

The Ghosts of Rome, by Joseph O'Connor

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

The Ghosts of Rome, Joseph O'Connor's well researched historical novel, is set in Nazi-occupied Rome during the spring of 1944. Its story is based on the Italian Resistance initiative to hide refugees and help escaped Allied soldiers.

A band of escape-line activists, who call themselves "The Choir," smuggle fugitives out of Rome through an underground network. Their leader is Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, an Irish clergyman assigned to the Vatican. His disparate team of supporters include British diplomat Sir Francis D'Arcy Osborne and Delia Murphy-Kiernan whose husband is *de facto* Irish ambassador to the Holy See.

The heart and soul of "The Choir" is Contessa Giovanna Landini, an elegant, aristocratic 34-year-old noblewoman. Beautiful and resourceful, the Contessa had inherited the magnificent Roman Palazzo Landini from her late husband.

Fugitives from prisoner-of-war and concentration camps knew they were "one moment from betrayal. Living every second in fear." They had heard that if "they could make it to Vatican City, there's a chance of being saved. Find Contessa Landini. She'll know what to do."

SS Commander Paul Hauptmann, in charge of the Nazi occupation of Rome, is tasked with eliminating "The Choir" completely by any means. Hauptmann had requisitioned Palazzo Landini as his personal residence. He understands that failure is not an option; Hauptmann's wife and children in Berlin are being watched by the Gestapo. Warnings are posted around Roman neighborhoods: "Abetting a fugitive is punishable by death."

Despite the enormous risks they encounter, the Contessa and Monsignor O'Flaherty continue to harbor escapees and wounded Allied pilots who had been shot down by German aircraft. Among the hiding places in bombed out Rome was the abandoned opera house whose rooftop afforded an escape route should a Gestapo raid occur. After Commander Hauptmann hears reports that American forces are marching toward Rome, his efforts to quash "The Choir" become ever more desperate.

Throughout *The Ghosts of Rome*, the majestic "Eternal City" itself is an indelible character. "To a Roman, spring is lovely," the Contessa muses, "the soprano of the seasons. Our gracious parks, our glorious gardens shake awake and don their flirtish finery. Old churches glimpsed through blossoms. Sunlight through stained glass. Warmer, richer light gilding frescos and fountains. Chianti-tinted apartment blocks and cream-hued cathedrals. Dawn rising earlier on a blushing Colosseum."