

Heroes of the Holocaust

By Sr. Elizabeth Ann, S.J.W.

These articles are meant to recognize and honor a few of the brave and saintly men and women who were willing to suffer greatly for their Catholic Faith during World War II. There is no doubt that the Jewish people were the main target of Nazi hatred and racism. By the end of the war, approximately six million of our Jewish brothers and sisters had been deliberately murdered, over one million of them children. While remembering this, we must not forget that the Holocaust also claimed at least five million Gentile victims. Any system, such as National Socialism, that preaches a philosophy of hatred and racial superiority will have its avid supporters and its enemies. The Nazis arrested any person or group considered either racially inferior or a threat to the tenets of National Socialism.

The men and women in these articles—priests, religious and laity—were faithful in their daily lives to the demands of the Gospel. Because they were faithful, they were considered a threat by the Nazi regime.

There is an intimate connection between the way we live our life and the way we die. Every person mentioned in this book led a holy life even before confronted with imprisonment and death; they radiated Christ when things were going well and when things were going poorly. They did what they believed God wanted them to do, regardless of the consequences. Many did not survive the war. Others survived, only to die shortly after liberation because of the poor treatment they had endured.

Each of these biographies is unique because each person reflects Christ in a unique way. What the stories have in common is the witness each person was willing to give. The sacrifices they made were the culmination of lives lived for others in imitation of Christ. They died the way they lived; with love for their enemies and hope in the Resurrection. May their witness inspire us to follow the path of truth regardless of the consequences.

I. Heroes of Poland

II. Heroes of Austria

III. Heroes of France

IV. Heroes of Germany

V. Heroes of Holland

VI. Hero of Italy

Heroes of the Holocaust: Italy



Blessed Teresa Bracco *Virgin and Martyr*

Teresa Bracco lived a simple life of great faith and proved herself willing to die rather than offend God. Teresa was born February 24, 1924, in the small village of Santa Giulia, in Northern Italy. The new infant was baptized after Therese of Lisieux who had been beatified the previous year. Both women lived obscure lives that, after death, would be shining examples for us all.

Teresa was born into a hardworking, devout farm family. In time, the Bracco family would grow to five daughters who helped their parents at home and in the fields. In this family the Rosary was said daily and Teresa would rise early in the morning to walk the mile to attend Mass.

Teresa's small world consisted of her home, the village and the Church. In this environment, Teresa's knowledge of her faith grew as did her love of the Sacred Heart and Mary, the Mother of God. While she was named for the saint of the "Little Way", her inspiration was St. Dominic Savio whose motto was "Death rather than sin". When she was nine years old, Teresa found a picture of the young Dominic, cut it out and hung it over her bed.

Life on a farm requires a great deal of hard work. With no sons to help, the Bracco's depended on their daughters to do much of the heavy labor. Teresa was remarkable for her willingness to work; she never tried to "get out" of difficult chores. Although an attractive young woman, she never dressed to attract attention.

In 1943, World War II, which had been raging in Europe and the Pacific, came in full fury to the village of Santa Giulia. After Italy's surrender to the Allies in 1943, the German Army occupied Italy

and many Italians, called partisans, armed themselves to resist the German invaders. As the fighting between the partisans and the German soldiers continued into the next year, Teresa and the villagers carried on as best they could. In May 1944, when she was twenty years old, Teresa lost her father. Giacomo Bracco died, leaving his wife and five daughters to tend the farm amid all the unrest.



On July 24, 1944, a partisan group attacked German troops. Believing the partisans were hiding in Santa Giulia, the Germans began destroying farms in the area. On the afternoon of August 28, German soldiers took the villagers of Santa Giulia prisoner. As the soldiers marched their prisoners along, Teresa and two other young women were separated from the main group. Teresa's two companions were later reunited with their families, but Teresa never returned. When the villagers were finally freed, friends and family set out to find the missing woman. Along with the parish priest, Teresa's mother and sister found the young

woman's body. She had been shot and beaten. The doctor who examined the body confirmed that Teresa had been strangled by a soldier who could not make her surrender her purity.

Every year since her death, people have gathered to honor Teresa and her sacrifice. The first commemoration included members of her village, but as the years have gone by, the memorial has grown to include many people who do not live in the village but are inspired by such a faithful witness to the Gospel. Teresa's heroic act of love was recognized by the Catholic Church when she was beatified on May 24, 1998. "What a message of hope for those who are striving to run counter to the spirit of the world! To young people in particular, I hold up this young woman whom the Church is proclaiming blessed today so that they may learn from her clear faith, witnessed to in daily commitment, moral consistency without compromises and the courage of sacrificing even life if necessary, in order not to betray the values that give it meaning." (Homily from the Mass of Beatification)