

First Place Winner
Division I – 7-9th Grades
Racing Courage
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The 1938 *Tour de France* was the last prestigious bike race in France before German forces came, bringing the war with them. The culture and landscape that had existed for generations among France's many towns, cities and chapels were shattered. Poverty was spread within all social classes, hope was lost and resistance was drowned. Spies hid in every town. The only place free from emissaries was the Catholic church. The Church hid hundreds of Jews from the ongoing hunt led by German forces. The Jewish population within the catholic churches overflowed and all of the Jews needed safe transportation to allied held territories. Falsified identification papers were written, the key problem was to transport these illegal documents to their Jewish recipients. Amidst this desperate time of need, Gino Bartali demonstrated moral courage by transporting counterfeit identification cards hidden within the frame of his bike along a dangerous 100-mile route from Florence to Assisi. The consequence of being caught by the Germans with these illegal documents was execution.

Gino Bartali was born into poverty in rural Tuscany and slowly built up his racing career until the war came. He was hailed the king of cycling when he won the 1938 *Tour de France* easing civil tensions within Italy. Soon afterward France and other countries near Germany were snatched out of their government's hands and into the Nazis. Many Jews looked to the Catholic church for safety. The Catholic Cardinal of Florence called out to the famous Gino Bartali to transport falsified identification cards to Florence's neighboring town, Assisi. With the false identification cards hidden within the frame of his bike, he rode the 100-mile route around 40 times. One historian noted, "If he was caught helping the Jews, there was a very real possibility that the Germans would imprison him, execute him on the spot, or send him to a concentration camp" (1 Parris). If this was not yet enough risk, he also sheltered a Jewish family known as the Goldbergs in a guest house. If he was caught for these illegal actions, he and his family would be sentenced to death or sent to a concentration camp where they would slowly die of disease and starvation. By helping these Jews survive he was placing his family in a position of constant peril. Even though he was risking his loved ones for complete strangers his moral convictions drove him to help those in need.

On one unhappy day in June of 1944, a letter dreaded by any anti-fascist protestor was placed at Gino Bartali's doorstep. It was a summons to Villa Triste. Known as the house of sorrow by the public because of the screams emanating out of the cellars, there the Italian fascists interrogated the civilians of Florence to gather information about anti-fascist protestors. Within these walls, one encountered "the sour smell of old blood and rancid sweat. Their [people's] feet crunched as they walked on the floor soiled with a mix of coal debris and blood" (2 Mccoccon). Many of the people summoned came out a shadow of who they once were because of the horrifying torture methods. Bartali was fearful of the outcome. If something happened to him, his pregnant wife and child would not be able to support themselves. Within a few days, Gino was released with no serious physical injuries, but his experience had stained his

memory forever due to his horrifying experience. Even after this experience, Gino continued his dangerous endeavors to assist Jews in the Florentine community.

Gino Bartali's actions of moral courage have prompted me to take a stand against unjust practices since many in our world dismiss the massive issue of global warming. The few that do believe in it will not take the risk to stand up against the industrial companies. It is time for a change. Our society today is not unlike Gino Bartali's. Voices of millions are smothered under politics and money seeking minds. To speak against corporate companies prompts a conflict. In many countries, the government controls the people's voice. However, in America, we have freedom of speech, and we must use it. With Gino Bartali in mind, I use my poetry to warn others around me about climate change. In an attempt to initiate change, I wrote a poem and shared it with all of my family. Then, I gave each of my friends a copy and told them to share it with others. I learned from Gino Bartali that you can use your strength to benefit others. When I was spreading my thoughts with others I thought of Gino Bartali and how he distributed hope throughout Italy to hundreds of people he didn't even know. Whenever I read my poems to people with conflicting ideas I remember Gino Bartali. He spoke for the silenced world without words.

Gino Bartali never conceded to the fascist pressures of the Nazi government. He fought them secretly with his passion-cycling. According to Bartali, "Everyone in their life has his own particular way of expressing life's purpose - the lawyer [and] his eloquence, the painter [and] his palette, and the man of letters his pen from which the quick words of his story flow. I have my bicycle" (3 Bartali). Gino Bartali's actions have urged others globally to take a stand and show no fear. His actions of moral courage have caused a chain reaction through time by inspiring others to lend a hand and never give up. He has prompted millions by never giving in to governmental pressures and continuing to help others through his cycling passion. He has shown the world that even if you can't speak, you can use your passion to divide the tenebrosity of hate and open a world of peace. It only takes one person with courage, to inspire nations to come.

Bibliography

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