

## An interview with Father Francesco Brondello (February 2001)

### The priest who helped Jewish people

A contribution to a deeper understanding of what happened to the refugees from St.-Martin Vésubie and the network of assistance that helped many of them to survive is offered in this interview conducted a group of students from the Istituto Tecnico per Geometri "Guarino Guarini" in Turin (Luigi Gentile, Andrea Ragno, Christian di Potenza and Andrea Pozzi, overseen by Professor Antonella Filippi). The text forms part of a wider work presented to the annual "Concorso della Regione Piemonte" on themes of contemporary history. We should also note that Father Brondello was declared "Righteousness amongst the Nations" on 2 September 2004, in a ceremony at the synagogue in Cuneo.

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#### An interview with Father Francesco Brondello (February 2001)

*Father Francesco Brondello lives in Fontanelle, near Boves, in a small house with a small garden, given to him by the Curia. At midday and at seven in the evening, he walks down the road to eat at the Casa di riposo del Clero, near to the sanctuary. Father Brondello is now retired, after a life dedicated to his religious mission. But even as a pensioner, he continues to help the priests, at Mass, confession, or at the sanctuary in Fontanelle. His great thirst for life has certainly not declined: "I am old in years, but in my mind, I am younger than you!"*

*Francesco Brondello was born in Borgo San Dalmazzo in 1920. In 1943, he was the deputy priest in Valdieri, and the tragic events of those years saw him involved on the front-line, like many other priests in the valleys, helping those who were suffering. It was an active role, like that of a "combatant", made up of constant acts of resistance against Nazi and fascist oppression.*

*The young man of 23 years placed his Christian mission as a priest at the service of those in need, all those who wore the "badge of suffering", the partisans (with whom he worked closely), abandoned soldiers, Jews. Young, courageous, convinced of the choices he made, helped by the natural talents given to a "mountain climber" and great agility, this small priest with red hair managed to escape from the Nazis in the middle of the Promenade des Anglais, in Nice, and return alone, in a daring escape to his mountains, to Valdieri.*

*However, he did not escape arrest by the fascist; in 1944, he was imprisoned and interrogated at Cuneo, and repeatedly beaten for helping Jews and partisans. His story flows with animation and his account of what happened to him is never tainted by a victim mentality or by "heroism"*

*"And then they beat me, I was bleeding everywhere" is all that he says about the torture he endured.*

*And that is all, not the least sense of self-satisfaction or complacency for the help he offered, at the risk of his own life, to those in need. Even in these distant memories, his acts of solidarity form a natural part of the mission of a man of God. And even danger to the point of death is natural: "This year, it will be my turn!" he says, since the previous year, the Germans had murdered his friend Father Mauro Ghibaud in Boves. There was only one moment of emotion: Father Francesco wept as he remembered two Jews he had helped save who recognised him on the day of liberation and went to thank him. The emotions grow in remembering a life and salvation.*

*After the war, Father Francesco Brondello said enough to this world, and withdrew into the mountains, where he has lived for 35 years in different alpine huts with a little church. He has lived amidst Mother Nature, where he has found the most perfect connection with God: "no running water, no lights, no kitchen or bathroom, no! And no telephone".*

*We interviewed Father Francesco Brondello on 4 February 2001, in his house in Fontanelle. Given the importance of the events that he recalls, and the fluency of his account, we have chosen to transcribe the interview in its entirety: we have omitted only small parts that are outside the story, that relate to episodes of lesser consequence in the wider sense.*

**Question:** Father Francesco, tell us what happened at Valdieri, after 8 September?

**Father Brondello:** I think it was 12 September, although it may have been 11 September or 13 September, because there were many things happening... but I'll settle for 12 September, because on 8 September, there was the

destruction of the 4<sup>th</sup> Army, the famous 4<sup>th</sup> Army, which was the best armed and equipped in all of Italy, and which was controlling the south-east of France, Nice, Montecarlo, that area there, and they also controlled the area around San Martin.<sup>1</sup>

We already knew it, those few of us who were there, because the royal family lived in the Sant'Anna villa in Valdieri, and so they always came here on holidays. So we knew them, because the Queen always went fishing. Then there was also the chamois hunt. And then, at the end of August, we knew that something was not right, because the royal family who had been there with the princesses etc... they had begged them to leave, and they had gone to Switzerland. The gamekeepers were still there, they were still in the place: something is happening here...

And then the Armistice came, 8 September: and this was why we had already understood that something was not right. The destruction came right then because... these are sad things for us too, these things; the officers, they were the first to know and they had left; and they had not said anything to the soldiers.

The barracks had enough food-stuffs for six months, enough to support 600 troops for six months, given that it was autumn and preparations had been made for winter quartering. I am talking about Valdieri, because at that moment in time, we did not know what had happened elsewhere... there was the barracks, there was the frontier guard, there were all the outposts at Ser Bagarin, Mercantour, the Ciriegia Pass etc etc... which leads into France. And these friends of mine, lieutenants, they didn't know anything; no-one could phone us any more, the phone did not work...

So, Beppe Sannino, who commanded the outpost at Bagarin, he came down (I think it was on the 11<sup>th</sup>); another friend, who was a lieutenant, lieutenant Rosato, who was up with Ballestrieri at Marcantour or in the Ciriegia hills, in that area, they didn't hear any more news, so they came down and they found the officers were not there, the barracks had been ransacked. Rather than let everything fall into the hands of others, everyone came to get something, and they got cheese, and they got boxes of meat etc etc. So they had come down and found everything in a state of collapse.

There had already been a complete collapse, because the Italians, those from Piedmont or Lombardy, they could go home; but for example, Lieutenant Rosato was from Abruzzo, he could not go home dressed in military uniform.<sup>2</sup> So it was up to us priests to help, to get him civilian clothing: we went here and there to find it, and it was also the local people who greatly helped both the Jewish people and these young men; maybe because the local people had sons [serving] in Russia, or one had a husband serving in Libya, and so they gave me civilian clothing to take to the soldiers so that they could go home.

It was all a disaster. At this point, the question of the Jews became active... It is difficult for people who have not lived through this to understand, because it was really like Babel like it says in the Bible, no-one understood anything, the partisans did not exist (and in fact it was right then that the first partisan units began to form). For example, on 12 September, I always say 12 September, the first partisan unit... with Livio Bianco, came to Valdieri, because Livio Bianco had a house nearby to Canonica; I was 23 years old, they had also called me, that is to the first partisan formation; what do I do? Where do I go? I'll go to Madonna del Colletto, and give the keys to the people fleeing to Madonna del Colletto..., then, at the same time, for example, in Entraque, another partisan unit was formed, made up of people from Entraque, who went to Osteirà, the Osteirà group, who at that point in time had no contact with the Giustizia e Libertà organisation run by Galimberti.<sup>3</sup> At Sabèn, a mountain on the way to Andonno and Valdieri, there was also a group called the Saben group, who were compatriots of mine from Borgo (I am from Borgo San Dalmazzo).

The Jews also arrived: can you see what a mess it was? It was not an easy situation! So these Jewish people arrived, around 900 of them from San Martin Vésubie. It was good to see that, these Jewish people who were in San Martin Vésubie... they had arrived there from Poland and they had had to flee all the time... they were safe in San Martin Vésubie, which is a holiday mountain town for the French, like Limone for us; they stayed there happily, because they were amongst Italians, who were humane, and they had a mad fear of the Germans, they all knew what had

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<sup>1</sup> St.-Martin Vésubie.

<sup>2</sup> English translator's note: Abruzzo is in south-central Italy, whereas Piedmont and Lombardy are in the north.

<sup>3</sup> English translator's note: "Justice and Freedom", a non-communist anti-fascist resistance group formed in 1929 in France by Italian refugees

happened and so they found themselves there in San Martin Vésubie, not necessarily in heaven, but compared to what they been through in their various escapes, a peaceful place, an island of peace and tranquillity.

When the collapse came, when our soldiers left France, they had escaped but they now found themselves in danger of being captured by the Germans. They had to pass through the Alps and.... [so they said to themselves] let's flee, simply flee, go with the Italians rather than staying with the Germans, because we behaved far more decently. You must understand it was 12 September when they had to try and pass through the Alps... and they did not have equipment or proper clothes, they were not prepared, no proper shoes, all those things..., in the autumn, it begins to get colder, and there were drizzly days; they had to pass through the Ciriegia hills, 2,500 meters up, or the Mercantour, or the "Thieves' Pass", which is higher up again..., and they were escaping toward us. They were using small mountain paths, without any equipment, in the cold and who knows what else, and they did not even know... let's say that they wandered about for around four days, from 8 to 12 September, getting here from Entraque or from Valdieri.

I remember, it was really a spectacle. We were already worried about helping our soldiers to escape. I also remember another incident: there were four soldiers who only had a donkey and nothing else. They could not get home, because they were from Trentino, so I went to help them: they did not want to become partisans, because they had already endured three, four years of war: enough war, enough, we don't want to talk about war any more!... they had this donkey, and they killed it, and then every so often, they would eat a piece of its roasted meat, so I took them some biscuits, and then they went home...

It was very sad to see the town flooded, I mean really flooded, by Jewish people seeking refuge, people who did not have anything with them, no blankets, nothing, not even food. I remember one mother, for example, who was looking for her child, and she could not find her; as some were walking on the mountain footpaths in a hurry, and some were a little bit slower, the child arrived late in the evening, it was autumn, so by eight or nine in the evening, it was already dark, already curfew. And I remember her trying to find this child, and later she did. So, in Canonica we placed twelve people with the nuns in their shelter, and other groups in other houses. The young men who were fleeing from danger, they rested a while, ate, and then they went their own way.

Of the Jewish people, the older ones stayed here... and then, quietly and slowly, they formed in little groups of four or five, and I took them to Borgo, where Father Viale was, you will hear me talk about him... and Father Viale helped them, sending one group towards Switzerland, Turin, Milan and Switzerland, while others went to Genova to make their way to central Italy: there was another priest in Genova who was working with us. So we tried to do what we could....

**Question:** How did you try and help them?

**Father Brondello:** We tried to help, we gave them food... whatever we had to spare because everything was rationed... it was a problem, taking it from ourselves to give to them.... But we did it willingly. There were also Jewish people who had organised themselves. For example, I will tell you now one particular story: I think it was 7 October, a man from Florence came, and he was carrying envelopes containing money, and he knew that I had been involved in helping these people, doing whatever I could do; he gave me these envelopes with the money to pass onto the refugees. And to think that I have studied the Bible, because at that moment, it did not occur to me and then he said "please tell all of them that tomorrow is Yom Kippur, tell all of them that tomorrow is Yom Kippur". So I asked "What is that?" He replied "nothing, don't you worry about it!". There was this element of wariness, because these were dangerous times: he had come to see me, but he had never met me, people had said "you can trust him" – that is, you can trust him up to a certain point. So I said, alright; but he never told me who he was: I knew that he had come from Florence to deliver money to the Jewish refugees, and then he went.

So in the night-time, I went round all the alpine huts where these groups of Jewish refugees were hiding, and said "tomorrow is Yom Kippur ". What is it? It is the day of atonement, the day of purification. And there were pleased! A Catholic priest who went to tell Jewish people that the following day was the day of purification, the day of pardon, and they kissed my hands, and then I gave them the envelopes, and also some tinned meat and some biscuits that I had got from the barracks, handed it all out to them. So I say, think about this, a Catholic priest going from hut to hut, in the middle of the night, because it was important to take them these things, it was beautiful!

And then a group of German troops arrived: Müller had had posters put up in every corner in the local towns, from Valdieri to Entraque, which read "beware to anyone who does not present himself". They had already launched one

raid and they had found one or two Jews, and they had loaded them onto this truck, but the numbers were small, so then after that they decided on a forced round-up, I think it would have been 17 or 18 September, because on the 19, there was the massacre in Boves.

The day before, this business had occurred. So we had to stick together: if you did not present yourself as ordered, it was not only you who would be killed, but also those who had taken you in. So you can imagine the panic! But the day before, there had already been the massacre in Boves, they had burnt the town. So, we thought, they really are serious! The Jews were scared, the local people were scared, these Jews said to themselves, for years we have been fleeing, fleeing; we cannot stay here in the winter, not with the children etc, so they also surrendered willingly, they went to the barracks in Borgo.

**Question:** So nearly all those in the camp in Borgo, they had surrendered?

**Father Brondello:** They had surrendered in the face of these German troops; we have to understand, these refugees had already crossed the mountains, they were in poor health and very afraid, and then this group of troops orders them to present themselves or else, there had been the massacre in Boves the day before, they were killing everyone... so they thought, alright, let's report as ordered. Out of the 900, maybe 300 reported as ordered.

**Question:** and what about the rest?

**Father Brondello:** We went to take them food and other essentials, and we found them the huts [to hide in]. These were alpine huts in the mountains, for example, in some places they were farmhouses where the people living on the mountain kept their work tools, their shovels and hoes, that sort of things, to collect dry leaves, for instance. And nearby there were perhaps some store-rooms, just somewhere where they could take refuge; they were helped by people for example in Desertetto and we worked together, we helped them, gave them what we could.

For example, I remember one young woman. When we found her, she was suffering, really suffering! She would have been maybe 17 or 18 years old. She began every conversation with the same words "our old people were right to tell us.... our elders in Calvary prayed that God's punishment would come down on them, and the blood of this innocent..." like it says in the Gospels, and she was very taken with this phrase: so I tried to encourage her: "But madam, two thousand years have passed since then, don't talk like this now", I tried to give her courage, and she always had this same fixed idea in mind. "They prayed that the blood of the innocent come down on us, and now it is happening and we have been on the run for years". I don't know if she was Polish, or where she had come from: she had always been on the run. She had reached us, and I had to console her...after the war, I learnt that she had gone to Palestine, but she had been baptised, and then gone into cloisters and become a nun....

**Question:** how many families were hidden?

**Father Brondello:** in Desertetto, there were two or three, there were also some at Borgo, and we had some hidden towards Madonna del Colletto. At Boves, they had murdered the deputy curate, who was a school-friend of mine, Father Ghibaudo Mauro...,<sup>4</sup> we were from the same town, the same age, we had been friends at school and in the priesthood, then in the mountains, we always went up into the mountains together. He came to find me on the 14<sup>th</sup> (they killed him on the 19<sup>th</sup>); I said yes, but here it is a disaster, you are right, what do we do? We stay with these people here: our duty is that of the Good Samaritan who never asks for documents. In fact, in prison, when they were beating me around the head etc... they were doing it because I had helped Jews and partisans. Excuse me, but many of us are *super partes*,<sup>5</sup> if I see someone lying hurt on the ground, I don't go and ask him who he is, or say "if you are Jewish, I will kick you". I don't care whether a person is Jewish, or atheist or Catholic, I care about the fact that, at that moment, he is suffering, and so at that moment I have to stop and I have to help him. And in the prison they beat me, saying "but that one was Jewish, that one!"

So with Father Ghibaudo, we reached an agreement. We will stay with these people, I had many military maps of the mountains, with the paths marked out, I gave them to him. We will keep these maps, because we can no longer walk for long on these roads because here... ola! And now we stayed on the paths, so that if we had to meet and help these young people who were escaping, we would know where... and we decided: if we write notes, we will write them in Piedmontese dialect, but with letters of the Greek alphabet, that way, they won't understand anything.

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<sup>4</sup> Father Viale recalls the tragic deaths of Father Ghibaudo and Father Bernardi in his conversation with Nuto Revelli, *Il prete giusto*, Einaudi, 1998, pp 46 and 47

<sup>5</sup> English translator's note: a Latin phrase literally meaning "above parties", in this context meaning unwilling to differentiate between victims of suffering.

You can understand, we were 23 years old, we had this work to do because everywhere people were suffering, and as priests coming out of the seminary, we had to stay with those who were suffering, it was Jesus who said, we will stay with those who are suffering. But it was essential to be alert as well because we were being looked for: the Germans were out there, the SS, but also the Brigade Nere,<sup>6</sup> but there was also the Monte Rosa, the Decima Mas,<sup>7</sup> it was all very confused; we could have been captured by any of them. So we wrote in Piedmontese dialect, but with letters of the Greek alphabet, so if we were captured, they would not understand any of it...

**Question:** were there people working as spies?

**Father Brondello:** Up by us, no. I am speaking of the Jews, because it all happened very quickly, carried out by the few families who were left there with us at the end. I think that Cavaglion speaks in his book of a few who escaped from the Germans' barracks. I don't know if he known it, but it was me who freed them. I had gone to the cemetery, because we could not bury the dead, neither the Jews nor anyone else, when someone died, you had to take them to the cemetery, but we were not allowed to touch them! In fact, Father Ghibaudo, who was in Boves, [his body] was quietly "stolen" and taken back to his house in Borgo ... I had gone down from Valdieri, there was his brother-in-law there who had a car, we took Father Ghibaudo's body, all covered in blood, with his clothes all blood-stained, wrapped in a military canvas so that no-one would notice, then his brother-in-law drove the car and I had his body with me; we took him to the cemetery in secret! So I was there, and I tried to wash his body clean, and he went to fetch a coffin, and we buried him in a tomb without anyone knowing anything about it! We had a proper funeral two years later, on 19 September 1945. There were moments....

In Valdieri..., for example, there was a poor lady in this little house who I always remember, her husband was away with the war, in Russia or who knows where, and in the house were two soldiers who could not get home. But they didn't want to join the partisan brigades: we have to understand, after so much war, in Greece, here, there and everywhere, we did not want to join the brigades... so they helped the woman in the fields, cutting word, collecting hay.... and she gladly had them as guests, because she was thinking of her husband and her children who were who knows where. And then the Germans arrived, and I had to do my round of the village, with a German officer pointing a gun at my back... it would have been trouble if anyone had fired at him, I would have been the first to be shot.... when he came into this house, he saw three plates of steaming hot polenta on the table, and only this one woman living there; and he understood immediately: there are people who have escaped hiding out in this house. He searched the house, which was hardly a mansion, but he didn't find anything. But nonetheless, there were still three plates of hot polenta, there must be some people hiding there, maybe partisans etc... so what did he do? He respected the woman, but he set fire to her house. And when I came down from Desertetto, I warned people that up there, it was dangerous, the Germans were in Valdieri.

The German officer said to them "Father, there are two corpses up on the bridge, but we did not kill them, you, someone amongst you, you killed them", and I went up to the bridge, and I asked for help from Giordano Vincenzo, and with a hand-cart, we put them one on top of the other, carried them to the cemetery, buried them as best we could, but it was not allowed, there were things that.... they would have killed us all!

And then in Borgo, I came back from the cemetery, there was a storm on and it was curfew, but I knew the road well because I am from Borgo and I had to go to Valdieri on foot, ten kilometres away, but all on the side roads. So I passed through the fields, and I went across the railway line, and then I passed close to the walls of the barracks to reach Borgo. And I made this journey in all the thunder and lightning: the lightning lit me up, and it would have been trouble if anyone had seen me, because they would have opened fire on me. So I waited for the storm to create a cover of darkness, so that no-one could see anything, it was late in the evening, maybe 8 or 9pm, early November, maybe the end of October ...I think October 26... and I hid, and there were thunderclaps and they covered the sound of my footsteps, and meant I could not be seen... then I hid behind a wall, and then behind a tree, and I waited for another flash of lightning.

When I got near the barracks, I heard something behind me.... fortunately, they said to me "*Juif*, we are Jewish", because you can imagine how I would have taken it in that moment... if they had been Germans! Instead I explained to them "come behind me", and they understood Italian well enough, so as I started to move off, they moved off behind me in line, and then I hid, and they hid, and so on.... We passed through Borgo, and I went up towards Madonna di Monserrato... there were three or four men. And then when I was out of Borgo, I told them to

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<sup>6</sup> English translator's note: Black Brigades, Fascist paramilitary units operating in the RSI from 1944 onwards.

<sup>7</sup> English translator's note: a commando frogman unit employed by the RSI principally as an anti-partisan force operating on land.

keep on going up, because I had to go to Valdieri, I still had ten kilometres to walk through the fields; so you go on up, you will find partisans up there, and they are all my friends, Veglia or Bastiano etc. When you meet someone, present yourselves and say “we have been saved by Father Francesco, we are Jewish”, and you will see that they will help you.

So they went up, and they were safe there because they were outside Borgo, there were no more Brigade Nere or Germans up there. After 25 April, we celebrated liberation in Borgo on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The partisans came in, and Borgo was liberated on 28 April. I was at Castelletto in hiding and I went to see my mother, to see how she was. When the war ended, I had my bicycle in an attic in Valdieri, my mother was in Borgo, and I was in hiding because they had been looking for me and wanted to kill me.

So after liberation, I went to Borgo to see my mother: she was in the square, everyone I knew was parading there, people who had come down from Saben etc... and I saw two men, and they looked at me and they laughed, and I did not know that they were the two Jews, because it had been night-time and I would not remember their faces! They came over to me, we embraced, kissed each other, you have no idea of the joy of that moment, they were the Jews that I had saved. Embracing each other, crying and both saying “don’t you remember us?”, but I remembered, yes, there were many such events... “we are two of the people you saved” they said, etc... so we kissed and hugged each other, and then they came with me to the tram that went from Borgo to Cuneo, and then I walked to Castelletto, and they came with me to the tram with a handkerchief... and then we lost sight of each other, and they went home.

**Question:** can you tell us how you were arrested?

**Father Brondello:** right... first of all, I escaped from the Germans.

**Question:** were there Germans in Valdieri?

**Father Brondello:** they came in from Borgo, they came from time to time on short incursions. On 20 August 1944, they burnt down the house of a woman.

**Question:** but didn’t they know that there were Jews hidden in the mountains?

**Father Brondello:** they knew, but... in fact, they had murdered one in front of a small chapel, because they found him there... they found this Jew there, they took him outside in front of the church, at gunpoint, and shot him. He had identity papers in his pocket, [but] they just murdered him immediately, immediately.

**Question:** you were talking about your arrest?

**Father Brondello:** when the Jews came down, escaping from San Martin Vésubie, they left the families who had given them shelter, and since they were people of good conscience, there were maybe 78 letters, I think, written by the Jewish refugees, and I went to take them to San Martin, I was the Jews’ postman, you might say. It was November, everything was already covered in snow, and to climb the Alps in the middle of winter with that amount of snow on the ground is not easy. But nonetheless, I had these letters from the Jews to deliver.

Then there was this woman, a young woman, who had worked in France, because in the mountains there was no work, so they went to France to work as baby-sitters or waiters, and she had her interests in France, one might say, because with the war, she had escaped, but there they were changing the currency and she lost even the small amount she had saved up by working. I said to her, look, I have to go there to deliver these letters. There was also a Slav who had not seen his mother in years: he knew that she had gone to work as a waitress for an aristocratic English lady, and so he had come to San Martin Vésubie, he wanted to see his mother again. So I said to him, look I will take you to San Martin Vésubie, I have a letter to deliver, there is a woman I have to see and then I have to speak to Lieutenant Rosato who had not been able to return to home.... I had to find him, so I said, let’s go, and we went. It was the middle of November, we had to cross the Alps in the middle of November with the snow... I was wearing civilian clothes, because I had put my priest’s frock in my backpack, so that I would walk in the snow....

We went down, and I found Rosato who was on his way up... and he said to us: “The Germans are looking for me, because they know that I have been at my fiancée’s house, and they came to get me, so I had to escape during the night” and so he was going back up. If that was the situation, then we could not go on with Germans following him, and us heading straight towards them. So we hid in the woods and waited for night-fall... and the next day, the Slav and Lieutenant Rosato crossed back into Italy, because it was already dangerous, and I went with the woman to

distribute the letters. And the morning went well there, I celebrated mass and then I found this woman from Borgo, and I gave her the news.

**Question:** Were there Germans in San Martin Vésubie?

**Father Brondello:** Were there! Now I'll tell you. When we came down, we were crossing an area called Les Trois Monts: and there was an explosion, and an echo! It was a bomb and then an echo... what's happening, why are they bombing? So we go down, and there were already two Germans there, well-armed, who were going up the path to see what was happening. This woman says to me "Father, the Germans", I tell you, I was pretending to understand nothing. I was dressed as a civilian, 23 years old, just crossed the border high up in the mountains, after a bomb goes off! I always say that it was the Lord who helped me! These Germans on the path stopped me. I said "Bonjours", they said "Bonjours", they looked at me, and they didn't say anything. So I went down. When I arrived, I changed my clothes in the bushes: I took the priestly robe from my bag, got changed into it, put on flat shoes, and then put my bag inside the "diplomatic" bag and arrived at San Martin dressed as a priest... then, in the afternoon, I took the bus to Nice to go and find the others. And here too, God helped me! I got onto the bus, and then this one who was not a Slav (I only learnt that after the war), well he was a Slav, but he was a spy, and he signalled that someone dangerous had arrived; and I had gone to his mother to give her the news, and there was this Englishwoman... So when I got onto the coach, two plainclothes Gestapo got on as well, and came straight to me and said "Papers" and I didn't even have my passport, because I had had permission to pass. So they took hold of me, in the middle of the coach, which did not have any exits... the coach left at 3pm, and at San Martin Du Var, a well-armed German official got on board, and they handed me over to him.

The coach reached Nice at 6pm, curfew had started, and it was now night-time, so I thought to myself, I have to escape now... but how to do it? I looked behind me, and saw that there were some bushes (I had never been to Nice and I didn't know Nice!). Thanks to the grace of God, I was very lithe, even when walking in the mountains, sometimes I was already at the top of Monviso by 6am!.. so I thought to myself, this German is wearing jack-boots and he is armed, so I can escape, jump over the bushes, and that way, he won't be able to follow me. But this German had understood my intentions because he walked a meter behind me, to watch me. So then I saw – we were in the main street in Nice – the trams; I thought, as they slow down, I can jump up on one while it is moving, and when we move a bit further down the road, I can get off on the other side, and go in another direction. But at that moment, the two Gestapo I had met in S. Martin Vésubie appeared, they told me to follow them, and made me go under the arcades... I tell you, I had to escape!

When he said to me "*montez*", it was over for me, because I was about to end up in the barracks: as he said "*montez*", I ran off, they were firing this way and that, but I managed to escape: it was six in the evening, six thirty, and there were women talking an evening walk, and there is this priest wearing an underskirt, dodging under the arcades, in and out of the arcades, which I thought was the best way to avoid the gun-fire. I managed to find a church, which I found out later was called St. François de Paul; I went in, and asked the priest for help. And in fact they were monks, and there was a monk in charge of ringing the bells, and I said to him "look, the Germans are after me, open the loft ". He quickly took me up, and I went into the loft.

I was scared up there; before, I had not been afraid, because if you are scared in those moments, you don't have the strength to run! So I stayed there, and I hid myself well; when the monk arrived... I was scared, but when I saw that he was dressed in civilian clothing, I felt better... then I spoke to one of them and I said "listen, do me a favour, find me a bicycle, and I will cycle back to S. Martin Vésubie and get my ski-boots... and he said "I'll come with you" and I said "I would like that, you speak French!". So we left on our bicycles, on the Promenade des Anglais, the first time I had been on that road on a bike, and there were all these Germans in a column... we arrived at Belvedere and I went to the canonical house of the local priest. And he said "be careful because the other day, the partisans fired on the Germans, and the Germans were now using sniffer dogs as well."

So I left in the morning, it was the middle of November, and the ground was all frozen: there was a full moon, which on the one hand was pleasing because I had never gone that way along the Gordolasca to go to Valdieri, but because the moon was out, I could still see a bit on the frozen ground. But on the other hand, the moon-light clearly signalled my presence; but it went alright, and I reached the sanctuary. I thought I would take refuge there, catch my breath, it was all bad, it was cold, all the gutters were frozen, there was snow... and so as not to let the freezing cold get to me, I had a bit of breakfast and then I "danced" up and down, up and down, to avoid frost-bite.

And after that, I climbed the Clapier hills, 2800 meters up, all frozen over, but... you could see Nice from there, it was a very beautiful day! But on the opposite side, the ice was melting, as it had caught the rays of the rising sun; I did not have crampons or an icepick; but I could see that even at the bottom, there was fresh snow, there were no rocks... I walked three paces and jumped maybe 200 or 300 metres into the little stream, right to the bottom. I was so happy that I wept with joy... and I arrived in Valdieri... and when I said "I have escaped from the Germans", they said to me "you don't half tell some stories!".

**Question:** When did they arrest you?

**Father Brondello:** I had conducted the marriage ceremony of a Brigade Nere member with a woman from Cantoria, and so they knew me, and this woman knew everything. She spoke to her husband and told him everything, so they knew that I had already helped Jewish refugees, that I helped partisans, that I had escaped from the Germans, so one fine day, 19 September 1944, the year after they had murdered Father Ghibaudo, I said, this year it will be my turn. When I heard that there were Germans in Valdieri, I said, this year it will be my turn!

So I went to church, and I prayed, and there was a priest there, and I said to him "maybe tonight I will already have left this world: let's do a proper confession"... this Ferraris, the Brigade Nere member I had married, he arrived and he knew me well, and he said "You are Father Francesco?", and I said yes, and we went outside, and he said to me "go and get your hat, because you have to come with us". So I went to the rectory, and I could have easily escaped... but I said to myself, this time I will not run, this time I want to see how it ends.

And then we went down to the Cacciatori restaurant, in Valdieri, because the jeep was there. And they took me to their headquarters, to Commandant Bellinetti, who led the Brigade Nere, and we had the first interrogation. Then there were the two Ferraris brothers. So he started asking me questions" For example, "why do you obey Pope Pius XII?" and I would say "at the end of it, he is my superior", and then I said to him "It was Jesus who said <you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build...>" And he interrupted me and said "you priests will have the right to live only if instead of teaching the mass to children, you put guns in their hands and teach them to fire, fire, fire".... Then the jeep arrived at Cuneo, and we had another interrogation.

One of them took a small hand-grenade, a 'balilla', and put it in my mouth ... and the other one was sat at the desk and said to me "What's your name?", and I could not reply; so the other one whipped me across the back with: "Answer me!". What I could do, with a hand-grenade [in my mouth]? And then the first one pointed his pistol at me, and said "Answer me, or I will shoot you!"...

The next day, we had another interrogation: this time, they really beat me up! I was bleeding... fortunately, they had told me in the seminary that I had a hard head! "If you had not had a hard head, you would definitely have died!". And while they were beating me, I was bleeding everywhere: for two hours! And it was all for one reason... they wanted to know about the Jewish refugees and the partisans, and I said "I don't care if someone is Jewish or partisan, when a person is in need, us priests, we have to stop and help, regardless of the price, we have to stop and help. Whether someone is Jewish or partisan, or from one unit or another unit, it does not matter to me, I have to help him because he is my brother". And so they beat me even more. And then... how did I get out of there? I have to thank a young woman for that.... the Bishop had tried everything he could, nothing doing; the Prefect had even written to General D'Agosti, nothing doing; and then, a school-friend of mine went to see this young woman. Her sister had been captured by the partisans, and he went to her and he said "listen, I freed your sister, and a very dear friend of mine is in prison, you can't say [you won't help me]". And each evening, she went to visit General Ronza, commander of the Brigade Nere, to offer him a little company, shall we say.

She went to him and said "listen, you have a priest up there ... you need to free him". And Ronza went straight to the phone and called up and said "you have a priest called Brondello Francesco? Free him! I said free him!". And Bellinetti and the Ferraris brothers, they were scared and they threw me out, but they said I had to stay inside the seminary, and each morning, I had to go and present myself to them, and each evening I had to go and present myself... and then at a certain point, the Bishop said to me, we need you as well. And there was the commander of the Political Office: I went to him, and said how come I am not allowed to return to Valdieri? And he said "In Valdieri, at Madonna del Colletto, there are partisans and so as not to place temptation in your way [to work with the partisans again], you cannot go to Valdieri, the partisans would send you wherever they wanted". So they sent me to Castelletto Stura instead: and Bellinetti and the Ferraris brothers, they said "go on then, off you go, but this is not over, we will settle our score with you, we will find you again". And in fact, didn't I just see them at Castelletto Stura, killing the heads of two families? I was hidden, but I recognised them.



And then when the war was over, the trial was held, and I went to it, I wanted to go, but not for them, but to defend these two women, the father had been killed, one of them had three children I think, the other one had a baby. And I said I would go and defend these two women, because if it was known that they were war-widows, they would receive compensation, and the children would be recognised as orphans due to the war. So I went to Rome for the trial, and I told everything that had happened... I was not interested in what they had done to me in prison, I had forgiven then, I do forgive them... I only pray that they never do that again.... no more murders, all that over with. And in the end, the two women were recognised as war-widows and the children did not lack for anything.

**Question:** did you know Father Viale?

**Father Brondello:** Oh yes! I always took him up into the mountains, because he was not a mountain climber..., and I was from Borgo and he came to Borgo as the deputy priest, so I knew him very well.

*The church-bells sounded for midday, and Father Francesco had to leave us, because they were waiting for him for lunch. We listened to him for an hour and a half, following him on his mountains and his ability to reconstruct the tragic events of his youth, with only some brief moments of emotional upset, and always with certainty in his faith.*

*(Translatio by Corey Dimarco)*