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Faith Today

An adventure in Assisi

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

In the midst of World War II, the historic and beautiful Italian town of Assisi saved the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands of Italian Jews. No individual accomplished the feat. It was done by all.

The remarkable story of this collective act of courage on the part of the townspeople is told in Alexander Ramati's book, "The Assisi Underground" (Stein and Day, 1978).

After the Fascist government of Benito Mussolini was ousted in the summer of 1943, German troops captured Rome and occupied all of Italy. As they had done in the rest of German-occupied Europe, the Nazis began arresting, deporting and murdering Jews.

In Assisi, encouraged by the local bishop, a Franciscan priest named Father Rufino Niccacci began sheltering and protecting Jewish refugees. Ramati, himself a Jew, tells in his book how Father Niccacci dressed many of the people as monks and nuns and hid them in monasteries and convents, practically under the noses of the German troops.

On occasion, as the dreaded Gestapo searched the monasteries, Jewish "monks" would gather in the chapel and mumble Latin prayers taught to them by Father Niccacci. The act invariably fooled the Germans.

Once Father Niccacci convinced the German commander that a group of Jewish refugees were actually Christian pilgrims who had come to Assisi to celebrate Christmas. They had been stranded in Assisi, Father Niccacci explained, and had no way to return home. The German commander volunteered a truck, a driver and an armed guard to transport the "Christians" home. Three of the

Jews dressed as priests and one wore the red cassock and pectoral cross of a bishop. The German troops respectfully escorted the Jewish refugees through army checkpoints to a town near the Allied lines, where they were safe.

The people of Assisi joined in the unfolding drama. Printing presses churned out fake identity cards that were given to newly arrived refugees. False documents were printed in Assisi and delivered to Jews all over Italy. Jews were spirited away to caves in the hills above Assisi where St. Francis and his followers once prayed. Jews hid in parishioners' homes, found jobs and blended into the community.

The effort was an unqualified success. From the time the Germans occupied Assisi until the Allies liberated Italy, not a single Jewish refugee was captured in Assisi. No one ever betrayed the operation.

What makes the Assisi story even more notable is the fact that not a single Jew had lived in the town. Father Niccacci said he had never even known a Jew before his rescue efforts began. The people of Assisi were risking their lives for total strangers.

It is important to note that what occurred at Assisi was not an isolated case. Throughout Italy, other priests, nuns and laity essentially repeated the death-defying act of Father Niccacci and his friends. It is a tribute to their courage that 80 percent of Italian Jews survived the war. This, writes Ramati, is exactly the opposite from what happened in the rest of Europe where, except for Denmark, 80 percent of all Jews perished in the Holocaust.

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Courage is a quality often thought to belong to the individual. But surely the story of

the Assisi underground is proof that, more often than we think, courage is a community endeavor.

Moreover, I don't believe the definition of community in this context can be limited to a village or town. Families, parish communities, neighborhoods and even nations can boldly face danger or pain or challenge.

But if it is difficult for an individual to be courageous, how can an entire community demonstrate courage?

I think the Assisi story contains at least part of the answer. The people of Assisi encouraged and supported each other. Because they were a community, there existed shared beliefs and shared commitments.

And because they were a community, it appears, a powerful courage came into being that probably surprised the people of Assisi themselves.

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)

Assisi, Italy, during World War II, was a town with its life on the line. Led by a parish priest, the town defied the might of the German army in order to save a group of strangers. Courage in Assisi, writes Joe Michael Feist, was a community quality.

