

Fratelli d'Italia? Remembering Platform 21

BENEDETTA GRASSO (January 25, 2010)



An interesting new Italian documentary, that will come out on January 27 with "Corriere della Sera" and that explores a not so well-known side of Italian history during the tragic times of the Holocaust. Survivors, side by side with young people, retell their stories and remember their journey of deportation from Milan

Have you ever heard of ["Binario 21"](#) [2], the track at platform 21 in Milan's main train station (Stazione Centrale)?

Even if you go around asking people, even if you take a train departing from that same track today, it will be hard to find it, to see it clearly in front of your eyes and even harder to tell its story.

Certain stories, in fact, certain places, certain parts of history are hidden, kept under the surface, brought to ground level only when someone digs deeper and suddenly discovers that right below his feet there's a whole different track belonging to an older black and white world, a colder reality



made up of stories now only few people can tell.

To some people these stories are not so hidden. They were bedtime stories, conversations around the table, or emotional moments of passage of family traditions, and tales from one generation to the other. These people are the children and the grandchildren of those who actually saw that dark colder reality: they are young and the only ones who can pass this story onward.

On January 30, 1944 from platform 21 leaves the first train from Milan to Auschwitz. Of the 605 people that are forced on it, only 20 will survive. From then on, other trains with Italian Jews left from that same track to also go to Fossoli (a concentration camp near Carpi, Modena), Bergen-Belsen, Bolzano.

As a way of commemorating this tragic day, a documentary has been made in 2009 that takes on these issues in a very original, unique and groundbreaking way. "Fratelli d'Italia?" (directed by Dario Barezzi, written by Mariella Zanetti and produced by Andrea Jarach and Movingimage) is a movie that retells what happened on January 30, 1944 through the words of a small group of high-school and college students, descendants of the few survivors or related somehow to people who were deported and killed. The film is aimed at young people, but it doesn't talk down to them nor does it simplify the issues. It's also interesting because it uses the modern setting and technology of the train station of the 21st century, with its digital screens, the PA system and luminous panels and colorful trains to project old documents, witnesses' and survivors' accounts, and radio messages. Not only do these elements help combine the past with the present, they also create an interactive experience for the curious commuter, the tourist, and the people stopping by.

The title relates to the Italian national anthem and, in a way, it's essential in understanding something that is often felt even by immigrants or people living in the United States: how do your roots, your religion and ethnicity affect your national identity?

For many Italian Jews in the 30s and 40s, being Italian came before being a Jew. Nobody could even imagine that there would be laws that separated the Jewish race from the Italian race. They went to school, worked with everybody else and identified with Italy's values and culture. Reassured at first by Mussolini, they didn't know what was going on and didn't feel radically different from their friends and even some non-Jewish family members.

After 1938 what was applied wasn't just a set of simple bureaucratic policies: the names of the Jews were even deleted from phonebooks and put in other lists, lists that much like platform 21 linked Italy with Auschwitz and the Final Solution.

The young men and women in the documentary tell their personal stories, connecting them with the actual footage of the interviews with survivors like Liliana Segre, for example, who is still able to remember every detail of that terrifying journey from the prison of San Vittore, to a train crammed with people and hay, to the concentration camps.

What this documentary focuses on is the "indifference" and the "forgetfulness" of the Italians. If in the 40s few people knew or did something to help, it's even more disheartening that today random people interviewed in a station barely know what the Holocaust in Italy was about.

Focusing on young people is not just a matter of keeping the memory alive, it's also a bridge to discuss the issues that are still problematic today and kids face every day in school, in soccer stadiums, on the web, and on the walls of their cities. Words are twisted around and anti-semitism is not completely dead, but often re-worked into modern political ideologies and quasi-pluralistic messages.

One of the young men involved in the documentary, Davide Ortona, 21, says that the most beautiful aspect of the project was to "work side by side with the survivors. When we were shooting a scene it struck me that they looked at us, with complete attention as if they were silently trying to tell us: we won't be around for long to remember; now it's all up to you".



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[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/giornodieci01412644589280jpg>

[2] <http://www.binario21.org/>