HISTORY This Week EP 325: The Church Kidnaps Edgardo Mortara
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. June 23, 1858. I'm Sally Helm.

Just after nightfall, there’s a knock at the door.

Who could that be, thinks Marianna Mortara. She’s sitting at the living room table in the small apartment above her husband’s upholstery shop. An apartment that holds all ten members of their family. Her husband and their oldest son are out walking in Bologna, but the other seven kids are here. Six-year-old Edgardo, asleep in his parents’ bed. Six-month-old Imelda, who’s still nursing. The eleven-year twins, sitting at the table with their mother, learning to knit.

A few moments later…footsteps on the back stairs…and another knock on the door. Who is it, she says, nervously. A voice calls back: Let us in.

It’s the police. Marianna is panicking now. She tries to put them off, but the officers insist. They come into the crowded apartment and tell her to list the names of her children. She won’t do it. Just then, her husband Momolo returns. He tries to calm things down. Okay okay, he says. I’ll list everyone in the house. Starting with himself and Marianna, right down to baby Imelda.

As Momolo talks, an officer is ticking off names on a list. And one of those names is underlined. Let me see the children, the officer says. Ricardo. Ernesta. Erminia. And when they come to Edgardo, the six-year-old, asleep in his parents’ bed…the officers pause. David Kertzer, who’s researched this whole scene, described what happens next. Momolo demands to know what’s going on…

David Kertzer: And the chief policeman turns to him and says, I’m sorry to tell you this senor Mortara, but you have been betrayed. And he says, well, what do you mean I’ve been betrayed? And the policeman says, your son has been baptized.

Sally Helm: Marianna knows what this means. And she begins to scream. We’re sorry, the police tell her. But we’ve been ordered to take him away.

Today: The Pope, the founding of Italy, and a six-year-old Jewish boy. Why did the Catholic Church order the kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara? And how would that decision end up re-making the map of modern Europe?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Momolo and Mariana Mortara are Italian Jews. Two of just about 200 Jews living in Bologna in 1858. At that time, Bologna is under the control of the Pope.

David Kertzer: People think of Italy as having existed for hundreds of years, but in fact, Italy's a recent creation.
Sally Helm: Brown University Professor David Kertzer spoke with us from modern day Italy, where he’s done a ton of research, including years spent deep in the Vatican’s own archives. He told us, back in 1858, a large swath of what is now called “Italy” was known instead as the papal states.

David Kertzer: For over a thousand years, the whole center of Italy was ruled by what became known as the Pope King.

Sally Helm: The Pope King. A religious and civil ruler. The Church makes the laws. And that is not good news for Jewish people living in the papal states. Catholic doctrine in 1858 states that Jews are collectively responsible for the death of Jesus.

Italian Jews like Momolo and Mariana Mortara can't attend university. They're excluded from most occupations. At one point, Jews are even forced to wear red ribbons atop their hats, so that Christians can avoid them. And for the same reason, they're confined to ghettos.

David Kertzer: Not only were Jews required to live, have their homes in the ghetto, which was very crowded and so limited space, the Jews were required to pay the Christian gatekeepers to lock them in every night.

Sally Helm: Required to pay Christian gatekeepers to lock them in every night?

David Kertzer: Yes. That was one of the requirements of the Jewish community.

Sally Helm: Bologna doesn't have its own ghetto--for a long time, no Jews lived there at all. But a few have moved to the city in relatively recent years. Including Momolo and Marianna.

They try to lay low. Keep under the radar. Which is why it's such a shock when the papal police come knocking at their door.

David Kertzer: Let's go back to that evening, June 23rd, 1858.

Sally Helm: Momolo Mortara has been out in Bologna. And when he returns home:

David Kertzer: There are a bunch of police surrounding their building, plus the two policemen in their apartment and he demands to know what's happening.

Sally Helm: The policemen tell him: six-year-old Edgardo, your son, has been baptized. Here’s why that matters: it's the official doctrine of the church that a baptized child should be considered Catholic. And therefore, can't be brought up by Jews.

David Kertzer: Even though the Jews were their own parents, they had to be taken away. In fact, this is one of the greatest fears Jews in the papal states had lived with, that one night the police would show up at their door and claim one of their children had been baptized.

Sally Helm: It's happened before. And now, for the Mortaras, that fear is coming true.
Relatives begin to congregate at the Mortara home. And two of Edgardo's uncles rush off to San Domenico Church to talk to the Inquisitor. The inquisitor is the official in charge of rooting out acts that run counter to Catholic doctrine.

**David Kertzer:** These could range from you know, swearing, taking the Lord's name in vain to living together without being married.

**Sally Helm:** And he oversees this question of baptized children.

It's around 11pm. The Inquisitor admits the Mortara uncles and listens to their pleas. Then he tells them: this boy has been baptized. It's my duty, under church law, to insist that he be removed from your family's care. You should just accept it.

The Mortara uncles beg him: *Please. Just give us a little time to get this straightened out.* So, the inquisitor says... fine.

**David Kertzer:** Gave him 24 hours to try to show that all this was a mistake.

**Sally Helm:** The timer starts right now. T-minus 24 hours until the Mortaras lose their son.

The inquisitor orders the police to stay at the Mortara home all night, watching.

**David Kertzer:** The inquisitor was worried, of course that the family, if given 24 hours would just escape with their child. In fact, he was afraid that the Jewish parents would kill their child rather than allow the child to be taken by the church. And so, it's a very painful night because there are two policemen in the bedroom with Edgardo and his parents.

**Sally Helm:** Early the next morning, the Mortaras try to talk to some high-ranking church officials. But the inquisitor has warned those officials about what's going on. And so, perhaps to avoid confronting this desperate family:

**David Kertzer:** They both arranged to be away.

**Sally Helm:** By the time the Mortaras give up on this, it's already afternoon. Momolo isn't sure what else to do.

**Sally Helm:** Wow so almost half his time is gone.

**David Kertzer:** Yes, so Momolo makes one last attempt.

**Sally Helm:** Momolo goes to the Inquisitor himself. *Please,* he begs. *Tell me who says that they baptized my son.*
David Kertzer: And the inquisitor says, ‘oh, that's a secret of my office. I can't tell you. There's nothing I can do.’

Sally Helm: And after that, there's nothing Momolo can think to do, but wait.

The Mortaras send their other children to stay with a relative. Edgardo's mother, Marianna, is frantic with grief.

David Kertzer: She gets put in a wagon and goes off to a friend's place. Neighbors report the shrieking and wailing of the mother as she was leaving.

Sally Helm: That evening, Momolo holds Edgardo in his arms until the moment the marshal says: time's up.

David Kertzer: The child Edgardo clings to his father and the policemen in charge, basically has to pull Edgardo away from his father, go down the stairs and put him into the carriage. The neighbors are lining the street, by now it's become a big scene and Momolo, actually faints.

Sally Helm: His son… is gone.

This is a story about beliefs. The people responsible for taking Edgardo believed devoutly, sincerely, that what they did was right.

But Momolo believes: my son should be with me. And he thinks, there must still be a way to get him back.

Momolo remains stuck on this question of who baptized his son. Or says they did. He's clinging to this hope: if I can find that person, maybe I can get Edgardo back on a technicality. Prove he wasn't rightly baptized after all.

David Kertzer: Suspicion quickly begins to fall on family servants because historically many of these cases have in fact involved the Christian maids in these families

Sally Helm: Many Jewish families have Christian maids. For a practical reason. Jews who observe the Sabbath are not supposed to do work on Saturdays. But their Christian servants can. It's technically against the rules for Jews and Christians to associate so closely, but the rule isn't being enforced.

So, the Mortaras start asking questions.

David Kertzer: They've kind of sent out feelers around they get a report that a previous maid that they had had, when Edgardo was very little, was said to have claimed to have baptized the boy.

Sally Helm: She's a young woman named Anna Morisi, who had worked for the Mortaras as a teenager. She was from a poor family in a small hillside town near Bologna. And that's where she now lives.
**David Kertzer:** San Giovanni in Persiceto is the name of this town. It's heavily agricultural like many hill towns, that surround Bologna. So too had family members go off to interview her.

**Sally Helm:** It's Wednesday morning. Market day. So, this little town is buzzing with activity. The two Mortaras easily slip in unnoticed. They find Anna Morisi in her family's home. It's a humble place:

**David Kertzer:** Very little natural light and, floors of dirt and she's actually trembling and apparently bathed in tears. When they go in to see her. Very fearful knowing what's happened to Edgardo that they've come to somehow harm her. And they try to calm her down, saying they mean her no harm. They just need to understand what's happened. And so, she tells the following story.

She says that when Edgardo was about 12 months old, she was almost sure that child was about to die, that he was so sick, and she went to the local grocer and reported that he was ill and wondered whether he should get baptized because she had learned that unless you're baptized, you'll live an eternity in hell.

**Sally Helm:** But if the sick little boy was baptized, he'd live in heaven when he died.

**David Kertzer:** And she says the grocer said, oh, she should baptize this child and told her it's very simple formula for how you do it. So, she went back and in the kitchen, when no one was looking, she took some water from a bucket, sprinkled it on Edgardo was 12 months old and pronounced the single sentence, a formula, 'I baptize you in the name of the father, the son, and the holy ghost,' and then kind of nothing more of it. The child got better. And, what apparently happened, she said was that years later, she confided this story in another servant and the next thing she knew she'd been summoned by the inquisitor into his office to tell her story.

**Sally Helm:** The Mortaras ride away from the humble hillside village with new ammunition. Now, they can investigate Anna Morisi's story. And try to discredit her.

They are no longer fighting this battle on their own. The story of Edgardo's kidnapping has spread far and wide in the papal states.

This is all happening at a time when the political world is in turmoil.

The pope's power has lately been shaky. All across Europe, countries are putting more separation between church and state. Jewish people are gaining freedoms. And in Italy, there's a strong nationalist movement brewing. Its goal is to unify the Italian states under a single, secular ruler. In 1848, a decade ago, that movement even drove the pope into exile. But he managed to claw his way back.

**David Kertzer:** The Pope called on the armies of the Catholic countries of Europe to come to his aid to restore him to power. And this is what the French army did.

**Sally Helm:** So, he's in power, thanks to the French. But he's still weak. Some segments of the press are sympathetic to Italian Nationalism. And they seize on the story of Edgardo Mortara.
**David Kertzer:** Stories about how this child is taken from his weeping parents and is crying out, please don't take me.

**Sally Helm:** In Rome, an influential man is closely following the story. His name is Sabatino Scaggizcio. He's the lay leader of Rome's 4,000-member Jewish community and he's been getting lots of letters about the case. Scaggizcio and his community occupy a unique position among Jews in Italy. The Vatican is in Rome. It's the center of papal power. And Scaggizcio's job is to work directly with the Pope. He's been hearing from people who are angry about what happened to Edgardo Mortara. And he says: leave all this to me. He plans to work quietly behind the scenes to get this figured out. But the story just won't stay quiet.

The Church is getting worried. It's a bad time for them to be facing a popular outcry.

**David Kertzer:** And so, there begins to be in the Catholic press, a wholly different account of what had happened. An account where, as the child is being taken by the policemen in a carriage to Rome, the impact of his initial baptism kind of makes itself felt. He wants to stop at practically every church along the way to go in to read Christian prayer books. And admire images of Mary.

**Sally Helm:** Six-year-old Edgardo Mortara has landed right in the center of an information war – a war of symbols and dueling stories.

But Momolo and Mariana Mortara still just want their son back. They get word that he's being held in Rome. And Momolo decides, *I'm going to get him.*

Sabatino Scaggizcio tries to persuade him to stay in Bologna. He's worried that a grief-stricken father might take an aggressive approach and anger the pope. But Momolo won't be dissuaded. In early July, he hires a carriage and travels to a place Italians call the Eternal City.

**David Kertzer:** There's no evidence that Momolo had ever been in Rome before. What he would have seen first of all, this kind of fetid ghetto area, crammed with all these, uh, the Jews were closed in. It would certainly have been a shock to him.

**Sally Helm:** Edgardo, of course, is being held outside the ghetto. The Church has a whole building that's basically a conversion center. Dedicated to pressuring Jews into becoming Christians. That's where Edgardo is.

**David Kertzer:** The Casa de Catechumene, the house of the catechumens, actually almost a stone's throw from the Coliseum. So, in central, Rome.

**Sally Helm:** I guess when you say the house of the Catechumens, maybe because it sounds like catacombs, I sort of picture like a, I don't know, cavernous, dreary kind of environment. Is that right? Like what was sort of—?

**David Kertzer:** No, this was just a church building. It was nothing particularly, larger, fabulous but it was a place that the Jews lived in great fear of, because of exactly the kind of thing that happened to Edgardo, having happened to so many other Jewish children.
Sally Helm: Potential converts are kept inside that building. Parents aren't allowed to visit regularly—the thought was this might cause the kids to resist conversion. But that doesn't stop Momolo from trying. He heads straight to the Vatican.

David Kertzer: The marble floors, the frescoed ceilings, the famous artwork, the voluminous halls. It all would have seemed incredibly grand and majestic to him.

Sally Helm: Momolo gets a meeting with the Cardinal who serves as the pope’s secretary of state. He knows that the politics of this are looking bad for the church. So, he makes an exception. He says that Momolo can visit his son during his stay in Rome.

In the house of the catechumens, father and son embrace.

David Kertzer: Momolo himself is crying. He tells his son, I'm not going to leave Rome without you, you're going to come back.

Sally Helm: The rector, the priest in charge, watches their whole interaction. Momolo will later say that young Edgardo seemed to fear the man.

Momolo stays in Rome for several weeks, trying in vain to get his son released. Visiting him whenever he can. Then in September, Momolo gets a letter from his family, back in Bologna. His business is failing. So is Marianna's health. "The one medicine that would bring her back to life," they say, is news that Edgardo will come home. But her husband can't give her that news. Edgardo remains confined inside the House of Catechumens. So Momolo brings himself home to Bologna instead.

Meanwhile, Scazzocchio, Rome's Jewish lay leader, is trying to tackle things the old-fashioned way. He writes up a report arguing—in the pope's own language—that Edgardo should be returned to his parents. He cites things in church doctrine, like the father's authority over the child, to back this up. And he sends it off to the Vatican, hoping that the pope might be convinced.

Back in Bologna, Momolo gets some news. He talks to the town grocer—the one who supposedly told Anna Morisi how to baptize baby Edgardo. And the grocer says: I never spoke to her about this child. I certainly never told her to baptize him.

David Kertzer: So, one can only imagine, you know, is he standing behind his counter of fresh fruits so on denying that Anna Morisi’s his account is as accurate. So, his testimony is notarized and sent along to the Vatican as well.

Sally Helm: But the Vatican looks at this, and Scazzocchio's report...and rejects both of them. So Scazzocchio tells Momolo, come back to Rome. And bring Marianna. He thinks the sight of a mother in despair might break this deadlock.

The Mortaras arrive at the house of the catechumens to see Edgardo.

David Kertzer: But the rector spirits him away.
Sally Helm: The rector doesn't want Marianna anywhere near her son.

David Kertzer: He's been working so hard to get the child to be good about leaving his family, becoming Christian, leaving his religion that if his mother embraced him, all this could be for naught.

Sally Helm: So, he flees, with Edgardo, to a nearby town. The Mortaras find out where they’ve gone and chase after them.

David Kertzer: And, as they get there, they catch a glimpse of Edgardo leaving the church with the rector.

Sally Helm: They try to follow their son, but the authorities stop them, and drive them out of town.

David Kertzer: When the Cardinal secretary of state learns about this, he's horrified.

Sally Helm: It looks terrible for the church. The Cardinal tells the rector: bring Edgardo back to Rome at once.

David Kertzer: There's this very teary embrace of Edgardo with his mother. Marianna prepares her own account of this dramatic meeting with her child, that tear-soaked meeting. But the Catholic press puts out a wholly different account where Edgardo was begging the rector not to allow the parents to come see him unless they too see the light and convert.

Sally Helm: Soon, back at the Vatican, the Cardinal secretary of state is starting to wonder if all this is worth it. There's an international outcry over this case. The French ambassador is saying, this is upsetting our citizens. In December 1858, the New York Times prints over 20 stories about the Mortaras. A rally in San Francisco brings out over 3000 people, calling for the boy's return.

So, the cardinal goes to the pope, and says: should we just send the boy back to his parents? Let this one go?

David Kertzer: And the Pope responds, no, I have a higher duty. My greatest duty is not politics or the papal states. It's to Church doctrine.

Sally Helm: Here we return to the issue of belief.

Pope Pius the ninth believes his calling is higher than politics—it’s to enforce the rules of religion. He also believes that he can interpret those rules better than anyone else. In fact, he would invent the notion of papal infallibility—the idea that, when it comes to Church doctrine, the pope is never wrong. And Kertzer said, Pope Pius IX’s time in exile back in 1848—it changed him. For the worse.

David Kertzer: Certainly, in his early days as Pope was seen as someone who was a very good person who was very compassionate, and the experience of 1848, 1849, really changed his
personality. I think he became a much harder kind of person in many ways afterwards. He was prone to kind of emotional outbursts.

Sally Helm: But he is also acting from compassion. He's grown close to the young Edgardo. The boy has even taken to calling the pope his other father.

David Kertzer: And the Pope, I think, thinks of himself that way as well.

Sally Helm: When Scanzocchio has a meeting with the pope for the new year, it's clear that the Mortaras are stuck. Pius the ninth shouts that Scanzocchio knows nothing about theology. Scanzocchio leaves the meeting in tears. Getting Edgardo back seems farther away than ever.

David Kertzer: Really there's not much chance. Well, there is one chance.

Sally Helm: That chance... lies with France.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: It’s 1859. Half a year since Edgardo Mortara was taken from his family. And his father Momolo has tried almost everything he can think of to get his son back. But he has one last big idea.

It goes back to that moment ten years before, when the pope was ousted by revolutionaries. He was sent into exile, and only returned to power with the help of Catholic Europe. Austrian troops now enforce papal power in places like Bologna. And French troops defend the Pope in Rome.

David Kertzer: The Pope was really reliant on the French army to keep himself in power in the papal states.

Sally Helm: Momolo thinks: If I can get the French on my side, the pope will be left defenseless. He'll have to give in.

Someone else has the same idea. The prime minister of another Italian state—the Savoyard Kingdom in Turin, Count Camillo Cavour.

David Kertzer: He was short and squat and had a funny beard with no mustache, you know? And he was known as a pretty serious, you know, he's a political economist not a slap you on the back kind of fellow.

Sally Helm: Cavour is the mastermind behind the movement to unite the Italian states under a secular ruler. He looks at the Mortara case, and thinks, hmmm. I might be able to use this to take down the pope.

David Kertzer: This was not making the pope look very good. And they needed to discredit the idea that it was good thing for the Pope to not only be a religious leader, but also a king, a political leader.
Sally Helm: The Mortara affair is making that case for them.

Count Cavour seizes his moment. He arranges a secret meeting with Napoleon the third, the emperor of France.

David Kertzer: At which they will plan what's going to end up being the first major part of the demise of the papal states. So, you know, the big question is what motivates Napoleon the third to agree to this?

Sally Helm: Remember, up until now, Napoleon the third has been collaborating with the Austrians to keep the pope in power.

David Kertzer: So now, he is reversing course, he's lost, the willingness to keep supporting people power. And so, as a vestige of the medieval times, and what would more make it seem the message of medieval times then taking this Jewish child from his family on grounds of church doctrine.

Sally Helm: The Pope isn't blind to the plots forming against him. And the way the Mortara case is making him look. But still: he refuses to budge. He believes that baptism is a holy sacrament blessed by God and cannot be reversed.

David Kertzer: Later on, he says to Edgardo, ‘Edgardo, dear child, you have cost me dearly. You have cost me my kingdom.’ He realized that but he would not bend on a principle he regarded as absolutely central to his faith.

Sally Helm: Less than a year after Edgardo is taken from his family, the French army goes to war with the Austrian troops who had been their allies. By June 1859, Bologna has fallen. The Pope's power over the entire region is beginning to fracture. Eventually, it breaks. By 1870, the papal states cease to exist.

David Kertzer: Italy would not exist as a country without the fall of the papal states. But it's not just the papal states that are affected, but it's changing the whole political power dynamics in Europe.

Sally Helm: But what happens to Edgardo Mortara? The little boy who ended up at the center of this struggle for power?

David Kertzer: Well, this is one of the big mysteries of the case, really, because we know what comes out the other end, which is that he becomes a priest.

Sally Helm: The Jewish boy Edgardo comes to believe in--to preach--the Christian faith. It's a choice he makes himself. Though many have wondered how free he really was to choose.

David Kertzer: Here's this child who is getting the attention of nuns and other priests spending his days indoctrinating him with the notion that the Jews are basically evil. He also gets to spend some time in the Vatican, these incredibly magnificent circumstances, which he gets attention by the Pope who's also the king. So, it's not hard to see how a child of that age would come to change his views of his family and of his religion.
Sally Helm: This ending, Kertzer believes, is why the story tends to be overlooked in Italian history.

David Kertzer: It's embarrassing both from a church history point of view and from a Jewish history point of view. From the Jewish point of view, the problem is Edgardo was put up as this great Jewish martyr. But in the end, he becomes a priest and in fact goes around the world, trying to use his own inspirational story to convert Jews. From a church point of view, it's not something these days that most folks in the church really want to call attention to.

Sally Helm: So, sort of, no one has an incentive to keep it alive, even though it does have this huge impact on political history.

David Kertzer: Yes, I think the notion that you know, the main opponent of the Italian nation was the Pope. The nation was founded literally through a war with the Pope and the papacy and the papal states, but of course, Italy is still largely a Catholic country. It becomes kind of awkward history for Italians.

Sally Helm: Though perhaps less awkward now. The Church’s official view of Judaism is very different from what it was in 1858. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council produced an official document that repudiated the kind of anti-Semitism the Church had long been guilty of. The statement says, “God holds the Jews most dear."

Which goes to show: beliefs can change.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guest: David Kertzer, author of *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*. Kertzer’s latest book tells the story of the Pope’s role in World War II, using recently released documents from the Vatican archives.

David Kertzer: At the time was called the Vatican secret archive.

Sally Helm: The Vatican secret archive? It does sound very like what's in there?

David Kertzer: Yes. And Pope Francis recently renamed it after many centuries, maybe for public relations reasons.

Sally Helm: That book is called *The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini and Hitler*. 
This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O’Grady and sound designed by Dan Rosato. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Morgan Givens, Julie Magruder, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz. Yes, it takes a lot of producers to make this show.

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