

A Righteous Gentile: Pope Pius XII and the Jews

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attack on Pius, under His very windows: the Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy, published by Yale University Press, received heightened media attention as well. For Jewish leaders of a previous generation, this harsh portrayal of Pope Pius XII, and the campaign of vilification against him, would have been a source of profound shock and sadness. From the end of World War II until at least five years after his death, Pius Pope enjoyed an enviable reputation amongst Christians and Jews alike. At the end of the war, Pius XII was hailed as "the inspired marl prophet of victory," and "enjoyed near-universal acclaim for aiding European Jews." Numerous Jewish leaders, including Dr. Eliezer, Israel Meir Goren, Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, and Chief Rabbi of the Diaspora, Rabbi Isaac Herzog, who had been serving the Jewish community in the Holy Land since the war, had all praised the Pope for his role during the Holocaust. In his meticulously researched and comprehensive 1967 book, Three Popes and the Jews, the Israeli historian and diplomat Pinchas Lapide, who had served as the Israeli Counsel General in Milan, and had spoken with many Italian Jewish Holocaust survivors who owed their life to Pius, provided the empirical basis for their gratitude, concluding that Pius XII "was instrumental in saving at least 700,000, but probably as many as 860,000 Jews from certain death at Nazi hands." To this day, the lapide.volum.compels the definitive work.b.v.a Jewish scholar on the subject.

The Historical Record: What Pius XII Did for the Jews

Despite allegations and misrepresentations to the contrary, it can now be documented conclusively that Pope Pius XII was responsible for saving hundreds of thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. Although the villainous “silence” of the Pope has been repeatedly alleged since the early 1960’s, there is much historical evidence to confirm that he was not silent, that before and after he became Pope he spoke out against Hitler and that he was almost universally recognized, especially by the Nazis themselves, as an unrelenting opponent of the Nazi regime.

The London Times of October 1, 1942, explicitly praises him for his condemnation of Nazism and his public support for the Jewish victims of Nazi terror. "A study of the words which Pope Pius XII has addressed since his accession," noted the Times, "leaves no room for doubt. He condemns the worship of force and its concrete manifestations in the suppression of national liberties and in the persecution of the Jewish race."

So, too, was the Pope's Christmas message of the following year, Pope Pius XII's widely-discussed Christmas message of December 24, 1942, in which he expressed his passionate concern "for those hundreds of thousands who, without any fault of their own, sometimes only by reason of their nationality or race, are marked down for death or progressive extinction," was widely understood to be a very public denunciation of the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Indeed, the Nazis themselves interpreted the Pope's famous speech of Christmas 1942 as a clear condemnation of Nazism, and as a plea on behalf of Europe's Jews: "[His 'the Pope's'] speech is one long attack on everything we stand for—he is clearly speaking on behalf of the Jews—he is virtually accusing the German people of injustice toward the Jews, and makes himself the mouthpiece of the Jewish war criminals."

Critics of Pius minimize the significance of the Pope's 1942 Christmas message and fail to note (or analyze) the German reaction to the Pope's address. To do so, as Pius' defenders have aptly noted, would destroy their image of Pius as a "silent" Pope, and would demonstrate that the Nazis were very much aware of, and angered by, the Pope's condemnation of the Final Solution.

This awareness and danger on the part of the Nazis, moreover, had potentially dire consequences for the safety and security of Pope Pius XII during the remaining years of the war. The Pope's condemnation of Nazi actions against the Jews, led to considerable speculation at the time that Hitler would seek revenge on the papacy, and attack the Vatican.

There was, to be sure, ample historical precedent for Pius XII to have feared for his safety and security, if not his very life, should the Nazis be provoked to besiege the Vatican. As Rychlak has recently pointed out, the possibility of German invasion of Vatican City was very real: Napoleon had besieged the Vatican in 1809, capturing Pius VII at bayonet point and forcibly removing him from Rome. Pope Pius IX fled Rome for his life following the assassination of his chancellor, and Leo XIII was also driven into temporary exile during the late nineteenth century.

In fact, Hitler spoke publicly of wanting to enter the Vatican and "pack up that whole whoring rabble." It has long been known that at one point Hitler planned to kidnap the Pope and imprison him. And, as several scholars have noted, Pius XII knew that the Nazis had a plan to kidnap him. In addition to minutes from a meeting on July 26, 1943, in which Hitler openly discussed invading the Vatican, Ernst von Weizsacker, the German Ambassador to the Vatican, has written that he heard of Hitler's plan to kidnap Pius XII, and that he repeatedly warned the Pope and Vatican officials against accepting Berlin's offer to let the Nazis imprison him at the Vatican. Pius XII, however, refused to listen to the warnings and instead decided to remain in the Vatican.

In critically assessing what actions Pius XII might have taken, but did not take, on behalf of the Jews of Europe, his defenders and critics alike point to his "failure" to "excommunicate Hitler and other Nazi party leaders. Indeed, many of the Pope's "defenders," including this writer, wish (and believe) that papal excommunication should have at least been attempted. Such sentiments notwithstanding, there is abundant evidence to suggest that the excommunication of Hitler would have been a purely symbolic gesture, and that the Pope's failure to excommunicate Hitler was not a failure at all. In fact, the Pope's failure to excommunicate Hitler was a failure that was never made, and the act which had prevented the Holocaust, or significantly diminished it. On the contrary, there is much evidence to suggest that a formal order of excommunication might very well just have achieved the opposite.

When Don Luigi Sturzo, the founder of the Christian Democratic movement in Italy, was asked by Leon Kubovy, an official of the World Jewish Congress during the Holocaust era, why the Vatican did not excommunicate Hitler, he recalled the case of Napoleon and Queen Elizabeth I of England. “The time a monnal excommunication was pronounced against a state, pointing out that neither the pope nor the monarch could be held responsible for the actions of the state, was long ago,” Hitler would have replied. “The pope’s excommunication,” would have resulted in violent retaliation, the loss of many more Jewish lives, especially those then under the protection of the Church, and an intensification of the persecution of Catholics. This is, I believe, a compelling argument that cannot be ignored. It is one, moreover, that is supported by the testimony of Jewish Holocaust survivors, such as Marcus Melchior, the former Chief Rabbi of Denmark, who attests that “if the Pope had spoken out, Hitler would probably

His "failure" to excommunicate Hitler, *Pius XII's* critics assert, is only one instance of his larger failure to make sufficiently forceful denunciations of the Nazis. The critics who have accused *Pius XII* of "silence" have claimed that in other ways, also, he failed to forcefully condemn the Nazi regime. Had he done so, they argue, it might have reduced, or even halted the anti-Jewish atrocities. Had he spoken out more forcefully and publicly, they maintain, more Jewish lives would have been spared. Their contention, however, "fails to consider the brutal realities in the wake of Nazism, as well as the retaliatory consequences sure to follow any condemnatory action." More stringent protests, or denunciations, on the part of the Vatican might, *vita* contends, have backfired.

An example frequently cited by defenders of the Vatican is the public protest of Dutch bishops in July 1942 against the deportation of Dutch Jews from the Netherlands. When Pius XII first learned of the Nazi atrocities in Poland, he urged the Catholic bishops of Europe to do all they could to save the Jews and other victims of Nazi persecution. The bishops of Holland distributed a pastoral letter that was read in every Catholic church in the country, denouncing "the unmerciful and unjust treatment meted out to Jews by those in power in our country." In no other Nazi-occupied country did local Catholic bishops more furiously resist Nazism than in Holland. But, their well-intentioned pastoral letter—which explicitly declared that they were inspired by Pope Pius XII—backfired. As Pinchas Lapide notes: "The saddest and most thought-provoking conclusion is that whilst the Catholic clergy in Holland protested more loudly, expressly and frequently against Jewish persecutions than the religious hierarchy of any other Nazi-occupied country, more Jews—some 110,000 or 79 percent of the total—were deported from Holland to death camps." The protest of the Dutch bishops thus provoked the most savage of Nazi reprisals: The vast majority of Holland's Jews and the highest percentages of Jews of any Nazi-occupied nation in Western Europe were deported and killed.

With the advantage of hindsight, Pope XII's revisionist critics have been judging the Pope's "silence" without considering the likely consequences of his having "spoken out" more loudly and explicitly. These critics do not know (or have chosen to ignore) the fact that the Pope's silence was strongly advised by Jewish leaders and by Catholic bishops in Nazi-occupied countries not to protest publicly against the Nazi atrocities. When the bishop of Munster wanted to speak out against the persecution of the Jews, he was told by the Jewish community in his diocese to remain silent. In Rome's Jews in October 1943, as stating unequivocally twenty years later: "none of us wanted the Pope to speak out openly. We were all fugitives and we did not want to be pointed out as such. The Gestapo would have only increased and intensified its inquisition; it was much better the Pope kept silent. And we all felt the same, and today we still believe that." Bishop Jean Bernard of Luxembourg, an inmate of Dachau from February 1941 to August 1942, notified the Vatican that "whenever protests were

There is much evidence to suggest that had Pius XII more vigorously opposed or denounced Hitler's policies, there would have been serious and devastating retaliation. Undoubtedly, a stronger public condemnation of the Final Solution by the Pope would have provoked Nazi reprisals against Catholic clergy in Nazi-occupied countries and in Germany itself. Undoubtedly, also, such a public condemnation by the Pope would have severely jeopardized the lives of the thousands of Jews hidden in the Vatican, as well as the lives of Catholics in other countries who were sheltering Jewish refugees. Undoubtedly, too, such a strong statement by the Pope would have put the Vatican in a position to pressure the German government to release Jewish prisoners of war and survivors who had agreed with Michael Tagliazucchi, a Jew hidden at several times during his life at the Seminario Rosmini, to return to their homes in Italy.⁶ A clearer, stronger denunciation of the Nazis, they believe, would also have jeopardized the lives of the priests and Catholic laity who were sheltering and protecting them. Indeed, as even Susan Zuccotti in her recent critique of Pius XII states, "the pope's inclination to silence might

Well he would be influenced by a concern for the Jews in hiding and for their Catholic protectors.¹ To the very end, Pope Pius XII believed that a public denunciation of the Nazis would be tantamount to furthering their goals, and he was right. In the end, the Nazis were violent reprisals against Europe's Jews, and against tens of thousands of Catholics as well. In retrospect, historians have come to appreciate this tactical caution on the part of Pius XII and the Holy See. His "silence" was not a failure. His refusal to speak was effective strategic protection to protecting more Jews from deportation to the Nazi death camps. A more explicit and forceful papal denunciation of Nazism might have invited even more Nazi reprisals and made things even worse for the Jews of Nazi occupied Europe. One might ask, of course, what might have been worse than the mass murder of six million Jews? The answer is abundantly and horrifically clear: The slaughter of hundreds of thousands more.

Pinchas Lapide documents conclusively the extraordinary relief and rescue efforts conducted by Pius XII and his diplomats during the Holocaust. Through his country-by-country analysis of Papal efforts to rescue European Jews throughout Nazi Europe, Lapide demonstrates, beyond any reasonable doubt, that "the Catholic Church saved more Jewish lives during the war than all other churches, religious institutions and rescue organizations put together."

While approximately 80 percent of European Jews perished during World War II, 80 percent of Italy's 40,000 Jews were saved. The Nazi deportations of Italy's Jews began in October 1943, after the German army occupied Rome and entrusted internal security matters to the S.S. On October 16, more than a thousand of the city's Jews were rounded up and deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered a week later. From October 1943 until the Allied capture of the city in June 1944, the deportations continued, with 2,091 Roman Jews eventually being exterminated in Nazi death camps.

During the months that Rome was under German occupation, Pius XII, who secretly instructed Italy's Catholic clergy "to save human lives by all means," played an especially significant role in saving thousands of Italian Jews from deportation to

Schwartz and other Nazi death camps. Beginning in October 1943 Pope Pius asked the churches and convents throughout Italy to shelter Jews. As a result, although Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and the Fascists who remained loyal to him yielded to Hitler's demand that Italy's Jews be deported, in churches, monasteries and private homes throughout the country Italian Catholics defied Mussolini's orders and protected thousands of Jews until the Allied armies arrived. Although their lives were endangered by helping to save Jews, Italian Catholic Church leaders, from Cardinals to parish priests, hid Jews from the Nazis. In Rome, 155 convents and monasteries sheltered some 5,000 Jews throughout the German occupation. No less than 3,000 Jews found refuge at one time at the Pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, and thus, through Pope Pius' personal intervention, escaped deportation to German death camps. Sixty Jews lived for nine months at the Jesuit Gregoriana University, and many were sheltered in the cellar of the Pontifical Bible Institute. Pope Pius himself granted sanctuary within the walls of the Vatican in Rome to hundreds of homeless Jews. Following Pope Pius' direct instructions, individual Italian priests and monks, cardinals and bishops, were instrumental in saving hundreds of Jewish lives.

In Tribute to Pope XII: Praise From the Jewish Community

During his lifetime, and for several years after his death in 1958, Pope Pius XII was widely praised as having been a true friend of the Jewish people, who saved hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives during the Holocaust. As early as December of 1940, in an article published in Time magazine, the renowned Nobel Prize winning physicist Albert Einstein, himself a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, paid tribute to the moral "courage" of Pope Pius and the Catholic Church in opposing "the Hitlerian onslaught" on liberty:

Being a lover of freedom, when the Nazis revolution came in Germany, I looked to the universities to defend it, knowing that they had always boasted of their devotion to the cause of truth; but, no, the universities immediately were silenced. Then I looked to the great editors of the newspapers, whose flaming editorials in days gone by had proclaimed their love of freedom: but they, like the universities, were silenced in a few short weeks. Only the Catholic Church stood squarely against the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing the truth. I never had any special interest in the Church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration because the Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom. I am forced thus to confess that what I once despised, I now praise unreservedly.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, tributes to Pope Pius came from freewheeling other Jewish leaders who praised him for his role in saving Jews during the war. In 1943, Chaim Weizmann, who would become Israel's first president, wrote that "the Holy See is lending its powerful help wherever it can, to mitigate the fate of persecuted co-religionists." Moshe Sharett, who would become Israel's first Foreign Minister and second Prime Minister, reinforced these feelings of gratitude when he met with Pius in the closing days of World War II: "I told him [the Pope] that my first duty was to thank him, and through him the Catholic Church, on behalf of the Jewish public for all they had done in the various countries to rescue Jews. We are deeply grateful to the Catholic Church." In 1945, Rabbi Isaac Herzog, the Chief Rabbi of Israel, sent a message to Hgr. Angelo Roncalli (the future Pope John XXIII), expressing his gratitude for the actions taken by Pope Pius XII on behalf of the Jewish people. "The Holy See has been the center of our prayers and our hopes," he wrote, "and it is a source of great comfort to us to know that the Holy See is not indifferent to the fate of the Jewish people and its sisters in the most tragic hour of our history, which is living proof of Divine Providence in this world." In September 1945, Dr. Leon Kubowitzky, the Secretary General of the World Jewish Congress, personally thanked the Pope in Rome for his interventions on behalf of Jews, and the World Jewish Congress donated \$20,000 to Vatican charities "in recognition of the work of the Holy See in rescuing Jews from Fascist and Nazi persecutions." Dr. Raffael Cantoni, head of the Italian Jewish community's wartime Jewish Assistance Committee, who would subsequently become the President of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, similarly expressed his gratitude to the Vatican, stating that "six million of my co-religionists have been murdered by the Nazis, but there could have been many more victims had it not been for the efficacious intervention of Pius XII." On April 5, 1946, his Union of Italian Jewish Communities, meeting for the first time after the war, sent an official

The delegates of the Congress of the Italian Jewish Communities, held in Rome for the first time after the Liberation, feel that it is imperative to extend reverent homage to Your Holiness, and to express the most profound gratitude that animates all Jews for your fraternal humanity toward them during the years of persecution when their lives were endangered by Nazi-Fascist barbarism. Many times priests suffered imprisonment and were sent to concentration camps, and offered their lives to assist Jews in every way. This demonstration of goodness and charity that still animates the just, has served to lessen the shame and sorrow and sadness that afflicted millions of human beings.

Many other Jewish tributes to Pius came in the years just preceding, and in the immediate aftermath, of the Pontiff's death. In 1955, when Italy celebrated the tenth anniversary of its liberation, the Union of Italian Jewish Communities proclaimed April 17 as a "Day of Gratitude" for the Pope's wartime assistance in defying the Nazis. Dozens of Italian Catholics, including several priests and nuns, were awarded gold medals "for their outstanding rescue work during the Nazi terror."

A few weeks later, on May 26, 1955, the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra flew to Rome to give a special performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, at the Vatican's Consistory Hall, to express the State of Israel's enduring gratitude for the help that the Pope and the Catholic Church had given to the Jewish people persecuted by the Nazis during the Holocaust. That the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra so joined the rest of the Jewish world in warmly honoring the achievements and legacy of Pope Pius

XI is more than passing significance. As a matter of state policy, the Israeli Philharmonic has played the music of the nineteenth century composer Richard Wagner because of Wagner's well-known reputation as an anti-Semite and as Hitler's "favorite composer," and as one of the cultural patron saints of the Third Reich, whose music was never at Nazi party functions and ceremonies. Despite requests for music lovers and specialists, the official state ban on the Israeli Philharmonic's playing Wagner's music has remained in place. The Israeli Philharmonic has even his name, as a symbol of the Hitler regime. That being the case, it is inconceivable that the Israeli government would have paid the travel expenses for the entire Philharmonic to travel to Rome for a special concert to pay tribute to a church leader who was considered to have been "Hitler's Pope." On the contrary: The Israeli Philharmonic's historic and unprecedented visit to Rome to perform for Pius XII at the Vatican was a unique Jewish communal gesture of collective recognition and

On the day of Pius XII's death in 1958, Golda Meir, Israel's Foreign Minister, called the following message of condolence to the Vatican: "We share in the grief of humanity, among thousands of martyrs came to our people in the decade of Nazi terror, the voice of the Pope was raised for the victims. The life of our times was enriched by a voice speaking out on the great moral truths above the tumult of daily conflict. We mourn a great servant of peace." Before beginning a concert of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, conductor Leonard Bernstein called for a minute of silence "for the passing of a very great man, Pope Pius XII."

Similar sentiments were expressed in the many tributes and eulogies for Pius by numerous rabbis and Jewish communal leaders, as well as by most of the Israeli press, several of whose readers suggested in open letters that a "Pope Xii Alti Forest" be planted in the hills of Judea "in order to perpetuate fittingly the humane services rendered by the late pontiff to European Jewry." During and for close to two decades after World War II, Jewish praise and gratitude for Pius XII's efforts on behalf of European Jewry were virtually unanimous. Indeed, as Pinchas Lapide has so aptly stated: "No Pope in history has been thanked more heartily by Jews." Because of Pius XII's exemplary humanity toward European Jewry, no other Pope has earned such gratitude from the Jewish people.

Pius XII: A Righteous Gentile, Not Hitler's Pope

I believe that a new, Jewish historical account of Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust—a comprehensive, yet critical scholarly “defense” of what Pius did for the Jews—needs to be written. Such a true account of what Pius XII really did for the Jews would arrive, I believe, at exactly the opposite of Carmel’s conclusion. Pius XII was not Hitler’s Pope, but the closest Jew who came to having a papal supporter—and at the moment when it mattered most.

Such a new Jewish historical evaluation and “defense” of Pius, needs to be based on how Pius’s Jewish contemporaries viewed his efforts—his accomplishments and failures alike—during his lifetime, and how Jewish Holocaust survivors have evaluated (and reevaluated) his life and legacy in the decades since. Such a book must incorporate the first hand testimony of Jewish leaders in Israel, Europe and America, and of Holocaust survivors and former chaplains who served in Nazi occupied Europe, which

In recent decades, new oral history centers have been established to record and preserve the oral histories and personal testimonies of Jewish Holocaust survivors and their Catholic rescuers. As a result, an impressive body of new oral history interviews, with Jewish Holocaust survivors and military chaplains, Catholic clergy and laity, in Italy and other countries of Nazi occupied Europe, have been conducted and transcribed. These provide a new basis for understanding Pius XII's role in the Holocaust. The new oral history interviews, with Jewish survivors, Catholic clergy and laity, and military chaplains, provide a new basis for understanding Pius XII's role in the Holocaust. The new oral history interviews, with Jewish survivors, Catholic clergy and laity, and military chaplains, provide a new basis for understanding Pius XII's role in the Holocaust. The new oral history interviews, with Jewish survivors, Catholic clergy and laity, and military chaplains, provide a new basis for understanding Pius XII's role in the Holocaust.

The Talmud, the great sixth century compendium of Jewish religious law and ethics, teaches Jews that "whoever preserves one life, it is accounted to him by Scripture as if he had preserved a whole world." More so than most other twentieth century leaders, Pius XII effectively fulfilled this Talmudic dictum when the fate of European Jewry was at stake. Pope Pius XII's legacy as a "righteous gentile," who rescued so many Jews from Hitler's death camps cannot and should not be forgotten. Nor should the fact that the Jewish community, and so many of its leaders, praised the Pope's efforts during and after the Holocaust, and promised never to forget.

These points are especially significant in evaluating Pope Pius XII's enduring legacy for twentieth, and twenty-first, century Jews. It needs to be remembered, as noted earlier, that no other Pope in history has been so universally praised by Jews. So too, the compelling reason for this unprecedented Jewish praise for, and gratitude to, a Pope needs to be better remembered than it has been in recent years: Today, more than fifty years after the Holocaust, it needs to be more widely recognized and appreciated that Pius XII was indeed a very "righteous gentile" – a true friend of the Jewish people, who saved more lives than any other person, including Raoul Wallenberg and Oskar Schindler. A new authentically great history of Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust, emphasizing his historic role and accomplishments as a "righteous gentile," may help to bring some long overdue recognition to his too little known and appreciated legacy as one of the century's great friends of the Jewish people.

