

## About “Under a False Name”\*

Frediano Sessi\*\*, Paolo Rampi\*\*\*, Giordano Cavallari\*\*\*\*

**Abstract.** Mantua, Viale Gorizia 6, early days of September 1943. As in every part of Italy, the hunt for the Jew is frenzied. In Rijeka, first racist laws then the arrival of the Germans and the establishment of the Adriatic Littoral Zone of Operations make life impossible for Jews. A Jewish family, fleeing Rijeka, finds refuge in an apartment in Mantua. They escape deportation and see with relief the end of the war. They are Maximilian Gizelt (b. 1874) a dentist by profession, his wife Erna Wolfsohn (b. 1878) a housewife, and their children Carlo (b. 1914) and Liselotte (called Lilly b. 1915) with Robert Frankl (b. 1902) who will be her husband after the war. The protagonists of this rescue story were two young newlyweds, separated by wartime contingencies: Francesco Rampi, born in Faenza in 1907 (died 1986) and his wife, originally from Rijeka, Luisa Ungar, seven years younger (died 1981). The Rampis had lived in Mantua for just under two years and certainly were known to their neighbors, but not as well in the city. Thus, the thought that an identity swap could save that endangered family of Fiuman Jews became a concrete fact. The Gizelt became the Rampi of 6 Gorizia Avenue, and to reinforce this new status, they also used the ration cards that Luisa and Francesco gave them. Only in 2023 did this story become public knowledge. The story was reconstructed by Frediano Sessi in his book *Sotto falso nome* (2023).

**Keywords:** Giusti delle nazioni, Fiume, Mantova, Memoria, Olocausto, Shoah.

**Riassunto.** Mantova, viale Gorizia numero 6, primi giorni di settembre del 1943. Come in ogni parte d'Italia, la caccia all'ebreo è forsennata. A Fiume, prima le leggi razziste poi l'arrivo dei tedeschi e la costituzione della Zona di operazioni del Litorale Adriatico, rendono la vita agli ebrei impossibile. Una famiglia di ebrei, in fuga da Fiume, trova rifugio in un appartamento a Mantova. Sfuggiranno alla deportazione e vedranno con sollievo la fine della guerra. Si tratta di Massimiliano Gizelt (classe 1874) di professione dentista, di sua moglie Erna Wolfsohn (del 1878) casalinga e dei loro figli Carlo (nato nel 1914) e Liselotte (detta Lilly del 1915) con Robert Frankl (1902) che sarà suo marito dopo la guerra. Protagonisti di questa storia di salvataggio furono due giovani sposi, separati dalle contingenze belliche: Francesco Rampi, nato a Faenza nel 1907 (deceduto nel 1986) e sua moglie, originaria di Fiume, Luisa Ungar di sette anni più giovane (deceduta nel 1981). I Rampi abitavano a Mantova da poco meno di due anni e certo erano conosciuti dai loro vicini di casa, ma non altrettanto in città. Così, il pensiero che uno scambio di identità potesse salvare quella famiglia di ebrei fiumani in pericolo divenne fatto concreto. I Gizelt diventarono i Rampi di viale Gorizia 6 e per rafforzare questa nuova condizione, utilizzarono anche le tessere annonarie che Luisa e Francesco gli diedero. Solo nel 2023 questa storia è diventata di dominio pubblico. La storia è stata ricostruita da Frediano Sessi in *Sotto falso nome* (2023).

**Parole chiave:** Righteous among the Nations, Fiume, Mantua, Memory, Holocaust, Shoah.

**Giordano Cavallari (G.C.).** Paolo, can you summarize the story told in the book?

**Paolo Rampi (P.R.).** My mother Luisa Ungar and my father Francesco Rampi offered their apartment in a small condominium in Mantua to my mother's best friend Lilli Gizelt and her family, during the period 1943-44. Lilli and her family members – from Fiume like my mother – were Jewish. After September 8, Jews were being hunted throughout Istria. The apartment in Mantua was left

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\* The title refers to Frediano Sessi's book *Sotto falso nome* ["Under a False Name"] (Turin: Einaudi, 2022). Translation by Isobel Butters. Among Sessi's books, see *L'angelo di Auschwitz. Mala Zimetbaum, l'ebrea che sfidò i nazisti* (Venice: Marsilio, 2019), *Prof, che cosa è la Shoah?* (Turin: Einaudi, 2020), *Il mio nome è Anna Frank* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010).

\*\* Prof. of Sociology, University of Brescia, Italy. Address: Via Sante Vincenzi 45, 40138 Bologna, Italy, e-mail <frediano.sessi@unibs.it>.

\*\*\* Son of Francesco Rampi and Luisa Ungar, Entrepreneur. Address: Viale Europa 21/23, 46047 Porto Mantovano (MN), Italy, e-mail <paolo.rampi@rampi.it>.

\*\*\*\* Board member of the online Journal *SettimanaNews*, Via Sante Vincenzi 45, 40138 Bologna, Italy, e-mail <cavallarigiordano57@gmail.com>.

empty as my father had been called to arms in January 1943 and sent to Sardinia. My mother, now alone in a city she did not know, went back with my infant sister Maria Anita to Fiume to be with her mother. Fiume was under the rule of the Republic of Salò, under Nazi occupation, and a particularly ferocious division of the SS. Without thinking of the risks, my parents handed the keys to their furnished apartment and their ration cards over to the Gizelts. This enabled their dear friends to hide, live under a false name and to survive the horrors of those terrible times. It was a gesture made from the heart and thinking more about the values of friendship and altruism than about themselves and the terrible risks they were running, something they were however undoubtedly aware of.

**G.C.** Frediano, how did you come across this story during your research?

**Frediano Sessi (F.S.).** Three years ago, in January 2020, the pandemic forced me to interrupt my research on the life of Laura Geiringer, a Jewish girl from Trieste. She was the only Auschwitz survivor in her family, but she died shortly after her return from the medical experiments she had been subjected to during her imprisonment. A Catholic of Jewish origin, after liberation she had lived until August 1945 in the Auschwitz infirmary before returning to Trieste. Besides the documentation in the Museum's archives, someone who could tell me more about Laura was an Italian, Luigi Ferri, who, like her, had also remained in the Auschwitz infirmary for a few months after liberation. So, I started looking for him. My meeting with Luigi Ferri led to the book, *Il bambino scomparso. Una storia di Auschwitz* (The Missing Child. A Story from Auschwitz) (Venice: Marsilio, 2022) (<http://www.settimananews.it/cultura/auschwitz-una-storia/>). Luigi, age 11, had been taken with his grandmother Rosalia (Rosa) Gizelt, a Jew from Fiume, to Auschwitz Birkenau and was spared thanks to the courage of Dr. Otto Wolken. The grandmother went to the gas chamber the day after their arrival, on July 2, 1944. To find out more about her, I turned to the archives of the Jewish Community in Fiume and it was then that I learned that Rosa Gizelt's brother, the dentist Maximilian Gizelt, and his entire family (his wife Erna, son Carlo, daughter Lilli and his daughter's fiancé Robert Frankl) had been saved thanks to the generosity of the Rampi family of Mantua who had taken them in and hidden them in their home at 6 Viale Gorizia.

With the help of Paolo, son of Francesco and Luisa Ungar Rampi, and his sister Maria Anita, I managed to reconstruct the story that became *Sotto Falso Nome /Under a false name*. It is one of immensely generous hospitality whereby, in a daring identity exchange, the Gizelts became known to everyone in Mantua as "the Rampis".

**G.C.** What was happening in Fiume at the time of the Rampi-Gizelt events?

**F.S.** After September 8, Hitler ordered a new administrative area to be established in the territories of the Upper Adriatic. It became to all effects a region of Greater Germany, known as the Adriatic Coastal Operations Zone (*Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland*), to which belonged Udine, Gorizia, Ljubljana, Trieste, Pola, and Fiume, as well as the territories of Sansego, Buccari, Cabar, Castù, and Veglia. Right from the start of this occupation, the Slovene, Croat and Italian military resistance was relentless, provoking frequent clashes with the German forces. Supreme Commissioner of the Adriatic Littoral Friedrich Rainer began a violent repression of all forms of dissent. People were arrested indiscriminately; there were massacres, villages were burned and innocent civilians deported, which brought the war to the countryside and homes throughout the

region. Because of this resistance to the occupation, the German administrative and military apparatus was flanked by a large operational police unit. It was led by SS Division General Odilo Globočnik, who, upon arriving in Italy, became the supreme commander of the SS and the police of the entire Adriatic Coast.

The SS officer in question is considered one of Germany's top war criminals today. Before he arrived in Trieste, Globočnik had built three concentration camps in Polish territory: Bełżec, which was opened in March 1942; Sobibór, active since May of that year; and Treblinka, located near Warsaw, operational since July 1942. The total number of Jewish victims at these three camps reached the figure of one and a half million.

**G.C.** What about Mantua?

**F.S.** The situation was critical there as well because many people had signed up to the new Italian Social Republic, although their motivations differed. Some had joined out of convenience because they needed to work to support their families; some wanted to seize the chance to acquire property confiscated from Jews or opponents of the regime; and others firmly believed in the fascist and Nazi ideas for a new Europe. Also in the city was a sinister group who arrested people for no reason other than to terrorize the population. These fascist militants were guilty of theft, looting and more serious crimes including murder, knowing full well that they would go unpunished. Named the Torturers of Villa Gobio, between the summer of 1944 and April 1945, they imprisoned, persecuted and killed people suspected of being part of the Resistance or carrying out activities against the regime.

**G.C.** What risks did the Rampis take with the neighbors?

**F.S.** The obligation to fix a notice to the main door with the names of the people who lived in each apartment was also a threat to the Gizelt family's stay in Mantua, even though their documents showed them all to be gentiles. If the neighbors had been interrogated for hours, as often happened to defenseless civilians, might they have revealed the family's true identity?

**G.C.** Paolo, as far as you know, did the Gizelts feel Jewish? Were they practicing?

**P.R.** The Gizelts were Jewish, originally from Lviv in Ukraine. They had left in the early 1900s because of the pogroms. I do not know if they went to synagogue. Fiume was a thriving multi ethnic and multi religious city. They certainly felt Jewish, as evidenced by their family history, even after the end of the War.

**G.C.** How did your mother Luisa and Lilli Gizelt become friends?

**P.R.** My mother and Lilli were friends since childhood. They were neighbors and went through school together. In the many photos I still have, they are walking arm in arm along the waterfront, pretty, elegant, and smiling: two real lifelong companions. The friendship and socializing continued even after the end of the War, although we lived in Mantua, while Lilli, with her husband and small daughter Susy, had moved to Merano. We used to spend winter vacations together in the mountains and, in summer, at the seaside – as numerous other photos testify, as do my personal memories as a child.

**G.C.** Was your mother Catholic?

**P.R.** My mother was not particularly religious, but she was Christian and Catholic in education and values. I remember her as a deeply sensitive, affectionate woman who was good to everyone. She was extraordinarily fond of her children and grandchildren. But deep down she felt the burden of her background. She remembered the exodus of Italians from Istria and Fiume that affected her large family and their possessions, the early illness and short life of her dearest friend Lilli after the War, and she missed intensely her beloved hometown. She disliked the Po Valley climate of Mantua and longed for the sea and the wind of the Gulf of Warner.

**G.C.** Your neighbors in the apartment block took their own considerable risks. What can you say about that?

**P.R.** I can only say that they were “normal” people, in the best sense of the word. The neighbors all knew what was going on in the apartment in their small condominium. They were fully aware that the five adult newcomers had come out of nowhere and were not the Rampi family, despite the documents. But these neighbors somehow shared with the Rampis the values of human solidarity and generosity. Their courageous behavior saved the lives of other human beings at a moment in history when informing, betraying, and selling information were everyday occurrences. At the time, they were not remembered or thanked as much as they deserved. The early postwar years were not easy for anyone. People wanted to forget the fear, hardship and suffering, and as soon as it was possible, all the families left the small apartment building in the middle of nowhere. It was later torn down to make way for larger buildings.

Just a few weeks ago, the Mayor of Mantua, Mattia Palazzi, unveiled a plaque on the site of 6 Viale Gorizia. It is there to remind us that on that spot the Rampis and their neighbors deliberately disobeyed the brutal fascist racial laws in the name of human solidarity.

**G.C.** *Why did people become informants?*

**F.S.** It is often thought that anyone who reported a Jew or a family with a partisan relative was always a staunch fascist or someone willing to get other people into trouble out of self-interest. But during the German occupation in Italy and even earlier, with the Fascist regime in power, informants could also be decent people who were forced by torture – or under threat to them or their family members – to betray Jewish acquaintances or partisans. It should not be assumed that the informers were always cruel men or women. Primo Levi, in his book *I Sommersi e I salvati* [*The Drowned and the Saved*] 1986), spoke of the “gray zone” to refer to those prisoners who, to obtain certain privileges that increased their life expectancy, agreed to collaborate with their jailers. They are victims, however, for whom there is no human tribunal that can judge and condemn them. The Germans, Levi continued were also responsible for this crime. The oppressors are guilty of inducing their victims to betray. However, it is also true “that in the lagers and outside there are gray, ambiguous people, ready to compromise”. This makes the gesture of the young Rampis who risked their lives to save the Gizelt family all the more remarkable.

**G.C.** You say this is a story of “altruism”. What does altruism mean?

**F.S.** Altruism is an everyday virtue whose meaning has been lost. We often talk about charity and solidarity, forgetting that altruism has to do with *giving* at a loss, without expecting anything in return. It is help offered regardless and it includes elements of sacrifice and risk but is the basis of a universalistic society. I believe that today we have lost the sense and value of altruism because we live in a time when the affirmation of the self, often without limits, prevails.

**G.C.** I ask you Paolo the same question: what is altruism?

**P.R.** It isn't easy to define: for me, it is “simply” a feeling that manifests itself in a decision that comes from the depths of the conscience: it is the moment when a person decides to give part or all of themselves to help another person or people, without any personal gain. Sometimes I feel like I see Luisa and Lilli – the lifelong friends – over coffee or sitting on a bench gazing out at their beloved sea. Lilli confesses her anguish and the terror of the whole Gizelt family about the hunt for Jews that extends right across Istria. That may have been the moment when my mother, appalled at what could happen to her beloved friend and family members, made her decision. Perhaps she said “Our house in Mantua is empty, no one lives there. Don't waste time, go now if you think it can help. I'll alert the neighbors or accompany you there in some way to explain to them, and then come right back to Fiume to my mother and daughter”. Perhaps that was the moment my mother's altruism spoke and became feeling and the feeling became a tangible act of spontaneous, selfless and courageous help.

**G.C.** This is a book for young people, but it is also, of course, for adults. Is the idea to “teach” altruism?

**F.S.** Neither accounts like this nor words are enough. Altruism needs to be practiced daily and close to home – in our building, neighborhood, parish or school – any environment can put us to the test. We need to remember that we are always a “demonstration” of how people should behave in society. At any given moment of our lives, we should show others how we would like society and human beings to be. Even without knowing it, we set an example; show the way forward. This, in itself, is a sign of altruism: feeling responsible not only for oneself. And showing in daily life that there is still a limit between what can be done and what is permissible. The rule of exchange is always allowed in contemporary life, but it is not always justifiable. It punishes the fragile, the needy, those who have no chance of redemption, and those who live in suffering. Choosing to overcome the so-called rule of exchange in favor of gifting can be a way of bringing us closer to the daily virtue of altruism.

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