

Red Cross Delegates in Italy and the Holocaust¹

The Case of Leo Biaggi de Blasys

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In 2007 an over-fifty-year-old travel document of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) resurfaced in Buenos Aires. It was issued in 1950 to a certain Richard Klement, born in 1913 in the northern Italian town of Bolzano (Bozen). The man with brown hair, blue eyes, and a “regular” nose had a valid visa for immigration to Argentina. This travel document soon made it into the spotlight of international media, because of the photo attached to the it: the distinctive looking man in the photo with round eyeglasses was no other than Adolf Eichmann, one of the organizers of the Holocaust. The papers, which gave him a new identity for a fresh start overseas, were issued by the Red Cross delegation in the Italian port town of Genoa and signed by Leo Biaggi de Blasys. Soon it became clear that Eichmann was by no means an exception. On the contrary, many Nazis and war criminals made it out of Europe through Genoa with the help of Red Cross travel documents. This realization raised questions and concerns about the actions of the Red Cross and its delegates in Italy. In this report, I briefly summarize my research findings on the role played by one of these delegates, Leo Biaggi de Blasys, in this complicated chapter of postwar history.²

EARLY LIFE

Dr. Leo Biaggi de Blasys was born in Genoa in 1906 into a devout Catholic family. Leo’s father, Giovanni Biaggi de Blasys, was originally from the Ticino region in Switzerland, but eventually moved his business headquarters to Genoa and became a leading member of the Swiss community there. Giovanni (Gianni) Biaggi’s most active years in Genoa coincided with the era of fascism in Italy and World War II, challenges which he tried to navigate with prudence and Swiss neutrality. In June 1920, he was named Honorary Swiss Consul and later Honorary Consul General with a diplomatic passport, a clear recognition of his many accomplishments for the Swiss expats in this part of Italy. His son Leo graduated with a law degree from the University of Genoa and after a North American stay in 1931, worked for the family business—a sugar refinery. Things went well

for Leo and his young US wife Virginia. In 1934, they bought Villa “Montevideo” in Bogliasco and renamed it “Villa dei Pini,” which remains its name to this day. In September 1939, the German Wehrmacht marched into Poland and started WWII. Fascist Italy entered the war alongside its Axis partner Nazi Germany in June 1940. Leo’s sugar business was soon impacted by the emergencies of war. And it got worse. As early as October 1942, Genoa saw the first allied arial bombing of the important port city, one of many to come. In October 1943 the United States Army Air Force launched its first massive attack on Genoa. The situation in Northern Italy, under Nazi occupation since September 1943 and in the clutches of an escalating civil war, became increasingly desperate. In November 1943, Leo Biaggi was named as the delegate of the Red Cross in Genoa and northwestern Italy, and remained in the position until 1976.

To better understanding the implications of Leo’s appointment, it is important to understand the unique role of the Red Cross and the ICRC in international politics. The movement of the Red Cross goes back to the Swiss humanitarian Henri Dunant, who initiated the organization around 1860, after witnessing firsthand the lack of care for wounded soldiers after a battle. Like Dunant, many early pioneers of the Red Cross movement were inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament and its principle of impartial help to everyone who suffers, friend or foe. They believed that this principle should also be upheld in times of war to the benefit of wounded soldiers. To accomplish this, Dunant and his peers founded the ICRC with headquarters in Geneva, which was formally a private association consisting only of Swiss citizens in its leadership. The ICRC soon inspired the foundation of national Red Cross organizations all over the world, which shared the same philosophy. However, the Swiss-based ICRC always had a special status under international law as the “mother” of the movement and the promoter of the Geneva Conventions. The Geneva Conventions, as is well known, are international treaties for the protection of the wounded and imprisoned soldiers, and after 1945, also of civilians caught in the middle of armed conflicts. For the supervision of the Geneva Conventions and other agreements, especially in wartime, the ICRC delegates served as the movement’s neutral eyes and ears.

Being named a Red Cross delegate was an impressive honor particularly for a citizen of Switzerland, where the organization held iconic status. But it also presented a difficult challenge during the Nazi years. The total war impacted the newly appointed ICRC delegate Leo Biaggi and his family deeply, especially between 1943 and 1945, when the brutalities of the armed conflict

devastated Italy. The huge Swiss flag displayed on the roof of Villa dei Pini would protect it from Allied bombing, but the protection did not extend to the Biaggis' offices at Via Caffaro 12 in downtown Genoa. After several hits and extensive damage to the building in the fall of 1942, the family sugar refinery offices as well as Giovanni Biaggi's office as the Swiss Consulate, had to be moved to a Genoa suburb. Part of Leo's duty as a Red Cross delegate was to represent the organization in much of Nazi occupied Northwestern Italy, particularly after Rome's liberation in June 1944. In that capacity, he visited at least 200 camps housing prisoners of war (POWs), internees, and refugees between 1944 and 1947.

RESCUING JEWS

As a harbinger of things to come, in 1933 Jewish refugees began to arrive in Italy, first from Nazi Germany and later from German-annexed Austria. Traveling from there to overseas was not easy for many reasons. Therefore, nearby neutral Switzerland became a beacon of hope for many German and Austrian Jews stranded in Italy. Although Jews tried to flee to Switzerland, the country had a restrictive immigration policy, especially for Jews. While an estimated 20,000 Jews were allowed to enter, 24,000 were rejected at the border. As the Swiss honorary consul, Leo's father Giovanni Biaggi was in a position to help Jews of Swiss citizenship, who were expelled from Italy. But what he could do for foreign Jews was limited. Despite this limitation, some sources clearly indicate that Gianni and Leo helped both Swiss and non-Swiss Jews avoid deportation during the last years of the war.

With Mussolini's downfall and Nazi Germany's invasion of its former ally Italy in the late summer of 1943, the situation for Jews in Italy worsened dramatically. Soon the SS and its local Italian collaborators targeted the Jewish communities for deportation and murder. As a result, Switzerland eventually eased its restrictions for Italian refugees, particularly Jews. Those changes created an opportunity for rescuers. Available sources suggest that the Biaggis cooperated with the Italian Delegation for the Assistance of Jewish Emigrants (DELASEM) to rescue Jews. Massimo Teglio, one of the DELASEM officials, helped to smuggle Jews from Genoa and Milan to the nearby neutral Switzerland in the last years of the war. DELASEM likely saved more than 5,000 Jews and was supported by some Catholic clergy and the discrete blessing of Genoa's local archbishop Guiseppe Siri.

Teglio and his helpers established a system for smuggling fugitives across the border into Switzerland. To do so, Teglio sought the aid of the ICRC delegate for Northern Italy, Leo Biaggi, and the Swiss consul, Leo's father Gianni. Leo promised to help but insisted that the fugitives have plausible fake documents for Italy and real ones to show to the Swiss border guards. Week by week, Teglio was able to move Jews from Italy to Switzerland, where the leaders of DELASEM could help them with funds from the New York-based American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. According to a postwar interview with Teglio, the passages to Switzerland were indeed arranged by Leo Biaggi and his father: Teglio would give the names of the Jews crossing over the Swiss border to Leo, who shared the information with the Swiss border guards to make sure that nobody was rejected at the border. Swiss identity papers were prepared for that purpose, stating that the people in question were in danger.

The available survivor testimony is less clear on the role of Leo Biaggi in Teglio's smuggling operation, because it does not state who was the main contact and who communicated with the Swiss authorities. Technically, the point of contact must have been the Swiss consul and not the ICRC, which was officially an independent and neutral organization rather than a Swiss government agency. As a normal course of business, the ICRC would not have engaged in rescue activities in a narrow sense, but more in relief missions. Therefore, Leo's actions as its delegate would have been rather unusual. Red Cross officials, who engaged in rescue mostly on their own initiative, were rarely thanked by their organization. The same holds true for Swiss officials who went above and beyond their duty to save lives. There are plenty of examples to make this point. Swiss police officer Paul Grüniger, who helped Jewish refugees cross into Switzerland, lost his position and was humiliated because of the actions he took. Red Cross delegate Friedrich Born and Swiss Vice-Consul Carl Lutz saved thousands of Jews in Budapest in 1944/45, but on their return from Hungary neither Born nor Lutz received thanks from their Swiss homeland. Instead, Lutz was accused of overstepping his authority and Born's death in 1963 went unnoticed. Both would ultimately achieve recognition in Switzerland for their extraordinary acts of rescue, but only after they were officially recognized as Righteous by Israel's Holocaust Memorial and Museum Yad Vashem. For them, as for most other rescuers, the recognition came too late.

For much of the war, ICRC delegates focused their energies on helping POWs. POWs, and not civilians, were those mainly protected by the Geneva Conventions at the time. However, in the last

months of the war, the ICRC delegates in Northern Italy increased their relief efforts for civilian camp inmates. As a result, the ICRC delegates Leo Biaggi and Federico Zweifel in Verona were given permission to inspect the Bolzano transit camp, where many Italian Jews were interned. In December 1944, storage facilities were prepared in Northern Italy for standard Red Cross food parcels and Leo Biaggi planned to send relief to the concentration camp in Bolzano. As far as we know, the plan was never put into action before the war in Italy officially ended with the surrender of the remaining German and Italian-fascist forces on May 2, 1945. Leo continued visiting camps for POWs and refugees, and his visits extended beyond Northern Italy.

POSTWAR REFUGEES

At the war's end, Europe was in ruins and millions of displaced persons were on the move. These refugees were a diverse group – survivors of the Holocaust, anticommunists, slave laborers, and stranded POWs among others. Many had no intention or possibility to go back to their old hometowns, and therefore hoped for a new and better life away from Europe. For these people Italy became the ideal transit country, because it offered the closest overseas port for people stranded in Central Europe. Once in Italy, refugees needed travel papers for their journey overseas by ship. While most were supported by Allied refugee organizations and obtained travel papers that way, millions of expelled ethnic Germans and former Axis citizens found themselves without such support.

Given this humanitarian emergency and based on its neutral humanitarianism, the ICRC decided to intervene. It made travel papers available to everyone who claimed statelessness and asked for them. In February 1945, the ICRC thus began to issue simple travel papers called *titres de voyage*. These *titres de voyage* were a substitute passport because the Red Cross was not a government agency and could not issue proper passports. By the end of 1951, the Red Cross had issued an estimated 120,000 such travel papers, most through its delegations in Italy. The organization did not attempt to verify the information disclosed by applicants for travel papers and repeatedly stated that screening applicants was not its job. Although the ICRC delegations in Prague, Vienna, Innsbruck, and Salzburg also issued travel papers, those in Rome and Genoa put out by far the majority of these documents. This is not surprising given that Italy remained a crucial transit country for people seeking to leave Europe. By August 1949 the ICRC delegations in Rome and

in Genoa alone had issued 67,500 travel papers, especially to Ukrainians, Yugoslavs, and Germans. It was particularly the port of Genoa, where countless refugees converged looking to leave. Emigration issues therefore consumed much of Leo Biaggio's work.

In August 1948, Leo Biaggio investigated which countries were recognizing the ICRC travel papers. He wrote to a large number of consulates and embassies in Italy and got back an extremely positive response: almost all Latin American countries recognized the travel papers. Just like the main Allies, South American countries too were interested in skilled laborers and highly educated personnel from war-devastated Europe. They were willing to allow a certain number of Europeans to immigrate, as long as they were anti-communist. A fascist or Nazi past was not considered an obstacle and was sometimes regarded positively as it backed anti-communist credentials.

Although Jews eventually received support and documents from international refugee organizations, the ICRC also helped them with travel papers if needed. For example, on June 27, 1949, Jacob S. from Romania applied at the Biaggio's ICRC delegation in Genoa for a *titre de voyage*. Jacob stated that he was Jewish and had been imprisoned from 1941 until 1944 in Ferramonti, a camp initially established in Fascist Italy in 1940 to round up foreign Jews in the country. Jacob had been born in Bukovina, which at the time of his birth was an Austrian province, although after 1918 changed hands several times. At the end of the war in 1945, Jacob and his family found themselves stranded in Italy, considered stateless by Italian authorities. They had no intention of going back to their home in Bukovina, now part of Romania. Jacob declared that he and his family wanted to immigrate to the newborn state of Israel, and the information on his application form was signed and confirmed by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Genoa. Though we have no copy of his travel papers, it appears that his application was approved by Leo Biaggio as he was able to emigrate. Unsurprisingly, for all his work for Jewish refugees Leo was thanked by DELASEM in the postwar years.

But soon it was increasingly German non-Jewish refugees asking for travel papers from the ICRC delegation in Genoa. On September 17, 1947, Leo Biaggio informed the ICRC in Genoa and the Swiss foreign office that he was mainly issuing travel papers for refugees of German background. Leo also stated that a certain number of German nationals had managed to sneak into Italy in the hope of emigrating overseas. These Germans showed up at the Genoa ICRC delegation and often

asked Leo to intervene on their behalf. Following the instructions from the ICRC's Rome office, Leo believed that he was authorized to issue travel documents to all persons who had been recommended either by consulates or other refugee organizations such as the Vatican Aid Commission. And so he did.

ESCAPE OF NAZI WAR CRIMINALS

As an unintended (but expected) consequence, thousands of Nazis and fascists made it overseas with an astonishing ease, a significant number of them helped by the ICRC travel papers. Among them were some of the most notorious war criminals and Holocaust perpetrators. Just as for refugees, for Nazis and fascists on the run from central and central-eastern Europe, Italy was the easiest way out. And for many of them Genoa, in the northwest corner of Italy, was the closest overseas port. No wonder then that Leo's ICRC office became particularly important in this context.

Adolf Eichmann remains the best-known case of an escaped Nazi war criminal. In June 1950, the bureaucrat of mass murder applied for a travel document with the Red Cross delegation in Genoa. Eichmann presented himself as Riccardo Klement, an ethnic German from Northern Italy. As proof of his personal information, Klement presented an Italian ID from the town of Termeno (Tramin) near Bolzano. His new identity was completely invented, but cleverly chosen. The Bolzano border province (South Tyrol) was and is predominantly German-speaking. Given its location and the ethnic background of the locals, the region became an ideal first stopover for Nazis entering Italy. Klement's cover story obviously worked: as a stateless ethnic German he fulfilled the formal requirement needed for the Red Cross travel papers with which he could leave Europe for Argentina. That day in Leo Biaggi's office at Via Asserotti 52 was likely quiet and without a long wait. Eichmann applied and got his travel papers the very same day. The application form and the actual document are both dated, June 1, 1950. Just below Leo Biaggi's signature and the stamps around Eichmann's photograph is Eichmann's fingerprint in red ink. The visa from the Argentine consulate was issued on June 14. A few days later the former *SS-Obersturmbannführer* embarked from the port of Genoa to Buenos Aires on the liner *Giovanna C.*

On his Red Cross travel paper, Dr. Josef Mengele, the former Nazi camp doctor of Auschwitz–Birkenau turned into a certain “Helmut Gregor,” also an ethnic German from the Italian South

Tyrol. As the war ended, Mengele was already wanted for atrocious crimes, especially his cruel experiments on twins. Like the other medical staff in Auschwitz, Mengele also performed ‘selections’ of prisoners on the ramp, determining who could be exploited for labor and who would be murdered immediately in the gas chambers. At first he managed to hide among the millions of German POWs and later worked as a farmhand in Bavaria. Mengele’s escape eventually led him to Leo’s office in Genoa, where on May 16, 1949, he applied for Red Cross travel papers. Mengele declared that he was “stateless” and based his story on his alleged background as an ethnic German from northern Italy. He consequently managed to receive all the necessary papers to escape to South America. Mengele was never brought to justice and died in 1979 in a bathing accident.

Ludolf von Alvensleben, Heinrich Himmler’s adjutant and, as SS *Gruppenführer, Generalleutnant der Waffen SS and Police* the highest-ranking Nazi in Argentine exile, followed in Eichmann’s footsteps as well. He had other reasons than just his high rank in the Nazi regime to escape overseas. Alvensleben had been involved in major war crimes in Poland and Crimea. In Poland alone, his ‘*Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz*’ unit killed an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people, including Polish intellectuals, Catholic priests, Jews, and other civilians. After the war, the Polish authorities sentenced him to death in absentia and he was wanted in West Germany. In October 1949 Alvensleben applied for ICRC travel papers in Genoa under the alias of “Teodoro Kremhart” from Bolzano. He obtained the papers and managed to travel to Argentina, where he joined up with Eichmann. Alvensleben died in 1970 in South America without having been brought to trial.

The above are just a few prominent examples of Nazis fleeing Europe with the help of Red Cross travel papers. Although we have no exact numbers, similar cases likely number into the thousands, especially when including the many Nazi collaborators and Fascists from all over Europe. In most of these cases, we have no access to the travel papers that facilitated these war criminals’ escape – Eichmann is the exception. However, the application forms and other related documents in the ICRC archives in Geneva indicate that the majority of applications were submitted to the Genoa delegation. We can infer that these applications were approved based on other sources, such as the Argentinian immigration records showing that war criminals used ICRC travel papers to leave Europe. Because Leo Biaggi was the ICRC delegate in Genoa, he was likely the approving official.

EARLY KNOWLEDGE

The involved institutions knew early on about the massive abuse of the travel papers by illegal refugees, spies, and criminals – including Nazis. The US State Department and the US intelligence community started an investigation into the illegal emigration schemes in Italy almost immediately after the war in 1946. On May 15, 1947, State Department official Vincent La Vista submitted a thick report detailing the involvement of Catholic institutions and the ICRC in people smuggling and other illegal activities. The vague guidelines and the non-existent screening process for obtaining ICRC travel papers allowed for all kinds of abuse, he found. The issuance procedures were extremely flawed and in many cases led to inaccurate or blatantly false identification documents. La Vista made it clear: “It is to be noted that although these International Red Cross passports are recognized as perfectly valid identity documents, they in fact identify nothing.”³

On August 26, 1947, the ICRC leadership in Geneva was confronted with these issues by the US ambassador, Leland Harrison. The ICRC promised reforms and was willing to give up the travel papers service, once a solution for non-recognized refugees could be found. The ICRC delegates in Italy were also confronted with evidence of war criminals abusing their travel. In September 1947, Leo Biaggi had a meeting with a high-ranking ICRC official in Geneva, during which he was confronted about issuing travel papers to Germans who were able to sneak into Italy. Leo stated that he was issuing fewer and fewer of these papers. Meanwhile newspapers reported about the abuse of travel papers by Nazis. For instance, in January 1947, Italian newspapers reported that a group of suspicious “refugees” had been arrested in Genoa. The group was housed in a Catholic workers' dormitory. It soon turned out that the Catholic men were French SS members who apparently wanted to evade extradition to France by fleeing to South America or Spain. The Nazi collaborators had in their possession travel documents from the ICRC and letters of recommendation from the Vatican. The ICRC made some changes and tried to find solutions for non-recognized refugees, but the issuing of travel papers without effective verification and screening continued into the early 1950s. By then Leo’s Genoa office at Via Assarotti 52 was one of the last ICRC delegations left in Italy. In 1976, Leo retired from his voluntary work for the ICRC, which honored him for that work repeatedly. He died on November 15, 1979, in the town of Escalona near Toledo (Spain).

CONCLUSION

The *titres de voyage* program showed the ICRC's commitment to the principle of neutral humanitarianism. The program was also an easy and cheap way to provide some concrete aid to undocumented war victims, particularly the ones not cared for by Allied organizations. Problems with the travel papers could have been foreseen, but the ICRC took a calculated risk. Based on the principle of humanitarian neutralism, it believed that a greater injustice would be inflicted if the innocent were to be punished together with the guilty. Screening out war criminals was not part of the ICRC's mission anyway. The ICRC made it clear that "political conviction" was not a reason to exclude anybody; therefore, Nazis would get the papers as easily as communists. A former ICRC official in Rome made this point clear when she emphasized that the ICRC workers were not detectives. In addition to a few bad apples, they were also able to help many people who deserved help. The Independent Swiss Commission of Historians on Switzerland in the Second World War (Bergier Commission) has concluded that the ICRC anticipated the potential abuse. The intention of the ICRC "was to enable stranded and other people in need to travel overseas. This should be achieved with minimum administrative effort for the ICRC. The ICRC therefore took into account that a considerable space for abuse would unfold."⁴ Leo Biaggi de Blasys, the ICRC delegate in Genoa, found himself in the middle of all these issues, because the port of Genoa was a sought-after port for everyone wanting to leave war-ravaged Europe behind. Following the fundamental principle of neutral humanitarianism, Leo helped everyone he was directed to help. He helped Jewish victims during and after the war, but prominent Holocaust perpetrators too, took advantage of his Red Cross office. The Red Cross in Geneva as well as the delegates in Italy knew about the ongoing abuse of their travel papers by criminal elements, spies, and Nazis early on. But there is no indication to date that Leo Biaggi intentionally and willingly helped Holocaust perpetrators like Eichmann escape justice.

¹ I want to thank the Biaggi de Blasys family, especially Laura Harrison and Gianni Biaggi de Blasys, and the staff of the Bogliasco Foundation for their help with this research. The following institutions and individuals also deserve recognition for their support: The Museum of the Italian Red Cross in Campomorone/Genoa; the Swiss National Archives; the Archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva (especially Fabrizio Bensi); the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich, the Yad Vashem archives in Jerusalem and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee archives in New York. I also consulted a number of local archives in Genoa, among them the Caritas, the *Istituto Ligure per la Storia della Resistenza e dell'Età Contemporanea*, the Archivio di Stato and the

Camera di Commercio among others. I am grateful to Norbert Sparer, who helped me with some local research in Northern Italy.

² This summary keeps the sources to a bare minimum, an extended version of this paper with full and detailed sources will be published in an academic journal in the near future. For more on this topic see e.g. Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler's Henchmen Fled Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and also by the same author, *Humanitarians at War: The Red Cross in the Shadow of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ Vincent La Vista, Subject: Illegal emigration movements in and through Italy, May 15, 1947 page 4, Report attached to letter from State Department, Washington, DC, to Leland Harrison, American Minister, Bern, 11 July 1947, (TOP SECRET) NARA, RG 84, Austria, Political Advisor (TOP SECRET), General Records 1945–1955, Entry 2057, Box 2, Folder 1947, 130.9-820.02.

⁴ Christiane Uhlig et al. *Tarnung, Transfer, Transit. Die Schweiz als Drehscheibe verdeckter deutscher Operationen (1938-1952)*, ed. Unabhängigen Expertenkommission Schweiz-Zweiter Weltkrieg (Zurich: Chronos, 2001), 192.