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Don Arrigo Beccari: A Safe Haven In Villa Emma SALLY M. ROGOW

It was a long train ride from Yugoslavia to Italy. No one knew what to expect. The children were good actors and hid their fear in silence. They were Jewish child refugees from Germany, Austria, and Poland whose parents had been deported to Nazi concentration camps. Josef Ithai, the young teacher who looked after them, shared their fear.

Ithai was only twenty-three years old when he took the children to Yugoslavia. He, along with two other adults accompanying the children, was planning to take the children to the British Mandate of Palestine, the land that was to become the state of Israel. Almost as soon as they arrived in Yugoslavia, the country was occupied by German and Italian troops. Travel to Palestine was not possible.

Ithai and the children were in the city of Zagreb in the German zone and Jewish people were being arrested.

"You see, Hitler is chasing us again and one day he'll catch us," one of the boys said to Ithai. The young teacher knew he was right; the children were in danger. He knew he had to get the children out of Zagreb as quickly as possible.

"Bring them into the Italian zone," an Italian official told him. "We are Hitler's allies but we do not persecute Jews." The official arranged for Ithai to take the children to the province of Lubiana in the Italian zone. The Italian Jewish Relief Organization gave Ithai money to rent an old castle — the Lesno Brdo. The children settled into the old castle and the relief looked after them. Ithai was able to buy food and other necessities and he felt confident that the children were safe.

They had been living in the castle for one year when the German troops took over the Italian zone. The children had to be moved, but where could he take them, Ithai wondered.

"You can take the children to Italy," a friendly Italian official told him. Arrangements were made and on July 18, 1942 the children were on their way to Italy. Ithai did not know how or where they would be living; he was simply told to take the train to Venice. Numb with fear, the older children held the hands of the younger as they boarded the train.

Mario Finzi, the head of the Jewish Relief Organization met them at the train station in Venice. He told Ithai that arrangements had been made for the children to live in Nonantola, a small farming village north of the city of Bologna.

"You'll be safe in Nonantola," Finzi assured him. He added: "With the help of the priests of the Abbey at Nonantola, arrangements have been made for the children to live in the Villa Emma, an empty



Jewish children at Villa Emma,
Nonantola, Italy, 1942

mansion." Finzi also assured Ithai that the Jewish Relief Organization would pay their expenses. "You'll be able to set up a school program and the older boys and girls will be able to learn to farm," Finzi said.

How could Mario Finzi be so sure Ithai wondered? What would the villagers think about so many Jewish children coming to live in the small village? Few of them knew how to speak Italian. But his fears were quickly put to rest as soon as the train came to a stop in Nonantola. A group of friendly villagers were there to welcome them. They gave candies to the children and walked with them to the Villa Emma.

The large mansion was empty — without beds, chairs or tables. Women from the village brought food to the mansion and Father Arrigo Beccari came to greet them.

The tall priest in his cassock walked around the room shaking the children's hands. "You are safe now," he said. He could see the fear in their eyes and he wanted to reassure them. Josef Ithai spoke to Father Beccari:

"They've suffered so much and they need so much," he said. "They will not suffer any more," Father Beccari assured him. "You can be sure I'll do everything I can to help."

Ithai explained that since he wanted to prepare the children to live in Palestine, he thought it was important that the children keep up with their studies and learn to farm and build furniture. Father Beccari was also a teacher and promised to help Ithai set up the school program.

Dr. Giuseppe Moreali, the village doctor, came to the Villa to introduce himself and told Ithai he would take care of the children. The Jewish Relief Organization made the Villa Emma their headquarters where they set up a warehouse and supplied the funds to purchase food and other necessities. Beds, tables and chairs, blankets and sheets and other necessities were brought to the Villa. In a few weeks the mansion was transformed into a real home.

Village women came to help the older girls cook. A village carpenter came and built a bathroom, and showed the older boys how to make furniture. One room in the Villa was set up as a synagogue, and with Father Beccari's help, the children were kept busy with school work.

The children felt at home in Nonantola. They sang songs, played games, went on picnics and hikes and even put on little shows to entertain the village people who came to visit them. There was always something to do at the Villa Emma. The children felt safe again and were having fun.

"This situation is ideal and the children are adjusting very well. Some are even learning to speak Italian," Ithai told Father Beccari.

But after just one year of the idyllic life at the Villa, in September 1943, Italy was defeated by the British and Americans. No one in the village suspected that the German troops would take over northern Italy, but their worst fears were confirmed when Father Beccari saw the German army come into Nonantola. They set up a hospital for German soldiers across the street from the Villa Emma. A Nazi flag flew from its roof. The Villa Emma was no longer safe.

Father Beccari told Ithai to bring the children to the Abbey. He had heard that the Nazis were planning to arrest every Jew in Nonantola.

The children could not be kept together for there were too many. Father Beccari went from door to door in the village, and in the surrounding countryside asking people to hide the children. Most families were willing to help. Within a few hours all the older boys and girls had been hidden in homes in the village. The seminary took in the youngest children. The Villa Emma stood empty.

Still, it was not safe to keep the children in Nonantola. German soldiers were patrolling the village; someone might report the hidden children.

How will it be possible to save us now Ithai wondered. He knew the priests and the people hiding children were risking their lives. How much more could he ask of them? But he did not have to ask.

Monsignor Pilati, another priest of the village, and Dr. Moreali planned an escape route to Switzerland. Dr. Moreali obtained blank identification cards and Father Beccari filled them in with false names. Dr. Moreali signed the cards. Five weeks later, the children and young people were

taken to the train station.

Dressed in the uniforms of Catholic school children, Father Beccari accompanied them to the train station. Josef Ithai shook Father Beccari's hand: "How can I ever thank you enough? You have saved our lives."

"You do not need to thank me. All I want is for the children to be safe," he answered simply. Father Beccari watched the children board the train.

The Swiss border was north and east of Nonantola. The children and their courageous chaperones had to change trains in Milan. The train that would take them to the border town did not leave until early the next morning. German soldiers were patrolling the train station.

Ithai took the children to an underground public washroom. They spent the night huddled together, unable to sleep. Early the next morning, they left the washroom and boarded a small train that took them through the mountainous country to the border town. Father Beccari had arranged for a local priest to meet them at the train station. He told Ithai they would have to walk the rest of the way.

"I know the path very well, just follow me," he told them. The younger holding the hands of the older, the children hiked up a steep alpine path until they came to the Tresa River, a small alpine stream.

"We're going to have to walk across this stream. We'll all hold hands," the Swiss priest said. Like a human chain, Ithai took the children across the stream.

A Swiss guard came to meet them. Ithai showed the guard the identification papers Dr. Moreali had prepared and the guard let them enter Switzerland. Dr. Moreali knew people in Switzerland and he had arranged for the children to stay in Bex-Les-Bains, a small town. They lived in Bex-Les Bains until the end of the war.

After the war, Ithai was able to bring the children to the British Mandate of Palestine that was to become the State of Israel.

The children of Villa Emma never forgot Father Beccari, Dr. Moreali or the people of Nonantola. They planted one hundred trees in honor of the people of Nonantola and told everyone who would listen about Father Beccari, Monsignor Pilati, and Dr. Guiseppe Moreali.

In Haifa, Israel, the civic government created a park, the Gan Nonantola, to honor the citizens of the village. At the ceremony, an official of the city unveiled a sculpture by Tilla Offenberger, one of the children, now an artist. The plaque reads in Hebrew and Italian:

In honor of the citizens who under the guidance of the parish priest Don Arrigo Beccari and Dr. Guiseppe Moreali, righteous among the nations, saved during the Holocaust of 1943, 107 Jewish orphaned children of Europe. With eternal gratitude, the children of the Villa Emma.

Father Beccari and Dr. Moreali were honored by the Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial and documentation center in Israel for their heroic rescue work.

Today, the Villa Emma Foundation, launched by Nonantola's mayor, Stefano Vaccari, promotes peace and Holocaust education.

Ithai, Josef, *The Children of Villa Emma* (translated by Ivo Herzer) in [*The Italian Refuge: Rescue of Jews During The Holocaust*](#) (Ed) Ivo Hertzner, Washington, D.C. The Catholic University of America Press, 1987

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Educator and author, Sally Rogow has written books and articles on language development, literacy, play and social development as well as stories and books for children and young people. Her most recent book [*Faces of Courage: Young Heroes of World War II*](#), tells the stories of young Christians as well as Jews, Germans, Gypsies, young people with disabilities, who rescued, resisted, and defied Nazi terror. A native New Yorker Sally Rogow now lives in Vancouver, B.C.



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