



Timeless

The story of Gino Bartali

By James O'Toole

Precariously perched between the steep ascent of a mountain to the left and the dramatic plunge of a cliff into a valley on the right sits a narrow mountain road. The road is travelled little recently, military occupation has left the picturesque countryside off limits for travel.

Down the road, rhythmically pushing higher into the mountains, in an image symbolic of resistance, is a lone man on his bike. This man had begun his life at the feet of hills, through success and struggle riding higher to the peak of his sport.

Trailing behind him, a small wooden cart is achingly pulled up the mountain. With each revolution, the rider furiously, enduringly carries this cart higher into the clouds, closer to relief.

The man recalls his past achievements, back-to-back race wins in Italy, a win at the world's premier race in France. Before risking his life, he was a household name across Europe --- a national hero in his home Italy. Now, the fame is only good for keeping him alive. Those races, those recognitions meant nothing compared to the ride today. The weight of this moment was felt not in the sluggish cart being dragged up the mountain, but the duty to deliver the cart's cargo.

Hidden in the cart attached to his bicycle lay three children, escaping their homes, and their families, for a chance at freedom. With success, he'll pull them to neutral territory, free from the threat of deportation.

Now, without a race, without acclaim, he continues to ride — not for himself, but for others.



Gino Bartali finishes a stage of the Tour de France

Gino di Firenze

“Everyone in their life has his own particular way of expressing life’s purpose - the lawyer his eloquence, the painter his palette, and the man of letters his pen from which the quick words of his story flow. I have my bicycle.”

Italy’s King of Cycling was born to humble beginnings in the village of Ponte a Ema, a few miles south of Florence. The Bartali family, like many in the area were farmers, with Gino, his younger brother, and two older sisters helping the parents raise crops.

By the time he turned 11, Gino began attending middle school in Florence. To get to school, he saved up, with some help from his father and sisters to buy his first bicycle. With the training of riding in the hills surrounding Florence, Gino and his younger brother Giulio found their love for racing. Gino pushed his skills forward and win his first race by the age of 17.



A young Gino Bartali

Bartali quickly accelerated his cycling abilities, beginning to race professionally in 1935 at 21 years old, and winning back-to-back Giro d’Italia races in 1936 and 1937. All Italians soon knew the name Gino Bartali as one of the leading athletes from their country.

Gino the Pious

“My faith in God, my heartfelt love for religion, have always given me the strength to overcome all the things that were first thought impossible.”

Tragically, not long after his first Giro d'Italia win, Gino's younger brother Giulio was killed in a race when he and other riders lost control on wet pavement and collided with a car that should not have been on the course. After this, Gino distanced himself from cycling choosing to take on a greater role in his church community and ultimately befriending the Florentine Cardinal Elia Dalla Costa. Bartali was fiercely religious throughout this whole life, earning the nickname “Gino the Pious”. Few career opportunities outside of professional cycling, however, soon brought Gino back to racing.



Gino Bartali with his friend, Cardinal Dalla Costa

Off the heels of his back-to-back Giro d'Italia wins, Bartali was selected by the Italian Cycling Federation to race in the 1938 Tour de France. This race, infamous for its grueling three weeks of riding is world renowned as the premier cycling competition. Bartali won the 1938 Tour and became famous across Europe. The ICF, as an extension of Italy's fascist government used Bartali's Tour de France win to suggest of Italian racial superiority.

Despite the ICF's goals for Bartali as a fascist icon, the devout catholic and Mussolini skeptic made the bold decision to dedicate his win to God, not the dictator as was expected. As a result, the Italian government and

media made no welcome ceremony for Bartali's return home. This subtle move was an early high-profile indication of Bartali's uncompromising character.

A stubborn personality sometimes presented as short temper and anger. Bartali, sometimes called Ginettaccio — “Gino the Terrible” in English — by fans and the press. Such a name was given only partially in jest, after instances of the cyclist's criticism of the press and physical altercations with heckling fans. In one colorful confrontation, Bartali stopped mid-race to punch a spectator who was taunting him.

In the United States, the sport of cycling didn't hold the same attention as the national pastime of baseball. Press coverage however couldn't miss the historic wins of the Italian cyclist. After his 1938 win, the New York Times reported Bartali's win and 20-minute lead over the runner-up.

The cyclist's strong personality and strong character became a point of awe for many around the world. In a time when it was hard to be optimistic for the future, Bartali stood ahead as a universally renowned positive figure.

Most notably, Bartali's defiant public resistance to the fascist powers in his homeland was a key point of inspiration for Italians and their resistance movement when the war began. The American press noted the lack of reception for Bartali after his '38 Tour de France victory. Someone who otherwise would have been lauded as a national hero returned to silence.

The Mussolini regime was criticized for its priorities after it chose not to recognize the athlete who refused to accept their style of victory. For Americans, Bartali was one of the most public figures in Axis Europe openly skeptical of fascism. His unwavering character and seemingly endless athletic potential has remained a point of admiration by American media still today.



Fans watch Bartali ride in the Tour de France

Giant of the Mountains

“Good is something you do, not something you talk about.”

Only a year after Bartali's Tour de France victory, Europe was at war following Germany's invasion of Poland. Like many Italian men of his age, Bartali was called to duty, and assigned to be an army messenger on account of an irregular heartbeat. Tapping into his abilities, Bartali rode his bike to transmit messages around the country.

While Bartali continued riding for the Army, Italy's position in the war weakened, and Mussolini's regime was overthrown from within. What at first might have seem like a taste of freedom for Italians was quickly snuffed out by the invasion of the German Army from the north. With fascist control reestablished, the quality of life of war-torn Italy only got worse, especially for Italian Jews.



Gino in his army uniform

The Nazi occupiers began deporting thousands of Jews to concentration camps. Tens of thousands of others went into hiding or fled to neutral Switzerland. Working in the shadows, underground networks were established across the country to facilitate the protection of Jewish families.

Bartali's friend Cardinal Elia Dalla Costa worked with Rabbi Nathan Cassuto to establish a rescue network for Jews. The Dalla Costa Network, in collaboration with the Assisi Network, based in the hometown of Saint Francis, worked to provide falsified identification, safe-houses, and escape routes for Jews in hiding.

Through his connection with Cardinal Dalla Costa, Bartali was recruited to transport falsified papers around the Italian countryside on his bike. His knowledge of local routes, with the plausible cover of race training and fame made Gino the perfect agent for the task.

Beginning in September of 1943, Bartali placed documents in the frame of his bike, distributing them along a territory spanning from Rome to the Swiss border. While wearing the uniform of his race jersey, and training with oblivious companions, Bartali completed upwards of 40 rides transporting messages during the last two years of World War Two.



Gino Bartali climbing a mountain on a stage of the Tour de France

The Iron Man

“I do what I feel in my heart.”

On the occasion he encountered a patrol, Bartali's fame allowed him special treatment. Patrol guards agreed to not inspect his bike when Bartali asked, as he explained it was very finely calibrated to precise specifications. Being so well regarded across Europe, few soldiers dared face the repercussions of interfering with the training of Italy's star athlete.

Despite his fame and popularity among Italians, Bartali wasn't immune to suspicion of subversive activities. Eventually, his cover story of embarking on long rides to train became less credible. In 1944, Gino was detained and questioned by the fascist secret police in Florence. A letter between Gino and the Cardinal had been intercepted, in which the cyclist was thanked for “carrying vegetables”. His captors correctly suspected him of smuggling for Italian resistance networks.

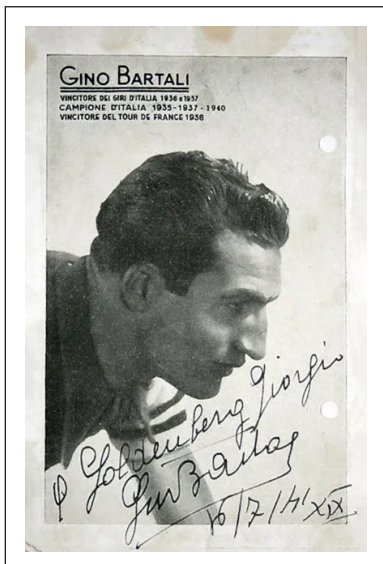
In another example of his strength of character, disregarding the threat of execution, Bartali explained his actions to his secret police saying, “I do what I feel in my heart.”

As luck would have it, the commanding officer in the interrogation was a man who Bartali once served with. All charged were dropped and Bartali picked up where he left off riding for the Dalla Costa Network.

Forged documents weren’t the only cargo Bartali smuggled. In one instance of disguised training, Bartali pulled a wagon attached to his bike, with refugees hiding in a secret compartment. Living up to his moniker “Giant of the Mountains”, Bartali pulled the wagon through the Alps until the refugees reached safety in Switzerland.

Gino Bartali’s role in the Dalla Costa Network extended even into his own home. A Jewish family called the Goldenbergs, who Bartali had met in Fiesole, near Florence in 1941, turned to their friend in their time of need.

The Goldenbergs stayed free of Nazi detection by hiding in a Florence apartment owned by Bartali. Shlomo Goldenberg, who was 12 years old at the time, recalls meeting Bartali and the work he did to ensure their safety. Shlomo’s connection to Bartali is immortalized in a signed photograph the cyclist gave to the Shlomo as a child. Bartali also provided the family with forged papers, which allowed Shlomo’s mother to leave the apartment and acquire supplies for the family.



Gino’s autograph to Shlomo Goldenberg

The mantra that kept Bartali going through the war was the idea that “doing good doesn’t have to be told,” a mindset he would repeat to his son Andrea after the war.

The King of Cycling

“I won the challenge of life, winning the love of the people.”

The city of Florence was liberated from Nazi occupation on August 11th, 1944. Bartali again received no distinction for his actions; the resistance agent returned to his day job of professional racing. While Bartali and Italy were free, the return to normal life was not easy. The star cyclist struggled to recapture his pre-war mastery of the sport.

Despite experiencing significant physical and mental setbacks from food shortages and the stress of war, Bartali defied the odds and won the Giro d’Italia for a third time in 1946 and the Tour de France for a second time in 1948. At this point, there was no question Bartali could claim the title, “King of Cycling”.



Gino wins a Tour de France Stage

Ten years had passed between Bartali’s first and second Tour de France wins. Even with the circumstance of the Second World War, Bartali proved his one-of-a-kind athletic abilities. Such a gap in time between Tour wins remains the longest to this day.

Bartali wasn’t the only one struggling to recover after years of conflict; the entire nation of Italy struggled to unify and find peace. Political strife reached a fever pitch when Italian Communist Party leader, Palmiro Togliatti was severely injured after being shot in the neck by a sniper.

A boiling over of domestic unrest seemed inevitable, as Italians became restless of an ineffective government's inability to address economic downturn. Bartali's three consecutive stage wins and ultimate victory at Le Tour '48 helped to ease tensions at home and give Italians a positive figure to rally around.

Throughout the rest of his life, Gino Bartali remained a beloved figure in Italy. The 1979 song "Bartali" by Paolo Conte set the national hero's cycling prowess to music.

"E vai che io sto qui e aspetto Bartali

"And go, I'm here waiting for Bartali

Scalpitando sui miei sandal

Stomping on my sandals

Da quella curva spunterà

From that curve will appear

Quel naso triste da italiano allegro"

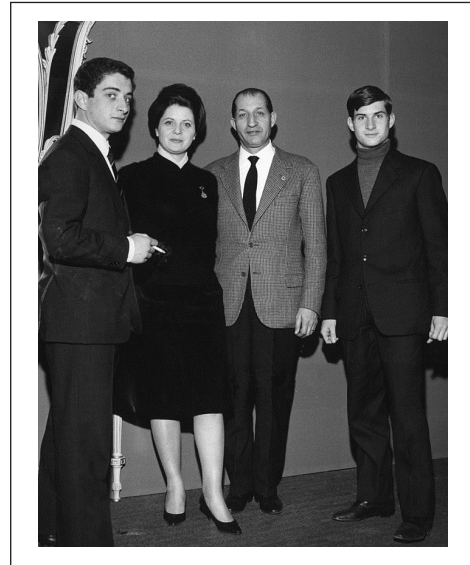
That sad nose of a cheerful Italian"

Gino the Timeless

"I want to be remembered for my sporting achievements and not as a war hero. The heroes are others. Heroes are those who have experienced physical and mental pain, who have lost their loved ones. All I have done is riding my bicycle, which is the best thing I can do".

For most Italians and fans around the world, Bartali was remembered for his cycling prowess and staunch rivalry with teammate-turned-competitor, Fausto Coppi. Bartali, the devout catholic from the countryside and Coppi, the secular city-dweller encapsulated the cultural rifts that did and still do exist in Italy. To this day, many Italians have picked their side on the Bartali-Coppi divide.

For decades, however, nobody knew of that same man's wartime activities, not even his family. Gino's son, Andrea only learned brief details as his father neared death.



Gino with his wife and two sons, 1963

Public knowledge of Bartali's selfless actions were not known until after his death in 2000. Historians and organizations began researching Gino's wartime activities to corroborate what had come to light.

Dozens of individuals spoke on how Bartali helped bring them to safety. People like Shlomo Goldenberg provided documentation and testimony which piece by piece, told Gino's story. In all, more than 500 people received help from Bartali during World War Two. Travelling almost 250 miles a day transporting forged documents, smuggled cash, and trips across international borders, truly countless lives were touched by Bartali's actions.



The Goldenberg Family

In 2013, Gino Bartali was posthumously declared Righteous Among the Nations, a prestigious recognition bestowed upon non-Jews who risked their lives to save their Jewish neighbors and countrymen during the Holocaust.

As if his cycling accomplishments weren't enough, the documentation of Bartali's heroism cemented his place in the canon of great Italians. In the decades since his death, Bartali's story has been immortalized in books, documentaries, and films.

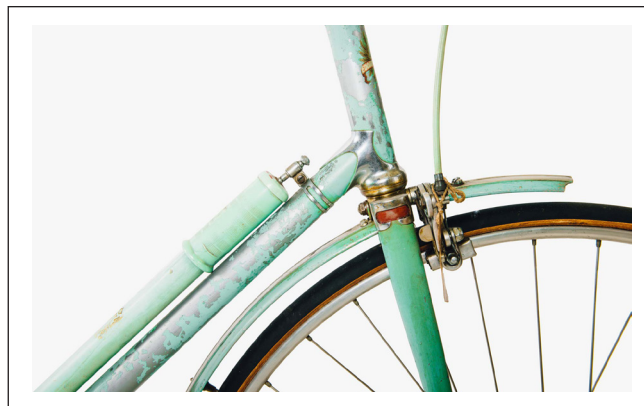
In his native Florence, a museum has been dedicated which collects and preserves history associated with the cyclist. In the United States, Bartali's story is being adapted to the silver screen, with a Hollywood biopic about his life in development, with actor Miles Teller confirmed to play the famed cyclist.

For the first stage of the 2024 Tour de France, which began in Florence, the organizers routed the riders past the Bartali Museum and through Ponte e Ema, to honor the two-time Tour winner. The museum, in coordination with the schedule of the Tour organized an exhibition of Bartali's bicycles from across his long career from 1931 to '54.

What for many people would have seen ripe material for a memoir, speech circuit, or monument, Gino Bartali saw no purpose in drawing attention to his heroic actions. Whether this was informed by his humble upbringing, intense faith, or preexisting fame, Bartali's heroism is a profound lesson in doing the right thing simply for the sake of doing the right thing.

While not everyone will risk their lives to save a couple hundred strangers, even an ounce of the courage Bartali displayed during his life will make a great impact in bettering the world. Simply, Gino Bartali's story underscores the virtue of humility and conviction.

“If you're good at a sport, they attach the medals to your shirt and then they shine in some museum. That which is earned by doing good is attached to the soul and shines elsewhere.”



Gino Bartali's bicycles

Sources

- Conte, P. (1979). *Bartali. Un gelato al limon*. Paolo Conte, Italy.
- Crutchley, P. (2014, May 9). *Gino Bartali: The cyclist who saved Jews in wartime Italy*. Retrieved from BBC Magazine: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27333310>
- Gunston, J. (2023, July 14). *Gino Bartali, the two-time Tour de France winner with a secret life* . Retrieved from Olympics: <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/gino-bartali-two-time-tour-de-france-winner-secret-life>
- Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. (n.d.). *Rescuer Story: Gino Bartali*. Retrieved from Holocaust Memorial Day Trust: <https://hmd.org.uk/resource/gino-bartali/>
- Hunt, L. (2018, July 7). *Gino Bartali: Cycling's Unsung Hero* . Retrieved from DuVine: <https://www.duvine.com/blog/gino-bartali-hero/>
- Masters, J. (2019, May 2). *Gino Bartali: Cyclist who helped save Italy's Jews from Nazis honored with new innovative cycling school* . Retrieved from CNN Sports: <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/02/sport/gino-bartali-academy-yom-hashoah-spt-intl/index.html>
- McPherson, A. (2024, June 28). *The Tour de France champion who saved hundreds of Jews* . (BBC) Retrieved from BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20240628-the-tour-de-france-champion-who-saved-hundreds-of-jews>
- Pro Cycling Stats. (n.d.). *Gino Bartali*. Retrieved from Pro Cycling Stats: <https://www.procycling-stats.com/rider/gino-bartali/1954>
- Tinaglia, S. (2022, April 21). *Cycling-legend-turned-war-hero Gino Bartali* . Retrieved from Italian American Veterans Museum: <https://iavmuseum.org/cycling-legend-turned-war-hero-gino-bartali/>
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (2025, March 27). *Righteous Among the Nations* . Retrieved from Holocaust Encyclopedia: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/righteous-among-the-nations>
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.). *Gino Bartali* . Retrieved from Holocaust Encyclopedia: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/gino-bartali>
- Visit Tuscany. (n.d.). *"Gino Bartali" Cycling Museum* . Retrieved from Visit Tuscany: <https://www.visittuscany.com/en/attractions/gino-bartali-cycling-museum/>
- Yad Vashem. (n.d.). *Gino Bartali*. Retrieved from Yad Veshem. The World Holocaust Remembrance Center: <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/righteous-sportsmen/bartali.asp>