

“My father, a righteous man who rescued 300 Jews”

A Bolzano story

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An account by Lucillo Merci's daughter: "Sixty-two years on, it is time to tell his story" »

BOLZANO. “We are very proud of him and of what he did. He was a wonderful father”. Lucilla Zanella is the daughter of Lucillo Merci, Bolzano’s Schindler, the man who, between October 1942 and September 1943, saved 300 Greek Jews from deportation. Carla Giacomozzi, head of the Bolzano city archives, stumbled on his story quite by chance. Tomorrow (9.30am Sala del Comune) he will be celebrated during the event organized for the Day of Remembrance.

Despite the fact that Merci was a well-known figure in Bolzano (inspector of Italian schools after the war), and that he had kept a diary of those years (preserved in the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem); and despite the whole of his very large family (six daughters and a total of 75 grandchildren, great grandchildren and in-laws) knowing about it, his story has remained untold for 62 years.

Lucilla explains why: “Out of a sense of modesty, neither we, nor my father, ever thought it was appropriate to talk about it”.

Now that so many years have passed, the moment has arrived. “My father - explains Lucilla – was born in Riva del Garda in 1899, then under the Austro-Hungarian empire. He fought in the final months of the First World War. Then, in 1919, he came to Alto Adige”.

He was a primary school teacher in Salorno. In 1923 he was appointed director of schools in Malles Venosta and became a point of reference for the three hundred teachers – young women sent from the remotest corners of the provinces – sent by Mussolini to “italianize” every child in Alto Adige. These girls felt lost and abandoned and it was my father’s job to keep an eye on them and help them”. In the meantime, Lucillo Merci married Dina Rizzardi. In 1928 he was given another directorship, in Bressanone. In 1938 he was transferred to Bolzano, as director of the Oltrisarco Tambosi school.

In 1940 war broke out and life changed for the Merci family. Despite already being in his 40s, Lucillo was called up, into the Aqui Division, massacred by the Germans in Cefalonia after 8 September. In December 1940 he was sent to Albania, in April 1941 he was in Greece: Corfu, then Lamia. In August 1942 in Salonica, he spoke excellent German, he worked in the Italian consulate as an interpreter. When Merci arrived in Salonica, all the Greek Jews were being rounded up. The final solution had entered its operative stage. Merci did what he thought was right: he tried to rescue as many of them as he could. Along with the consul Guelfo Zamboni. “They provided the Jews with false documents certifying their Italian citizenship. It guaranteed them safe conduct. My father went round the concentration camps with the fake documents and got people out just in time”. All in all, three hundred of them.

“They were only able to help those who had some connection with Italy. He wasn’t afraid, every now and then he came home on leave and told us all about it. He said that the Germans had no mercy, and that orders from Rome were to help the Jews as much as possible”.

When on leave in July 1943, Merci accompanied a group of some forty Jews to Italy. Some of them were saved in Florence, while another twenty, hidden in Meina on Lake Maggiore, were tracked down by the Nazis and shot on 22 September. It was to be the first Nazi massacre of Jews in Italy.

Merci and Zamboni’s rescue operation came to an end on 8 September. “By then the Germans thought of us as enemies. Imagine, that on 2 September my father was here in Bolzano. I remember it perfectly well: that day marked the first bombardment of the city. On 8 September he was on a

trip, they made him leave even if they knew that the armistice was a question of hours”.

On his arrival in Salonica, he was arrested by the Germans. The consul Zamboni went to the headquarters of the Wehrmacht and managed to get him released. “His second stroke of luck after narrowly escaping Cefalonia”. In civilian clothes he carried on doing exactly what he had done before: rescuing people. He helped Italian sailors and soldiers captured by the Germans, saving some by passing them off as teachers from the schools of the large Italian community in Salonica. Schools never abandoned Lucillo Merci. “He was appointed inspector of all the city’s Italian schools”.

On 24 December 1943 the consulate was closed down: the consul and all the staff had diplomatic safe-conduct to travel to Italy. On 4 January 1944, Merci was back in Bolzano, amongst his own people. For him the war was over.

In 1945, after the liberation, Lucillo Merci returned to the Tambosi. Then he worked as an inspector of Italian schools, until his retirement in 1964. In the early Fifties, he wrote a book that generations of Bolzanini have read: *Alto Adige’s Finest legends*. (“Unfortunately it is no longer in print - sighs Lucilla – more’s the pity”).

Lucillo Merci died at the age of 85, on 5 November 1984. “A good and righteous man who never believed he had done anything exceptional, but simply something that had to be done».

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