

A Bike as a Tool for God

By M. Regina Cram

It was 1943, and the Germans occupied Italy. Jewish families were being hunted, then sent to death camps. Identification papers were essential. Everyone was searched.

Everyone except Gino Bartali

At 29, Bartali was a national icon and a devout Catholic. Three times he won the Tour de France, considered the world's most grueling race, and twice he won the Giro d'Italia. Wherever he rode, crowds cheered. Soldiers at checkpoints knew his face. Gino Bartali possessed something more valuable than medals: he could hide in plain sight.

One day, a message arrived from the Cardinal of Florence, who was secretly coordinating a network to save Jews. He had documents and forged identity papers that meant the difference between life and death, but he couldn't transport them. Every courier they sent was arrested.

"We need someone the soldiers won't search," the Cardinal said. Bartali understood. "I will go." His plan was simple. He'd announce he was training for a big race. He'd wear his racing jersey with his name emblazoned across the chest, and he'd ride between Florence and Assisi, sometimes covering 250 miles in a day.

Each morning Bartali rolled up photographs, baptismal certificates, forged documents, identity cards and ration books, then hid them inside the hollow steel tubes of his bike. These documents provided everything Jews needed to become, on paper, Catholic Italians.

Soldiers often stopped him, saying, "Gino Bartali! The champion! Can we get a photograph?" He would smile, chat, and sign autographs. If soldiers moved toward his bicycle, he'd act protective. "Please, don't touch the bike!" Bartali would stress. "If you adjust anything, it ruins the balance. I have to race in two weeks!" The starstruck officers, not wanting to damage a hero's equipment, would wave him through.

Bartali rode past machine guns, barbed wire and military convoys. He rode in summer heat and exhaustion, knowing that if the Nazis discovered forged papers, he would be executed, as well as his wife and children

In addition to his courier rides, Bartali hid a family in a concealed basement space – Jewish refugees with nowhere else to go. Every night he prayed they wouldn't be discovered. Each morning he chose to risk everything.

By the time the war ended in 1945, Bartali's secret network had saved 800 Jewish lives.

Then Bartali quietly returned to racing.

In 1948, he stunned the cycling world by winning the Tour de France again. The press swarmed him, asking how he'd trained during the war. He just smiled.

For 52 years, Gino Bartali didn't speak about what he had done. He died at age 85, still silent about his actions.

Only after his death did his family discover diaries, letters, and documentation. Children and grandchildren of people Bartali had saved began sharing their stories.

In 2013, Israel's Holocaust memorial recognized Gino Bartali as Righteous Among the Nations, an honor given to non-Jews who risked their lives to help Jews during the Holocaust. The cycling champion was finally acknowledged for the victories that truly mattered: not the races he won, but the lives he saved.