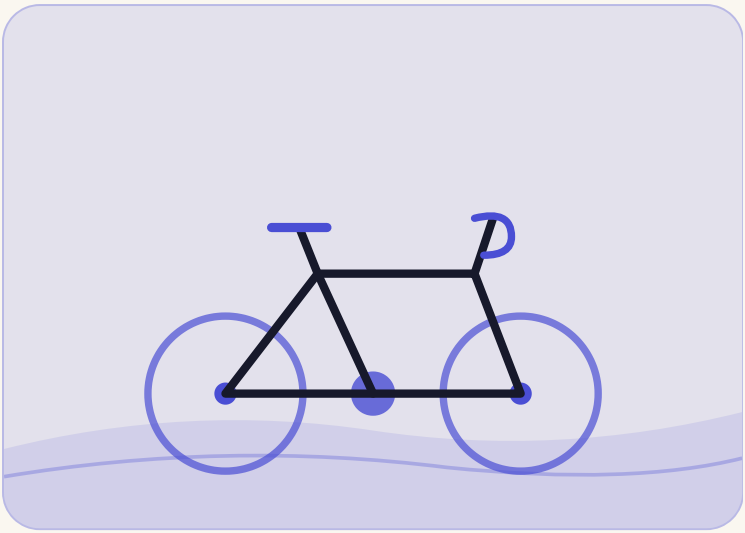

ITALY

# The cyclist who carried secrets in his bike

A Tour de France champion rode through Nazi checkpoints on training rides. Hidden inside his bicycle frame were forged papers that saved hundreds of lives.

| | |
|---|---|
| WHERE | Florence to Assisi |
| WHO | Gino Bartali, a cycling champion who used training rides to rescue hundreds of people |
| WHEN | 1943 to 1944 |

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

# The story

In the late 1930s, Gino Bartali was one of the most famous athletes in Europe. He grew up poor near Florence. He worked as a boy in a small bicycle workshop. When he began racing, he was unstoppable on steep mountain roads.

In 1938, he won the Tour de France. The race was the toughest bicycle contest in the world. He returned home to Italy as a national hero. Italian leaders wanted him to praise their fascist rulers. Bartali refused. He was a devout Catholic. He believed all people had equal worth in the eyes of God.

Then the Second World War engulfed Europe.

## A dangerous request

In September 1943, Nazi forces took control of northern and central Italy. Armed soldiers roamed the streets. Jewish men, women, and children were hunted down. They faced arrest and deportation to death camps.

An underground rescue network formed in Florence. The group was led by the local archbishop and a local rabbi. They hid Jewish families in safe houses, farms, and quiet church convents.

The hidden families needed new identities to survive. Secret printers in the town of Assisi agreed to make forged identity papers. The printers also made fake

travel passes.

Assisi was more than one hundred and seventy kilometres away from Florence across rugged hills. The roads were blocked by military checkpoints. If soldiers caught anyone carrying fake documents, they executed them on the spot.

The rescue group needed a courier who could travel fast without raising suspicion.

The archbishop called Gino Bartali to his office and asked for his help.

Bartali knew the danger. He had a young wife and a baby son. Getting caught meant certain death. Yet he did not hesitate. He agreed immediately.

## The hollow tubes

Bartali came up with a brilliant plan.

He continued to train every day for future bicycle races. He rode out into the countryside wearing his official cycling jersey. His name was printed in bold letters across his chest.

Before each trip, he met his secret contacts in Florence. They handed him passport photographs and false papers rolled tightly into thin tubes.

Bartali unscrewed the metal seat post of his racing bicycle. He slid the rolled papers down into the hollow frame. He also hid documents inside the handlebars.

Then he set off alone on the road.

The ride from Florence to Assisi and back was brutally long. It stretched over three hundred and fifty kilometres. The route crossed steep mountain passes and dusty dirt roads.

Bartali pedalled through pouring rain and bitter wind. When German patrols ordered him to halt at roadblocks, he acted calm.

The soldiers instantly recognized the great champion. They crowded around him and asked for his autograph.

Whenever a guard stepped forward to touch his racing bicycle, Bartali spoke up quickly.

He warned the guards not to touch the metal parts. He told them the bicycle was adjusted to the millimeter for top racing speed. He claimed that even a light touch would ruin his balance.

The soldiers believed him. They backed away. They stamped his travel pass and waved him through.

> **"Good is something you do, not something you talk about. Some medals are pinned to your soul, not to your jacket."**
>
> GINO BARTALI, SPEAKING TO HIS SON ANDREA

Bartali arrived in Assisi tired and covered in road dust. He pulled up at the church convent. Nuns and monks welcomed him inside.

He pulled out the rolled documents from his bicycle frame. The workers pasted the photographs onto fresh identity cards and stamped them.

Then Bartali loaded the finished fake passports back into his bike. He turned around and pedalled all the way home to Florence.

He made these perilous journeys dozens of times over many months.

He also hid a Jewish family in his own basement in Florence. The Goldenberg family stayed there safely until allied troops freed the city.

| 1938 | 350km | 800+ |
| --- | --- | --- |
| the year he won his first Tour | the distance of his round trips | lives saved by the network |

## The silent hero

The network helped save more than eight hundred Jewish people from the death camps.

After the war ended, Bartali returned to professional cycling. In 1948, ten years after his first victory, he won the Tour de France a second time.

Yet throughout his life, he never boasted about what he did during the war. He never gave speeches about his rescue trips. He never told reporters.

Years later, his son Andrea learned about the secret rides. When Andrea asked about them, Bartali told him to stay quiet. He said real heroes are those who suffer in their souls, not those who seek applause.

Bartali died in the year 2000 at the age of 85.

Only after his death did the full scale of his bravery emerge. In 2013, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Yad Vashem, named him Righteous Among the Nations.

His bicycle carried him up the highest peaks in sports. But its greatest race was run in secret, pedalling for human life.

## How it unfolded

- **1938** Bartali wins his first Tour de France as a young athlete.
- **1943** Nazi forces occupy northern Italy, and Bartali joins the rescue ring.
- **1944** He carries forged identity papers across hundreds of miles.
- **1948** Bartali wins the Tour de France a second time, a decade after his first.
- **2013** Yad Vashem honors him as Righteous Among the Nations.

CHAPTER TWO

# What makes it special

Most sports stars use their fame to gain comfort and safety. Gino Bartali used his fame to risk his own life for strangers. He turned his training rides into secret

rescue trips and never spoke about his heroism.

OUR TAKE

*True courage does not ask for an audience. Bartali showed that real heroism is done for others, without expecting praise or reward.*

CHAPTER THREE

# What we can learn

### 1 Use your unique gifts for others

Bartali could not fight an army, but he could ride a bicycle faster and farther than anyone else.

**Try this:** Identify one skill you do well and use it to help someone in your circle this week.

### 2 Keep quiet about your good deeds

He believed that boasting about helping others robs the deed of its purity.

**Try this:** Do one kind deed for a coworker or neighbor this week without telling anyone else about it.

### 3 Find courage when principles are tested

He had a young family and everything to lose, but he refused to stand aside while neighbors were hunted.

**Try this:** Speak up calmly for someone being treated unfairly at work or in your neighborhood this week.

### 4 Let consistency carry the weight

He did not save hundreds of lives in one afternoon. He pedalled long mountain roads trip after trip.

**Try this:** Break a daunting task into small daily efforts and complete one leg of it every day this week.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

## Some medals are pinned to your soul, not to your jacket.

## Sources


**BBC News**
Gino Bartali: The cyclist who saved Jews in wartime Italy

**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**
Gino Bartali

**Holocaust Memorial Day Trust**
Gino Bartali


**Fact-check note:** Bartali kept his wartime missions secret during his life. Exact numbers of people saved are estimates from historians and survivors. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.