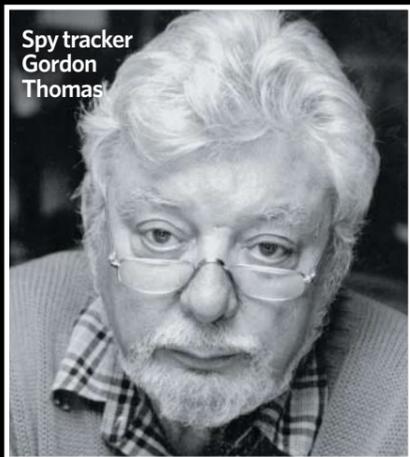


# Saved

by the  
K Syndrome



British journalist and international espionage expert Gordon Thomas has a new story to write. He has discovered the secret of Dr. Vittorio Sacerdoti, an Italian physician who saved dozens of lives during World War II by diagnosing “K Syndrome” — sending the invading Nazis into a tailspin of fear over this dread disease

BY *Aryeh Deutsch and Rachel Ginsberg*  
PHOTOS AP



If Italy's Jews thought they could wait out the war, all that changed in September 1943. Nazis storm the Jewish ghetto

**I**f you pride yourself on medical sophistication but have never heard of “K Syndrome,” it doesn’t mean you’re scientifically ignorant or know nothing about pathology. The world’s top doctors haven’t heard of it either.

“K Syndrome” was the “disease” invented by Italian physician Dr. Vittorio Sacerdoti that was responsible for the rescue of dozens of Rome’s Jews during World War II. Dr. Sacerdoti, the unsung hero of Rome’s Jewish ghetto, remained anonymous for decades, until he revealed his remarkable story to the BBC on the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Rome, in 2004.

And now British writer and journalist Gordon Thomas is going to write that story.

Thomas, a former political correspondent who has authored over fifty books, is best-known as an expert on international spy rings, including the Mossad. He lectures widely on the secret world of intelligence, and regularly provides expert analysis on intelligence for US and European television and radio programs. His book *Gideon’s Spies*, about the secret workings of the Mossad, has been translated into sixteen languages.

When Thomas learned about Dr. Sacerdoti’s anonymous heroism, he was intrigued. “I first heard about Dr. Vittorio Sacerdoti from his niece Luciana — now seventy-six — who was a child when she was saved by her uncle from the Nazis,” Gordon Thomas tells Mishpacha. “I subsequently found a handful of other survivors, all children at the time, who corroborated the story.” Thomas has spent the last year uncovering some of the mystery of those dark days for Rome’s Jews; for although it’s not ancient history, there are not many witnesses to testify. Dr. Sacerdoti himself passed away in 2008; the few survivors of his heroism were just children at the time; and out of

all the Jews deported to Auschwitz from Rome’s Jewish ghetto, only seventeen survived the war.

Who was Dr. Vittorio Sacerdoti? And what was the mysterious “K Syndrome” that saved the patients in his hospital?

**Rome, 1943** If Rome’s residents thought they could live out the rest of the war in relative quiet following the ousting of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in 1943, their illusion was shattered when dozens of swastika-bearing armored vehicles rolled into the city.

“I first heard about Dr. Vittorio Sacerdoti from his niece Luciana who was saved by her uncle”

— Gordon Thomas

From 1939, when Italy’s Fascist leaders forged the Pact of Steel treaty with Hitler that outlined the “friendship and alliance” between Germany and Italy, Italy remained part of the Axis with Nazi Germany for as long as Mussolini was in power. But he was deposed in July 1943, and a secret armistice was signed between the Allies and the Italian

government. This was supposed to bring an end to the war in Italy.

But once they discovered that the Italians had gone over to the Allies’ side, German troops moved quickly to disarm the Italian forces and take over critical defensive positions. By September, Rome was overwhelmed by Nazi troops, and the deportations to the death camps began.



## The Mossad’s Best Friend

Prolific writer, former correspondent, political analyst, and spy aficionado Gordon Thomas, seventy-eight, knows more about the Mossad than most Israelis. He has penned forty-one books over his long career, yet his access to the Mossad and the subsequent film and his best-selling book *Gideon’s Spies: The Secret History of the Mossad* that came out of that connection, was what he calls “a door opener.”

“I originally met Meir Amit [Mossad head from 1963 to 1968, who passed away in 2009] while I was working on the film version of *Voyage of the Damned* [about the doomed refugees on the ship *St. Louis* who were used as political propaganda pawns and turned back to Europe after the US rejected them]. People were intrigued by the Mossad and he was willing to let me write about them. Why me? Meir Amit told me, ‘We’re tired of all the garbage, and we also don’t want the “all Jews are wonderful” hype. We just want a fair portrayal. And we’ve all read your book on the CIA. It’s in our library.’”

The Mossad chief also felt connected to Thomas through Thomas’ father-in-law and lifetime friend Joachim Kraner, a legend in the international spy community. Kraner was an officer in the MI6, Britain’s secret service. During the Cold War, he ran a spy network in East Germany against the Soviets but was ultimately caught and spent fourteen years in prison.

“Rafi Eitan, Meir Amit, and my father-in-law are all part of the pantheon of spies to whom I owe my career,” he says.

Thomas seems to be drawn to Israeli intrigue and Jewish suffering: *Gideon’s Spies*, *Voyage of the Damned*, *Operation Exodus* [about the Haganah refugees and the founding of the Jewish State], and now his new book about the Jewish tragedy of the Rome ghetto. Thomas admits that he’s drawn to Israel and the Middle East: as a child, his father, an officer in the RAF, was stationed in Haifa. Later, as a correspondent for the *Daily Express* (“before it became the rubbish it is now”), he was stationed on and off in Tel Aviv and Cairo, where he covered six wars, from the Sinai Campaign in 1956 when he was arrested by the Egyptians, to the First Gulf War.

After living in Ireland for many years, he’s back in England, where he lives outside London in a farmhouse built in 1643. “I do my best writing here,” he says. “It’s me, my wife, and squirrels and rabbits.” And no computer. “I’m from the old stock of classic writers. I still do all my writing longhand. My wife types out my e-mails.”

Just two weeks passed from the time the Nazis entered Italy until Rome’s Jewish leaders were summoned to the German embassy. There, the SS commander ordered them to procure fifty kilos of gold within thirty-six hours as a “donation” to the war effort. In return, their personal safety would be guaranteed.

With alacrity, the requisite sum was collected from both the affluent Roman-Jewish community as well as many non-Jews. Even the Vatican contributed. Thirty kilos was kept in reserve, in case more demands followed.

Yet even the most naïve Jews in the community, who thought that the gold would buy them silence, saw how little time they actually had. On Shabbos Chol HaMoed Succos, 1943, German forces marched into the ghetto with detailed lists of names. During that *aktion* 1,259 Jews were rounded up. By Motzaei Shabbos, most of them had been sent to Auschwitz.

**When in Rome?** At this time, Vittorio Sacerdoti, a twenty-seven-year-old Jewish doctor, worked in the small regional hospital located near the Jewish



Dr. Sacerdoti on vacation in 1946. For six decades, he kept the secret

## Here, Too, Pius Was Silent

Endless reams of material have been written about the deafening silence of the Vatican during the Holocaust. But does the Vatican have another face?

“What is less known,” Thomas says, sharing information he has gathered for his book, “is that there were priests and nuns in the Vatican who worked to save Jews.”

Historically, the physical closeness of the Jews of Rome to the Vatican, the heart of the Catholic Church, was never advantageous. Many decrees issued by the sitting pope victimized Rome’s Jews over the years, and persecutions were part and parcel of their lives.

With that, there were Christians who went out of their way during the Holocaust to save Jews, and many Jews owe their lives to members of the clergy.

Pope Pius XII, the head of the Catholic Church from 1939 to 1958, is at the center of a stormy debate that has continued for decades. What was his relationship with the Nazis as a whole, and his response, or lack thereof, to the destruction of Jews during the Holocaust in particular?

Pope Benedict, whose recent nomination of Pius XXII for sainthood sparked a renewed debate over his and the Vatican’s role in the Holocaust, insists that the Vatican and Pius used behind-the-scenes diplomacy in an effort to save Jews.

Vatican spokespeople repeatedly insist that the pope personally worked to hide thousands of Jews during the war, and only his fear of the Nazis prevented him from working openly for the persecuted Jewish Nation.

Conversely, many historians and Holocaust researchers believe that if the pope had taken advantage of his elevated status and tremendous influence over the world, condemned the Nazi regime in public and called for a halt to the annihilation of Jews, the outcome might have been different. Perhaps, at the very least, more Christians throughout Europe would have helped Jews to hide or flee.

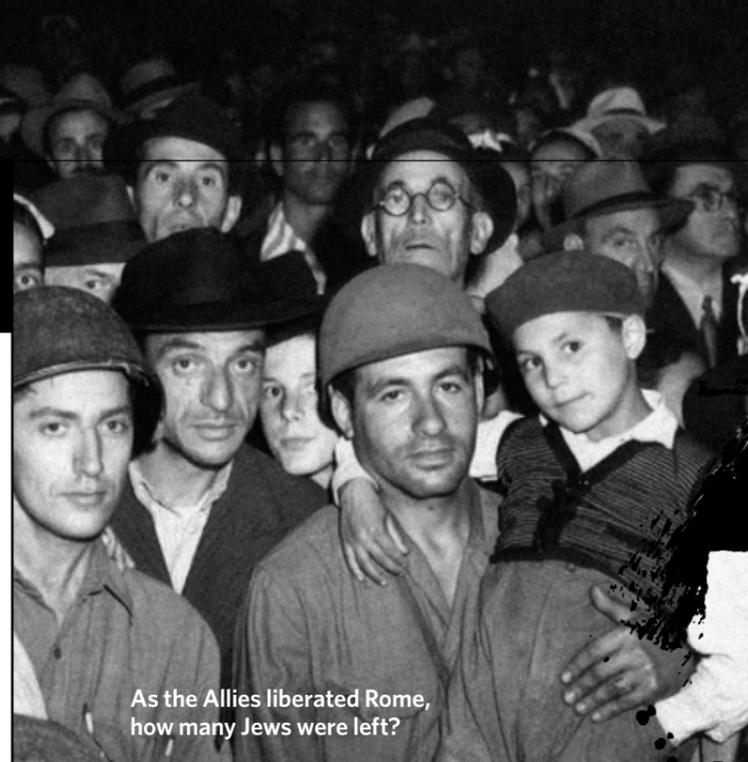
What is known is that the pope did all he could after the war to thwart efforts by Jewish rescue organizations to take back Jewish orphans hidden in convents during the war.

Either way, Gordon Thomas highlights the role of many Christians in the rescue efforts of the Jews of Rome. He recounts the story of Monsignor Hugh O’Flaherty, an Irish priest who spent the war years in Rome and held a senior position in the Vatican Curia. O’Flaherty used his status to conceal thousands of escapees — Allied soldiers and Jews — in flats, farms, and convents. O’Flaherty’s family spoke extensively to Thomas and shared stories of how he had arranged hiding places in Vatican property for many of the ghetto’s Jews, under the noses of the Wehrmacht and Gestapo forces who had spread through the city.

“The operation had to be done at least with the pope’s knowledge, if not his blessing,” Thomas claims. “Moreover, I recently received documents from American intelligence services, in which they testify to Hitler’s fury when he heard about Jews being saved by the pope’s men.”

An estimated 4,500 Jewish children were hidden in churches and convents, 400 of them in Vatican City.

One of the most controversial personalities to be hidden by the Vatican was Israel Zoller. Born in Galicia, he was known as a *talmid chacham* and became chief rabbi of Trieste, Italy, after World War I, when he changed his name to Zolli. In 1939, he was appointed chief rabbi of Rome, yet when the Germans invaded in 1943, he abandoned the community and took refuge in the Vatican. After the war, he reappeared and wanted to resume his position as chief rabbi, yet the survivors rejected him due to his unworthy behavior while they were being deported. Some contend that he released the community roster to the Nazis — or at the very least he didn’t destroy it — and thereby assisted the Nazis in their roundup. After his rejection by Rome’s surviving Jews, he converted to Catholicism and returned to the Vatican, becoming a showpiece for the pope.



As the Allies liberated Rome, how many Jews were left?

ghetto on the banks of the Tiber River, which bisects Rome.

“He was ousted from his position in a hospital in northern Italy because he was Jewish,” Thomas explains. “Fatebenefratelli Hospital on the Tiber belonged to the Vatican, and was therefore exempt from racial decrees. The medical director, Giovanni Borromeo, provided accommodations for him and his family members in the hospital basement, and permitted him to lead a group of Resistance fighters from that cramped room.”

Dr. Sacerdoti, who had become the hospital’s deputy director, was stunned when he saw a group of Nazi soldiers tossing hapless Jews into the back of a truck. Most of these were Jews who had been in hiding and were betrayed by non-Jewish neighbors. He knew he needed to work fast, if he could devise a plan to save any of his fellow Jews.

As the roundup continued, the young doctor began admitting any Jew who could reach the hospital and, following

The Germans demanded to see the files of the quarantined patients, who were suffering from a “terminal and highly contagious”

a quick examination, ascertained that they were all suffering from the incurable and highly contagious “K Syndrome” — placing them all in quarantine, in a closed ward.

When the Nazi soldiers — scouring the city to ferret out the last of Rome’s Jews — arrived at the small hospital, they encountered large signs warning visitors that the hospital accepted those suffering from K Syndrome, a condition requiring strict quarantine. The Tiber facility was already known for its quarantined tuberculosis ward, so suspicion was not unduly aroused.

The Germans demanded to see the medical files of the quarantined patients, which indeed stated that they were suffering from a severe, terminal, and highly contagious disease, whose most pronounced symptom was a wracking cough. The Nazis were flummoxed by their ignorance of this mysterious ailment, but who had the time or resources to research a debilitating disease in the middle of a war?

The Germans elected to believe the medical staff — many of whom were nuns — who fully cooperated with Sacerdoti’s rescue effort. Moreover, the

Fatebenefratelli Hospital on Tiber Island. The Vatican owned and staffed this haven for “K Syndrome” survivors



Mishpacha extends its deepest sympathies to Reb Menachem Weinreb on the loss of his sister.

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## Saved by the K-Syndrome

patients all began to suddenly cough at once. Luciana Sacerdoti, the doctor's niece, related, "Someone ran into our room and said, 'You have to cough a lot because the Nazis are afraid of coughs. They won't want to catch the disease, and they won't come into the ward.'"

Indeed, the fear of the unknown kept the Nazis away.

**Special K** While K Syndrome, that dread disease, existed solely in the imagination of Dr. Sacerdoti, his brainstorm saved the lives of at least sixty Jews. There may have been others whose names never made it onto the lists of documented survivors.

Even after the war was over, Sacerdoti retained his anonymity and few knew what he had done for his fellow Jews, his escapade remaining a secret



Rome's Jewish ghetto was built under orders from Pope Paul IV more than 450 years ago



Italians breathe a sigh of relief as Allied forces march through the capital

for sixty years. Hospital head Giovanni Borromeo was eventually recognized by the Israeli government as a heroic righteous gentile and awarded the Righteous Among the Nations award in 2004, forty years after his passing. But Sacerdoti preferred to remain silent.

Only to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Rome from the Nazis on June 4, 1944, did he finally agree to share his personal details for the first time. In a 2004 interview with BBC reporter Guto Harri, Sacerdoti spoke about those days from his apartment in Rome's Jewish ghetto where he was still living — just a few minutes away from the old hospital.

Sacerdoti said that he had decided to invent a fictitious syndrome, and gave it the name K, in ironic defiance of the supreme commander of German armed forces, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring. The Nazis might have assumed the "K" was in memory of Robert Koch, the German scientist who won the Nobel prize in 1905 for discovering the tuberculosis bacteria.

Later, he revealed more details in a taped interview with Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.

Dr. Vittorio Sacerdoti passed away three years ago at the age of ninety-two. He is buried in Rome.

**Who Was Sacerdoti?** The entire story was kept secret for decades, and received almost no coverage by either the media or Holocaust documentation groups. Until former foreign correspondent and writer/producer Gordon Thomas decided he wanted to share the story with the world.

"Dr. Sacerdoti was a Jew and belonged to a respected Jewish family in the city," says Thomas in response to claims that perhaps Dr. Sacerdoti was a non-Jew. In fact, the name Sacerdoti in Italian means "Kohein." A rabbinical family in Italy at the time was also called Sacerdoti.

Guto Harri, the BBC reporter who was the first to interview the doctor and

expose the story, relates that the doctor told him that he still remembers the day the Nazis marched into the ghetto to capture his Jewish brethren.

To put Dr. Sacerdoti's life in context, Gordon Thomas, no stranger to unearthing secrets and mysteries, knew he would need more information.

Thomas decided to turn his attention to the stories of the Roman Jews during the Holocaust. He enlisted the help of historians who specialize in the Holocaust era, and then embarked on obtaining personal testimonies. He has used media outlets worldwide to call on survivors of the Rome ghetto to contact him with first-hand testimony.

"The book I'm currently working on is about the lives of the Jews in the crowded Rome Ghetto, not only during the nine months that the Nazi forces controlled

Rome," Thomas says. "I plan to present a broad historical tapestry of all those who helped the Jews during this time, from the priests and the nuns in the Vatican, to the Allied spies, to the Roman underground who helped hide survivors. In my view, little space has been given to the people of the ghetto living along the banks of the Tiber. Yet they not only represent the six million victims of the Holocaust, but also symbolize its survivors."

Thomas says that as he gathers more information, he realizes that many of the survivors have never shared their personal stories and memories of the war years with the public.

"My book is intended to ultimately be a story of the ghetto set against a selection of eyewitnesses," says Thomas, who plans to release the book in 2012. "It is a testimony to history's cruelest period." . ●

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