

Covenant

Interview with Marcella Servi Siegel: Under the Tuscan Thumb: A Holocaust Survivor's Tale from Pitigliano, Italy

Interview Conducted By Judith Roumani and Jacques Roumani for *Covenant*

Abstract: Marcella Servi Siegel, born in the small Jewish community of Pitigliano, Tuscany, tells in the interview of her childhood, the tight-knit social relationships, and the unraveling of a five hundred-year old Jewish community, due to antisemitism. Still a child, she hid from Fascist and Nazi persecution with her siblings in the countryside for many grueling months and received help from farmers and partisans.



Pitigliano

ca. 1941

Marcella Servi with her parents, uncles and aunts, and older siblings. Marcella is on the far left. Jerusalem, December 2007. Photo courtesy of Marcella Servi Siegel

C: The story of how Italians acted during the Holocaust is a complicated, even ambiguous one. Some memoirists tell us of how ordinary

Italians sheltered Jews in the Shoah, and saved many; others emphasize that the Fascist racial laws were as harsh as those of Germany, that

the majority of Italians belonged to the Fascist party, that Mussolini was no paper tiger, and that at least 15 percent of Italian Jewry perished.¹ We'd like to hear your personal story of growing up in Pitigliano, a small town in Tuscany where Jews were historically well integrated and well treated, and how Fascism and Nazism affected your life, as well as the actions of the local people.

MS: It was true that most Italians belonged to the Fascist party, because you couldn't get a job without party membership. Jews were doctors, lawyers (*liberi professionisti*) which meant they had less need to belong to the party than other Italians. A large proportion of Italian Jews were killed, with the collaboration of Italians. My own grandmother and her relatives were killed because Italians brought them to the Nazis in Rome. That wouldn't be true that most Italians saved Jews. It might be true that it was mostly Italian Jews that were saved, with the help of Italians.

C: Would you like to tell us about your childhood, growing up in Pitigliano?

MS: I was born in 1930, from a father that was the Jewish leader of the town, of the village and my mother that was born and raised in Rome. She came to Pitigliano as my father's bride.

C: Wasn't you mother's family from Livorno?

MS: No, my mother came from Rome and her name was Di Capua, two separate words.

C: Was your mother happy in Pitigliano?

MS: No, she hated it!

C: Why?

MS: Oh, I don't know, specially in those days, that was like going back, as she used to say, five hundred years. There was no real communication with the outside world. Everyone was linked to the outside world only through a bus service that was unreliable.

C: Even today...

MSS: But in those days it was totally isolated. The culture was 500 years back. Only recently they had received electricity, and the person who did it was related to my father. This is a little anecdote: we honor Edison, who invented the light bulb, but *maggior* glory to Engineer Sadun, who brought it to Pitigliano. This was within my father's lifetime, so as you can see the life of the town was very, very backward

C: So your father was born in Pitigliano?

MSS: Absolutely, from a father that was born in Pitigliano, from a mother that was born in Pitigliano. The family name was Lattes, the family of Dante Lattes. My great-grandfather was born in Pitigliano. My father's family had been in Pitigliano for hundreds and hundreds of years.

C: So how did he meet your mother, in Rome?

MSS: No, the engineer I had just mentioned had gone to study at the University of Pisa. The University of Pisa was and still is a very, very prestigious university and many of the Jews that went there, in order to maintain a kosher lifestyle, lived in a *pensione* run by a Jewish woman in Livorno. So this man met this aunt of mine, my mother's sister, and this is how my parents met, through my aunt and the engineer. My grandfather had a hard time finding a second wife, because he was a *kohen* and he couldn't find so easily a *betula*, a virgin girl who was willing to marry a man with four children. So he didn't remarry for a few years. At that time, my mother and her sister were sent to the two aunts and brought up in different households. From the second marriage he had a son, and a daughter who was killed in Auschwitz with her mother (my step-grandmother). The son was saved by the fact that he was married to a non-Jew, a Protestant from the isle of Malta. The antisemitic laws forbade the children to go to public school. To go to the Jewish school, they

had to go to the school across town, the Jewish school in Trastevere, Rome. So instead of going across town, they went to a private Jesuit school.

C: And that's how they were saved?

MS: That's so. When the crunch came, the still-Jewish husband, and the still-Jewish kids, (he had three of them at that time) went to this convent and they were saved there. But, when they came out, they were committed Christians. So there was a price to pay for survival. My mother's oldest brother also married a girl from a mixed marriage. She had a Jewish name, because her father was Jewish, but she was from a mixed marriage, and they also ended up in a convent and were saved this way.

C: The convent was in Pitigliano?

MS: No, no, in Rome. My mother and father and us four children in 1943 (my twin brother was dead, he's buried next to my parents in the Jewish cemetery in Pitigliano, he died less than a year old, so there is his tombstone, next to my parents and grandparents and great-grandparents) were living in Pitigliano.

So, back to when the German occupation came to our part of Italy...

C: How did that change your lives?

MS: Up until 1943, we were under the Fascist laws. These laws came in 1938, and they covered the education system, the marriage system, the work laws, they kept increasing in severity almost daily for the first year. Every day we got a new law: we couldn't keep a Christian maid, that we had always had until then, we couldn't get a work permit, we couldn't work, we couldn't own a radio, and so on and so on.

C: But you were a child then. Were you aware of these things?

MS: Oh, I couldn't go to school! I had finished my second grade, and I was kicked out of school. The day after, they kicked out all the Jewish teachers.

C: So you must have been happy, no school? It's like a teachers' strike...

MS: Well no, I wasn't happy at all. I remember that day very well. My mother came and sat on the bed. We were usually summoned to school by the church bells. We lived in the old ghetto. The school was at the opposite end of Pitigliano. You know, Pitigliano is long and thin, to go to school we had to cross the whole length of the town. I was still lingering in bed, and she was teary and sad, and she said I couldn't go to school any more It took a little time to organize a Jewish school. There weren't enough children to have a real school.

C: So you went to the new Jewish school then?

MS: Yes, it was a little makeshift. They put us all in the same room. Whether we were first grade or fifth grade. Pitigliano had school only until the fifth grade, elementary school. Recently they had started a vocational school. Up until the eighth grade.

C: A trade school?

MS: Yes, a trade school, up to the eighth grade. So, the children of the Jewish community ranged from those who had finished the second grade to those in eighth grade. My little brother Mario had never been to school before. But they put us all in the same room.

C: Was the school near your house?

MS: Yes, near the synagogue, and we could even enter directly from my home, the rabbi's house.. And what we were allowed to do was at the end of the school year to take the exams as external students to be promoted to the next grade. But we didn't take the exams with the other children of course. We went up to the school proper (each of us being the one Jewish

kid in each grade), and had to take the exam. The teachers were wearing the Fascist uniform, naturally everyone had to wear it that had an official capacity. I don't want to sound chauvinistic, but we were smarter than the other Italian children who came from poor and often illiterate families. For us, it wasn't an academic difficulty, but there was a very big emotional difficulty to pass this exam. So I finally reached the fifth grade, and that was the end of it.

C: And then the Germans came?

MS: No, let me see, it was 1941, I was eleven, the Germans had been there all along, because Italy and Germany were allies. There was a lot of coming and going of German troops. On July 25, 1943, the king put Mussolini in jail, he and General Badoglio signed an Armistice with the Allies. He went on a ship to Portugal. He left us Italians, Jews and non-Jews, to fend for ourselves. The Germans were there already, but now they were the occupying power. There was no more Italian government. This was September 8, 1943, and I was thirteen years old. The Germans liberated Mussolini and formed the Republic of Salo, and they gave the Italian soldiers an ultimatum: to be part of this republic, or to be victims. Arrested or executed.

C: Is that when the Resistance started?

MS: It existed before, since the 1920s, but they were the nucleus. There were soldiers who had a musket, a weapon, and were running away from the *repubblichini*, we used to call them, the government that the Germans had installed. So the real armed Resistance began, but the Resistance had existed before.

C: How did your family react to these events in 1943?

MS: The first thing we had to do was: the men in the family, my two older brothers, those of military age, were possible victims of seizure. They ran away to hide. This was the first week

of September, 1943. They joined the local partisans, the *macchia*, we used to call it.

C: So they had to leave the family and just go away?

MS: Yes. If you saw a young man walking in the street, you would know he was doing so illegally. Until then, because Jews were not allowed to be in the military, they were safe. The town knew that my brothers couldn't go in the army. But as of September 8, anyone could stop them and say how come you're not in the army? Either you could be eliminated as a Jew, or you could be eliminated as a deserter. Every young man was in hiding. So my brothers joined the partisans. By October, the Jews of Rome were all taken. The news reached Pit eventually, we didn't have any television or radio, the news didn't travel fast. There was an outstanding number of *pitiglianesi* who were concierges in Rome, because their children were in higher education there. They had housing and a bit of money and they could keep their children. So the news of this 'clearing' of the Italian Jews in Rome came back to us, we heard that, I don't know how fast, and that they were doing the same all over Italy, and our family had better go into hiding. So my mother, father and my younger brother, who was only nine years old, went to a farm that my father knew. My father was the religious leader of the town. My father knew many of the farmers around Pitigliano. He had five children, a wife and a maid to support. He took whatever jobs he could find. And one of the jobs, that his father had done before him, and his grandfather had done before that, was to help the poor people. You see, in Pitigliano there were only three classes: the noblemen (the Orsini and so forth); the few middle class bureaucrats, a pharmacist, the doctor, paid by the government, a bishop, and my father belonged to that middle class. The other *pitiglianesi* worked for the rich landowners and they were sharecroppers, *mezzadri*. In those days, 25 percent stayed for the workers. 75 percent went to the owner of the land. The system was called *mezzadria*. They did not read or write. They had to keep

an account of every egg, every chicken, every kilo of grain, everything they produced, in order to get their share. They went to my father to keep the accounting. My father didn't receive money from them, but he received a few eggs, a handful of beans, payment in nature.

C: But his employers were the rich landowners?

MS: No, his employers were the poor farmers. The rich noble people that had a *mezzadro*, they had an administrator, and these poor guys, the workers, had to go to the administrator once a year to get their share.

C: So that's how he got to know the farmers?

MS: Yes, my father knew all of them. So the name of Servi was in high esteem with these people who had used our services for generations. Many *pitiglianesi* had gone overseas. And they worked and sent the money for their family to join them. All that correspondence, who did this? My father did it, and his father before him. Wrote the letters, translated them, helped them out. So one day a poor woman came to my grandfather, she had received a letter from the consulate that was in Livorno.

C: The American consulate?

MS: Yes. She had to be there at such and such a day (I don't know whether she had children or not) to get a boat to go to America where her husband was. My father was there at the time, he was about thirty seven, (born in 1883, this happened in 1920) and this woman started tearing her hair out: How do I get to Livorno? I don't know how to take the train, I don't know how... My father said, You know what, I have a friend that lives in Livorno, I'll take you. And he took her to Livorno, and went to visit his friend. And that's how he met my mother. My father's friend had married my mother's older sister...The picture gets very confused...

C: The Jewish community of Pitigliano was fairly isolated from other Jewish communities, right?

MS: Yes, there was no way not to be. A trip to Livorno, now it's a two-hour trip, but then it was going across the world! When my father's sister, the eldest of fourteen children, got married, as a gift, a wedding present, she was sent to see the sea. She said, "My God, *Come e grande Haolam!*" [in Italian and Hebrew: How big the world is!] This is a woman who was relatively educated, she knew how to read and write, since my grandmother was a Hebrew teacher. This was an intellectual family. To go from Pitigliano to the sea, which is 60 kilometers, was such a thing, that it was breathtaking. Because she was born and bred in Pitigliano, what did she know of life?

C: What kept this community together as Jews?

MS: I have wondered myself, what caused people to cling, and I have come up with two answers, I don't know if there are more, but these are my two answers. One, that Pitigliano had a synagogue, a yeshiva, a cemetery so anyone from Pitigliano at least once a year came back. Besides, most of them had emigrated to places where they were the only Jewish family. So they came back for a little bit of 'Jewishkeit' to Pitigliano, as the Jewish center, the 'Little Jerusalem' they called it. For the Jews that lived in surrounding villages this was the mecca, they came to Pitigliano to get Jewish life. There was a library, a good library. After the war, they found an incunabulum from Yehuda Halevi, they had 18 *Sifrei Torah*—riches! The yeshiva had functioned in my father's day, and they had had a Jewish school. My older brothers, they went to the Jewish school and had a Jewish education. By the time I was born it had shrunk to 80 people, the whole community. By 1943, it was even smaller because there were no economic possibilities. Jews had emigrated to the big cities, to larger Jewish communities. What could you do to maintain a family? Perhaps if you had a small store, dry goods, you could do something. But how many Jews could have a

job that would support the family? And then there was this big expense of sending the children away for education. Once they lost their bureaucratic jobs, the town didn't have anything to give, once the Jews were excluded, that was it. But most of the time they were eking a living to send the kids out to study

C: They were investing in the future, right? But this situation obviously interfered with maintaining the traditional Jewish life of Pitigliano...

MS: I remember my father was a *shohet* [ritual slaughterer, also used as a verb]. Now to *shohet* a cow, he had to make sure the Jews could use a cow. There weren't enough families to eat a cow. So the kosher meat started to dwindle. So on the holidays, he would *shohet* a lamb, or two maybe. But to eat a cow, who the hell is going to have enough money to eat a cow? I remember the matza business. But you had to have enough families, with enough money, to keep the matza oven going. If the community has declined to the point where they couldn't provide my father as acting rabbi enough for a living, then Jewish life is declining.

To get back to the story I was telling: my father, mother and the little one went to one farm.. My brothers mixed with the partisans. Eventually, my sister and I, we also had to leave the town and join the brothers.

C: The farmers themselves were supporting the partisans?

MS: That's a tricky question, if you really want to know. The farmer was in a very, very precarious position. All the men had been in the war. The war had started in 1936 when Italy went to get the empire in Africa. So there were men who had gone into the army in Africa and never made it back because they were taken prisoner. So the farming population amounted to the very old people and the women. There were no young men. When you say they were helping the partisans, I don't know who helped who more. Because

those partisans would help with the harvest and the farmers sheltered them. Young men were a precious commodity. Also the Italian and German armies confiscated everything. If it was food, they took it, if it was livestock, they took it. You know, the army in this particular war, was a very poor army. Italy was a very poor country. This was before the postwar economic revolution. They didn't even have clothes or shoes, and they sent them to Russia. This was not the German army. This was the Italian army that was really very raggedy.

C: So the farmers weren't for the Fascists?

MS: The second point was that 1943 was only twenty-five years after World War I, so there were people, like the old man, the leader of the *macchia*, who had served against the Germans. It wasn't an alliance of the people. The fathers of the kids serving in the army had lost life and limb against the Germans. So it wasn't a national affinity at all. The fact that at this point they found themselves occupied by the Germans, most normal people, not psychopaths (farmers usually are the most normal of all people) didn't have any sympathy for the situation. Italy is a Catholic country. Most of the rebellion against the Fascists came from the Communists. They were considered enemy number one, of the Fascists. Many exiled Italians in America had before the war been Communists or Socialists. Tuscany is a left-wing country.

C: Even today...

MS: The big landowners were not very nice to the farmers. How to rebel? Become left wing or Communist. I don't know if you can call it ideological, it was because of economic necessity. I would say more—opportunistic. My grandmother had five sons in the war at the same time, 1914-1919. One came back in not good condition, and the other four with various degrees of disabilities. Never mind whether he is Jewish, imagine that he had to be the ally of the Axis. Twenty-five years is a very short time.

C: They were taken into the army in 1914 even though they were living in an isolated, mountainous community?

MS: Yes, of course, everybody had to go into the army.

C: The state, in 1914, was able to reach there, nobody escaped?

MS: Nobody could escape but I doubt whether anyone wanted to escape. They were part of an independent Italy, Italy had been dominated by the German Empire until one generation before. The father had fought for Italian *irredentismo*, the son was in the army against the Germans, and here they were asking for the grandson to be a loyal German supporter. For normal, sane people, it wasn't a marriage made in Heaven.

C: So the farmers did not mind helping the Jews, but up to what point?

MS: Here's the thing: during that harsh winter, when we were in hiding, in various farms, they had no food to give away. It was extremely, and became more and more, dangerous. I remember one incident when we went to visit some ex-prisoners of war that had jumped the truck that was transporting them and were hiding in a cave near San Martino, a hamlet near Pitigliano. So we went to visit them because we heard that one of them was Jewish. We wanted to see them. The daughter used to go down in the cave and bring them food.

C: The daughter of the farmer . . .

MS: Yes. It was nice, they had food, they had shelter. Remember, I was thirteen years old. I had no clothes, no shoes, and I was constantly hungry. Salvation was in our moving, constantly being on the move. The farmers would receive two kilos of salt for handing over a Jew. Remember that the coast where salt was normally to be found, was mined, and in those days salt was used for the preservation of food.

In the meantime, the local chief of the *carabinieri* sent a message to my father at the farm where they knew he was hiding, that the Germans would begin rounding up the Jews from their hiding places, from the farms, unless my father (as community leader) could provide a few Jews. Voluntarily, my father, my mother and the little one turned themselves in (presented themselves), on December 1, 1943. My father's action was a heroic, generous gesture, but I'm not sure he was really aware of the risks he was running. There were four other members of the family left at large. Our father, mother and little brother were sent in a guarded bus to Roccatendeirighi, in the mountains near Grosseto, actually a villa that was the summer residence of the bishop of Grosseto, on a mountain between Grosseto and Siena. It had been turned into a *Campo di Smistamento*, or sorting camp, a depot. Father was sixty by then, mother was fifty, and the little one was nine. There was no food for anyone, certainly not for the Jews, at that time. The Germans went in alphabetical order by last name, methodically sending families off toward the north and the extermination camps. By the end of the war, they had taken everyone whose name began with a letter before 'S' and disposed of them. Our family hid in a bathroom, and were saved by the director of the camp, on the understanding that they would save him when the partisans came.²

The four of us who had joined the partisans were never all together. I myself that winter fell on the ice and broke a bone, which immobilized me. I lay alone in bed at the farmer's house for weeks. I had to share the bed with the farmer's daughter, who had lice. They would wash my hair with kerosene to treat the lice that were swarming there, and to this day I vomit at the smell of kerosene. Eventually I got better, and could walk again. At one time, since we didn't have a calendar, we had figured out from the full moon that it must be Pesach, and we had baked our own matza.

I was very sick, I was anemic and my body was swollen. When we visited those fugitives in the cave I wanted to stay there, it seemed so comfortable. But my brother had a feeling of danger, and he made me move on. He had to slap me and pull my hair to get me out of there. Soon after that they were discovered and all were killed. Mussolini's soldiers burned down the farm of the family that had been sheltering me and the others, killed the husband and raped the daughter. Many, many years later, his widow had moved near Grosseto, and we went to visit her there. She told us that they never succeeded in bringing her husband's murderers to justice. Usually it took some time after a tip-off for the *carabinieri* to arrive and locate fugitives, but this time they had arrived very fast. We suspected it was because the local priest, unusually for the time, had a phone and had tipped them off.

In order not to draw attention to ourselves, we would walk at night and constantly kept on the move. We were so hungry!

Later, the Front was coming closer and closer to where we were, until it eventually arrived right in our area of Tuscany. Livorno was bombed, even Pitigliano was bombed. The Allies were trying to hit the bridge near the town in order to prevent the Germans from retreating, but one bomb fell right on the main piazza, and a hundred people were killed there.

After the Liberation, we went right back to Pitigliano, where we found a mound of stones

and bodies. We belonged to a Resistance group called Monte Amiata, after the highest mountain in the region. We wanted to find our parents at all costs. We split into two groups, a brother and a sister in each. We stayed this side and let it, the Front, overtake us, Gino and I. Lello and Edda went up ahead of the Front. It was a crazy thing to do. We lost contact. Then we heard that Roccatodeirighi had been liberated, but we didn't know whether our parents, or our brother and sister, were alive. We went there, the two of us, hitchhiking as best we could. Along the way, we heard of another Jewish family from the camp at a tent hospital. The parents of that family told us that our parents had been saved. This was in August. As we were leaving we passed a group of three children playing on the steps of the church, with something that looked like a small box. After we had passed, we heard a terrible explosion. Those children had unknowingly been playing with a bomb, and it had blown in their faces. All were killed. I had a sort of nervous breakdown then, and had to be taken to the tent hospital.

C: Did you bring yourself to go back to Pitigliano?

MS: Yes, but from then on, we could never feel at home there again. In fact, when we had gone back to our home, I, all by myself, had had to evict a Fascist family that had taken it over.



The synagogue of Pitigliano in the 1960s, after the aron kodesh had been removed and sent to Israel. The building later collapsed and was eventually restored in the mid-1990s. Photo courtesy of Marcella Servi Siegel.

The day the Front passed, we were in Sorano (a small town close to Pitigliano). The Germans were retreating and taking their ammunition with them. The partisans wanted that ammunition so they could blow it up. My brother hid me in a cave and covered me with straw, telling me in strict terms not to move until he came back. I heard fireworks, but Gino didn't come back. Eventually, after many long hours, I came out of the hay as I

couldn't stand the suspense any more. The valley below was full of soldiers, I couldn't tell who they were. I ran to town to look for Gino and they told me the partisans were in the cemetery, burying the German dead. Gino and I were reunited in the cemetery. The nuns in Sorano had organized a lunch. When I arrived they said, "Tu non puoi entrare" [You can't come in!]. After many months on the run, my clothes were threadbare and torn, and I was not dressed decently. But I protested,

being very hungry, and they told one nun to take me in the back and dress me. For my first meal as a liberated Jew, I was dressed in a Fascist uniform!

C: What kept you from despair during all those months of danger?

MS: I was desperate, really desperate. I was convinced I was going to die, so I was no longer afraid. I think, when the fear of death is removed, there is nothing stopping you. It is simply the life force asserting itself, something different from mere courage, and that is what made me go on.

C: Thank you, Marcella, for sharing your story.

About the Interviewee

**Marcella Servi Siegel was born and grew up in Pitigliano, Italy. During the Second World War, as a teenager, she hid from the Fascists and Nazis with her brothers and sister, who had joined the Resistance. After the war, she returned with her family to Pitigliano but soon moved to Florence as their Jewish community had disintegrated. In Florence she met an American Jewish tourist, traveled to America and with her family's blessing married him. She lived in America for about forty years, brought up a family there, finished high school and earned a degree as a social worker. After her husband's retirement the family moved to Jerusalem, where she now lives.*

NOTES

¹ For a range of scholarly approaches, see Bernard Cooperman and Barbara Garvin (eds.), *The Jews of Italy: Memory and Identity* (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2000).

² Luciana Picciotto Fargion has published a book on non-Jews who saved Jews, *I Giusti d'Italia: I non-ebrei che salvarono gli ebrei* (Mondadori & Yad Vashem, 2006); Vera Paggi has made a documentary on the inmates of the Roccateldeirighi camp for RAI Italian television.