

From Guardiagrele to New York, from Nazism to Freedom. Meeting Doris Schechter

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On October 19, 2009 Doris Schechter, an Austrian Jew who escaped Nazi persecution, met Mario Palmerio, the mayor of Guardiagrele, the small town in the Abruzzo region where she and her family found refuge from 1939 to 1943. During the ceremony, held at her restaurant “My favorite food” in Midtown Manhattan, she told us about her years in Italy and how they really became the basis of who she is today

Sometimes sad stories have a happy ending. It's the case of Doris Schechter, the owner of the restaurant “[My most favorite food](#) [2]” in Midtown Manhattan. Between 1940 and 1943 she and her family escaped from Nazi Austria and found refuge in the small town of Guardiagrele, in the region of



Abruzzo, where she hid together with 130 dissidents, partisans, and Jews.

On October 19, 2009 she met the mayor of Guardia Mario Palmerio and Councilwoman Mariella Naccarella in a small ceremony held at her restaurant and organized in collaboration with journalist Andrea Fiano, Chairman of the [Primo Levi Center](#) [3] in NYC. Also with them were, the Director of the [Italian Tourism Board](#) [4], Riccardo Strano (who in a few days would host a presentation of the Abruzzo region at the institution's headquarters), the director of the [Museum of Jewish Heritage](#) [5] in Manhattan David Marwell, and the Deputy Consul of Italy in New York Maurizio Antonini.

It was an occasion for Doris to remember the past and recall the people who during

that long period of time while in hiding in Abruzzo assisted her as if she were part of one big, united family.

"We are here to remember and celebrate, to fulfill the duty to testify in line with the mission of the Primo Levi Center and of Primo Levi himself. We must remember what happened and celebrate the courage of the many in Guardia who protected and hid the refugees. The more we know about the history of those tragic days, the more chances we have of not repeating them anywhere in the world", said Andrea Fiano introducing mayor Mario Palmerio. "A former teacher, mayor Palmerio has researched and written about the history of the refugees in the town he governs. Even before the Italian parliament officially instituted it, he decided to celebrate the Day of Memory in Guardia in January 2000.

Taking the microphone, a moved Doris immediately showed us a copy of the picture from her mother's passport that mayor Palmerio found while doing his research. While we were enjoying the nice Kosher dinner she offered us on the second floor of her restaurant, she shared with us the most significant memories of her period in Abruzzo. Made an honorary citizen of Guardia, Doris remembers one woman in particular, Rosalia, to whom she "owns the most beautiful memories of her period in Abruzzo", a woman that took care of her as her own child, offering her family all kinds of material and spiritual support.

Doris told us about the circumstances which made her family move to Guardia: "We were still in Vienna in 1938, but my father realized that it was not a place for a Jew to be any more. So he went from Embassy to Embassy to find out how he could get a VISA to move to any other country in Europe. The only open door he found was to Italy. When we arrived in Guardia, those people had never seen Jews before, but they knew we were not there because we wore a stigma, but because we were human beings. And for that we had to be respected. Rosalia respected and loved my family and me. The incredible affection she showed us was really the basis of who I am today. Because of her, I am a person who celebrates all religions and I feel that she taught us all the most important lessons of life, those of love, tolerance, understanding and humanity".

Mayor Palmerio took the microphone right after her, and gave a long and in-depth speech about the history of Guardia, both before and during the era of Fascism in Italy. He was extremely grateful for the occasion he had to meet Doris, who had left Italy with her family to move to the US the same year in which he was born. After he presented Doris and some of the distinguished guests attending with gifts from his town, we had a chance to talk to her in private and ask her more about her experience in Italy.

She told us that after moving to America, she went to Tuscany several times throughout the years. During one of those trips she finally decided to write a letter to Mario Palmerio to tell him about her experience. When he called her back, just four days after receiving her letter, she decided to go back to Guardia to visit the places that welcomed her during her stay in Italy and, most of all, to visit Rosalia, who passed away just a few years ago. "I went back three times in one year, once with my



husband and once also with my daughter and my grandchildren. That's because Mayor Palmerio knew everything about the time my family spent in Guardiagrele. You would never think that somebody would still be interested in that small fraction of the town's history, but he was."

"When I go there, I feel very much as if I were living my past again. My entire emotional life is very much tied up to the experience I had in Guardiagrele, and I am proud to be an honorary citizen of that small town where, as I was lucky enough to experience, people have a strong, rare sense of humanity".

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