italian Army had undertaken to protect. Moreover, they were barely succeeding in this task due to the pressure of the Croats who incessantly demanded that these Jews be turned over to them. Roatta added, however, that the refugees then in Dalmatia should not be abandoned, because if they were to fall into the hands of the Croats, they would be transported to the Jasenovac concentration camp, and “the consequences are well-known to everyone”. He suggested therefore that the refugees be interned on one of the islands off the coast of Dalmatia, i.e. in Sector A, since in his opinion they could easily be protected there without causing unnecessary difficulties for the Italian civil administration.

This first round of correspondence had no practical consequences, for Bastianini rejected Roatta’s suggestion out of hand, claiming that it could not be implemented. The fact that no decision was reached, however, had very positive consequences. All those involved in the issue understood that if their desire was to ensure the safety of the refugees, they should not reach a hasty decision. As a result, they continued to correspond with one another at a leisurely pace, raising various possible solutions. In the meantime, certain

facts were created which no one questioned. The refugees who succeeded in reaching safety were not expelled, and here and there they even began to rebuilt their lives, with the help of DELASEM or upon their own initiative.

Hardly more than a month had elapsed since the beginning of this correspondence, when a dramatic turnabout occurred. Soon this peripheral matter concerning the fate of several thousand refugees, became an issue of principle, morality, and policy, which involved the political and military policymakers of the two Axis powers, and in several respects strained the friendly relations between Italy and Germany.

The beginning of this turnabout was purely coincidental. One day in June 1942 – apparently around the 20th of the month – a group of German officers and engineers serving in a unit of the Todt Organization which was in charge of bauxite mining in Mostar, the capital of Herzegovina, passed through that city. They were accommodated at the staff headquarters of the Italian “Murge” division, which was stationed there, and one of the German engineers commented about some sort of “agreement between the governments of Germany and Croatia to deport all the Croatian Jews, including those of Herzegovina, to the Russian areas occupied by the Germans” (see document no. 2). These remarks – made in the course of a friendly conversation among comrades at arms – aroused the ire of the Italian hosts, either because they considered the agreement a blow to the status and authority of the Italian Army – the district of Herzegovina was included in Sector B – or due to humanitarian principles. As a result, they appealed to the headquarters of the Second Army, which in turn contacted the Foreign Ministry in Rome, and expressed the opinion that this agreement should not be carried out with regard to the Jews of Sector B, at least as long as the Italian Army was still stationed there.

This time, the various levels of Italian officialdom did not delay. On June 23, 1942, the first cable concerning the issue was sent to Rome, four days later a memorandum was sent, and on June 28, Ciano’s personal secretary, the Marquis Blasco Lanza d’Ajeta replied that, “Also for reasons of a general nature this Ministry agrees that the said agreement between the governments

of Germany and Croatia should not be carried out in the areas under our occupation”.

The policy adopted by the Italians, and the various steps which led to it, are fully clarified and confirmed in one of the documents of the German Foreign Ministry published by Sabille.⁷ A memorandum submitted to Ribbentrop on July 24, 1942 stated that an agreement had been reached between the Germans and the Croats on the deportation of all the Jews of Croatia; that the agreement had already been formulated in writing; and that the Croats favored the deportation, but insisted that it encompass all the Jews, including those in Sector B, whose number they estimated at about 4,000-5,000 persons. The author of the memorandum added that in his opinion the Croats would need forceful German support to carry out the plan, since stubborn opposition by the Italians was anticipated, and in fact there were already many indications of such opposition. Thus, for example, the Italian Chief of Staff in Mostar had only recently announced that he would not agree to the deportation of Jews from the city, since it was against the declared policy of the Italians, who granted full equality to all residents. Even more caustic comments were made in the presence of the German commander of the Todt unit which was supervising the bauxite mining in the area. The same memorandum also states that Siegfried Kasche, the German Ambassador in Zagreb, expressed his opinion that the deportation could begin immediately, but that he also believed that “for reasons of principle” it must be implemented throughout the country. The memorandum seems to indicate even though it does not say so explicitly, that the German Foreign Ministry was requested to assist in the operation by asking the top political official in Rome to order the army commanders in Croatia to change their position.

Even before this memorandum was written, the Germans had, in fact, turned on several occasions to the Italian Legation in Zagreb and pointed out the extreme security danger posed by the presence of numerous Jewish refugees in Sector B. They evaded the Croatian “racial laws”, engaged in espionage, and cooperated with the enemy. As early as July 7, Casertano, the Italian envoy in Zagreb, had reported regarding these repeated protests, noting that

⁷ Poliakov-Sabille, op. cit., pp. 164-165 (English edition).

“This German concern, which already smells of interference, could be a prelude to some official step” in the future. Apparently, the Italian authorities were not particularly impressed by this warning. Thus throughout the month of July and the first half of August 1942, they continued to leisurely correspond and discuss the placement of the refugees, despite the fact that during this entire period more and more information was received from the Italian Legation in Zagreb about the intensification of the persecution of the Jews in Croatia, including the news of the concentration of thousands of Jews and their deportation to the “territories of the East”. According to this same source, this news seemed to indicate that “the Jewish problem in this country, which had already been dealt with in a most drastic manner in the past, was now approaching the stage which could perhaps constitute its final solution”.⁸

Finally, on August 17 (according to one of the sources, August 18), 1942, an official intervention was made. Early in the morning, as was the custom of German diplomats, Prince Otto von Bismarck, the counselor in the German Embassy in Rome, brought a telegram from Von Ribbentrop requesting his Italian counterpart “to see that instructions be given to the Italian military authorities in Croatia so that the operation planned by the Germans and the Croats for a massive transfer of the Jews of Croatia to the territories of the East will be able to be carried out in the Italian-occupied zone as well”. Verax, who apparently was among those who received the German counselor, knew Bismarck personally and he described him as an average man, obsessed by feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis the Anglo-Saxon world, a man who at times allowed himself to whisper criticism of the Nazi policies in a confidant’s ear, yet was always ready to carry out orders, even of the most humiliating nature.⁹ On that morning as well, after he had fulfilled his mission, Bismarck whispered in the ears of the Italian officials that “the matter concerned several thousand people” and that “the purpose of the planned operation was in fact their physical dispersal and elimination”. In response, he was told that his request would be considered and that it would be brought to Ciano and Mussolini for a decision.

⁸ Report of the Italian Legation in Zagreb, August 6, 1942, Archives of the Italian Foreign Ministry (hereafter – AIFM).

⁹ Verax, op. cit., p. 23.

Ciano's response is not known, and it appears that he refrained from taking an unequivocal position in this matter. This was not the case as far as Mussolini was concerned. The memorandum presented to him by officials of the Foreign Ministry contained three short paragraphs: the substance of Ribbentrop's appeal, the whispered warning of Bismarck, and a summary of the abovementioned report sent by the Italian Legation In Zagreb on August 6, 1942. On the basis of this information, Mussolini was asked to decide whether to accept or reject Ribbentrop's appeal. Mussolini's answer was anything but ambiguous. On the page which he was given (and which has been preserved), he wrote in the upper right hand corner "nulla osta" – ("there is no opposition"), and signed next to it with the famous "M" (see document no. 3). Thus, with one stroke of the pen, and on the basis of two words written by Mussolini on a piece of paper with a coarse pencil, the fate of 3,000 individuals had been sealed. "There is no opposition", he wrote, and the meaning of these words was that the Jewish refugees should be handed over to the Germans, even though it was clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that this meant their death.

Several days later, on August 29, Ciano's office informed Army Headquarters of the contents of the German Embassy's appeal and of the decision of "the Royal Government" that there should be "no opposition" to handing over the Jewish refugees who had found shelter in Sector B. (Of course no mention was made of Sector A, which had been annexed to Italy). This communication, which was transmitted in the name of "the Government" was tantamount to an explicit command to the General Staff to see to it that the decision be implemented. It should be noted, however, that no date was set for the beginning of the operation and no timetable of any sort was included in the communication – an omission which perhaps was not accidental.

In theory, the die had been cast. In fact, at the very moment that this decision was made, the real rescue efforts, planned from above and coordinated with the various branches, began in earnest. Among those who took part in this activity were several commanders of the Italian Army stationed in Croatia, among them General Maria Roatta and Giuseppe Pièche, the general of the Carabinieri forces (who after the war was awarded a special citation by the

Union of Jewish Communities of Italy for his bold efforts on behalf of the Jews), and Vittorio Castellani, the head of the liaison bureau between the Foreign Ministry and Army Staff Headquarters in Yugoslavia (Ufficio collegamento con il Comando Superiore delle FF.AA. Slovenia Dalmazia – Supersloda). In Rome, several high-ranking officials of the Foreign Ministry initiated and participated in the plan, particularly Ambassador Luca Pietromarchi, who was the head of the department which dealt with the problems of territories occupied by the Italian Army (Gabinetto, Affari Politici, Ufficio Slovenia, Croazia, Dalmazia, Montenegro, Grecia e Isole Ionie), Signor Roberto Ducci, head of the “Croatian Office” (Gabinetto, Affari Politici, Ufficio Croazia), and the Marquis d’Ajeta, head of the Minister’s Secretariat.

During the initial consultations which took place in the Foreign Ministry after Mussolini’s response was received, these officials – and perhaps other as well about whom we have no information – decided that on principle they would not accede to the decisions of the Ministry regarding the extradition of the Jewish refugees from Croatia. They considered the issue to be one of humanitarian concern, a matter of principle in which they simply could not give in – on a practical level – under any circumstances. They decided to adopt delaying tactics, in the hope that the longer they could put off the implementation of the plan, the more likely it was that it would eventually be abandoned.

This decision was further reinforced upon receipt of a new report from the Italian Legation in Zagreb on August 22, 1942. The report, which was the most detailed and accurate hereto received on the subject, stated that the deportation to Poland (it is noteworthy that until then the indefinite term “territories of the East” has been used) of the remnants of the Jews of Croatia had recently begun; that the deportations were being carried out in special railway cars provided by the Croatian authorities; and that the Croats even obligated themselves to pay the Germans 30 marks for each Jew who was taken out of the country. The report further stated that the representative of the Vatican in Zagreb, Monsignor Ramiro Marcone, had intervened via diplomatic channels to stop the deportations but his intervention had been futile. It seemed, however, that “Aryans” married to Jews would not be

deported. Besides describing the events, the author of the report also noted that the German Ambassador in Zagreb had once again approached him and demanded that the Jews of Croatia who had fled to Sector B be included in the deportations, stating that the German Government would soon take formal steps in this matter. (The German Ambassador in Zagreb also reported on this step).¹⁰

The picture was thus very clear to the officials of the Italian Foreign Ministry. They also had already made their own decision and had chosen the tactics which were to be used. Nothing remained to be done except to begin to implement the plan which, of course, required careful coordination between the diplomatic and military elements, and this type of coordination, by its nature, required oral communication, rather than the use of the regular channels. This is what occurred, although clear evidence was also left in writing, which enables us to trace several of the major steps which were taken. It seems that the participants did not insist upon preserving the “conspiratorial” nature of their activities – apparently they did not deem it necessary. This fact is indicative of the extent to which they depended on the widespread support of various military and government circles in this operation.

The first stage of the delaying process are very clearly outline in a confidential summary composed by the staff of “Supersloda”, a copy of which was attached to a letter written by Castellani, the liaison officer between the Foreign Ministry and “Supersloda” staff headquarters, to his superiors in Rome. Written on September 11, 1942, Castellani’s letter relates that immediately upon his return to Second Army headquarters following his visit to Rome, he met with General Roatta. They discussed the “well-known problem of the Jews”, and Castellani learned that “he [Roatta] agrees completely with our point of view”. “Supersloda” will therefore reply to General Staff Headquarters in the spirit of the points raised in the summary which was attached, and it would do so “without any undue haste” (see document no. 4). The summary stated that while “Supersloda” was, naturally, ready to carry out the orders of the General Staff regarding the extradition of the Jewish

¹⁰ Poliakov-Sabille, op. cit., p. 166.

refugees, the staff nonetheless considered it its duty to point out the practical difficulties hindering the execution of this program as well as the political considerations which in their opinion made it necessary to refrain from actually carrying it out. The refugees were very few in number, since most of Croatian Jewry “had been slaughtered by the Ustaša during the previous summer, particularly in the Gospic and Pago camps”. The refugees were scattered throughout both parts of Sector B (areas B and C), where the control of the Italian Army was limited to several places. Moreover, even in those locations, the refugees were mixed together with local Jews and Jews from Sector A (who, of course, were not candidates for expulsion). Thus in order to carry out the instructions, it would first be necessary to determine where the refugees were located, their exact number, and who should be handed over. In addition to the great effort involved, which would be totally out of proportion to the number of refugees involved, the extradition of the refugees would cause inestimable damage to the good name and prestige of the Italian Army in Croatia and throughout the Balkans. It would be interpreted as a disavowal of the express obligation assumed by the Italians to ensure that no one would be discriminated against because of their religion or race in the areas under their occupation. Moreover, such a move was also likely to arouse the suspicions of the Serbian population that once the Jews had been extradited they too would be handed over to the “wild men of the Ustaša”, a suspicion which might undermine the peace in this area which in any event was far from stable. Finally, the report noted that even though the behavior of the refugees had not aroused any security worries until then, a plan to transfer them to special camps on one of the islands off the coast of Dalmatia had recently been discussed (see document no. 5). From the tone of the report, it is obvious that the writer considered this to be the most practical and desirable solution.

This document sums up the major points which the Foreign Ministry officials and the officers of “Supersloda” agreed would serve as the basis of their attempts to prevent the extradition of the Jews. Indeed, “Supersloda’s” response, sent on September 22, 1942 to the General Staff, repeated these same points, albeit more briefly and in a somewhat laconic style. Castellani,

who two days later sent a copy of this response to the Foreign Ministry, bemoaned the style and the abbreviations, and found it necessary to explain that “the formulation of this response was also very difficult, and the final version was not arrived at until after a series of six drafts” because “General Roatta’s position is extremely difficult, and he is constantly preoccupied (and perhaps not unjustly) that his friends in Rome might be given an excuse to depict him as rebelling against the instructions of his superiors”. These clear-cut comments are evidence of their fear that there were officers in the General Staff whose opinions were contrary to those which had hereto been voiced. (It is possible that this comment also, or mainly, referred to Marshal Ugo Cavallero, the Chief of Staff, who was considered to be decidedly pro-German. In his diary, Ciano labeled him a “servant of the Germans”. According to the documents of the Foreign Ministry, however, one gets the impression that as far as the Jews of Croatia were concerned, Cavallero’s position was no different than that of Roatta or his other colleagues).

In late September 1942, the situation was therefore fairly clear. The Italian staff officers in Croatia continued, “without any undue haste”, their discussions about plans to concentrate the Jewish refugees in special camps – at that time the inclination was to intern them on one of the islands off the coast of Dalmatia – and they also began taking a census of the refugees. At General Staff Headquarters in Rome, there was no response to “Supersloda” remarks and suggestions, either because they too considered this the wisest way of dealing with the matter, or because they believed that at that time there were more crucial military problems that required their attention. The Foreign Ministry, on the other hand, followed the development of the events with interest, tensely and fearfully awaiting the German response.

They did not have to wait long. At the end of September, Pavelić met with Hitler at German Staff Headquarters and in the course of one of their discussions, the question of the Jews of Croatia was raised. Hitler emphasized that “the Jews are the underground communications channels and the junction points of all the resistance movements” and he demanded that their activities be stopped once and for all. Ribbentrop, who was also present at that discussion, recalled Mussolini’s decision concerning the

extradition of the Jews of Croatia, and added that, “evidently this decision had not yet been transmitted to the local Army headquarters”.¹¹ They finally decided that the German Embassy in Rome should ask the Italian Foreign Ministry what had been done to transmit Mussolini’s instructions to the army personnel involved.¹² Thus, on October 3, Johann Von Plessen, a counselor in the German Embassy in Rome, contacted the Italian Foreign Ministry, and reminded them of the previous decision to hand over the Croatian Jews living in the “area under the control” of the Italian Army. He also declared that according to the information which had reached the Germans, the competent military authorities had not yet received the proper instructions in the matter (see document no. 6). He added orally – according to the testimony of Verax¹³ - that “certain German elements had opined that the Italian Foreign Ministry was somehow involved in this delay”.

This diplomatic maneuver led to an Italian reaction on several fronts. On October 7, Ciano sent an urgent cable to the General Staff, in which he informed them of the German’s complaint, reminded them of the prior agreement of “His Majesty’s Government” and asked that he be informed immediately what instructions had been issued and what steps had been taken. Either intentionally, or merely due to a slip of the pen, Ciano wrote about the extradition of the Jews “to the German authorities”, even though until then they had always spoken of handing the Jews over to the Croatians. Ciano also added that the Germans had complained that, according to the information which they had, the Italian officers in Croatia had stated that they received no instructions whatsoever regarding this matter.

This last item aroused a certain uneasiness among the officers of the Italian General Staff. In a cable sent on October 12, they informed “Supersloda” of the Foreign Minister’s appeal, emphasized the seriousness of the German complaint, and demanded that the matter be clarified. They also asked that a report on the results of the census and the steps which had been taken to implement the orders concerning the extradition of the Jewish refugees to “the Germans authorities”, be sent immediately.

¹¹ Part of the protocol of this meeting is quoted in a memorandum of the Italian Foreign Ministry, dated October 20, AIFM.

¹² Poliakov-Sabille, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

¹³ Verax, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

This time “Supersloda” did not delay. One day later, on October 13, it sent a strongly-worded response that no one had ever discussed the handing over of the Jews to “the German authorities”, thus it was only natural that no Italian officer had issued any “statement” on this matter, neither to the Germans nor to anyone else. It was the Croatians – and not the Germans – who had time and again asked them to hand over the Jews; and it was to them that “Supersloda” had responded that it had to receive explicit instructions from Rome. The Germans’ complaint was thus unfounded. As for the census, it had been ascertained that the total number of Jews in Sector B was 2,025, (In his letter of October 15, 1942, to the Foreign Ministry, however, Castellani noted that this figure did not include 1,626 additional refugees who at the time were “in the midst of being transferred from Spalato to Ragusa” – i.e. from Split to Dubrovnik – and for this reason they were not included in the census in either place). What presently had to be determined was how to divide the Jews who had been counted in the census into the various groups – those who were to be handed over to the Croatians and those who were to continue to benefit from the protection of the Italians. In order to do so, “Supersloda” added, it required further instructions from the Foreign Ministry, which would list the exact criteria which were to be used to classify the Jews. At the end, the cable stated that “Supersloda” had not changed its position as outlined in the report of September 22 – that the interests of Italy demanded that the Jews not be handed over. It had also not received any new instructions, since according to the oral instructions given by the Chief of the General Staff Marshal Cavallero to Genral Roatta, “Supersloda” was to refrain from taking any additional action until further notice. In any event, the opinion of “Supersloda” was that the members of the Italian armed forces should not under any circumstances be given the task of extraditing the Jews. If this shameful act had to be carried out, the Croatians should come and collect the Jews themselves.

In the course of the ensuing developments, it became clear that of all the arguments used by “Supersloda” – all of which were of great moral weight – the one which led to the most practical results was “Supersloda’s” request that the Foreign Ministry establish the criteria which were to be used in deciding “who was a Croatian Jew”. It soon became clear that this question, which at

first glance had seemed so simple, was fairly complicated, since it had to be formulated as follows: “Who was a Jewish refugee residing in Sector B, who was originally from one of the Croatian districts which had not initially been included in the area of the Italian occupation?” This formulation enabled anyone interested to ask many other questions such as: What was the definition of “refugee”? What was the cutoff date, after which a Jew who had come to Sector B was considered a refugee? What should be done with a Jew who was in fact a refugee, but whose family had originally live in one of the cities of Sector B? What should be the fate of those Jews who had in fact fled from Croatia but who had originally lived elsewhere, for example Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, or even Spain or Portugal (from whence their ancestors had emigrated at the end of the 15th century)? Questions of this sort could be asked ad infinitum.

It soon became clear that this matter of “criteria” could serve as very useful ammunition. One could easily find exceptions in the family origins of most of the Jews, and thus it was easy to claim that every case had to be investigated carefully and that the matter could not therefore be completed within a short time, particularly under the difficult wartime conditions.

The correspondence concerning these questions went on for a long time, and we need no review the details. It is sufficient to note that immediately after Von Plessen’s visit to the Foreign Ministry, the legal advisor of the Ministry was asked to give his opinion as to who could be considered a “resident” – as opposed to a “refugee” – of the areas under the control of the Italian Army, and who could claim Italian citizenship. On the basis of this initial legal opinion, which was dated October 13, 1942, the officials of the Foreign Ministry established a number of guidelines, which were intentionally broad and vague, and which later, with minor revisions in their formulation, became the basis for all subsequent directives. According to these guidelines, a “resident” was generally an individual who had been officially registered in the local population register. As far as being granted Italian citizenship was concerned, however, the following people would also be taken into consideration: individuals born in the area, those who had resided there “for a fairly long time”, a person whose relatives (until the third degree) lived there,

those who had real estate in that area, as well as individuals who had rendered outstanding service to the Italian occupation authorities – even if they did not fulfill any of the above criteria (see document no. 7).

These guidelines were sent to “Supersloda” on October 16, and the Foreign Ministry repeated them verbatim in a cable sent to the General Staff on November 3. Since they were so broad, it is not surprising that the Italian Army authorities in Croatia claimed from time to time that not only was the clarification of the family origin of the Jews a complicated matter that would take a very long time, but that the number of those who in the end would be extradited would, according to all estimates, be very small indeed. Why then all the unnecessary anxiety concerning the matter? The problem is known and is being dealt with, and in the meantime no security problems are envisaged as a result.

Parallel to this approach, which combined both delaying and diversionary tactics, the officials of the Foreign Ministry also attempted other steps which were more suited to their talents as professional diplomats. They began to conduct discussions with the Croatian authorities in Rome and Zagreb, and attempted to convince them to forego their demand for the extradition of the Jews.

Verax, who apparently was personally involved in this activity, mentions a conversation with Stj. Perić, the Croatian Ambassador in Rome, which took place on October 20, 1942. At this time, the ambassador said that his government would be willing to forego its extradition request if the Italian Government were to undertake to transfer these Jews to Italy (to the “old Italian districts”, as he defined it, even excluding Sector A, which had been annexed to Italy) and hand over all their property to the Croats. According to Verax’s testimony, Perić added that he personally hoped that the Italian Government would accept this condition “because he is well aware of the fate awaiting those Jews who are deported by the Germans to the territories of the East”.¹⁴

Verax was encouraged by the ambassador’s comments, by his formal suggestion, as well as his personal remarks. He did not know, however, that

¹⁴ Ibid.

on the same day that Peric had presented his government's proposal to the officials of the Foreign Ministry, the Croatian Foreign Minister, Mladen Lorkovic, had contacted Siegfried Kasche, the German Ambassador in Zagreb, had informed him of the Italian proposals, and told him that his government did not intend to accept them unless the Germans gave their explicit approval and unless regardless of what happened all the Jews' property would be handed over to the Croats. That very day, Kasche sent a report to the German Foreign Ministry protesting the Italian diplomatic maneuvers – in which he saw signs of the influence of the Vatican – and expressed his opinion that these proposals be rejected outright because “to hand over the Jews to Italy would be tantamount to reversing our entire European policy vis-à-vis the Jews”.¹⁵

As could be expected, the response of the German Foreign Minister was shortly forthcoming. The next day, October 21 (according to another document – on October 22), Prince Von Bismarck came to the Italian Foreign Ministry and demanded that the Croatian Jews be handed over immediately “not to the German armed forces, but to the Croatian authorities who were working in close cooperation with special units of the German police”.

This appeal, and similar appeals which were subsequently submitted to the Italians almost every day, confused the Italian officials. They sensed that they were about to be “caught in the act” and that their maneuvers had brought them to a dead-end from which they had to extricate themselves as quickly as possible lest all their efforts came to naught. They therefore set up a small committee which was to come up with a new plan of action that could be endorsed by both Ciano and Mussolini and which, at the same time, would enable those involved to resist pressure from the Germans.

The committee worked very diligently and in the course of a few days prepared five drafts (in effect five different formulations of two alternative proposals), at least two of which were seen by the Foreign Ministry. The fifth draft, which was accepted by all involved on October 23, was presented to Mussolini for his endorsement. This time, Mussolini's signature was not preserved on the paper, but there is no doubt that he personally endorsed the

¹⁵ Poliakov-Sabille, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-172.

plan, since it is referred to on many occasions as the “instructions of the Duce”. It appears that Mussolini saw no contradiction between this endorsement and his earlier decision of August 21, 1942. In fact, at first glance there appears to be no contradiction between the two.

According to the plan, the General Staff would instruct “Supersloda” “to coordinate the handing over of the Croatian Jews found in the area of the Italian occupation with the Croatian authorities”. However, since these Jews had become mixed up with the rest of the Jews, some of whom were eligible for Italian citizenship, the General Staff should direct “Supersloda” to first of all clarify the origin of every Jew, for it was inconceivable that Jews who were eligible for Italian citizenship and were residing in the area of the Italian occupation would be negatively discriminated against in comparison with Jews who possessed Italian Citizenship and were residing in one of the countries occupied by the Germans. (In these countries the Italians ensured that the civil rights of their citizens, including the Jews, were protected). In the meantime, in order to carry out this investigation properly, the General Staff should immediately issue instructions that all the Jews living in the area of the Italian occupation, regardless of their origin should be concentrated in special camps. The fact that the words “immediately” and “all” were emphasized in the original, is an indication of the importance which was attached to the directive to concentrate the Jews, which was the only important innovation in this plan.

The purpose of this directive was clear. The Italians feared that under the political and military circumstances which had developed, they would find it difficult to continue protecting the Jews who were scattered throughout a very wide area over which they were increasingly losing control. Similarly, it would be difficult for them to continue putting off the Germans’ request, without having some new and convincing excuse. The concentration of all the Jews in a few places would tend to facilitate the problem of protecting them and, at the same time, make things a little easier for the Italian diplomats, who could now point to the fact that “practical steps” had already been taken towards carrying out the plan to extradite the Jews. Moreover, thus the current claim of the Germans, that the refugee problem had to be solved immediately, because as

long as they were free the refugees constituted a serious security risk, could be absolutely refuted. Now the Jews would be held as prisoners in camps, where they could certainly not engage in hostile activities.

Once the plan had been accepted and endorsed by Mussolini, all the Italians had to do was to inform their German and Croatian allies and begin carrying it out. This time, the Croats unwittingly helped in the matter. On October 26, 1942, the Poglavnik himself, Ante Pavelić, intervened in the matter, and instructed his ambassador in Rome to propose again to the Italian Foreign Ministry the suggestions previously put forth by the Croatian Government concerning the transfer of the Jews to one of the “old districts” of Italy. It is difficult to ascertain what Pavelić’s rationale was in making this additional appeal after his foreign minister had brought these suggestions to the attention of the Germans and in so doing had brought about the failure of the whole matter, perhaps he did not know about Lorkovic’s initiative; perhaps he knew about it and opposed it. At any rate, it was now easy for Ciano’s secretary, the Marquis d’Ajeta, to reply to Perić in a cold and somewhat discourteous fashion that the Italian Government rejected these proposals outright. It would adhere to the original plan concerning the handling over of the Jewish refugees to the Croats, and the Duce had already given orders to concentrate all the Jews in camps as the first step in the process of identification and extradition. The Italians were not interested in discussing the issue any further at this time. Perić, who a week earlier had admitted that he hoped for a different solution to the problem, apparently did not understand the meaning of the change in the Italian position. He announced that he had taken note of the message and expressed the satisfaction of his government at the decision.¹⁶

The following day, October 28, d’Ajeta met with the German Ambassador, Von Mackensen. He informed him of the “Croatian initiative” and of Italy’s outright refusal to accept it, because in d’Ajeta’s words, as reported by Von Mackensen, “Italy is not Palestine”. D’Ajeta also expressed his displeasure that the suggestion was raised at all, claiming that it was an attempt on the

¹⁶ A report on the conversation which had taken place on October 27 was included in the cable sent by the Foreign Ministry to “Supersloda” and to the Italian Legation in Zagreb on October 31, 1942, AIFM.

part of the Croatian Government to transfer the responsibility for a problem which belonged solely to them and which they alone had to solve, to the Italians. Finally, d'Ajeta informed him of the new steps which Il Duce had ordered, whose clearcut aim was to begin the implementation of the extradition program.

Von Mackensen listened to these words with great satisfaction, and in this spirit he reported the conversation to Berlin.¹⁷ When the German Foreign Ministry relayed this report to its ambassador in Zagreb, however, Kasche responded in a completely different manner. He had discussed the matter with Lorkovic and had expressed his doubts as to the true intentions of the Italians. Lorkovic, in turn, became furious, and on the spot sent a long cable to Perić instructing him to once again clarify his government's position to the officials of the Italian Foreign Ministry.¹⁸ In the meantime, this move allowed the Italians to again raise the idea of a "trade agreement" with the Croats, the major points of which were that the refugees would hand over their property to the Croats if the latter would forego their demand for the refugees' extradition. (On this matter see below, regarding the discussion between Roatta and Mussolini in late November). In essence, however, these contacts and discussions were merely a matter of tactics, and few people believed that they would actually lead to any practical developments.

In the meantime, new facts were being created at a dizzying pace. On October 28, the day on which the conversation between d'Ajeta and Von Mackensen took place, Marshal Cavallero, the Italian Chief of Staff, personally instructed the army staff stationed in Croatia to immediately carry out the following three activities: 1) to intern all the Jews located in the area of the Italian occupation in special concentration camps; 2) to divide these Jews into two groups, one consisting of Croatian Jews and the other of Jews eligible for Italian citizenship; 3) to send a list of all the Jews in each of the two groups to general Staff Headquarters. According to the cable, additional instructions would eventually be sent concerning the methods to be used in carrying out the extradition (see document no. 8).

¹⁷ Poliakov-Sabille, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-175.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 176-177.

This time, the instructions of the General Staff could not be considered ambiguous, and they were carried out without delay. In the course of a few days, all the Jews – approximately 3,000 in number – were rounded up and concentrated in a number of buildings requisitioned for this purpose in the area of Dubrovnik and Split as well as on the island of Lopud and in the Porto Re (Kraljevica) camp, to which 1,161 Jews, most of whom had formerly been in Cirquenizza (Crkvenica), were transferred.

These instructions, which were issued so suddenly, and were put into effect without prior warning and without any explanations as to their true purpose, aroused different responses among the Jews, Italian officers, and Croatian population – reactions which ranged from extreme anger and great fear, to mockery and visible pleasure.

The terrible fear that their fate had been sealed and that they were about to be given over to their Croatian and German torturers, was aroused among the Jews. These were outbursts of despair and even a few cases of suicide.¹⁹ In fact, the situation became so bad that General Roatta himself deemed it necessary to visit the Porto Re camp to meet Jewish representatives and reassure them regarding the future.²⁰

During the first days after receipt of the order to round up the Jews, the officers of “Supersloda”,²¹ the commander of the Carabinieri unit of the Fifth Corps,²² and General Roatta himself²³ responded furiously. Apparently, none perceived the true intentions of the new orders which they had received, and they all expressed their anxiety as to what would happen to the Jews after they had been rounded up and all the investigations had been completed. They feared that the next step would be the extradition of the refugees – that was the most logical move and this was expressly stated in the instructions issued by the General Staff. They therefore unequivocally and energetically opposed these moves, both on political-practical grounds and owing to moral and humanitarian considerations.

¹⁹ Report by Castellani, November 18, 1942, AIFM.

²⁰ The Jewish representatives sent a letter of thanks for the visit which took place on November 27, 1942. It was attached to Castellani’s report of December 6, 1942 to the Foreign Office, AIFM.

²¹ Memorandum to Ciano, November 3, 1942, AIFM.

²² Report to “Supersloda”, November 8, 1942, AIFM.

²³ Letter to the Foreign Ministry, November 4, 1942, AIFM.

The commander of the Carabinieri of the Fifth Corps, Lieutenant-Colonel Pietro Esposito Amodio, wrote at length about these reasons, such as the damage that would be done to the image and prestige of the Italian Army in the eyes of the other minorities in Croatia and the Balkans. He also presented a lengthy and exhaustive summary of the reactions of the local population – the vast majority of whom were Croats – to the rounding up of the Jews and their deportation from the area. (The Carabinieri unit involved was also assigned to supervise Cirquenizza. Most of the Jews who had previously been there were transferred to the Porto Re camp). From his description, it seems that the initial reaction of the local population was surprise mixed with satisfaction and joy at the calamity. This was followed by an element of scorn for the Italians, which was rooted in rumors circulated by the Croatian authorities that the Germans had forced the Italian Government to take these steps. According to these rumor-mongers, this episode revealed that “it is not true at all that Italy is a great power as her press and propaganda attempt to prove. In fact, she is a small country that has been reduced to the status of a vassal of greater Germany, and she will no longer be able to oppose any demand made by Germany, or perhaps even by the Croatian Government, if it receives appropriate German support”. These and similar rumors, the report continued, have made a deep impression upon the native population and have caused inestimable damage to Italian interests. Many people now believe that the day is approaching when the Italian Army will be forced to evacuate so that the German Army can take over, and “many Croats no longer fear to ask the Italian soldiers and sergeants, simply and openly, when the Italian troops will be leaving the area”.

According to the report, these charges were widespread among the general population and especially in circles unfriendly to the Italians, and that was probably true. At times, however, it is difficult to distinguish in the language of the report between the comments of the antisemitic and anti-Italian Croats, which were presented to give an indication of the current atmosphere, and the musings of the author himself.

While the Jews were already being rounded up – but it is unlikely as a direct reaction to this step – the Foreign Ministry in Rome received a brief message

from General Giuseppe Pièche, the commander of the Carabinieri in Northern Croatia and Slovenia, who reported that according to the information at his disposal, “the Croatian Jews who had been deported from the area of the German occupation to the territories of the East had been ‘liquidated’ by poison gas which had been introduced into the train carriages into which they had been sealed”. The message was dated November 4, 1942 (see document no. 9).

Perhaps it is difficult today to accurately assess the impact which this news made at that time and to what extent it was astounding and shocking. Although certain circles in the Foreign Ministry were already aware of the fact that expulsion to the “territories of the East” meant physical destruction, this brief statement of General Pièche’s nonetheless aroused deep astonishment. On the spot it was decided that the message had to be brought to Mussolini’s attention, and it is conceivable that he was influenced by it, as we shall see later on. What is certain is that this news had a profound effect upon the officials of the Foreign Ministry and it reinforced their conviction to continue working to prevent the deportation of the Jews at all costs.

Several days later, the Foreign Ministry received a letter sent on November 5 by Raffaele Guariglia, the Italian Ambassador to the Vatican, who reported that it had become known to the “Secretariat of State” that the Germans were demanding that “2,000-3,000 Jews, most of them elderly, women and children” who were presently in the Italian occupied zone of Croatia, be handed over to them. The “Secretariat of State” asked the ambassador to intervene in the matter with the Foreign Minister “in order to possibly prevent the extradition of these people” (see document no. 10).

We do not know what provoked this step by the Vatican. We have already mentioned that in the documents of the Foreign Ministry there are indications that an appeal was made by Monsignor Marcone, the Vatican representative in Zagreb, to be Poglavnik, in the wake of which it seems that the situation of “Aryans” married to Jews was ameliorated.²⁴ Similarly, we found that the Germans suspected that the Vatican was somehow connected with the position adopted by the Italian officials regarding the deportation of the

²⁴ Report of the Italian Consulate in Zagreb, August 22, 1942, AIFM.

Croatian Jews.²⁵ This suspicion, however, was unfounded. Today it is clear that the “Secretariat of State” – through Ambassador Guariglia – formally intervened to save the refugees, although we still do not know the full background to this activity, its immediate cause, and who initiated it. The proximity of the dates of the roundup of the Jews of Croatia (the beginning of November) and Ambassador Guariglia’s letter (November 5), seems to indicate that the two are somehow connected.

The rounding up of the Jews and their internment in several localities was carried out in less than a week, and was completed during the first week of November. The Italians now hoped that they would be given a reasonable amount of time in order to make the necessary – and even unnecessary – investigations concerning the origin of these Jews. This time, however, the Germans were suspicious. They were not content to receive generalized explanations and requested that they be given complete copies of the instructions issued to “Supersloda” regarding this matter, and a copy was indeed given to Von Bismarck on November 11, 1942.

The text which was delivered to Von Bismarck was not exactly identical with the one sent earlier to “Supersloda”.²⁶ Yet it is not the difference in the details, but rather the difference in tone which is noteworthy. The document given to the Germans stressed the fact that all the Jews, regardless of their origin, had been interned and therefore there was no reason to fear that they might engage in hostile activities in the future. In the letter that was sent to “Supersloda” on November 17, on the other hand, the Marquis d’Ajeta emphasized the fact that because all the Jews had been rounded up without any prior screening, the Italian authorities now had to undertake exhaustive investigations in order to ensure that the Jewish “residents” would not be denied their rights, while remaining fully conscious of “the consequences which these clarifications are likely to bring about”. Indeed, the extensive correspondence on this issue indicates that the officers of “Supersloda” took this remark very seriously, and whenever they thought that there was any

²⁵ Poliakov-Sabille, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-172.

²⁶ Letter of the Foreign Ministry to “Supersloda”, November 3, 1942, AIFM.

room for doubt, they contacted the Foreign Ministry and requested appropriate instructions.²⁷

In Late November or early December, General Roatta visited Rome and met with Mussolini. At that time, crucial events were occurring which were to affect the outcome of the war. In Russia, the Red Army celebrated its first great victories, and the defensive alignment of the Axis powers in North Africa began to crumble in the wake of the landing of the American Army in Algeria. Despite all this, the two leaders found time to discuss the fate of the Jewish refugees in Croatia. Roatta expounded at length on the political and military reasons which, in his opinion, made it imperative for the Italians not to hand over the refugees to the Croatians under any circumstances. He even mentioned the severe damage which had been caused to the prestige of the Italian Army because of the roundups which had been carried out in early November. Roatta was of the opinion that all the refugees should be transferred to camps located in Italy proper, and that a compromise should be worked out with the Croatians on the basis of their “proposal” – as he called it – that the Croatians renounce their demand for the extradition of the Jews and the Jews relinquish their property and their Croatian citizenship.

Apparently Mussolini tended now, more than in the past, to accept such a solution and he himself summarized the conversation with two clear and unambiguous directives: “1) all the Jews would continue to be kept in concentration camps; 2) in addition to the investigations which would continue to be conducted regarding the origin of each internee, the collection would commence of applications of Jews willing to relinquish – in accordance with the abovementioned proposal of the Croatian Government – their Croatian citizenship and the property they owned in Croatia”.²⁸

These two directives, besides confirming the earlier policies, also contained two important innovations – first and foremost, that at least in the foreseeable future, none of those rounded up would be extradited, not even those who would be classified as “refugees”; the second was that for the first time the possibility was raised – to be more exact, the possibility was not *ab initio*

²⁷ Letters of “Supersloda” to the Italian Foreign Ministry, November 3, 5, and 20; December 13, 14, and 16, 1942, AIFM.

²⁸ Report of Castellani to the Foreign Ministry, December 3, 1942, AIFM.

denied – that some day in the future the problem of the refugees would be solved by transferring them to Italy. This possibility was, in fact, never realized, and fortunately so, for it is very doubtful whether most of the refugees would have eventually been saved (as they were in Yugoslavia) had they been sent to Italy.

A few days later, on December 9, Von Bismarck once again visited the Foreign Ministry to ask his by-now standard question concerning the extradition of the Jewish refugees in Croatia. This time, however, he also offered a new suggestion. His government understood, he said, the severe difficulties involved in transferring thousands of Jewish refugees through territory in which “bands of rebels” were active. He therefore proposed that these Jews be transferred by sea to Trieste and from there straight to Germany.

It was clear that in this manner the Germans intended to forcefully present their demand. The Italian officials were startled by this suggestion and were not able to offer any response on the spot, except to mutter that technical difficulties, such as the lack of boats, would prevent the implementation of this proposal.

Apparently Von Bismarck accepted this response and did not react.²⁹ Nevertheless, the officials of the Foreign Ministry were worried by the tone of the new German proposal and a few days later, upon their own initiative, they contacted the German Embassy in Rome and reported once again that the staff of the Italian Army in Croatia had been ordered some time ago to round up all the Jews “in a small number of concentration camps”, and that they were presently under the strictest possible surveillance.³⁰

For several weeks after this answer, there is little information on the diplomatic activity regarding the fate of the Jewish refugees from Croatia. Perhaps it is only coincidental that few documents from the months January-February 1943 have survived. Perhaps the decisive events which occurred at the time, both on the Eastern front and in North Africa, caused the leaders of the Axis to forget this “worry”. In the January 22, 1943 entry in his diary, Ciano described the situation of the Axis powers on the two fronts in the bleakest

²⁹ Minutes of the meeting of November 9, 1942, AIFM.

³⁰ Report of the Foreign Office to the General Staff, December 15, 1942, AIFM.

possible terms. According to the Italian Foreign Minister, Mussolini himself considered the German bulletin of that day as the most grave report received since the beginning of the war. The following day, Tripoli fell to the British Army, and thus the last remnant of the “Italian Empire” in Africa, which had always been the great dream of the Fascist leadership, was lost. Several days later, on January 31, 1943, Stalingrad fell to the Red Army and a large German force surrendered. With astounding suddenness, the great turnabout in the balance of power between the two fighting blocs became apparent, and for the first time since the start of the war it became conceivable that the Axis powers might be defeated, and perhaps in the not too distant future.

Public opinion in Italy was deeply affected by these events, and in their wake – for reasons which cannot be elaborated upon here – opposition to the regime began to gain ground among wide sections of the Italian population. Mussolini sensed this, although he apparently did not realize just how strong the opposition was. In order to undercut his opponents, he decided to make large-scale changes in the leadership of the party, government, and the high command of the army. Some of these changes were to have an influence – in certain cases which was positive – on the fate of the Jewish refugees in Croatia.

On January 31, 1943, a week after the fall of Tripoli, Marshal Cavallero, the Chief of Staff, was replaced by General Vittorio Ambrosio. In 1941, Ambrosio had been the commander of the Italian forces in Croatia – he was General Roatta’s predecessor – and thus the general background of the Jewish refugee problem was well-known to him. Five days later, on February 5, the Foreign Minister was replaced. Ciano was appointed Ambassador to the Vatican in place of Guariglia, while Mussolini himself assumed the post of Foreign Minister. In addition, he appointed Bastianini, who until then had been Governor of Dalmatia and was one of the first people to deal with the question of the Jewish refugees in Croatia, as Deputy Minister, the man actually responsible for running the ministry. Finally, in mid-February, General Ambrosio recalled Roatta from Croatia and gave him a command in Italy proper. (Both Ambrosio and Roatta later played a crucial role in determining the army’s policy after Mussolini had been deposed and arrested). Ambrosio

appointed General Mario Robotti the commander of the Italian Army in Yugoslavia in Roatta's place. Robotti had formerly been one of the leading officers of the Italian occupation forces in Croatia and was deeply involved in all the activities that had hereto been undertaken in order to save the Jewish refugees.

In this atmosphere of uncertainty regarding the future, which pervaded the ranks of the Italian leadership in early 1943, the Germans renewed their pressure for the extradition of the Jewish refugees, and this time they did so at the highest diplomatic level. Toward the end of February, the German Foreign Minister, Von Ribbentrop, visited Rome, and spent three days conferring with Mussolini. According to detailed testimony which has been preserved in the documents of the Italian Foreign Ministry, Von Ribbentrop raised the issue of the fate of the Jews living in Southern France in the course of these talks,³¹ but he undoubtedly also dealt extensively with the fate of the Jewish refugees from Croatia. Evidence to this effect exists in the testimony of Colonel Vincenzo Carlà which was given on March 6, 1945, about two years after the event.³² Carlà, who at that time was one of the leading officers of "Supersloda", relates that he accompanied General Robotti when the latter traveled to Rome "early in 1943". In fact, the General had an audience with Mussolini at the beginning of March. Carlà also accompanied his commander on this visit, although he was not present during the actual meeting. Together with other officers, he waited in a room next to Mussolini's office. Upon leaving, General Robotti told him that Mussolini had said: "Minister Von Ribbentrop was in Rome for three days and employed all kinds of pressure to ensure that the Yugoslavian Jews will be extradited. I tried to put him off with excuses, but he persisted, so in order to rid myself of him I was forced to agree. The Jews should be transferred to Trieste and given over to the Germans". General Robotti expressed his adamant opposition to Mussolini, repeating the reasons that had been put forth previously – the extradition was inhuman and it went against the interests of the Italian Army in that area. Mussolini was not insistent, and summarized the discussion by saying: "O.K.,

³¹ Memorandum of March 14, 1943, to which a report of February 25, 1943, by the German Embassy in Rome and the reply by the Foreign Ministry dated March 9, 1943 are attached, AIFM.

³² Poliakov-Sabille, op. cit., pp. 152-153.

O.K., I was forced to give my consent to the extradition, but you can produce all the excuses that you want so not that no even one Jew will be extradited. Say that we simply have no boats available to transport them by sea and that by land there is no possibility of doing so.³³

Thus the conversation ended – according to the testimony of Colonel Carlà, who heard the details from General Robbotti. Even if we assume that here and there the two witnesses embellished the description, the basic content of the testimony is undoubtedly accurate. It is confirmed by Verax,³⁴ and various details concerning General Robbotti's trip to Rome, such as the date and its general purpose, are confirmed by a cable sent to him by General Ambrosio inviting him to the meeting.³⁵

The German pressure, therefore, bore no fruit, even when applied at the highest level. As spring approached, however, a new danger, potentially more severe than all the others, became evident. Everyone realized that the Allies would resume their offensive in the Mediterranean area in full force in the spring, and many thought that following the surrender of the Axis forces in Tunisia, Italy would be the Allies' next target. This opinion also gained currency among Italian statesmen and military men. They began to argue that in view of this bleak prospect, it was imperative to bring at least part of the armed forces still stationed in the occupied areas of France and Croatia back to Italy as soon as possible, and to hand over the responsibility for the areas which would be evacuated to the Germans or their allies. As is known, however, these proposals were not accepted because of the stubborn opposition of Mussolini and his inner circle, who were captivated by their delusions of grandeur and thus neglected the defense of their own country. The proposals themselves, however, represented a severe threat to the safety of the Jews interned in Sector B, and officials of the Foreign Ministry, as well

³³ Copy of the testimony of Col. Carlà, which was given in the Italian War Office on March 6, 1945, is preserved in the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris and I am indebted to that institute for making a copy of the document available to me.

³⁴ Verax, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

³⁵ A Photostat of the document was published in the pamphlet, *Državna Komisija za Utvrđivanje Zlocina Okupatora I Njihovih Pomagača, Saopćenje o Talijanskim Zločnima Protiv Jugoslavije I Njenih Naroda (The Atrocities Committed by the Italians Against Yugoslavia and her Peoples)*, Belgrade 1946, p. 165.

as the Italian Army officers in Croatia, were forced to consider how to deal with this danger.

It should be noted that at that time, the Italian authorities already possessed full and detailed information on the refugees – their number, origin, and citizenship. After the Jews had been concentrated in the camps, and especially during the long winter months, the census had been completed, as were the relevant “investigations”. It was determined that 2,661 Jews were interned in the various camps, 893 of whom claimed Italian citizenship in accordance with the guidelines of the Foreign Ministry listed above; 283 possessed foreign citizenship (German, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, and Albanian – the Albanians were at that time considered to be subjects of the Italian crown!); and 1,485 were Croatian Jews who could not prove any “right” to any other citizenship. All these refugees lived in areas under the jurisdiction of three corps of the Second Army: 1,172 under the jurisdiction of the Fifth Corps, in the Cirquenizza (Crkvenica) camp; 615 under the jurisdiction of the Eighteenth Corps, on the islands of Lesina and Brazza (Hvar, Brac); and 874 under the jurisdiction of the Sixth Corps in Cupari, Mlini, Gravosa, Isola di Mezzo.³⁶

These figures, which appear to be reliable and exact, do not match the number of Jews who were eventually liberated. Their number, according to a Jewish source which seems to be reliable, was approximately 3,500.³⁷ Perhaps the officers of “Supersloda” purposely minimized the number of the internees, especially the number of Croatians among them, or perhaps during the months between March and September, additional Jews, who at first had not been rounded up and were therefore not included in the census, later entered the camps. In any event, the documents of the Foreign Ministry from then on deal with the fate of the 2,661 Jews counted in the census of the internees and who, it was feared, would fall into the hands of the Croatians as a result of border changes which might be made in the future.

By this time, there were few options left for solving the problem and, in effect, the choice was between two possible solutions: either to transfer the refugees

³⁶ Reports of February 27, March 9 and 20, 1943, AIFM.

³⁷ Jaša Roman, “Jevreji U Logoru Na Rabu I Njihovo Ukjučivanje U Narodnooslobodilači Rat” (Jews in the Rab Camp and Their Participation in the Liberation War), *Zbornik*, No. 2, 1973, (hereafter – Romano), p. 70.

to Italy itself, or to concentrate them all in one camp in the annexed area (Sector A), as close as possible to the old Italian border, in order to make it easier for the Italian Army to guard them and, in an emergency, to transport them across the border.

As expected, the General Staff and the Foreign Ministry differed on this question. The former supported the first option, since it would have freed them from any further responsibility in the matter. Moreover, under the conditions which existed at that time, it really would have been difficult to set up a camp which could accommodate thousand of refugees. The Foreign Ministry, on the other hand, pressed for the adoption of the second option since, among other reasons, it feared that the Ministry of the Interior – which from the very beginning had not been particularly well disposed toward the measure taken on behalf of the Jews of Croatia – would object to, or at the least hinder, the transfer of refugees to camps in Italy. Moreover, without the consent of the Ministry of the Interior, under whose jurisdiction these camps would be, no such solution could be effected.

Throughout March and the beginning of April, the issue was debated at length in the correspondence between the various bodies until a compromise of sorts was finally reached, whereby the Jews would be concentrated on the island of Arbe (Rab) in Sector A, but their transfer to this site would be carried out in two stages. During the first stage, 1,489 Jews under the jurisdiction of the Sixth and Eighteenth Corps would be transferred. They were further away and were scattered in various places, so the fear that they might fall into the hands of the Croatians was more real. Meanwhile, the Jews under the jurisdiction of the Fifth Corps, who were already concentrated in the Porto Re camp located several tens of kilometers from the Italian border, would remain there a few months longer, until the necessary arrangements could be made on the island of Arbe for their absorption.³⁸

In fact, however, almost no time at all passed between the transfer of the two groups. The transfer of the first group was delayed time and again and began close to the end of May – whereas the transfer of the Porto Re group began

³⁸ Correspondence between “Supersloda” and the Foreign Ministry, March 20, 25, and 31; April 5 and 16, 1943, AIFM.

on July 5, 1943. By the latter half of July, all the Jews were already concentrated on the island of Arbe, several kilometers off the Italian mainland. The Arbe camp (officially entitled “Campo di concentramento per internti civili di Guerra – Arbe”) was a large camp, in which approximately 20,000 individuals were incarcerated (according to some sources – 15,000), mainly Croatian and Slovene citizens. A separate wing of the camp was set aside for the Jews in which the conditions were fairly satisfactory although not comfortable. They were housed by families or groups of individuals. Dr. Jaša Romano, who was a prisoner in the camp, wrote about the life of the Jewish inmates, the internal organization, welfare and cultural activities, as well as about the contacts between the Jews and leaders of the underground in the non-Jewish section of the camp, and I see no reason to repeat what he has written.³⁹ There is room, however, to dwell upon the significant changes which occurred in the condition and the status of the Jewish refugees during the short period they were in Arbe, as a result of the political developments that occurred in Italy at the time.

The transfer of the Jews to Arbe was completed around July 20, 1943. Several days later, on the night of July 24-25, Mussolini’s regime was overthrown. Literally overnight, twenty years of government by the Italian Fascist Party were ended, and a government of “technocrats”, headed by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, was established. It negotiated with the Allies regarding the conditions for a ceasefire for 45 days, and finally, on September 8, surrendered unconditionally.

During these forty-five days, the general political framework in Italy was radically altered and simultaneously, the condition and status of the Jews in Italy and in the Italian-occupied areas, and especially that of the Croatian Jews interned in the Arbe camp, also changed. The question which now confronted the new Italian Foreign Minister Guariglia, the officials of the Foreign Ministry, and the officer of “Supersloda” was no longer how to evade the pressure of the Germans to hand over the refugees, but rather how to free these Jews from the camp without endangering their lives, at a time when releasing them might very well constitute a death trap for them, especially if in

³⁹ Romano, op. cit., p. 70.

the future the Italian Army would be forced to retreat from the areas it had hereto occupied in Croatia.

The subject was discussed at length by the military and political authorities both in Rome and in Croatia. The officer of “Supersloda” again proposed that the refugees, or at least part of them, such as the women and children and men with professions that might benefit the Italian economy, be transferred to Italy⁴⁰ (see document no. 11). The Foreign Ministry, on the other hand, thought that due to the political and logistical circumstances, there was no chance that this solution would be acceptable to the various responsible bodies, and it demanded that first and foremost the physical survival of the refugees be guaranteed. Finally, on August 19, the newly-appointed Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry, Augusto Rosso, sent a detailed cable to “Supersloda”, which was undoubtedly composed in accordance with the wishes of the Foreign Minister, in which he summarized the basic position of the latter vis-à-vis the Jewish problem in general and the question of the Jewish refugees from Croatia in particular (see document no. 12).

The Foreign Ministry attributed particular importance to this document as is evident from the fact that on the very day it sent the cable to “Supersloda”, it also sent a copy to the branch of the Ministry of the Interior which dealt with matters of demography and race (Direzione Generale Demografia e Razza), and which had been in charge of implementing the racial laws against the Jews since 1938. Needless to say, the Foreign Ministry had hereto not kept this branch informed of the steps taken in the matter of the Jewish refugees of Croatia, and one may assume that it often had to make special efforts to ensure that the information would not reach them. Now, however, times had changed. The project to save the Jews no longer had to be kept secret, and the officials of the Foreign Ministry found it useful to keep their “colleagues” in the Ministry of the Interior informed of this new situation, “no matter what happens” as they explicitly stated in the accompanying letter, and in order to warn them in clean and unambiguous terms that they should not intervene in the matter.

⁴⁰ Letters of “Supersloda” to the Foreign Ministry, July 28 and August 29, 1943, AIFM.

The cable of the Foreign Ministry instructed the Italian General Staff in Croatia that “Croatian Jews should not be released [from the camps] and are not to be abandoned in the hands of strangers without some sort of protection [thus being] exposed to potential acts of retaliation, unless they themselves prefer to be released and to be sent out of our area of occupation”. At the same time, the Italians should prevent these refugees from coming “en masse” to Italy, in the wake of the Italian Army, if it would be forced to retreat, and therefore they must see to it that even in such a situation the Jewish refugees should be able to stay on the island of Arbe, where they would have “adequate protection”. In the meantime, the army authorities could begin dealing with each case individually, in a friendly manner, in order to find individual solutions – all, of course, in accordance with the limitations imposed by the difficult conditions of the time.

As for the policy adopted by the Foreign Ministry in regard to the Jewish problem, the author of the cable asserts that “the racial policy which was adopted in Italy never prevented us from preserving those humanitarian principles which are an indelible part of our spiritual patrimony. Today more than ever we are commanded to preserve them. It is nonetheless desirable, from a political point of view as well, that this position be properly presented and made known”.

Two elements, which complemented each another, thus influenced the establishment of the Ministry’s policy – the humanitarian principle, which the author of the cable and his colleagues certainly believed in sincerely and wholeheartedly, and political interests, which they were aware of and were anxious to fulfill. How fortunate that an elevated moral principle and an important national interest should coincide in this case.

In reality, however, it soon became clear that the matter was much more complex than it had originally been considered. The “Supersloda” officers did not contest the moral principles which were the basis of the Foreign Ministry’s directives, and they certainly were willing to serve the interests of their country. As individuals who were in close proximity to the events, however, they fully realized that no guarantee or promise would be of value to the Jewish refugees if they were left alone in the midst of a hostile population, at

the mercy of the Croatian authorities. They also did not take into account that Tito's partisans could play a central role in saving Jews, as they eventually did. For these reasons, they maintained their position that, no matter what had occurred during the previous months, the only solution to the problem of the Jewish refugees was their original proposal to transfer them to Italy. The officers of "Supersloda" emphasized this point in a detailed letter sent to Castellani on August 29, 1943, in which they suggested – in response to the directives of the Foreign Ministry – to immediately begin transferring the first groups of refugees to Italy – elderly and sick refugees as well as those whose families were situated on the other side of the border.

This impassioned plea met with no response. In a desperate attempt to bring about action and prevent the tragedy which they believed was imminent, the officers of "Supersloda" decided on September 7, 1943, to send Major Prolo, one of their officers, to Rome in order to speed up the handling of their proposal and convince the Ministry of the Interior to agree to its implementation. This step was taken too late, however. On the evening of September 8, 1943, the Allied Command suddenly announced the surrender of the Badoglio government. The Italian Army laid down its arms and, in most places, the German Army immediately took over. Shortly thereafter, the island of Arbe also fell to the Germans and their Croatian allies.

Thus, for the Jewish internees in the Arbe camp, the day of liberation was one of great danger. It was, however, the day on which, for the first time since the beginning of the war, they were given an opportunity to cease being powerless and persecuted refugees and to become the masters of their own fate. For the first time, they were free to organize, to make their way to the areas which had already been liberated by the partisans, and to participate in the struggle against the common enemy.

Of the Jews who were in the Arbe camp at that time – 2,661 according to the Italian sources and approximately 3,500 according to Dr. Romano's testimony – only 204 individuals, mainly elderly and sick people, decided to remain where they were. They were captured by the Germans, transferred by sea to

Trieste and from there were deported to Auschwitz.⁴¹ The rest set out to join the partisans. Some were organized in a special Jewish unit, the Fifth Battalion, which operated jointly with four battalions of Slovenes, in the framework of the partisan brigade formed in Arbe. Many doctors, engineers, and nurses joined the regular partisan units. The Jews who could not bear arms – in Arbe there were some 500 children under the age of 16⁴² – found refuge among the civilian population in the liberated area. From among the Jews who joined the partisans, 277 did not live to see the day of liberation – 136 fell in battle and 141 were killed in the course of the war.

Two and one-half years passed from the invasion of Yugoslavia to the surrender of the Italian Army, and an additional year and a half elapsed before the end of the war. Throughout this entire period, the Jews of Croatia were mercilessly oppressed and the majority did not survive. Some were the victims of the terror unleashed by the “wild men of the Ustaša”; others were killed by German soldiers; some died as a result of the torture, hunger, and disease in the concentration camps of Croatia, while others were killed with their brethren in the German death camps. Only a few succeeded in joining the partisans and fighting in the struggle for their freedom and the liberation of the other peoples of Yugoslavia. Very few indeed lived to witness the final day of victory.

The percentage of Jewish survivors among those who escaped to the Italian zone of occupation, however, was relatively high – about 2,200 out of a total of 2,661 according to the Italian figures and approximately 3,000 out of 3,500 according to the figures of Dr. Romano. In addition, thousands of Jewish refugees managed to reach Italy, whether with the consent of the Italian authorities and the aid of DELASEM – such as the group of Jewish children

⁴¹ Romano, op. cit., pp. 70-72; Zdenko Löwenthal (ed.), *Zločini fašističkih okupatora I njihovih pomagača protiv jevreja u Jugoslaviji* (The Crimes of the Fascist Occupants and Their Collaborators Against Jews in Yugoslavia), Belgrade, 1957, p. 23.

⁴² These children were the subject of lengthy negotiations between the leaders of the Jews interned in Arbe and the Italian authorities. The former sought to transfer the children to Turkey (and from there to Palestine). Permission was not granted, due to the opposition of the Mufti of Jerusalem. I plan to deal with this episode, which lies outside the purview of this lecture, in an article entitled “The Negotiations Regarding the Transfer of Jewish Children from Croatia to Turkey and Eretz Israel in the Year 1943”, which will appear in the forthcoming volume (XII) of Yad Vashem Studies.

who were housed in the village of Nonantola near Modena⁴³ – or by traversing circuitous routes and illicitly crossing the border, activities which the local army commanders were generally well aware of.

These small-scale rescue activities were the product of the effort of several groups, a few of which were composed of refugees or Italian Jews, while others consisted of officials of the Foreign Ministry and officers of the Italian Army. In this lecture I only dealt with the work of the non-Jewish groups, which indeed were not the only factor, but whose role was undoubtedly of great, and perhaps from a practical point of view of decisive, significance.

Having reached the end of my lecture, I must pose the almost traditional question: What motivated these men to do what they did?

I have been asked this question many times in relation to this episode, as well as to other events, and the query always pains me because in my opinion it is an indication of a profound distortion in our thinking regarding the period of the Holocaust. The logical and natural question is not, “Why did so and so refuse to participate in cold-blooded murder or even try somehow to stop it?” but rather “How was it that so many people, and even entire nations, directly or indirectly sanctioned such deeds?” It is true that one cannot understand the history of a period without comprehending its internal logic and specific nature, but the criteria by which one measure human behavior cannot be arbitrarily changed to suit the character of this or that period, and it certainly cannot be made to suit the value system which governed the actions of the Nazis. Basic and universal moral norms are always binding, even in times of crisis, even when the majority of mankind ignores them, and the devotion to these norms requires no explanation.

Nevertheless, since I have answered questions of this sort in the past, I shall attempt to do so this time as well.

First of all, it should be noted that the initial activities of the Italian Army officers to save the Jews of Croatia were not in any way exceptional or unusual in relation to their operations in the area. When the “Independent State of Croatia” was established, and particularly during the spring and summer months of 1941, the members of the Ustaša brutally slaughtered

⁴³ Ilva Vaccari, *Villa Emma*, Modena, 1960.

many of the Serbian minority left in their state, including those living in Sector B, which was occupied by the Italians. At the time, the Italian Army was ordered to end this slaughter, and several times the forceful actions of the Italians led to clashes with their allies the Ustaša. The Italians finally decided to take away the authority for the civilian administration in Sector B from the Croats, and from then on, order was maintained in that region. In the spring of 1942, when the Ustaša intensified the persecution of the Jews throughout the area of the Croatian state, the officers and soldiers of the Italian Army who were stationed there understood that it was their obligation to protect the residents, and first and foremost the persecuted minorities; quite naturally, the Jews – both the local ones and the refugees – were also included.

Thus the initial steps taken to save the Jews were part of the general responsibility of the Italian Army in the region and a continuation of its activities to save the Serbian population. There is no doubt, however, that the Italians eventually devoted special attention to the rescue of the Jews, and for them it assumed political and moral significance far beyond their general interest in maintaining order in the region.

The Italians realized the political aspects of the problem in the spring of 1942, when the Croatian-German agreement to deport all the Jews in Croatia became known. The fact that the agreement had been signed without their knowledge, by a state which, it had been previously agreed, would be under their exclusive sphere of influence, was a severe blow to the status and prestige of the Italian Army. Moreover, according to the terms of the agreement, it was to include the Jews living in the area of the Italian occupation as well. From that time on, the opinion became widespread among various Italian political and military officials that the extradition of the Jews to the Croats would be tantamount to a surrender to German orders and, would for the peoples of the region, constitute a public admission of the weakness of the Italian Army.

All the arguments which the officer of “Supersloda” used so frequently in their appeals to the General Staff to justify their opposition to the extradition of the Jews, were basically true. Perhaps they at times embellished them a bit, or even a lot, but they certainly believed that they were true. Beyond the

subjective sensitivity of the Italians, who regarded themselves as the weak and deprived partner of the Axis who had been shunted aside due to the Nazis' tremendous power, there were legitimate political interests, which dictated that the Italians not accede to the demands of the Germans and the Croats to extradite the Jews, and the officers of "Supersloda" understood this very well.

At the same time, whoever thinks that the episode of the rescue of the Jewish refugees of Croatia can be explained solely on the basis of diplomatic interests errs. Soldiers and civilians on all levels participated in the rescue work and almost everyone regarded the issue first and foremost as a humanitarian problem, which had to be solved for reasons of conscience, which were beyond political considerations.

In view of the enormity of the tragedy which befell the Jews of Yugoslavia, this episode naturally seems quite insignificant. It was, however, a small episode in which a great deal of humanitarianism was revealed, and it is in this light that it should be evaluated, without the broader context of the rescue activities undertaken during the period of the Holocaust.

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