**The Pope Works to Protect Jews from Nazi Atrocities while Protecting Catholics from the Fascists, Nazis, and Bolsheviks**

Hitler and the Nazis treacherously continued negotiations with Pius XII to keep him from publicly and specifically condemning their regime. Keeping Pius quiet seemed very important to the Nazis, as they strung the Pontiff along until world opinion no longer mattered. From the Pope’s perspective, he did all he could to protect his people on the ground, as they were being even more viciously devastated by the Communist Soviet government in Russia, Poland, and other lands the Bolsheviks had conquered in eastern Europe. In addition, from the experience of Dutch bishops, the more the bishops complained, the harsher the treatment the SS inflicted on Catholics and especially on clergy and religious (orders) in the concentration camps.[[1]](#footnote-1) Pius determined it was best to operate covertly rather than endanger those in the camps, including Jews who were being rounded up for deportation in nations the Nazis subjugated.[[2]](#footnote-2) Instead, Pius XII and the Church worked to clandestinely harbor Jews throughout Europe. This is especially evident in Italy once Mussolini fell in 1943, and the Nazis invaded the peninsula. The Vatican established a covert network to provide persecuted Jews with false identification and paperwork so they could escape areas of Nazi occupation. Most of this was done verbally so as not to leave a paper trail the Nazi Gestapo could follow.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Despite his private interventions, over 3,000 Catholic priests were murdered by the Nazis. Catholic schools and publications were still shut down or strictly censored, and Catholic churches were closed. In contradiction to the Vatican policy on conducting stealth operations, Pius XII’s 1942 Christmas address condemned mass murder based upon one’s nationality or race. There Pius grieved,

*Humanity owes this vow to those hundreds of thousands who, without any fault on their part, sometimes only because of their nationality or race, have been consigned to death or to an extinction.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

He appealed to Nazi-occupied countries on behalf of persecuted Jews. Research by Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, show that Pius XII’s wartime strategy “enabled a considerable number of secret rescue activities to take place.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

After his death in 1958, there has been public condemnation of the Pope’s inaction during the Nazi years. Pius, however, was publicly praised by the Israeli government for his efforts. Albert Einstein, who was dismayed by the deafening silence from universities and newspapers, praised the Pope in 1940:

*Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler’s campaign for suppressing truth. …The Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

When the Fascist government was overthrown and Mussolini was ousted in 1943, the new Italian government made peace with the Western Allies, but the German Army still occupied all of Italy north of Cassino. It would take an American and British invasion force to liberate Italy. With the German Army on the ground in Italy, the persecution of Jews escalated. Attempts were made to round up the Jews in Italy and relocate them to concentration camps. Over 7,500 Jews were taken from Italy and sent to the Nazi death camps, where over 95% of them were killed or worked to death. There are historians who castigate Pius XII for not publicly denouncing Hitler when 1,035 Jews[[7]](#footnote-7) were being arrested “under his very windows.” The now commonly used “window” description of the round-up comes from Ernst von Weizsäcker, the Nazi German ambassador to the Vatican[[8]](#footnote-8) and the quote appears as the title of Susan Zuccotti’s critical treatment of Pius: *Under His Very Windows*.[[9]](#footnote-9) There are scholars who propose that Pius was more worried about the treasures of Western Civilization kept in the Vatican than he was about the victims. Nearly all do admit though, there was the real possibility that the *Wehrmacht* or *SS* would storm the Vatican in response to any public condemnation coming from Pius or the Church. Albrecht von Kessel, a diplomat at the German Embassy to the Vatican during the war, wrote in 1963:

*We were convinced that a fiery protest by Pius XII against the persecution of the Jews ... would certainly not have saved the life of a single Jew. Hitler, like a trapped beast, would react to any menace that he felt directed at him, with cruel violence.[[10]](#footnote-10)*

Pius also knew the consequences of loud protests from the Dutch experience, as recounted by a former inmate of Dachau concentration camp, Monsignor Jean Bernard, later Bishop of Luxembourg:

*The detained priests trembled every time news reached us of some protest by a religious authority, but particularly by the Vatican. We all had the impression that our warders made us atone heavily for the fury these protests evoked ... whenever the way we were treated became more brutal, the Protestant pastors among the prisoners used to vent their indignation on the Catholic priests: 'Again your big naive Pope and those simpletons, your bishops, are shooting their mouths off ... why don't they get the idea once and for all, and shut up. They play the heroes, and we have to pay the bill.'[[11]](#footnote-11)*

Still, historian David Kertzer decries that the Pope did not publicly protest the deportation of Italian Jews. Nevertheless, he writes that Pius had convinced the Germans to save Jews who converted to Catholicism. During the Roman “round-up” of Jews, 250 “non-Aryan Catholics” were pulled out and saved from the Auschwitz-Birkenau gas chambers.[[12]](#footnote-12) Other than hiding and sheltering them, this may have been the only way to possibly save the doomed “children of Israel.” The Catholic Church used this method to save Jewish lives in several situations throughout the war, despite that the Nazis were more concerned with the Jews as a race rather than a religion. The Nazi Nuremberg Laws considered any Jew who converted after 1919, still a Jew.[[13]](#footnote-13) It seems amazing that the *SS* did allow some of those who converted to Catholicism to be saved.

Scholars, such as Zuccotti and Michael Phayer also condemn Pius for lack of public outrage. They adduce that the Vatican left no paper trail of any orders from the Pope to save or shelter the Jews in Italian Catholic institutions.[[14]](#footnote-14) Zuccotti advances this lack of evidence as proof of Pius’ inaction, even though in an earlier book she explains, “Any direct personal order would have had to be kept very quiet to protect those who were actually sheltered.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Ronald J. Rychlak explained that “It was dangerous to keep papers in the Vatican. Pius and the Curia knew that Nazi forces might invade at any minute, so they were very judicious in their use of the written word.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Other scholars, such as Jewish Holocaust historian Sir Martin Gilbert try to contrast Pius’ silence with “papal action.” He elucidates,

*A few days earlier... [Pius]personally ordered the Vatican clergy to open the sanctuaries of the Vatican City to all 'non-Aryans' in need of refuge.[[17]](#footnote-17)*

Historian, Marc Saperstein relates how his father, Rabbi Harold Saperstein, a chaplain in the U.S. Army, heard straight from Roman Jews that Pius XII should be credited with the Church’s rescue of Roman Jews during the 1943 “round-up.” He reported:

*I drove into the Ghetto of Rome. People seeing the Star of David on my Jeep crowded around me. ‘How did you survive,’ I asked? ‘The Pope gave orders to the churches and the monasteries to take us in,’ they said, ‘and they did and saved our lives.’[[18]](#footnote-18)*

Rabbi Saperstein’s account is reinforced with reporting of the Allied liberation of Rome by New York Times Pulitzer-winning columnist Anne O’Hare McCormick:

*Once you consider the Jews who had entrusted their lives to the Church amid Nazi terror, you land in the world of hard choices, where we might learn from history and test our moral imagination and judgment.[[19]](#footnote-19)*

Just after the Nazi *SS* had first acted on the Jews in Rome, October 1943, Pius faced what seemed like an insurmountable quandary. Catholic institutions throughout the city, including the Vatican, already harbored hundreds of Jews. By June, one third of all Roman Jews (4,000) were under the Church’s aegis.[[20]](#footnote-20) Pius knew he could publicly and forcibly protest Hitler’ s policies, but would he sacrifice the lives of the Jews hiding in convents and monasteries that would come from a vicious Nazi vengeance? These are critical questions a student must consider. Should Pius have issued strong, stentorian denunciations condemning Nazi atrocities? They must consider whether a public condemnation of Hitler would lead to more pain and death for both Jewish and Catholic prisoners in concentration camps, as had happened in the past? Would it lead to Pius’ arrest and a Nazi occupation and rapine of the Vatican? Or would a public reprisal have saved Jewish lives? Could it have ameliorated any of the pain suffered by Jews all over Europe? Once students consider the possibilities, they should answer, “What would you have done in that situation and why”? “What would be the consequences of your overt actions, covert actions, or inactions?”

Over forty thousand Italian Jews, fortunately, were spared the horrors of Nazi death camps because courageous Italian citizens, Catholic clergy, religious orders, government officials, and even military officers daringly helped Italian Jews escape to southern Italy, then under Allied control, to Switzerland, or to Spain. Even in the face of hostile German troops, Italians often ignored, refused compliance, or forcefully resisted directives by the Germans regarding the capture, relocation, or killing of Jews in Italy. There developed an active armed resistance movement among Italian civilians against Nazi occupation in general. Roughly 2,000 Italian Jews, including the famed poet Primo Levi, joined the resistance. When the war ended in 1945, the Italians could take some pride in the fact that between 80-85% of the Italian Jewish population had survived the war. No other country under Nazi occupation, except Denmark, where the Danish resistance had covertly transported 7,220 of Denmark’s 7,800 Jews away to neutral Sweden,[[21]](#footnote-21) could make such a claim.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The Vatican has recently opened the records of those who positioned the Church for succor during the Nazi years. Many pleas came from Jews or on behalf of Jews who needed visas or passports to escape the tyranny. They also sought asylum, or to reunify families. In addition, they pursued news of deported family and friends. They pleaded for food, clothing, financial support, and prayers. All the appeals were funneled through the Vatican Secretariat of State. Church diplomatic channels tried to provide as much help as possible.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Vatican officials described these archives using the Pope Pius XII’s family name as “Pacelli’s List,” reminiscent of Thomas Keneally’s famous book *Schindler’s List,* which told the story of the many Jews Oskar Schindler had saved from the Nazi extermination camps. Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations, explained:

*Although the two cases differ, the analogy perfectly expresses the idea that people in the corridors of the institution at the service of the pontiff, worked tirelessly to provide Jewish people with practical help*.[[24]](#footnote-24)

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