

EHRI helps uncover an important aspect of the history of Risiera di San Sabba unknown for 80 years



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On 7 December 2023, the Museum and National Monument of the [Risiera di San Sabba](#), one of the most important places of Holocaust Memory in Italy, opened an important exhibition: *7 December 1943: Destination Lager*. The exhibition sheds light on the first months of Nazi occupation of Trieste and commemorates the 80th anniversary of the first transport of racial deportees from the area. The rigorous research carried out by several historians, including Matteo Perissinotto and Tullia Catalan from the University of Trieste, significantly contributed to this exhibition. Because of their work, it has been possible to name, for the first time and with a high level of confidence, 157 Jews that were part of the first deportation from Trieste on 7 December 1943. As referenced in the exhibition's accompanying [catalogue](#), the EHRI portal was crucial in finding key sources that helped them reconstruct the first convoy of Jews deported from Trieste. Descendants of deportees worked closely with the exhibition team to share family photos and memories, making them accessible both to the public and to scholars. This critical research helped them better understand the fate of their loved ones. Approximately 80.000 people visited the exhibition, among which visitors to the city, local residents and school children, who will have all learned more about this dark chapter of Trieste's history.

"Finding these documents in the EHRI-Portal opened our minds."

Tullia Catalan,
Associate Professor of Contemporary History
University of Trieste

The border area of Trieste is known for its complex history as well as its ethnically and culturally mixed population (mainly Italians, Slovans and Croats). In September 1943, the German *Wehrmacht* armed forces occupied the territory in and around Trieste and made the city the capital of their regional *Operational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral* (OZAK). Buildings of Risiera San Sabba, a former rice mill, were used by the Nazis as a concentration camp for political prisoners and as a transit camp for Jews, most of whom were deported to Auschwitz. The camp was the only camp inside Italy that also had cremation facilities. After the capitulation of the German forces in May 1945, the area was liberated by Yugoslav troops and briefly under Yugoslavian administration for 40 days before coming under Allied occupation for nearly 10 years. During that time, Trieste was a de facto free state, and it was only in October 1954 when it was partitioned between Italy and Slovenia. Researching and documenting what happened precisely in the first month of Nazi occupation provides a stark example of the challenges of dispersed documentation faced by historians of the Holocaust, as highlighted in the exhibition's catalogue:



Cover page of the exhibition catalogue.

"The archives are spread across a number of countries: Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia and the United States. Some of the documentation was destroyed by the Nazis when they fled from the Yugoslav troops who liberated Trieste. Furthermore, for several decades the city preferred to remove from collective memory the violence of the German occupation and the fascist collaboration and, as a result, several archives (such as that of the Police Headquarters) are lamentably flawed."

Matteo Perissinotto first discovered EHRI and its services when he helped the long-time EHRI partner Foundation Jewish Contemporary Documentation Center (CDEC) to run several workshops in 2017.



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Matteo is a researcher at the University of Trieste affiliated with the Italian funded project "Italian Cold War Borders. A new Research Framework on Transformation during Détente". Alongside his colleague Tullia Catalan, he is closely involved with CDEC, providing expert advice for the Trieste border area and supporting reviews of CDEC's work. Tullia Catalan is Associate Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Trieste. Her research interests include the history of the European Jews from the emancipation until today; narratives and representations of antisemitism and antislavism in the Upper Adriatic area; and public history in border regions. When Matteo became principal researcher for the exhibition and first considered how to find out who exactly was among the first convey of Jews deported from Trieste on 7 December 1943, he consulted with Tullia about how to best approach the task. Since learning about the EHRI Portal at a workshop in April 2017 that took place in Trieste, "Holocaust in Southern Europe", Tullia always starts with consulting the EHRI Portal when designing her next research project. Searching the EHRI Portal for "Risiera di San Sabba", they found [comprehensive information](#) about potentially relevant archival material held by the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia that was collected or created in connection with the activities of the Slovenian post-war internal affairs authorities. They decided to visit the archives to consult these documents that might help them piece together the puzzle of who was on the first convey deported in December 1943. Tullia refers to the moment of finding this information in the EHRI Portal as a moment that opened their minds: it made them realise that there were OZAK documents in Slovenia which could help them solve the puzzle.



Matteo Perissinotto

Once at the archives, they found among the archival material documents from the Gestapo and Sicherheitspolizei archives that contained names of the people arrested and imprisoned during the first months of the occupation. Already known sources held in the archive of the prisons of Trieste (preserved in the city's State Archives), the CDEC database in Milan and the Arolsen Archives, on the other hand, provided the names of prisoners still in jail after the first deportation in December 1943. They got in touch with Laura Brazzo, Head of the Archives and Digital Library at CDEC, to help them verify the accuracy of the information contained in the documents. Together with Annalisa Di Fant, historian and curator at the Jewish Community Museum of Trieste "Carlo and Vera Wagner", they carefully compared and consulted these documents to ascertain who was part of the first deportation in December 1943, which was not known throughout the 80 years that have passed since the deportation took place.

Because of this important work, carried out by a transdisciplinary team of historians, archivists and museum experts, we now know which prisoners were the victims of the first racial deportation from Trieste on 7 December 1943. We also know, however, that other Jews were on this first convoy who were, at that time, not imprisoned. The reconstructed transportation list of 7 December 1943 is thus only approximate, but it provides invaluable information to the descendants who know now what exactly happened to their loved ones whose memories they have kept alive over the last 80 years.

Following the discovery of the archival material in the National Archives of Slovenia, Matteo has won a [visiting fellowship at the Institute of Contemporary History in Ljubljana](#) to consult other important material that sheds light on the deportations and executions that took place in Trieste during the second world war. It is very likely that additional material that sheds further light on the deportations from Trieste lie hidden in archives across Slovenia and Serbia and are not yet available via the EHRI Portal. The story of how EHRI has helped uncover an important aspect of the deportation of Jews from OZAK unknown for 80 years stresses the need for further additions of archival material to the EHRI Portal, and indeed the need for EHRI.



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