

The Real Story of Pius XII and the Jews

By James Bogle

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Over the last year a number of commentators have sought to rehash old and ill-informed accusations in an attempt to undermine the reputation of Pope Pius XII. His war-time effort to save Jewish lives has, amazingly, been the principal area of attack. The BBC program *Reputations*, repeated on 14th February 1996, was one especially virulent attack. It was followed by a review in *The Times* by religious affairs correspondent, Ruth Gledhill, which attacked Pius XII apparently on the strength of the BBC program alone. Later, the producer of the program, Jonathan Lewis, attempted to explain his position in the liberal Catholic Journal *The Tablet*.

Pius XII was one of the few world leaders outside Jewry itself who was quick to recognize the danger of Nazism. Former Israeli diplomat Pinchas Lapide, in his book *The Last Three Popes and the Jews* demonstrates convincingly the consistent and active protection provided to Jews in Europe by the papacy. He does not shrink from strong criticism of other parts of the Catholic Church where necessary and of some Catholic governments in particular. Further, he commands respect from those reading from a Jewish perspective.

It is estimated that the actions of Pius XII directly led to the saving of 800,000 Jewish lives during the war. The estimate of 800,000 Jewish lives is based upon the testimony of the post-war government of the recently created State of Israel which recognized and honored that pope's contribution. The Israelis recognized the figure and a forest of as many trees was planted in commemoration in the Negeb, SE of Jerusalem, and was shown to Pope Paul VI with some ceremony on his first state visit to Israel.

Rev. Fr. Jean Charles-Roux, now a Rosinian priest living in London and whose father was French Ambassador to the Holy See in the 30's, lived with his family in Rome during the fateful pre-war period. He recalls that the Pope told his father as early as 1935 that the new regime in Germany was "diabolical." The Ambassador frequently warned his government but the general reaction in France seems to have been that it was good to see the back of the Prussian militarist and that it was no bad thing that an Austrian-Czech house painter was now Chancellor.

The reaction in the USA and Britain was scarcely different at that time; and even later when they must have begun to know about the camps. The U.S. government accepted a total of 10,000 – 15,000 Jewish refugees throughout the war. – a truly scandalous statistic.

Britain was little better and before the war the government had been full of "appeasers," the Duke of Windsor visited Hitler and Lloyd George even went so far as to call him "the greatest living German"!

Ambassador Charles-Roux's own government in Paris (and the British government) were deaf to the pleas of the Vatican to assist the German internal resistance to the Nazi government. From the very beginning Pius XII tried to persuade the Allied governments to support the German opposition to Hitler, but since they would not listen to men like the Anglican Bishop Bell of Chichester or to the few Jews who had escaped from Germany to Britain and America, they would not and did not listen to a Pope. Men like Adam von Trott zu Sulz (he had been a Rhodes Scholar at Balliol), Peter Yorck von Wartenburg and many other leading Germans who later formed the Kreisau circle, made continuous, repeated, energetic and ultimately futile attempts to reach and persuade the British government to back, or even talk with, the German resistance to Hitler.

They were all killed in the 20th July plot to assassinate Hitler, the last in a long line of foiled attempts to get rid of the dictator, which was triggered by the Roman Catholic officer, Count Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg. Stauffenberg was shot out of hand. Other conspirators were not so lucky. They were tried by the infamous "People's Court" and hanged by piano wire from butchers' hooks of Plötzensee prison. This was filmed on Hitler's orders so that he could watch it himself later.

Count von Galen, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Munster, was another outspoken critic of the racial and eugenic policies of the Nazis and would undoubtedly have been liquidated by them if not for the prominence and prestige of his position.

In August 1943 Pius XII received a plea from the World Jewish Congress to try to persuade the Italian authorities to remove 20,000 Jewish refugees from internment camps in Northern Italy. "Our terror-stricken brethren look to Your Holiness as the only hope for saving them from persecution and death" they wrote. In September 1943, A.L. Easterman on behalf of the WJC reported to the Apostolic Delegate in London (there was no Nuncio since the British government always refused to recognize the diplomatic rights of the Holy See—a hangover from our anti-

Catholic past). He reported that the efforts of the Holy See on behalf of the Jews had been successful and wrote, "I feel sure that the efforts of your Grace, and of the Holy See have brought about this fortunate result, and I should like to express to the Holy See and yourself the warmest thanks of the World Jewish Congress."

Around the same time, the German Chief of Police in Rome threatened to send some 200 Jews to the Russian front unless they produced within 36 hours 50 kg of gold or equivalent in currency. The Chief Rabbi approached the Holy See which immediately placed 15 kg at his disposal and lent the necessary money free of charge. More than half the Jews of Rome were sheltered in ecclesiastical buildings opened on the express instructions of Pius XII himself. The Vatican Secretariat of State saved more Jews by faking their baptisms and sending lists of "baptized" Jews to the German Ambassador, Weizsacker, so that they could be evacuated. Many of those saved were helped to escape by the massive over-issuing of Vatican passports, particularly in the latter half of 1944, and records exist of many of these. However, this had perforce to be handled with little or no ordinary documentary evidence since the Nazis would without doubt have crushed this means of escape immediately if they had become aware of the extent to which it was being used to facilitate the rescue of Jews.

In November, 1943 Chief Rabbi Herzog wrote to Cardinal Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, then Apostolic Delegate for Turkey and Greece, saying: "I take this opportunity to express to your Eminence my sincere thanks as well as my deep appreciation of your very kindly attitude to Israel and of the invaluable help given by the Catholic Church to the Jewish people in its affliction. Would you please convey these sentiments which come from Zion, to His Holiness the Pope (Pius XII) along with the assurances that the people of Israel know how to value his assistance and his attitude." The American Jewish Welfare Board wrote to Pius XII in July 1944 to express its appreciation for the protection given to the Jews during the German occupation of Italy. At the end of the war, the World Jewish Congress expressed its gratitude to the Pope and gave 20 million Lire to Vatican charities. A former Israeli diplomat in Italy claimed that: "The Catholic Church saved more Jewish lives during the war than all the other Churches, religious institutions and rescue organizations put together. Its record stands in startling contrast to the achievements of the International Red Cross and the Western Democracies."

The Pope protested particularly against the deportations of Jews in Slovakia, Hungary and Vichy, France, since these were formerly Catholic countries where Fascists had gained control and they still had a majority of Catholic citizens. In Hungary the Nunciature used thousands of blank and forged forms to help Jews escape. A Red Cross worker even complained that the use of forged documents was against the Geneva Convention! Happily this rather officious complaint did not prevent the Nuncio's covert operation continuing.

Pope Pius XII knew Germany well, having previously been papal Nuncio there. It was he himself who wrote (after reading the first draft by Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich) the criticism of racial policies in the Encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* (which means "with burning anxiety" i.e. about the Nazi threat to racial minorities and specifically the Jews) addressed directly to the German people during the pontificate of Pope Pius XI. He wrote that Catholics must never be anti-Semitic because "we are all Semites spiritually" and ought to hold the Jewish people in high regard accordingly.

As a matter of simple historical fact, Rabbi Israel Zolli, the Chief Rabbi of Rome, was received into the Catholic Church in 1945 after the war was over. He was baptized entirely of his own free will and asked Pius XII, with whom he had worked closely in the saving of Jewish lives, to be his godfather. Dr. Zolli chose the name Eugenio a his baptismal name precisely because it was Pius XII's own name.

These facts are rarely mentioned by commentators, yet they are clearly vital to any assessment of the reputation of Pius XII. Instead an insidious campaign has been maintained against the good name of that Pope, largely centering around the accusation that he kept silent during the war about the plight of the Jews and refused to mention them by name. It is now generally implied by some that this was so because he was racist and an anti-Semite. It is difficult to conceive of a more detestable lie.

Pius XII, as Cardinal Pacelli, had a hand in writing the encyclical *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* which condemned Italian Fascist doctrines, as well as *Divini Redemptoris* which opposed Soviet Communism and the massacres and starvation that were being perpetrated in its name in Russia (e.g. the 10 million peasants starved to death in the Ukraine). Pius XII was a highly active, energetic and zealous opponent of totalitarianism and oppression. Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical letter *Mit Brennender Sorge* in 1937 because he was the ruling Pope; but it was Cardinal Pacelli, later Pius XII, who wrote it. The German Roman Catholic hierarchy thanked Pope XI for the letter, which condemned racism and anti-Semitism roundly, and the Pope pointed to Cardinal Pacelli saying it was he who had been responsible for it. Pius XII's first encyclical in 1939, *Summi Pontificatus*, repeated the theme and the Gestapo were immediately given orders by the Nazi leadership to prevent its distribution.

Thereafter, Pius XII adopted his policy of not naming the Jews explicitly. This was partly because his experience of the diplomatic "deafness" of the Allied governments and partly because of his knowledge and experience of the increased persecution of Jews which followed the condemnatory statements made in the two mentioned encyclicals. He devoted himself instead to the covert rescue operation to save Jewish lives, which was probably the most successful of all those attempted particularly if one takes into account the saving of the Hungarian Jews and the joint actions of the Vatican and the papal Nuncio in Hungary at that time. It is well recognized that the saviors of the Hungarian Jews were the papal Nuncio and the Swedish Embassy (in the person of Raoul Wallenberg), both seeking to outwit the Chief Nazi murderer, Adolf Eichmann.

Pius XII followed the Dutch Roman Catholic hierarchy's plan to name the Jews explicitly in their condemnation of Nazi deportations and intended to issue a similar statement himself. The Nazis threatened to arrest more Jews. The Dutch Reformed Church agreed not to protest openly but the Roman Catholic hierarchy issued, in May 1943, their famous protest against the deportations. The Nazis then launched an all-out offensive against Jews (except those who had converted to the Dutch Protestant Reformed Church). Ironically, it was the Dutch hierarchy's letter of open condemnation which led to the arrest and execution of Edith Stein, the Jewish Roman Catholic nun and philosopher.

The news of the increased persecution reached Pius XII. His own protest was due to go into *L'Osservatore Romano* that very evening but he had the draft burnt saying "If the protest of the Dutch Bishops has cost the lives of 40,000 people, my intervention would take at least 200,000 people to their deaths." (See *II Settimanale*, 1 March 1975, p.48.) Such was the result of openly naming the Jews; more death from vain gestures.

There is no doubt that if Pius XII had made such a vain gesture, instead of saving more Jewish lives, he would then have been open to the criticism of having made the situation worse by vain and inopportune public statements. Those who now criticize him for not saying enough would then have attacked him for saying too much.

It is easy to forget that there was only so much that the Pope could do. He had no Army or police beyond the Swiss Guard and he was not listened to by the Allied powers. Under constant surveillance and threats from the Nazis when they occupied Rome, his statements were seized and destroyed by the Gestapo. As for his influence with loyal Roman Catholics, he had already spent out precisely and forthrightly what his views and those of the Church were in the two above-mentioned encyclicals and in constant re-affirmations of his position in the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore*. No loyal Roman Catholic need have been in any doubt at the time what the Catholic Church's views on Nazism and racism were. The fact that some bad Catholics allowed themselves to become involved with the Nazi terror cannot be blamed on Pope Pius XII—any more than the fact that there were Jewish Kapos and a Jewish police helping the Nazis enforce their extermination policies can be blamed upon Jewish religious leaders. Pius XII plainly repudiated the perverted doctrines of the Nazis and also the immoral Fascist doctrines of Benito Mussolini (which had been condemned in the encyclical *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* meaning "we have no need" i.e. of Fascist doctrines).

He is also sometimes criticized for not excommunicating Hitler, but Hitler was already excommunicated *ipso facto* for a whole range of crimes and could only have returned to the Catholic faith, even assuming that he would ever have wanted to, by having his excommunication lifted by the Pope himself. The lifting of the sentence was reserved to the Holy See, *latæ sententiae*. Besides, the complaint assumes that Hitler took some notice of the Holy See and the Catholic Church. Insofar as he did, it was for purely political reasons, since he was forced to recognize the influence of the Catholic Church and the papacy. Hitler described himself as "a complete pagan" (see *Hitler's Table Talk*) and regarded the Catholic Church as his greatest enemy, which he would destroy when he had the opportunity.

One must remember, too, that the Pope had a duty to his own flock, who were in equal danger if they spoke out against the Nazis. Prince Sapicha, the Cardinal of Cracow in Poland, told the Pope, perfectly accurately, that if there were open public denunciations Catholics and Jews would be massacred in Poland. It was better to try and rescue as many as possible through the religious houses and allow the opposition Army to build up (which it did – the *Armia Krajowa*, the secret underground Army under General Bor-Komorowski which was later betrayed by the Soviets and massacred by the Nazis). In 1940, 800 priests died in Buchenwald, 1,200 in 1942 and 3,000 in 1943. And that was just Buchenwald.

Later, after the war was over, Pius XII received a large delegation of Roman Jews in the Vatican and ordered that the Imperial steps be opened for them to enter by. These steps were usually reserved for crowned Heads of State (although they were later opened once for President Charles de Gaulle). The Pope received them in the Sistine chapel and, seeing that his Jewish visitors felt uncomfortable in that place, he came down from his throne and warmly welcomed them telling them to feel completely at home, saying "I am only the Vicar of Christ but you are His very kith and kin". Such was his great love for the Jewish people, augmented by his knowledge of their terrible sufferings.

Oskar Schindler, a Roman Catholic, is regarded as a "righteous gentile" by many Jews for saving the lives of some 3,000 – 4,000 Jews in his factories. Why then is Pope Pius XII so unjustly criticized, despite saving 800,000 Jewish lives?

