

From the 'memory' of a family saved in Assisi

... in gratitude for the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement's care and presence ...

Synopsis History of the "Assisi Underground" ~ taken from Wikipedia online:

In the Italian town of Assisi during World War II, 300 Jews were sheltered and protected by a peasant turned priest, Father Rufino Niccacci. He dressed many of them as monks and nuns, taught them Catholic ritual, and hid them in the monasteries. Others lived in parishioners' homes and, with fake identity cards, found jobs and blended into the community. The town's printing press, which during the day printed posters and greeting cards, at night clandestinely printed false documents that were sent by courier to Jews all over Italy.

No a single refugee was captured in Assisi. No one who participated in the rescue operation ever betrayed it. The operation was aided by the German Commandant of the city, Colonel Valentin Müller, a Catholic, who had been persuaded by Father Rufino that he had been sent to the town not only by the German High Command, but also by god, with the mission of protecting the Christian holy places and monasteries. Müller appealed to Marshal Kesselring to declare Assisi an open city.

When the Allies began approaching the city, one of the Jewish refugees, whose German was so excellent that he had gotten a job with the Wehrmacht, forged a letter from Kesselring declaring Assisi an open city. The Colonel never suspected it to be a forgery and immediately ordered all German troops to leave the town, thus saving Assisi from destruction.

From a "Memory" about the Holocaust in Assisi:

An account from our Sisters at St. Anthony's Guest House in Assisi, Italy:

On January 27, 2018, the Sisters present in Assisi (*Sr. Alessandra Sciaboletta, Sr. Maria Gabriella Lamioni & Sr. Suzanne Morissette*) joined numerous individuals in Assisi for a "memory walk" ~ remembering, praying and visiting the sites where the Hebrew people were saved through the Assisi Underground.

In January 2019, the site of St. Anthony's Guest House was a chosen historical place to visit. It is the property of the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement on via Galeazzo Alessi in Assisi, Italy.

The Sisters at St. Anthony's Guest House report the following:

"There is documentation of a *memory* from a family with the last name, Mayer (*of Hebrew origin*), who reported that their family was hidden and saved in this guest house. One of the sons, *Giorgio Cerniani*, visited St. Anthony's Guest House in 2002. He reported that the "memory" has stayed with his family "all these years" and that it has been passed down as one of the life stories in his family.

The family recounted that in the corner of the front of the house, (salottino) was a little statue of the Infant Jesus of Prague. It was here where the Sisters, together with the Hebrew family, prayed to be saved from the German occupying forces.

Many of you who have been to St. Anthony's Guest House may recall this little statue of the Infant Jesus of Prague – as it is still in this little "angolo" (corner) today. (Go to next page) . . .



Continued: The 'memory' of a family saved in Assisi

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DAL DIARIO

Lunedì 27 settembre 1943 Festa di S. Eleazaro

S. Messa e S. Comunione alle 7.30 nella nostra cappella con Padre Antonio.ofm

Le donne e le suore stanno lavorando alacremente per fare i materassi.

Questa notte, alle ore 1,00 le suore si sono svegliate con urla che chiedevano aiuto, poi spari ed un bussare forte. Le suore hanno potuto vedere la luce degli spari di una carabina che era stata usata per forzare una porta, così i fascisti e i tedeschi potevano catturare le persone che stavano cercando. Con nostra sorpresa il campanello della porta centrale stava suonando con molta insistenza e abbiamo sentito i passi avanzare nel nostro cortile. Abbiamo realizzato che era la nostra porta che stavano forzando per aprire.

Le suore con grande fretta si sono vestite e sono andate alla porta principale e con sorpresa hanno trovato la serratura forzata appena aperta ma con la sbarra dell'altra parte della porta che teneva l'apertura al minimo così che i soldati sono stati costretti ad andarsene.

Grazie a Dio e a San Michele siamo salve!

A 'memory' from the Diary of Monday, September 27, 1943:

Feast of St Eleazar ~ Holy Mass and Communion at 7:30 a.m. in our Chapel with Fr. Antonio, ofm.

"The women and the Sisters are working industriously to do the mattresses.

This night at 1 am the Sisters were awakened with shouting and calling for help; then shots and a strong knocking on the door. The Sisters were able to see the light of the shots of a carabina (weapon) which was used to try to force open the door, so that the fascists and the German soldiers might be able to capture the persons for whom they were searching. To our surprise the bell of the main door was ringing insistently and we heard the advancing footsteps in our front courtyard. We realized that it was our door which they were trying to force open. The Sisters dressed quickly and went to the main door and with surprise they found the lock forced slightly open but with the door bar still in place which prevented the door from being fully opened so that the soldiers were compelled to leave. Thanks be to God and St. Michael, we are safe!"

Other noted 'memories' from those who visited St. Anthony's Guest House in later years:

24 September 2002

*"In the memory of the moments of fraternal welcome, in 1943, persecuted by Nazi-fascists in the name of all my family MAYER of Hebrew origin from Trieste (Italy), I give thanks from my heart to the Sisters of this convent for having saved the lives and nurtured the heart." ~ ~ ~ ~ ~
~ ~ ~ by Giorgio Cerniani, son of mamma Mayer*

The second 2002 message written in our guest book by Giorgio Cerniani (the father of Roberto Cerniani who visited the Guest House just after retiring and wanted to see the place where he and his family were saved), tells of the images that his family shared, usually at the family table. His words were few.

"The feelings towards 'the American Sisters' and the little statue of the Infant Jesus of Prague were strong and emotional. Also, the memory of the Sisters praying for the family around this statue was vivid."

For Roberto, the son who came to us shortly after the death of his father in 2012, the images and sentiments have compelled him to uncover this little known history . . . and so that's where the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement enter! *"All of us were saved as a result of kindness!"*

Each year Assisi tries to keep the story alive and so, the living testimony is a vital part of the telling. For reasons unknown to us there is a strong culture of silence. But when one visits the *Museum of Memory* in Assisi, or one hears parts of the story, even *"Silence speaks!"*

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The Underground History from Assisi's Diary ~

"The house where me and my family were saved," wrote Roberto Cerniani, "was one of the Assisian convents of sanctuary (St. Anthony's Guest House) during the period of the Second World War 1943 - 1944.

"The Statue of the Infant Jesus of Prague remains a vivid memory in the recounting of the Mayer/Cerniani family time of rescue!"



Right: Mr. Robert Cerniani, a descendent of the MAYER family, poses with (L-R): Sr. Suzanne Morissette, Sr. Alessandra Sciaboletta, and his daughter, Daria.



March 2023:

For a more recent writing about these special stories of protecting Jewish families in Assisi, please read the article written by KEVIN ELPHICK, OSF, titled: *Children of God in Assisi*

It can be found on the website of:
Franciscan Connections

Link =

<https://www.franciscanconnections.com/blog.php?bid=374>

More History ~ in Italian:

1.) **Museo della Memoria:** <https://www.visit-assisi.it/monumenti-e-luoghi-dinteresse-2/musei/museo-della-memoria/>

2.) **Youtube video:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnRgMV4n7IA&feature=youtu.be>