

50 Italians. Should it be Screened in Schools?

Marina Melchionda (January 25, 2010)



Should a documentary that recounts the "gestures" of 50 Italian fascist soldiers who saved a few thousands Jews to escape Fascist persecution be screened in Italian schools? Here is the opinion of the director of the Primo Levi Center Natalia Indrimi

On the occasion of Remembrance Day 2010, and as part of Rai Fiction Week 2010, on January 20 the Calandra Italian American Institute hosted a double screening at the [CUNY Graduate Center](#) [2], "50 Italians" and "Memories of Anna Frank".

The documentary "50 Italians" focuses on the gestures of 50 Italian men, Fascist diplomats and generals, who found a way to help 50.000 Jews escape from persecution and death in the



concentration camps, or offered them help of different sort

The work, directed by Flaminia Lubin and produced by Francesco Pamphili, was presented by Paolo Galimberti, President of RAI. "This movie is part of a strong effort to educate new generations on the crimes perpetuated by the Fascist regime. In Italy Remembrance Day is an important date to commemorate, and is strongly felt among all of our citizens. We believe that it is important to hand down the memory of what happened in our country just 60 years ago to our children, grandchildren, and all of those who will come in the future. That is why I am particularly glad to see the students of the [Scuola d'Italia Guglielmo Marconi](#) [3], college undergraduates, and so many young people in the audience. Many of their friends will see this movie, since we are planning to screen them in several schools of Italy".

The Director of the [Primo Levi Center](#) [4] Natalia Indrimi who was watching the movie with us on that morning, didn't find in it what she expected. Talking with her, we understood that actually some aspects and parts of "50 Italians" could be pretty controversial. We thought it was important to share with our readers her opinions and comments.

"'50 Italians' narrates a very partial story, seen from a very partial viewpoint. It seems to me that the work of the historian is to document and articulate the complexities and contradictions of the past. What I have watched today does the opposite: replaces documents with memories and simplifies the context to present a packaged message: that Italians were good because of some essential quality.

"Would you then minimize the importance of the rescuers?

"Of course we must recognize acts of courage, humanity and solidarity. But implying the existence of a national character follows the same irrational principle that animates prejudice. Why then shouldn't 7,000 Polish rescuers and the now increasing number of German rescuers that are being documented make good nations? Or a Jew who saved himself by reporting another make a bad nation? The generalizations of national rhetoric must be regarded as such, not used as historical realities. If this history teaches us anything it is that pushing the rhetoric to an extreme can produce dangerous propaganda."

Wouldn't it make things easier to understand, help more people learn about this history?

"A film that offers comforting answers and does not raise many questions, is not ideal in an educational setting. Someone with no other information may come out of the screening thinking that Mussolini was moved by Christian values and that the Italian army had a code of honor that made it by default save women and children. It is difficult to relate these statements to the way in which Italian Jews were outcast and eventually sent to their death, or to the massacres perpetrated in the colonies and territories, including Croatia."

The film, however, does not embrace the after-armistice period...

"Would you say that the responsibilities for the atrocities that happened after the armistice are of the Allies?

Or that perhaps we cannot continue to consider the Fascist dictatorship a laughable joke that turned sour in 1938 or '43?"

What do you think was missing to make these personal memories viable documents?

"The context. In the introductory scene a teen-age boy, I believe the son of the director, says that there is a controversy about the rescuers and that some people believe they acted for reasons other than goodness. He continues: "But I don't believe so". And goodness triumphs. Which controversies is he talking about? And with which authority does he answer?

Controversies may exist on individual stories, but there is an overall historical picture that, especially today, when we know a lot more than we knew 20 or 30 years ago, cannot be completely avoided.



How can we discuss the actions of the Italian Army on the Croatian front in 1942 without at least a few references to the broader picture and without even mentioning their full extent, including the fact that Jews and Yugoslavians were treated in very different ways? It would have for instance been useful to ask an historian to map out some basic events like the entry of the US in the war at the end of '41, the first defeats of the Nazis in the Soviet Union in '42, and the internal schisms of the Italian army and the Fascist élite in preparation of the deposition of Mussolini. Between the end of 1942 and the beginning of 1943 even Germany began to destroy the evidence of the massacres of the Jews in Eastern Europe.

It seems to me that it is legitimate to ask whether the atmosphere of preparation for an aftermath that might not have been 1000 years of Reich affected the actions of certain factions of the Italian army. "

What should be the role of single testimonies in the preservation of the memory of the Shoah?

"Witnesses are not historians per se. They had an experience that touched their lives in unimaginable ways and that's what they remember. The accounts of camp survivors are checked thousands of times against one another and then against the records before they can be considered valid historical reconstruction. The refugees' perception that the Italian army saved them is indeed correct. And the feeling they express for the soldier who brings them a piece of bread or a cup of milk can also be taken at face value. However their feelings cannot replace factual information on the people who helped the Jews and the context in which they acted. "

The doc also featured an interview with historians from NYU and Yad Vashem. Was there a balance between the "historical truth" and the "truth of memory?"

"I found it interesting that not one of the two or three historians who are the experts in the history of the Fascist camps, especially the Croatian camps, were included in the film. Marcello Pezzetti, director of the Museum of the Shoah in Rome briefly addresses the larger reality of Fascist anti-Semitism, but his comments are unrelated to the core topic of the film. The statements of Yael Orvieto of Yad Vashem and Ruth Ben Ghiat of NYU are cut so short that they come across as very generic, whereas rather repetitive testimonies on the goodness of Italians receive a great deal of space. This is a filmic choice."

The doc starts with a conversation between two Jewish kids. One of them is about to enroll in the Israeli army, and states that soldiers there serve their country in the name of the memory of the Holocaust. What kind of message is sent out?

"The representation of the Holocaust as *raison d'être* of the State of Israel and foundation of its national identity is another generalization. As such, it is used by the leaders of the country as well as by its most virulent attackers. I don't understand how it relates to an historical documentary on the Italian diplomats who rescued Jews."

Is it proper to propose this kind of work on such an occasion like Remembrance Day?

"I don't think there is a rule, and certainly not a limit, on what's appropriate and what's not. This documentary offers an opportunity to address a certain rhetoric that is very common and thus an important opportunity for debate."

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