

English sisters who saved Jews and deserting Germans



The courage of the Brigettines. · English sisters who saved Jews and deserting Germans ·

The subject of the plight of Jews in Rome during World War II continues to excite much interest, often generating more heat than light. The central task, however, is to discover the true stories of what occurred. One such involves the Brigettines and their convent in the Piazza Farnese – particularly intriguing as the convent is the original house in which St Birgitta lived, centuries before, which received a new lease of life in the 1920s and 30s. A further twist to the story is that the nun who played a major role in helping the Jews was an English woman from a family which had no connection whatever with Rome and who could never have imagined herself involved in such drama.

British author Joanna Bogle has researched the saga. Her new book (Courage and Conviction: Pius XII, the Brigettine nuns, and the rescue of Jews, Gracewing Books: Herefordshire, England. £5.99p, paperback) tells the story of two young English women, Katherine Flanagan and Madeline Hambrough, who in the early 1900s joined the redoubtable Swedish Mother Elisabeth Hesselblad to re-found the Brigettine Order which had disappeared at the Reformation over three hundred years earlier.

By the time of World War II, the Brigettine house in Rome was thriving, and Katherine Flanagan was running daughter houses in England and Sweden. Madeline Hambrough - who took the name Riccarda when she made her final vows, honouring the English martyr Richard Reynolds - remained in Rome and would be the central figure in rescuing Jews who appealed to the Brigettines for help.

Piero Piperno, who as a teenager was hidden by Mother Riccarda along with his Jewish relatives, remembers her as endlessly patient, kind, and sweet-natured, soothing over the inevitable tensions and

difficulties of a family living in hiding. Food was short – Piperno remembers thinking that the soup was so thin that he thought the nuns had made it by simply picking the weeds and shrubs from the nearby city square. There was perpetual fear of discovery – and if they had been found, the nuns would have been shot and the Jews taken to Auschwitz to perish there. Unknown to Piperno, the nuns were also hiding a deserter from the German army – who later became a priest and contributes his memories to this book.

This is a fine story, told with details researched in some depth: the Hambrough family and their aristocratic connections, the vanished world of late-Victorian England in which Madeline Hambrough grew up, the debate surrounding Pope Pius XII, the work of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI for good Jewish-Catholic relations.

Serious historians are now recognising the truth about the saving of so many Jewish lives through the efforts of Pius XII and of religious communities in Rome. This paperback sheds useful light on the whole subject and is a good read.

John McCarthy, Australian Ambassador to the Holy See

John McCarthy - L'Osservatore Romano