

The Alps and Resistance (1943-1945)

The Alps and Resistance (1943-1945):

*Conflicts, Violence
and Political Reflections*

Edited by

Francesco Scomazzon

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



The Alps and Resistance (1943-1945):
Conflicts, Violence and Political Reflections

Edited by Francesco Scomazzon

This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2021 by Francesco Scomazzon and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-7389-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7389-5

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	viii
<i>Francesco Scomazzon</i>	
Chapter One.....	1
Through the Alps toward freedom: the escape of Jews from the Province of Como to Switzerland	
<i>Roberta Cairoli, Elisabetta Lombi, Lairetta Minoretti</i>	
Chapter Two	20
The role of the Italian-Swiss border in the partisan history of Middle and Upper Valtellina (1943-1945)	
<i>Andrea Paganini</i>	
Chapter Three	48
Nazi-fascist Alpine warfare in Ossola and Lake Maggiore, 1943-1945	
<i>Raphael Rues</i>	
Chapter Four	65
A community in the Carnic Alps: Villa Santina from the fall of the fascist regime to Liberation (1943-1945)	
<i>Luca Marin</i>	
Chapter Five	83
Italian antifascism Resistance in Switzerland after the 8 th September 1943	
<i>Toni Ricciardi</i>	
Chapter Six	96
Federalist thought in journalistic refugees initiatives in Canton Ticino (1943-1945)	
<i>Fabrizio Panzera</i>	

Chapter Seven.....	116
Giovan Battista Rusca and the struggle for democratic and European ideals during World War II	
<i>Sonia Castro</i>	
Chapter Eight.....	131
Swiss purgatory during the Italian Social Republic (RSI): three different transitions to the post-fascist Italy of the black shirt elite	
<i>Domenico Guzzo</i>	
Chapter Nine.....	152
Christian Democracy in the Alps: the Swiss exile of Amintore Fanfani and the forge of a new Catholicism	
<i>Francesco Scomazzon</i>	
Contributors.....	163

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to express my deep gratitude to the authors for their patience and collaboration. Without their commitment, their proposals and contributions, this work would never have seen the light. I also wish to thank professor Franco Giannantoni for his support, his advice and suggestions. I'm really grateful to Cambridge Scholars Publishing who gave me the chance to publish this work, and in particular to Ms. Rebecca Gladders for proposing me to deal with this publication and, of course, to Clementine Joly, as author liaison of this work. Last but not least, I have to thank the *Istituto per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società contemporanea in provincia di Reggio Emilia* (Istoreco) for allowing me to use the image reproduced on the cover.

INTRODUCTION

FRANCESCO SCOMAZZON

Conflicts, violence and smuggling

Recently, research has shown an increasing attention to the issue of Alpine borders, observed in their supra-national dimension, therefore in the dual function of separation and union, both territorial and symbolic. On the other hand, the “High Lands” have always been since Roman times, not so much an inaccessible bulwark, as potential incubators for economic development, a reservoir of raw materials, an area of control progressively and systematically “domesticated”¹.

From the outskirts, the Alps thus become centres of power, places of conquest, theatres of human adventures, magnet for political and economic interests. Fascism itself soon recognized their role, strengthening the controls since the early 1920s, when the repression of illicit trafficking and smuggling, especially on the border with the neutral Switzerland – land of asylum for the first scattered antifascists – becomes a watchword for the nascent regime.

The periphery thus becomes centre, the mountains become battlefields as well as refuge and survival places for local populations oppressed by misery and hunger, far from a central power personified by the arrogance of soldiers not always alien to those rules and habits. This is what happens in the aftermath of 8 September 1943, when the Italian armistice and the birth of the Social Republic mark the start of a troubled path that, right in the Alps, will experience a dramatic season of conflicts and violence.

In this sense, the essay by Cairoli, Lombi and Minoretti is certainly exemplary in clarifying the function of a region, the Comasco, which, wedged between rugged valleys and hills, is a magnet for thousands of fugitives, antifascists and common opponents, as well as disbanded soldiers and POWs who look to the nearby and neutral Confederation as the only possible way of salvation. Then there are the Jews, the subject of

¹ Silvia Giorcelli Bersani, *L'impero in quota. I romani e le Alpi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2019).

their study, who point to Ticino despite a border passed under the iron control of Salò.

The Social Republic, which finds its *raison d'être* in a “fanatical faith in the future destiny of Fascism and in the final victory”, justified by “an obstinate desire for political survival”², blocks the borders, strengthens the vigilance, feeds an unprecedented wave of repression³. Controls didn't take long to bear fruit; expatriations become desperate escapes, often prerogative of local smugglers, pointed out by Cairolì, Lombi and Minoretti to feed “an easy-to-earn market, which could help boost the economy of these economically depressed areas”.

The distinctive hallmark of the Alpine border area is therefore confirmed, with its multiple and not always obvious interests overlapping and interweaving. A real “playing field”, where “smugglers and partisans mostly came from the same environments, from the same villages and from the same family members”, writes Andrea Paganini. In an entwine that makes them both rebels to be fought in an anti-partisan function, preventing them from becoming a *trait-d'union* with the *Delegazione del Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale Alta Italia* (CLNAI Delegation) and the Allies in Switzerland.

An effort that doesn't prevent the alpine barrier, a watershed between Italy and Switzerland, from becoming a hinge of a complex diplomatic-military game, that Paganini has well highlighted, stressing the complexity of a system, where – finally reports the author – “beyond the different destinies [...] emerges an unspoken but sensitive sympathy, closeness and in some cases a complicity links, which brought together border people, Italian and Swiss, towards a more human existence emancipated from totalitarian systems”.

A complicity that, precisely in the most dramatic moments, seems to unite the two sides of the border, destined to rediscover that unity on the Alpine chain that has always been its indisputable feature. Outlining the events of the Ossola Partisan Republic, Raphael Rues also clarifies on the other hand how the brutal violence that bloodied the mountains near Lake Maggiore, was the driving force behind that formidable experience of civil involvement – also supported by the nearby Confederation – which would have laid the foundations of the future democratic Italy.

The same experience that Luca Marin describes when addressing the study on the Alpine community of Villa Santina, the main centre of what

² Monica Fioravanzo, *Hitler e Mussolini. Le Repubblica sociale sotto il Terzo Reich* (Roma: Donzelli, 2009), 55.

³ Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *Gli specialisti dell'odio. Delazioni, arresti, deportazioni di ebrei italiani* (Firenze: Giuntina 2020), 16.

was – together with the Ossola experience – the Partisan Republic of Carnia, the largest “free zone” in occupied Italy. A strategic area directly linked with the Reich and, for this reason too, a centre of bitter conflicts between local, civil and religious authorities, committed to guaranteeing safety and security for a population divided between mountains and cities, between partisan groups and fascist repressions.

Once again the Alps bear witness to violence and conflicts in search of possible solutions through fragile compromises, often the prerogatives of a Church which, Marin still remembers, “careful not to slip into political choices, stands out in the extraordinarily efficient management of welfare activities, maintaining its presence even in the most problematic areas, exercising a recognizable institutional function”. In this fragile search for balance, the Alps thus become a laboratory of ideas, opinions and political thoughts for refugees and displaced people⁴.

“Fighting for a new Europe”: Alps and refugees

In the tragic months of the Social Republic, the Alps are trap and battlefield, as well as a refuge and laboratory of ideas where the face of modern European thought matures and takes shape. Alberto Cavaglion remembers it well, speaking for example of the valleys of Lanzo, Val Pellice or Vasalvarenche, as a space for reflection respectively for the music critic Massimo Mila, by Giorgio Diena and Federico Chabod, who brings to maturity in Valle d’Aosta his future volume *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896*, published in the early 1950s⁵.

Then in Lugano, in 1943, Montale published *Finisterre*, while Umberto Saba published the collection *Ultime cose (1935-1943)*, but there was also Adriano Olivetti who, amongst the Engadine mountains, in Samedan, transformed his *Memorandum* in the book *L’ordine politico delle Comunità*, a shining example of that new idea of society that the humanist-entrepreneur dreamed and hoped for. It’s a flourishing of ideas and thoughts that run after each other in Switzerland, a “land of asylum” and an alpine refuge for thousands of antifascists in that last juncture of war.

For Italians in Switzerland, at least those who have a more mature antifascist political awareness, it’s time to put in place every effort to help the first refugees from the Peninsula. The “Federazione delle Colonie

⁴ Nelly Valsangiacomo (edited by), *Le Alpi e la guerra. Funzioni e immagini* (Bellinzona: Casagrande, 2007).

⁵ Alberto Cavaglion, *La Resistenza spiegata a mia figlia* (Milano: Feltrinelli 2015), 112-16.

Libere Italiane” (FCLIS) settled at the end of 1943 by antifascists and exiles, refugee in Switzerland for years – especially in Geneva and Zurich areas – confirms to be “the enterprise of instrumentally innovating Italian antifascism”, writes Toni Ricciardi.

The Federation, in fact, grafted on the experience of the *Scuole libere* and the *Colonie* of Zurich by Fernando Schiavetti – future deputy at the Italian Constituent Assembly for the Action Party – is configured as “the first truly democratic laboratory for Italian migration, looking hopefully to a new Italy modelled on the antifascist Resistance”. A branched mesh of opposition to the regime, a real unicum amongst migrants and refugees’ associations, which in Switzerland find fertile ground for a sure political maturation.

For many of them, mostly intellectuals as well as politicians, journalists and writers refugee in Canton Ticino – Fabrizio Panzera recalls – the doors of newspapers and special pages of local sheets are opened, a sort of gym for democratic debate where to develop new ideas and projects. Contributions are signed by Socialists, Liberals, Republicans and Christian Democrats, as well as sympathizers of the nascent federalist movement of Rossi and Spinelli, which in Switzerland would have laid the basis of the European unification process.

A path made possible thanks to a local political class largely sided with antifascist militants. An emblematic case, brought to light by Sonia Castro, is the story of Giovan Battista Rusca, mayor of Locarno from the 1920s to the early 1960s, a leading figure in the local antifascist movement, a convinced Europeanist, whose commitment would have developed in at least three directions: in material assistance to refugees, in defence of the right of asylum and, in fact, by opening the doors of local newspapers and press to Italian refugees in Ticino after 8 September.

In Castro’s essay, the image of a political and cultural commitment that weld the best local intelligentsia in those years emerges overwhelmingly, a network of knowledge and ideas that find strength to look with renewed commitment to a fully democratic future. Here, then, that Europeanism takes shape, understood by Rusca “as part of an intellectual and political evolution in which the reflection on international peace and internal democracy were considered to be two inseparable and strongly connected elements”.

A commitment that clashes inevitably with the many, different souls gathered in that corner of Switzerland in the last juncture of war. Not only antifascists, but also “hot potatoes”: Domenico Guzzo looks at three exponents linked or close to the past regime – Dino Alfieri, Giuseppe Bastianini and Amintore Fanfani – welcomed in Switzerland after the

armistice, emphasizing in particular “the constant and wide-ranging support of the Swiss Catholic right’s networks to protecting fugitive fascist regime leaders”.

In this period, therefore, the ambivalent role of the Confederation emerges, as well as the tragic itinerary marked by a “minimization of responsibility”, which would have led in the post-war period to a disastrous “blow in the sponge”⁶ towards leading figures of the past regime. Some of which somehow managed to pay for their “fascist journey”, through what Domenico Guzzo suggest to be – with a definition certainly apt – “a very discreet Swiss purgatory”.

Undoubtedly the Swiss experience for exponents of the past regime represented – as for Fanfani – a personal and in-depth reflection opportunity, an intellectual growth and a political maturation which, in this case, would have led Fanfani to take a clear distance from Fascism, developing a full resistance awareness. Repaid, with his return to Italy, by the full recognition as a member in exile of the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale* (CLN), as well as founder and authoritative Christian Democrats’ father.

So this short but intense journey along the Alps comes to an end, a multifaceted itinerary, a place of conflicts, violence and political reflections. An area of divisions and convergences, of clashes and agreements, between centre and periphery: dichotomies typical of the Alpine regions, destined to acquire in those years of Resistance, a centrality perhaps underestimated but never questioned. An area that, in those dramatic two years of Italian history – but not only in Italy – was the beginning of a new democratic adventure.

⁶ Mimmo Franzinelli, *L’ammnistia Togliatti. 22 giugno 1946: colpo di spugna sui crimini fascisti* (Milano: Mondadori, 2006).

CHAPTER ONE

THROUGH THE ALPS TOWARD FREEDOM: THE ESCAPE OF JEWS FROM THE PROVINCE OF COMO TO SWITZERLAND

ROBERTA CAIROLI, ELISABETTA LOMBI
AND LAURETTA MINORETTI

Introduction

Proximity to the Italian-Swiss border had a decisive influence on the political events of Como and its province, which had been closely linked since the Risorgimento¹ with the Canton Ticino. In the years following the consolidation of the fascist regime and throughout the 1930s, the main activity of the Como anti-fascists consisted primarily in smuggling propaganda material across the Swiss border and in facilitating the clandestine expatriation of the politically persecuted and, at the same time, the return of anti-fascist leaders. Their aim was, therefore, to keep safe routes into Switzerland open, relying in some cases on the transit networks set up by smugglers, and, in certain instances, to form effective organisational structures that would remain active even during the Resistance and up until the end of the war². As early as 1927, for example,

¹ Roberta Cairoli and Lauretta Minoretti, *Il Risorgimento nell'antica provincia di Como. Politica e società attraverso i documenti inediti* (Castelmarte: Crea Libri, 2011).

² Giusto Perretta and Gerardo Santoni, *1919-1943. L'antifascismo nel comasco* (Como: Istituto Comasco per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione, 1992); Perretta and Santoni, *1919-1943. Il fascismo nel comasco* (Como: ICSML, 1998); Gianfranco Bianchi, *Antifascismo e Resistenza nel Comasco. Rievocazione – testimonianze documenti* (Como: Comune di Como, 1975); Giuseppe Coppino, *Como dalla dittatura alla libertà* (Como: Graficop, 1989); Marco Pippione, *Como*

the Prefect of Como, urged by central government to strengthen surveillance along the Italian-Swiss border, proposed the creation of an information service located in the Canton of Ticino for the purposes of exercising greater control over persons deemed dangerous to the regime and their activities³.

Between 1943 and 1945, with German occupation and the constitution of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (RSI), the Como area became one of the most important transit points for Jews, former allied prisoners, disbanded soldiers and political opponents attempting to enter Switzerland illegally. The overall data for the period between 12 September 1943 – when Como began to be occupied – and 23 March 1944, for the border zone of the 4th customs district, a jurisdiction that included the Canton of Ticino and the Mesolcina valley, attest to the entry of 23,300 refugees, of which 3,349 (14.4%) were Jews, 4,087 (17.5%) were prisoners of war escaped from concentration camps, 14,759 (63.4%) were Italian deserters and 1,105 (4.7%) were political refugees. In the same period, 9,833 rejections by border guards were recorded, to which must be added 2,675 expulsions, decreed by the Military Territorial Command⁴.

Through the cross-analysis of documentation preserved in the State Archives of Como and of the Canton of Ticino and on the basis of some first-hand testimonies, this essay intends to piece together, albeit partially, the flight and expatriation of Jews from the Province of Como. It focuses on certain aspects in particular: the militarisation of the border and the deployment of surveillance devices; the support networks for expatriation and the enforcement measures implemented by the RSI authorities against attempts to cross the border; the reception and *refoulement* policies of the Swiss Confederation and the period of internment in Switzerland. According to the current state of research, only about a thousand out of the approximately 6,000 Jews who took refuge in the Canton of Ticino would have passed through the territory of Como. This was mainly due to the local terrain, which, with the exception of the southern border between Stabio and Chiasso, was often tortuous, rugged and hence more difficult to

dal fascismo alla democrazia (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1991); on smuggling, see: Vittorio Roncacci, *La calma apparente del lago. Como e il Comasco tra guerra e guerra civile 1940-1945* (Varese: Macchione editore, 2003), 284-295.

³ Dante Severin, *Fascismo a Como 1919-1943* (Como: New Press, 1975), 101-106.

⁴ Adriano Bazzocco, “Fughe, traffici, intrighi,” *Rivista storica della Svizzera italiana*, No. 2 (2002): 194-212. See also Renata Broggin, *Terra d’asilo. I rifugiati italiani in Svizzera 1943-1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993).

traverse in volatile and dangerous conditions than the neighbouring province of Varese⁵.

Finally, it should be emphasised that the fragmentation and dispersion of documentary sources have hitherto made the events, identities and numbers of Jews present in the Como area before and after 8 September 1943 particularly challenging and complex to reconstruct. As a consequence, while there have been several important local publications⁶, a systematic study on the subject is still lacking. To this end, the present work also attempts to reassert the common thread between the discrimination faced by Jews following the promulgation of the racial laws of 1938 and the “persecution of the lives of Jews” from 8 September 1943, offering new ideas for reflection and possible avenues of investigation.

The Jewish presence in Como (1938-1943)

In the city of Como, the stable Jewish population was always relatively small; it is not surprising, therefore, that in the list of Jews registered in August 1938, only 48 out of 129 were Italian citizens, defined by the new “racial” criterion as Jews, and of these individuals, only 12 were born in the municipality of Como. All the others were of foreign nationality; most were born in Germany (49 individuals), others in Austria (11 individuals), nine people came from Hungary and the remainder were Russian, Romanian, Polish, Swiss and English⁷.

If, on the other hand, we consider the data at the provincial level, a significant increase can be noted in comparison with the 1931 census: rising from 128 individuals to 215⁸. To these must be added 182 Jews with temporary residency, generally holding residence permits for tourist purposes.

⁵ Francesco Scmazzone, “*Maledetti figli di Giuda vi prenderemo!*”. *La caccia nazifascista agli ebrei in una terra di confine Varese 1943-1945* (Varese: Arterigere, 2005), 143.

⁶ Rosaria Marchesi, *Como ultima uscita. Storie di ebrei nel capoluogo lariano 1943-1944* (Como: NodoLibri, 2004); Giorgio Cavalleri, *La modista di via Diaz: lezzi razziali e ebrei a Como* (Como: Nuoveparole, 2005); Broggin, Renata, ed. *Il lago, la guerra, gli ebrei 1943-1945*. Domaso: Comune di Domaso, 2009.

⁷ *Elenco degli ebrei censiti a Como iscritti nel registro della popolazione mutabile*. In Cavalleri, *La modista di Via Diaz*, 63-76.

⁸ Andrea Molteni, *Gli ebrei di Como e la persecuzione razziale 1938-1943*, Unpublished dissertation, University of Milan. 2002-2003.

The sizeable proportion of foreign Jews, accounting for 67% of the 215 residents in Como and its province, is particularly noteworthy. The significant presence of German Jews may point to immigration due to the anti-Semitic policy implemented by the Nazi regime. Indeed, starting from 1933, the total number of German Jews residing, even temporarily, in Italy increased by an average of five hundred people a year. In October 1934, these individuals numbered approximately one thousand and by October 1936, around two thousand⁹.

It could be surmised that Como, given its position close to the Swiss border and a short distance from Milan, was considered a favourable place to settle. Some had perhaps passed through Switzerland, where Jews fleeing Germany on racial grounds were not recognised as political refugees. Such individuals were granted a three-month residency permit, reflecting the time required to organize their departure to another place of asylum; what the Swiss authorities called the “continuation of the journey”¹⁰.

In Italy, up until 1938, there were no restrictions on the immigration of foreigners into the country. The turning point came in March of the same year when, following the annexation of Austria by Germany, an immigration ban was enacted, albeit not a very effective one. The promulgation of the Royal Decree-Law of 7 September 1938 no. 1381 on foreign Jews was a severe blow for all those who had settled in Italy. The Decree stipulated a ban “on Jewish foreigners establishing permanent residence in the Kingdom, in Libya and in the Aegean possessions”, revoked Italian citizenship granted to foreign Jews after 1 January 1919 and, most importantly, ordered all Jewish foreigners to vacate the territory within six months of the date of publication of the Decree. What repercussions did the discriminatory and persecutory measures introduced by the anti-Jewish laws of autumn 1938 have on Jews living in Como? Research carried out into those who appear in the list of Jews recorded during that summer indicates that some managed to emigrate to the United States or Brazil.

It is possible that a number of foreign Jews living in Como and its province attempted to enter Switzerland; however, the Swiss Confederation’s policy on the entry of Jewish refugees was tightened further following the

⁹ Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell’Italia fascista. Vicende, identità, persecuzione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007), 35-36.

¹⁰ Silvana Calvo, *A un passo dalla salvezza. La politica svizzera di respingimento degli ebrei durante le persecuzioni 1933-1945*, (Torino: Zamorani, 2010), 71.

massive exodus of Jews from Germany and, notably, from Austria after March 1938. As the 12 March 1939 deadline approached, the applications received by the Ministry of the Interior from foreign Jews requesting authorisation to continue to reside in Italy multiplied. At the international level, too, pressure was being exerted to dissuade the Italian government from expelling foreign Jews en masse. It is evident why, on the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War, there were still 8,807¹¹ foreign Jews residing in Italy.

Beginning on 20 May 1940¹², the Ministry of the Interior began preparing for the internment of Jewish foreigners. Men aged between eighteen to seventy were to be arrested and their families were to be resettled, pending the establishment of dedicated concentration camps, in provincial capitals to be determined. The province of Como, too, was involved in the phenomenon of “free internment” at various sites, some situated on the shores of the lake, others towards the province of Varese, around Lecco and in Brianza. Data supplied by Anna Pizzuti¹³ show that 213 names are listed: the majority, entering Italy from mid-1941, came from Yugoslavia, other than Croatia. For these refugees, compulsory residence in a camp or in a small town was not regarded as a persecutory measure, as it had been for foreign Jews residing in Italy in 1940. This was because, in contrast to the brutal persecution enacted in territories occupied by the Germans and by the Ustasha in Croatia, it represented a chance for salvation.

During wartime, vital support for Jewish refugees in Italy was offered by the Israel Kalk “Children’s Canteen”¹⁴, a private welfare association that began operating in Milan in 1940. Kalk, together with a small group of Jewish volunteers, began to organise various activities with the main aim of offering children, insofar as possible, a “normal” life: food,

¹¹ “Statistiche compilate dalla Demorazza”. In “Ebrei stranieri internati in Italia durante il periodo bellico”, www.annapizzuti.it

¹² Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *I campi del Duce. L'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista (1940-1943)* (Torino: Einaudi, 2006), 91-95.

¹³ “Ebrei stranieri internati in Italia durante il periodo bellico”, www.annapizzuti.it

¹⁴ Israel Kalk (1904-1980), originally from Lithuania, arrived in Italy in the early 1920s to study at the Polytechnic University of Milan, where he graduated in engineering. When the anti-Jewish laws of 1938 came into force, since he was married to an Italian citizen he was allowed to remain in Italy. He was deeply affected by the fate of Jewish refugees, especially children, who had found themselves in Milan and decided to take action to help them. It was through this initiative that he founded the “Children’s Canteen” (*Mensa dei bambini*).

clothing, schooling, games and recreation. Later, their support also extended to the elderly, women with young children and the sick. A considerable part of their work involved providing assistance to refugees interned in concentration camps and families placed under free internment. Some evidence of this activity can also be found in the Como area. For example, among the documents of the Israel Kalk Fund, accessible in the CDEC Digital Library¹⁵, are eleven application forms for a monthly allowance completed in April 1943 by displaced foreign Jews in Magreglio, a small town located in the so-called Larian Triangle. Another form relates to a displaced woman in Cantù, in the heart of Brianza. They predominantly concern elderly people, both male and female, from Poland, Hungary, Austria and Germany¹⁶. Another testimony consists of extracts from two letters of gratitude for help received from the “Children’s Canteen”. The letters, dispatched in May and July 1942, were sent by two families of foreign Jews placed under free internment in Bellagio and Oggiono¹⁷.

The border: military occupation and the closure of crossing points

In 1943, the border between Italy and Switzerland, in the province of Como, consisted for long stretches of nothing more than a fence made up of wooden posts and bells, constructed the Swiss at the end of the 19th century. Given the obstacles of the mountainous terrain it crossed, the maintenance of this fence was distinctly arduous and crude: this was a barrier that was easily surmountable in the most isolated areas, where control by the *Guardia di Finanza* was more impracticable and sporadic. Up until 8 September the border was controlled on the Italian side by three departments: the *Guardia di Finanza* (financial police); the *Carabinieri* (military police); and the Voluntary Militia for National Border Security (political police), which supported the *Guardia di Finanza*.

For about a week, between 9 and 16 September 1943, the entire border remained unguarded, thus allowing thousands of disbanded troops, allied

¹⁵ “Archivio fondo Israele Kalk”, <http://www.cdec.it/il-fondo-israel-kalk-nella-digital-library/>

¹⁶ “Assistenza sinistrati e sfollati in campagna”, <http://digital-library.cdec.it/cdec-web/storico/detail/IT-CDEC-ST0006-000011/34-assistenza-sinistrati-e-sfollamento-campagna-34.html/>

¹⁷ “Lettere di ringraziamento e richieste di aiuto dai vari luoghi di internamento”, <https://www.cdec.it/il-fondo-israel-kalk-nella-digital-library/>

soldiers who had fled from prison camps and a few groups of Jews to cross the border and enter Switzerland; consider that in the first ten days after the armistice, around 14,000 people entered the Canton of Ticino. On 18 September, the Germans dispatched to the frontier provinces contingents of the *Grenzwache*, a special border police force under the authority of Karl Wolff, commander of the SS in Italy. The Second “Monte Rosa” Legion was sent to Como, while the First Battalion was charged with guarding the territory between Como and Varese, the most trodden route into Switzerland¹⁸.

The decision to deploy the troops of the “Monte Rosa” legion, later the National Republican Border Guard, was determined by the regime’s complete distrust of the controls carried out by the *Guardia di Finanza* and the *Carabinieri*¹⁹.

In this regard, a report dated 12 November 1943, addressed by the Prefect of Como, Scassellati²⁰, to the Minister of the Interior, Buffarini Guidi, and to the head of the Police, Tullio Tamburini, described the situation at length, with the proposal to reorganize the border services:

The border services, intensified at the frontiers from 9 September by the Second Legion, have instead suffered a terrible downturn due to the conduct generally adopted by certain bodies responsible for the surveillance and control service at the crossing points located in the territory of this Province, as it appears that the *Guardie di Finanza*, the *Carabinieri* and the State Police officers, assigned to the specific border duties, have, instead of preventing the clandestine trafficking of people and things, especially in the second and third ten days of September, openly encouraged and even incited the stragglers to take refuge in Switzerland. [...]. The numerous defections that occurred among the ranks of the aforementioned Police departments, defections that had in part as their outcome, desertions abroad, suggest that the negative action of those who

¹⁸ Renata Brogгинi, *La frontiera della speranza. Gli ebrei dall’Italia verso la Svizzera 1943-1945* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 57-58.

¹⁹ The distrust of the *Guardia di Finanza* was also due to the desertions of the financiers after 8 September. In the province of Como, the brigades of Colombirolino (Cavallasca) and Drezzo deserted in their entirety. ASCo (Archivio di Stato, Como), fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, 2° versamento, b. 109 (ex 107), cat. XII, Elementi della *Guardia di Finanza*. See Luciano Luciani and Gerardo Severino, *Gli aiuti ai profughi ebrei e ai perseguitati. Il ruolo della Guardia di Finanza (1943-1945)* (Roma: Editore Museo storico della Guardia di Finanza, 2008).

²⁰ Francesco Scassellati Sforzolini (1901-1967), Prefect of Como from 17 October 1943 to 10 June 1944.

remained was more influenced across the border, by the fugitives, a fact that is not considered to have completely ceased. During the month of October, the passive action, especially of the Finanza and of the personnel in charge of the crossing points, continued – albeit with great caution – to encourage illegal traffic across the border. And in many cases this aiding and abetting has also been remunerated [...]. It also appears that, with the connivance of the Guardie di Finanza of Chiasso, a considerable amount of correspondence and clothing passes through Switzerland, directed to refugees and deserters who have taken shelter there. A mission is underway to identify the disreputable organisation to which civilians from Como, the Finance Police and people residing in Chiasso might belong; for this complacency, it seems that the Guardie, and the guard who assists, collect between 30 and 50 lire per letter or parcel [...]. Several German Commands, located along the border of this Province, have already noted that the standard of living of many members of the Guardia di Finanza is higher than their lawful income would permit and that, especially in the surroundings of Ponte Chiasso and Maslianico, there are properties of considerable value formerly owned by this Corps. [...]²¹.

Scassellati, therefore, suggested some targeted measures “aimed at decisively tackling the situation by addressing all the major inconveniences brought about by a service performed only formally”: to replace, for example, with elements “of proven faith and a strong voluntary spirit”, all personnel and officials who had hitherto been in charge of the crossing points and of the surveillance of the entire stretch of border between Rodero and Monte Bisbino, the section most vulnerable and permeable to “illegal border transit”, increasing the number of border personnel currently deployed along that stretch by about 300. “If, on the other hand” – continues the *Capo della Provincia* – “it is considered appropriate to replace all the *Guardia di Finanza* in border service within this Province, the increase in question should be extended to 576 personnel [...]²².”

A new strategy was, therefore, adopted to identify the facilitators: a report dated 12 December 1943, sent by the National Republican Guard to the *Capo della Provincia* of Como, exposed the “new orientation” of the

²¹ ASCo, fondo Gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII, Situazione del tratto di frontiera italo svizzero compreso tra Cippo 116k/A (Rodero) a Pizzo Martello (Como) con particolare riferimento al settore Rodero-Monte Bisbino – Proposte per sistemazione servizi, 12 November 1943.

²² ASCo, fondo Gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII, Situazione del tratto di frontiera italo svizzero compreso tra Cippo 116k/A (Rodero) a Pizzo Martello (Como) con particolare riferimento al settore Rodero-Monte Bisbino. *Proposte per sistemazione servizi*, 12 November 1943.

border police services. The intent was to identify the facilitators of emigrants, to pursue them as far as the border line, and then beat them to the punch “at the moment in which – after the exorbitant fee was collected – they tried to let the Swiss soil be gained by Jewish bands, accustomed to hiding in their more or less ragged boots valuables and assets stolen from the national wealth”²³.

The restrictive regulations on entry imposed by the Swiss Confederation during the months of September and October, as discussed in more detail below, would prove dramatic for entire families of Jews who attempted to cross over into the Canton of Ticino. The closure of the borders and the militarisation of the frontier zone led to the intensification of controls, resulting in the arrest of many people involved in the expatriation of Jews and also in the smuggling of foreign currency and valuables. Between 8 September 1943 and 29 February 1944, 117 people were arrested for aiding and abetting expatriation²⁴. These arrests were often the result of complex operations of infiltration and collaboration between various parties, as in the case of a vast operation conducted in December 1943 orchestrated by Roberto Franceschini, *alias* Gaddo Jermini, captain of the Republican Police, to dismantle an organisation that helped the expatriation of Jews whose logistic centre was in the “Volta” tavern in Brunate, run by Primo Mazza:

The aforementioned individual, becoming aware of this, immediately became acquainted with Mazza and, qualifying himself as a Jew wanted by the Police, who was trying to expatriate to Switzerland and who therefore needed Swiss currency and gold, managed to gain Mazza’s sympathy, who did not hesitate to put him in contact with most of the gang members. According to the indications given by the same person, a simultaneous police operation was carried out yesterday, in which elements of the Auxiliary Police, the Police Headquarters, the Prefecture and the Border Militia took part, in order to be able, at the same time, to get their hands on the entire gang. The operation was brilliantly successful and during the afternoons of yesterday and today, 36 people were arrested, some in Como and some in Brunate²⁵.

²³ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII, Guardia nazionale repubblicana. Comando II Legione “Monte Rosa”, fermo di ebrei, Como, 12 December 1943.

²⁴ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII, Operazioni e fermi effettuati dalla II Legione Gnr.

²⁵ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, carte Scassellati, b. 2, f. 2 pratiche di frontiera, 16 December 1943.

Law enforcement

His Excellency, the *Capo della Provincia* – we read in a report of 12 December by the 2nd “Monte Rosa” Legion – has shown on every occasion that he is following the purgative action with keen interest, favouring – with appropriate advice and resources – its successful outcome. [...] This is how the Jews’ race towards the border, with the escape to the hospitable lands of the Swiss – a refuge for rabbis – in their attempts to flee the providential and lapidary fascist laws, is hindered by the vigilant patrols of the Republican National Guard, who tirelessly, on even the most treacherous of paths, whatever the weather and at any hour, with voluntarily extended shifts of duty, watch over to dispel the dark and threatening activity of these accursed sons of Judah²⁶.

The “purgative action”, made effective, as already mentioned, by a large deployment of forces along the border, resulted in the arrest and detention, in just two months, from early October until 12 December 1943, of 58 Jews and the “seizure of significant valuables”, which were then transferred to the Prefecture. This is the case, for example, for the Milanese spouses Guido Levi and Olga Luigia Ascoli, who have been displaced for a year to 28 Via Volta, Como. This couple, already reported by the Minister of the Interior as “notorious anti-fascists” had been “cautiously supervised”²⁷ until their arrest on 23 October by the border militia in Maslianico, near the frontier:

Accompanied to the Command of the 2nd Border Legion and questioned, they declared that they left Como on the 23; arriving in Maslianico on the trolleybus and alighting near the Town Hall. From there they went to the “Giardinetto” hotel with the intention of staying there while waiting for the right moment to cross clandestinely into Switzerland through that stretch of the border. The motive for their attempted expatriation was stated to be the deteriorating situation of the Jews in Italy²⁸.

²⁶ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII, Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana, Comando II Legione “Monte Rosa”. *Fermo di ebrei*, 12 December 1943.

²⁷ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII. *Al Ministero dell’Interno Gabinetto; Al Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione gen. della Polizia*, 9 November 1943.

²⁸ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII, Comando II Legione Milizia confinaria “Monte Rosa”. *Verbale di fermo dei nominati*, 23 October 1943.

Delivered to the command of the SS *Grenzbefehlstelle West* of Cernobbio (Como), “being Jews”, Guido and Olga Levi were deported to Auschwitz and eliminated.

The number of arrests increased dramatically in December – 27 people were found guilty of attempted clandestine expatriation – partly as a result of police order no. 5 of 30 November 1943 issued by the Ministry of the Interior, which ordered the arrest and internment of Jews in concentration camps and the seizure of their movable and immovable property²⁹. A measure that made every Jew, as of 1 December, liable to arrest by the Italian authorities: it was the police headquarters and the various armed corps of the RSI that directly and autonomously implemented the capture of the Jews, helped and facilitated by the dossiers compiled in previous years, meticulous home searches and a large number of informants.

At the border, full-scale raids were carried out, in which entire family groups often fell. This is the case, for example, for Major Edgardo Bassani³⁰, arrested together with his wife, Nives Servadio, his brother-in-law, Carlo Servadio, and their children, Franco, 20, and Tina, 14. They left Milan on 1 December and were caught at the Como landing stage by the border militia. Held in the Como prison of San Donnino, they were then transferred to the Fossoli concentration camp and finally, on 22 February 1944, to Auschwitz³¹.

We are left with a heartfelt plea by Carlo Servadio to the Modena police headquarters on 26 December 1943 for the safe return of some valuables, money and personal clothing, seized at the time of his arrest, which bears witness to the violence of such a measure:

At the time of his arrest [...] the Border Militia confiscated, among other items, a fountain pen, his wedding ring and a gold ring bearing the initials G.S., treasured memento of his dead father, and about 20,000 in bank notes. A large suitcase containing his entire winter wardrobe could no

²⁹ ACS (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome), RSI, Presidenza del Consiglio, Gabinetto, Provvedimenti legislativi sottoposti all’esame del Consiglio dei ministri (1943-45), b. 33, f. 3/2-2, sf. 13. *Il ministro dell’Interno a tutti i capi delle province, Ordine di polizia, n. 5*, 30 November 1943.

³⁰ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII, Valori sequestrati all’ebreo Bassani Edgardo di Giacomo e fasc. “Valori sequestrati ad ebrei”; in ASCo, fondo Questura, b. 639, the personal files of all members of the family are conserved.

³¹ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII, Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana, Comando II Legione “Monte Rosa”. *Fermo di ebrei*, 12 December 1943.

longer be found by the soldier in charge, on the shores of the lake. As a result, he finds himself presently deprived of all the most essential items of clothing and toiletries necessary to conduct a sanitary existence in the concentration camp community where he is required to live. In addition, his wife, Paola Berghinz – Aryan and Catholic – who is presently in Udine with her mother, has no means of support to meet her own needs. For all these reasons, I respectfully pray that he be granted the monthly sum of four thousand Lire, from the amount confiscated, to allow him to send 2,500 Lire to his wife and to have Lire 1,500 to meet his basic necessities and for the payment of food at the Camp. He currently has nothing [...]”³².

By 29 February 1944, the number of Jews arrested had risen to 137³³, of which about 33³⁴, according to the available data, were rejected by the Swiss authorities on their first attempt at expatriation and arrested on their second, as was the case, for example, for the Calò family; for Emilio and Enrichetta Gentili, along with their children Rosina and Giuseppe, arrested on 2 December in Olgiate Comasco; and for the Trieste couple, Massimiliano Campi and Iris Valentinuzzi, and their daughter Anna Lia, captured the following day along the border, who had turned to Primo Mazza’s organisation to cross the threshold³⁵. Interned in Fossoli they were then all deported to Auschwitz³⁶.

The same fate befell Mosè and Regina Polacco, together with their daughter Enrica, the only survivor of the family, who recounts:

It was 4 December. My parents, Mosè and Regina Polacco, and I, immediately after crossing the border and setting foot on Swiss territory, were stopped by the guards in Bisbino and then handed over to the Italian financial police. Transferred to detention in Luino until 5 December; and until 12 December in the prisons of Como. From there to San Vittore in

³² ASCo, fondo Questura, b. 639, fascicolo Servadio Carlo, ebreo arrestato. *Campo di concentramento Fossoli di Carpi*, 26 December 1943.

³³ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, b. 109 (ex 107), 2° versamento, cat. XII, *Operazioni e fermi effettuati dalla II Legione GNR*.

³⁴ The date is inferred from a comparison between *l’Elenco di tutti gli ebrei della Provincia e delle relative proprietà mobiliari immobiliari*, written by the Como Police Headquarters (ASCo, fondo Questura, b. 638), the dates provided by Liliana Picciotto in *Libro della Memoria* (Milan: Mursia, 2002) and the list of Italian and foreign Jews rejected by Switzerland, given by (Broggini, *La frontiera della speranza*, 514-517).

³⁵ ASCo, fondo gabinetto di Prefettura, carte Scassellati, b. 2, f. 2, pratiche di frontiera, 16 December 1943.

³⁶ (Picciotto, *Il libro della memoria*, 178, 318).

Milan until 30 January 1944, the day of transfer to Auschwitz, where my relatives were eliminated³⁷.

Despite the intense enforcement activities deployed by the fascist militia, between 14 September and 1 November 1943, the Chiasso Customs Authority nevertheless recorded 512 encroachments of Jews from the Province of Como – transitory, resident or temporarily housed, including 125 foreign Jews who had already been interned³⁸.

Entering the Canton of Ticino

The German authorities chose the city of Como as the location of their principal Commands³⁹. On 20 September 1943, Chiasso, the most important road and rail crossing point into Switzerland, was occupied by the Germans, who imposed drastic measures to control border crossings:

On 18 September 1943, the German military authorities occupied the entire border and the main checkpoints, proceeding to shut down traffic. Only the Chiasso road crossing remained partially open, with transit authorised for holders of border passes and German “Passierschein”. All passenger trains were stopped in Como, so the police service (document control) at the Chiasso station practically ceased⁴⁰.

The decision to seek safety in Switzerland was not taken by the Jews immediately after 8 September, but only once it had become clear that there was no other alternative. It was not only Jews living in the province of Como who sought refuge in Switzerland, but also those who had fled from elsewhere, driven by the hope of reaching the Swiss border from Como.

Crossing the border in these circumstances was almost impossible for those who were identified by the regime as “anti-fascist”, “subversive” or “Jewish”. The only option was clandestine expatriation, so it was

³⁷ (Broggini, *La frontiera della speranza*, 105).

³⁸ ASTi (Archivio di Stato del Canton Ticino, Bellinzona), fondo Dipartimento di polizia, b. 94, f. 1938-1944, *Entrate clandestine*.

³⁹ The Gendarmerie and the Gestapo settled at the Palazzo Saibene in Piazza Sant’Agostino and in Via Zezio; the Wehrmacht at the Hotel Posta; and the “Arms and War Production” Department (R.U.K.) at the Carducci Institute.

⁴⁰ *Rendiconto del Consiglio di Stato della Repubblica e Canton Ticino anno 1943*, (Bellinzona: Arti grafiche Grassi, 1944), Polizia, 24. (Scomazzon, “*Maledetti figli di Giuda vi prenderemo!*”, 145).

necessary to turn to those who knew the mountains and the defensive system of the border area: the smugglers positioned themselves to facilitate expatriation, which often also became an easy-to-earn market, which could help boost the economy of these economically depressed areas. Their help, as guides, soon became indispensable for those wishing to cross the border. Indeed, it was the smuggling network that the very structures of the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale* (CLN), which hired the generally reliable “traffickers”, at fixed rates⁴¹, supported. Yet in many cases it was the smugglers themselves who fixed their fee, according to the economic means of those who put themselves in their hands. “They pointed us to a lady from Lanzo d’Intelvi” – recounts Marialuisa Cases – “and we paid 40,000 lire, which was a huge sum at the time”⁴². While many traffickers and smugglers completed their assignment, others had no scruples about abandoning, betraying or selling out to the Germans the Jews who had entrusted themselves to them, as we read in the following testimonies:

Halfway through the journey, the smuggler, who had taken my mother on his shoulders, couldn’t manage it anymore, so he found us refuge in a hut that served as a storage area for some local woodcutter. In the early hours of 23 December, together with our most generous smuggler, a grey-haired man, not very tall but sturdy, whose name of course I don’t know but whom I remember with great gratitude, we resumed the journey, I with our two suitcases and a sack on my shoulders, my mother once again on the back of the transporter and, eventually, we reached the long-awaited fence. Hiding in the bush, waiting for the sound of the patrol to move away, the smuggler accompanied us to a hollow that passed under the fence, which was incredibly dangerous to touch because the alarm bells could have sounded. I gave him the second part of the agreed sum, thanking him warmly and, crawling on the muddy ground, we managed to cross over to the other side⁴³.

There were gangs who offered, at a steep price, a ride to then abandon their victims, without their luggage of course. Some went so far as to build, with a piece of wire mesh, a bogus border fence in the woods, behind which it was easy to then have the wretched customers arrested, thereby gaining additional benefits⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Bazzocco, “Fughe, traffici, intrighi,” 200-212.

⁴² (Broggini, *La frontiera della speranza*, 45).

⁴³ (Broggini, *La frontiera della speranza*, 43).

⁴⁴ Franco Levi, *I giorni dell’erba amara* (Genova: Marietti, 1991), 115-116.

The relief networks

Catholic organisations, such as the *Organizzazione Scout Collocamento Assistenza Ricercati* (OSCAR)⁴⁵, and the small Waldensian community in Como⁴⁶, played an important role in the network that was built to assist the expatriation of Jews. Many parish priests lent their support to help anti-fascists and Jews. The contribution of the Como clergy to the fight against Nazi-fascism was highlighted in an initial provisional balance sheet in June 1945: 8 priests deported to Germany and as many in confinement; 30 arrested; 20 forced to flee to Switzerland⁴⁷. Some priests paid for their commitment with their lives: Don Umberto Marmorì, who had served as Provost of Cernobbio since 1934, was arrested at the beginning of 1944 for help given to the Jews and imprisoned in San Vittore. He died on 18 January 1945 in Sala Comacina, due to the consequences of the mistreatment he suffered. Don Battista Tavasci, coadjutor in Gardona in Valchiavenna, a wanted man, sought refuge in Switzerland, but on his return to Italy he was taken prisoner and deported to Dachau where he later died. One prominent priest/trafficker was Don Carlo Banfi, parish priest of Sormano in the years 1943-'45. He received and concealed numerous Jews who had taken refuge in Sormano after 8 September. He then helped them to escape, accompanying them in person through the Pian del Tivano, Nesso, and then across the lake and up the mountain to the Swiss border. The priest was subsequently interned in a refugee camp near Bern. After his internment his activity was carried on by Professor Ada Tommasi de Micheli⁴⁸. The Jews were hidden in the basement of the parish church and from there they were accompanied across the border: she managed to save about thirty of them in this way. She was arrested

⁴⁵ Carla Bianchi Jacono, *Aspetti dell'opposizione dei cattolici di Milano alla Repubblica sociale italiana* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1988).

⁴⁶ The house of the Waldensian shepherd, Lupo, welcomed Jews and served as a support centre throughout wartime. Rosaria Marchesi, *C'era la guerra* (Como: NodoLibri, 1998), 229-242 and Cairoli, Roberta. "Carlo Lupo antifascista. Un pastore evangelico nella Resistenza comasca". In *Carlo Lupo. Pastore, poeta, uomo di pace*, ed. Andreas Kohn (Torino: Claudiana, 2011), 161-193.

⁴⁷ Marco Pippione, *Como dal fascismo alla democrazia* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1991), 95-99.

⁴⁸ Ada Tommasi is one of three Italian women awarded gold medals for services to the Jewish Community. In 1982, Ada Tommasi and Mario De Micheli received the recognition of *Righteous among the Nations* from Yad Vashem (Israel).

with her husband, the art critic Mario De Micheli; after being interrogated for a day by the infamous Pankoff⁴⁹, they were eventually released.

The expatriation assistance activity also directly concerned the Jewish community. The “Children’s Canteen”, which moved from Milan to Montano Lucino in the summer of 1943, remained active even after the German occupation, aiding expatriates until October of that year, when its director Israel Kalk was forced to flee to Switzerland. Another important Jewish organisation that aided expatriation was the *Delegazione per l’Assistenza degli Emigranti Ebrei* (DELASEM), founded in 1939⁵⁰. After the armistice, DELASEM operated in hiding and its exponents emigrated to Switzerland, where they organised assistance for Jews who had taken refuge there. In the Larian district, there were numerous women who did their utmost to help Jewish families. These included Adele Cappelli Vegni, a Milanese doctor, who transformed her villa in Torno into a “care home”, where she hid Jewish teenagers and prepared them for their escape to Switzerland. This organisation was uncovered in the summer of 1944 and the subsequent “trial of the ladies”, held at the *Tribunale speciale straordinario*, sentenced the group of women to a total of sixteen years in prison “for protecting and helping Jews”. Another group operating in Como was centred around Ginevra Bedetti Masciadri, active until her arrest in August 1944⁵¹. In the Lecco area, the four Villa sisters had created, in their home, a support centre for Jews and allied soldiers fleeing from concentration camps in the Bergamo and Brescia areas and who, from Lecco, after crossing the village of Suello and the Pian del Tivano, could reach Lezzeno and Blevio and the Val d’Intelvi along the paths of Val Cavargna to Switzerland. The Villa sisters’ network, which operated under the Garibaldi division command and was located in Lecco at the home of the industrialist Ulisse Guzzi, was dismantled in March 1944⁵².

⁴⁹ Known torturer in the service of the political office of the Como police headquarters. *Alta Brianza e Vallassina 1943-1945. Taccuino degli anni difficili. Luoghi persone documenti ricordi* (Como: NodoLibri, 2009), 240.

⁵⁰ Rosa Painsi, *I sentieri della speranza. Profughi ebrei, Italia fascista e la Delasem* (Milano: Xenia, 1988).

⁵¹ Roberta Cairoli, *Nessuno mi ha fermata. Antifascismo e Resistenza nell’esperienza delle donne del Comasco 1922-1945* (Como: NodoLibri, 2005), 129-141.

⁵² The sisters Rina and Erminia managed to escape during their move to Germany, while Carlotta was transferred to Ravensbrück and survived the concentration camp. (Cairoli, *Nessuno mi ha fermata*, 109-111).

Jewish refugees in Switzerland

As we have seen, the events that followed the armistice of 8 September 1943 alarmed the Swiss authorities, as they feared that a flight of Jews resident in Italy towards Switzerland would be difficult to contain. On 14 September 1938, the Police Division of the Department of Justice and Police issued instructions concerning refugees from Italy, which pertained to the entry of military personnel, women who were already Swiss citizens, foreigners who could prove they had close ties with Switzerland and those foreigners who claimed to be in grave danger for their lives. In the latter case, it was the responsibility of the Police Officer of the Territorial Command to determine whether they would be permitted or refused entry⁵³. Three days later, on 17 September, Heinrich Rothmund, head of the Police Division, had to partially amend the orders that had been given. It was stipulated that all male refugees over the age of 16 were to be refused entry; while women and children were to be welcomed⁵⁴. It was not until 12 July 1944 that the Swiss authorities finally recognised the right of asylum for refugees displaced for racial motives.

For those who managed to cross the border, the standard procedure generally included: customs decision, admission or refusal, transport to the Internment Office in Bellinzona, identification and interrogation, assignment to a camp; and a three-week period of quarantine for all concerned.

As a rule, men and boys were separated from women with children, who, from the age of five, could be entrusted to families willing to host them. These measures are recalled with great bitterness and distress in personal testimonies. In her book *Con occhi di bambini [“With Children’s Eyes”] (1941-1945)*⁵⁵, Liliana Treves Alcalay recalls with anguish her stay with three unmarried sisters who treated her as a kind of Cinderella, forcing her to go hungry and endure an attitude of contempt towards her Jewish identity. Of course, the hosting experiences were not all so negative; however, their separation from their mothers, the sense of

⁵³ ASTi, fondo Dipartimento di Polizia, b. 94, f. 1943. Profughi ed internati stranieri. Dipartimento federale di giustizia e polizia. Divisione di polizia. *Istruzioni relative ai profughi dall’Italia*, 14 September 1943.

⁵⁴ ASTi, fondo Dipartimento di Polizia, b. 94, f. 1943-1945. Rifugiati – Disposizioni, prescrizioni e istruzioni federali in merito. Dipartimento federale di giustizia e polizia. Divisione di polizia. *Istruzioni relative ai profughi dall’Italia*, 17 September 1943.

⁵⁵ Liliana Treves Alcalay, *Con occhi di bambina (1941-1943)* (Firenze: Giuntina, 1994).

abandonment and the fear that no one would come back to collect them left a mark on the lives of those little refugees.

Some refugees, who possessed adequate financial means, could be released into hotels, boarding houses or private homes; but always under military control.

To give a tangible idea of the various steps that had to be faced by Jewish civilian refugees in Switzerland, let us take the examples of two cases, both concerning young couples.

The first case is that of Gustavo Fritz and Irma Lewin, for whom we have the transcript of the interrogation at Territorial Command 9b. Gustavo was born on 17 April 1908 in Berlin and was resident in Zagreb. His statement reads:

I entered Switzerland on 21 October 1943, clandestinely, near Chiasso. I was accompanied by my wife: Irma née Lewin, who is now in Agnuzzo. I was in Italy as an intern in the Cantù camp. The Marshal had informed me that the SS were going to start capturing Jews: so I decided to take refuge in Switzerland, in order to escape anti-Semitic persecution. My home was in Zagreb, where I remained until 1 January 1942. I fled from there, to escape being captured by the Croatian troops, to Ljubljana, where I stayed until 24 April 1943. From Zagreb I was sent by the Italian authorities to the Cantù camp⁵⁶.

On 4 November 1943, Gustavo Fritz wrote a letter⁵⁷ to the Territorial Command of Bellinzona to request reunification with his wife.

The second case is that of Giorgio Fuà and his wife, Erica Rosenthal. The report of their interrogations⁵⁸, compiled in Bellinzona, bears the date 19 May 1944. After 8 September, the young couple had joined Giorgio's parents, Riccardo Fuà and Elena Segre, in Ancona, where they were married in a Jewish ceremony on 16 September. They remained in hiding in the countryside throughout the winter, but when Erica was close to giving birth, they decided to go to Switzerland. They arrived in Milan with a lawyer friend who helped them to organise their escape. On 17 May 1944 they took the train to Como and then the boat to Carate-Urio. A local guide accompanied them to the border on the mountainside, which they crossed at 3:30 a.m. the following day. At 6:00 a.m. a soldier accompanied them to Bruzella, where they turned themselves in. We can only imagine

⁵⁶ ASTi, fondo internati b. 36, f. Fritz Gustav.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ ASTi, fondo internati b. 36 f. Fuà Giorgio; f. Rosenthal Erica.