BY JOE SANO

Gino Bartali

THE CYCLIST WHO SAVED LIVES



Gino Bartali (1914–2000) is remembered not only as one of Italy's greatest road cyclists, but also as a man whose wartime actions helped Jews escape Nazi persecution.

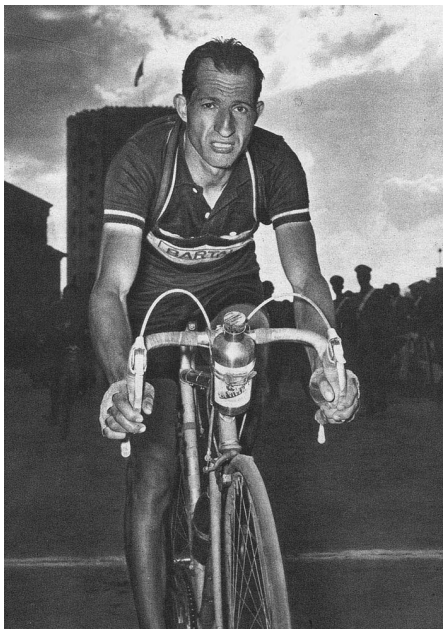
Bartali won the Giro d'Italia in 1936, 1937, and 1946. He won the Tour DeFrance race in 1938 and again in 1948, setting a record for the longest interval between victories. Known as "Gino the Pious" and the "Giant of the Mountains," he became admired for both his extraordinary athletic achievements and his deeply held Catholic faith.

During World War II, however, Bartali took part in a dangerous secret effort to help Jews persecuted under the Nazi occupation of Italy. He used his cycling career as a cover, disguising his missions as training rides. Hidden inside his bicycle frame and handlebars were forged identity documents, photographs, and other materials used by an underground rescue network.

One of the central figures in this network was Giorgio Nissim, a Jewish accountant from Pisa who was associated with DELASEM, an organization dedicated to helping Jews escape persecution. After the network in Tuscany was exposed in 1943, Nissim helped rebuild the rescue operation with the support of figures including Archbishop Elia Dalla Costa of Florence, Archbishop Pietro Boetto of Genoa, Franciscan friars in Assisi, and others. One of these "others" was Gino Bartali.

The network ultimately helped hundreds of people survive.

Bartali played a particularly important role by traveling between Florence, Assisi, and other locations. Nissim and his collaborators could produce forged identity papers, but they needed photographs of the people they were assisting. Bartali cycled to Franciscan convents and other hiding places to collect photographs and deliver them to the network.



His fame provided an unusual form of protection. Bartali was a nationally celebrated athlete, and his recognizable racing jersey and bicycle helped him appear to be nothing more than a cyclist out on a training





ride. Even when traveling through areas controlled by Fascist and German forces, his celebrity could make authorities reluctant to interfere with him. He was often photographed with the occupiers who remained clueless of what was stuffed into his bicycle frame.

Bartali's work nevertheless placed him in serious danger. He was eventually taken to Florence, where he was interrogated by the German Sicherheitsdienst and Italian Fascist forces. Despite threats against his life, he revealed nothing about the people involved in the rescue network. He was released unharmed.

During this time of Nazi occupation and Fascist collaboration, he sheltered a Jewish family in his home, hiding them in his cellar and helping protect them from deportation. Another account describes him assisting Jewish refugees attempting to reach safety near the Swiss border, using a wagon with a concealed compartment while telling patrols that it contained his cycling equipment.

For decades, Bartali rarely spoke about his wartime activities. He believed that helping others was not something to boast about. His modesty meant that much of the story emerged only after his death in 2000, when the sons of Giorgio Nissim discovered their father's wartime diaries, which described Bartali's involvement in the rescue network.

Bartali's wartime story later reached a wider audience through literature, television, and a documentary film. The 1978 novel *The Assisi Underground: The Priest Who Rescued Jews* and its 1985 American television adaptation drew on accounts associated with Father Rufino Niccacci. His story was also featured in the 2014 documentary *My Italian Secret: The Forgotten Heroes*. Aili and Andres McConnon further explored his life in their 2012 book *Road to Valor*. Currently a new Hollywood movie featuring Miles Teller as Bartali has been "green lit" for production.

In 2013, Yad Vashem recognized Bartali as a ***Righteous Among the Nations***, an honor given to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

There are some historians who have questioned aspects of the available documentation of Bartali's experiences and exploits. However, Yad Vashem's investigation strongly rejected any suggestion that Bartali's rescue activities were fabricated.

What is clear is that Bartali's life extended far beyond his celebrated cycling career. During the war, he used his fame, mobility, and courage in ways that placed him at considerable personal risk. His story is now remembered as an example of how an internationally known athlete secretly became involved in the effort to protect people targeted by Nazi persecution.



As Bartali reportedly told his son years later when discussing his wartime actions:

"One does these things and then… that's that!"

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