

## How Pius XII Defended the Jews

*By Jesse Romero*

There is a contradiction I wish to explore, the following are two editorials that appeared in the *New York Times* more than 50 years apart: “The voice of Pius XII in the silence and darkness enveloping Europe this Christmas . . . . He’s about the only ruler left on the Continent of Europe who dares to raise his voice at all” (Dec.15,1941).

Than 57 years later the NY Times reverses itself when it writes: “A full exploration of Pope Pius’s conduct is needed . . . . It now falls to John Paul and his successors to take the next step toward full acceptance of the Vatican’s failure to stand squarely against the evil that swept across Europe” (Mar.18, 1998).

These two editorials cannot be reconciled, is this an example of the unwavering voice of the media? Or is this historical revisionism par excellence? Taking swipes at the Catholic Church seems to be fashionable these days. How so, *‘in 1995 the National Conference of Christians and Jews did a major survey on PREJUDICE against virtually EVERY SEGMENT of the American population, and found that the number one PREJUDICE in the United States is ANTI-CATHOLICISM ‘(Envoy p.15). This is why it is politically correct to bash, revise or malign Catholicism in America. It seems to me as if the New York Times 1998 editor has just engaged in ‘Chronological Snobbery’ when he is juxtaposed with the 1941 editor’s analysis of Pope Pius XII. ‘Chronological Snobbery is a phrase coined by C.S. Lewis to describe the shabby reasoning by which someone discounts or discredits an idea simply because it’s an old idea ‘ (This Rock p.14). I also believe that the anti-Catholic apologist are setting up ‘Straw Men’ arguments, they are misrepresenting Pius XII’s role in the holocaust and then criticizing a caricature of him. ‘A Straw Man argument is an example of *non sequitur* reasoning, which is latin for “it does not follow”’ (ibid,p.18). Onto my *apologia*, this century will be marked in the annals of history for this monstrous, terrible genocide of an estimated six million Jews and ‘**many**’ other victims by Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. During this dark time the Catholic Church was being shepherded by Pope Pius XII, who proved himself an untiring foe of the Nazis. Pope Pius set out to save as many Jews as he could, yet today the modern historian’s almost give him no credit for his actions before or during the War.*

Pius XII was no friend of the Nazis, his opposition to them began years before the War. Before he was elected to the Papacy, when he was still Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the Vatican secretary of State. On April 28, 1935, four years before the War even started, Paceli gave a speech that awakened the attention of the world press. He spoke to an audience of about 250,000 pilgrims in Lourdes, France. This future Pope stated that the Nazis “are in reality only miserable plagiarist who dress up old errors with new tinsel. It does not matter whether they flock to the

banners of social revolution, whether they are guided by a false concept of the world and of life, or whether they are possessed by the superstition of a race and blood cult” (Graham, p.106). It was talks like this, in addition to numerous notes of protest that Paceli sent to Berlin in his capacity as Vatican Secretary of State, that earned him the reputation as an enemy of the Nazi Party.

The Nazis were very displeased with Pius XII, who showed himself as a relentless opponent of the Nazi Party. While still secretary of State, the future Pope Pius XII wrote the Papal encyclical in 1937, *Mit Brennender Sorge (With Burning Sorrow)*. In fact, upon its publication, the Nazi press carried vulgar cartoons and claims that “*Pius XI was half Jewish and Cardinal Pacelli was all Jewish.*” Two months before the anti-semitic horrors of Kristallnacht (The night of the broken glass), Pius XI stated “*Anti-Semitism is inadmissible; spiritually we are all Semites*” (O’Carrol, p.45).

Dr. Joseph Lichten, a Polish Jew who served as a diplomat and later an official of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, writes: “*Paceli had obviously established his position clearly, for the Fascist governments of both Italy and Germany spoke out loudly against the possibility of his election to succeed Pius XI in March of 1939, though the Cardinal Secretary of State had served as papal nuncio in Germany from 1917 to 1929. . . . The day after his election, the Berlin Morgenpost said: ‘The election of Cardinal Pacelli is not accepted with favor in Germany because he was always opposed to Nazism and practically determined the policies of the Vatican under his predecessor’*” (Graham p.107).

Former Israeli diplomat and now Orthodox Jewish Rabbi Pinchas Lapide states that Pius XI “*had good reason to make Pacelli the architect of his anti-Nazi policy. Of the forty-four speeches which the Nuncio Pacelli had made on German soil between 1917 and 1929, at least forty contained attacks on Nazism or condemnations of Hitler’s doctrines. . . . Pacelli, who never met the Fuhrer, called it ‘neo-paganism’*” (Lapide, p.118).

A few weeks after Pacelli was elected Pope, the German Reich’s Chief Security Service issued a then secret report on the new Pope. Rabbi Lapide provides an excerpt: “*Pacelli has already made himself prominent by his attacks on National Socialism during his tenure as Cardinal Secretary of State, a fact which earned him the hearty approval of the Democratic States during the papal elections. . . . How much Pacelli is celebrated as an ally of the Democracies is especially emphasized in the French Press*” (Ibid, p.121).

Unfortunately, joy at the election of a strong Pope who would continue Pius XI’s defiance of the Nazis was darkened by the ominous political developments in Europe. War finally came on September 1, 1939, when German Troops overran Poland. Two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Early in 1940, Hitler made an attempt to prevent the new pope from maintaining the anti-Nazi stance he had taken before his election. He sent his underling, Joachim von Ribbentrop, to try to dissuade Pius XII from following his predecessor's policies. *"Von Ribbentrop, granted a formal audience on March 11, 1940, went into a lengthy harangue on the invincibility of the Third Reich, the inevitability of a Nazi victory, and the futility of papal alignment with the enemies of the Fuhrer. Pius XII heard von Ribbentrop out politely and impassively. Then he opened an enormous ledger on his desk and, in his perfect German, began to recite a catalogue of the persecutions inflicted by the Third Reich in Poland, listing the date, place, and the precise details of each crime. The audience was terminated: the Pope's position was clearly unshakable"* (Lichten, p.107).

The Pope worked covertly to save as many Jewish lives as possible from the Nazis whose extermination campaign was stepped up more intensely after the War had begun. It is at this juncture that the anti-Catholic revisionist try to make their indictment: Pius XII is charged with either cowardly silence or outright support of the Nazi extermination of millions of Jews.

Much of the stimulus to vilify the Vatican regarding WWII came, appropriately enough, from a work of fiction. A stage play called The Deputy, written after the War by a little known German **Protestant** playwright named *Rolf Hochhuth*. The play appeared in 1963, and it painted a portrait of a pope that was too fearful to speak out publicly against the Nazis. Ironically, even Hochhuth admits that Pius XII was materially very active in support of the Jews. Historian Robert Graham explains: *Playwright Rolf Hochhuth criticized the Pontiff for his (alleged) silence, but even he admitted that, on the level of action, Pius XII generously aided the Jews to the best of his ability. Today, after a quarter century of the arbitrary and one-sided presentation offered the public, the word 'silence' has taken on a much wider connotation. It stands also for 'indifference,' 'apathy,' 'inaction,' and, implicitly, for anti-Semitism"* (Graham, p.18).

Hochhuth's fictional image of a silent (though active) Pope has been transformed by the anti-Catholic spinsters, into the image of a silent and **inactive** Pope, and by some spinsters, even into an actively pro Nazi accomplice. If there were any truth to the charge that Pius XII was silent, the silence would not have been out of moral cowardice in the face of the Nazis, but because the Pope was waging a subversive, clandestine war against them in an attempt to save Jews.

*"The need to refrain from provocative public statements at such delicate moments was fully recognized in Jewish circles. It was in fact the basic rule of all those agencies in wartime Europe who keenly felt the duty to do all that was possible for the victims of Nazi atrocities and in particular for the Jews in proximate danger of deportation to 'an unknown destiny' (Ibid, p.19). The negative consequences of speaking out strongly were only too well known. "In one tragic instance, the Archbishop of Utrecht was warned by the Nazis not to protest the*

*deportation of Dutch Jews. He spoke out anyway and in retaliation the Catholic Jews of Holland were sent to their death. One of them was the Carmelite philosopher Blessed Edith Stein”* (Lichten, p.30).

Today the armchair quarterbacks in anti-Catholic circles may have wished the Pope to issue, in Axis territory and during wartime, a ringing propagandistic statement against the Nazis. But the Pope realized that this was simply not an option if he actually were to save Jewish lives rather than simply mug for the cameras.

The desire to keep a low profile was expressed by the people Pius XII helped. A Jewish couple from Berlin, who had been held in concentration camps but escaped to Spain with the help of Pius XII, stated: *”None of us wanted the Pope to take an open stand. We were all fugitives, and fugitives do not want to be pointed at. The Gestapo would have become more excited and would have intensified its inquisitions. If the Pope had protested, Rome would have become the center of attention. It was better that the Pope said nothing. We all shared this opinion at the time, and this is still our conviction today”* (Ibid., p.99).

While the U.S., Great Britain, and other countries often refused to allow Jewish refugees to immigrate during war, the Vatican was issuing tens of thousands of false documents to allow Jews to pass secretly as Christians so they could escape the Nazis. What is more, the financial aid Pius XII helped provide the Jews was very real. Lichten, Lapidé, and other Jewish chroniclers record those funds as being in the millions of dollars, dollars even more valuable than they are now.

In late 1943, Mussolini, who had been at odds with the Papacy all through his tenure, was removed from power by the Italians, but Hitler, fearing Italy would negotiate a separate peace with the Allies, invaded, took control, and set up Mussolini again as puppet ruler. It was then, when the Jews of Rome themselves were threatened (those whom Pius XII had the most direct ability to help) that this Pope really showed his courage.

Joseph Lichten chronicles that on September 27, 1943, one of the Nazi commanders demanded of the Jewish community in Rome, payment of one hundred pounds of gold within thirty-six hours or three hundred Jews would be taken prisoner. When the Jewish Community Council was able to gather only seventy pounds of gold, it turned to the Vatican. *“In his memoirs, the then Chief Rabbi Zolli of Rome writes that he was sent to the Vatican, where arrangements had already been made to receive him as an ‘engineer’ called to survey a construction problem so that the Gestapo on watch at the Vatican would not bar his entry. He was met by the Vatican treasurer and secretary of state, who told him that the Holy Father himself had given orders for the deficit to be filled with gold vessels taken from the Treasury”* (Ibid., p.120).

Pius XII also took a public stance concerning the Jews of Italy: “The Pope spoke out strongly in their defense with the first mass arrests of Jews in 1943, and *L’Osservatore Romano* carried an article protesting the internment of Jews and the confiscation of their property. The Fascist press came to call the Vatican paper ‘a mouthpiece of the Jews’” (ibid., p.125).

Prior to the Nazi invasion, the Pope had been working hard to get Jews out of Italy by emigration; he now was forced to turn his attention to finding them hiding places.

*“The Pope sent out the order that religious buildings were to give refuge to Jews, even at the price of great personal sacrifice on the part of their occupants; he released monasteries and convents from the cloister rule forbidding entry into these religious houses to all but a few outsiders, so that they could be used as hiding places. Thousands of Jews, figures run from 4,000 to 7,000 were hidden, fed, clothed, and bedded in the 180 known places of refuge in Vatican City, churches and basilicas, Church administrative buildings, and parish houses. Unknown numbers of Jews were sheltered in Castel Gandolfo, the site of the Pope’s summer residence, private homes, hospitals, and nursing institutions, and the Pope took personal responsibility for the care of the children of Jews deported from Italy”* (ibid.,p.126).

Rabbi Lapide records that *“in Rome we saw a list of 155 convents and monasteries- Italian, French, Spanish, English, American, and also German-mostly extraterritorial property of the Vatican . . . which sheltered throughout the German occupation some 5,000 Jews in Rome. No less than 3,000 Jews found refuge at one time at the Pope’s summer residence at Castel Gandolfo; sixty lived for nine months at the Jesuit Gregorian University, and half a dozen slept in the cellar of the Pontifical Bible Institute”* (Lapide, p.133).

Notice in particular that the Pope was not merely allowing Jews to be hidden in different church buildings around Rome. He was hiding them *in the Vatican itself and in his own summer home, Castel Gandolfo.*

His success in protecting Italian Jews against the Nazis was remarkable. Lichten records (p.127 of his book) that after the War was over it was determined that only 8,000 Jews were taken from Italy by the Nazis, far less than in other European countries. In June 1944, Pius XII sent a telegram to Admiral Miklos Horthy, the ruler of Hungary, and was able to halt the planned deportation of 800,000 Jews from that country. The Pope’s efforts did not go unrecognized by Jewish authorities, even during the War. The Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, Isaac Herzog, sent the Pope a personal message of thanks on February 28,1944, in which he said: *“The people of Israel will never forget what his Holiness and his illustrious delegates, inspired by the eternal principles of religion which form the very foundations of true civilization, are doing for us unfortunate brothers and sisters in this most tragic hour of our history, which is living proof of divine Providence in this world”* (Graham, p.62).

Other Jewish leaders agreed. Rabbi Safran of Bucharest, Romania, sent a note of thanks to the papal nuncio on April 7, 1944: *“It is not easy for us to find the right words to express the warmth and consolation we experienced because of the concern of the supreme pontiff, who offered a large sum to relieve the sufferings of deported Jews. . . . The Jews of Romania will never forget these facts of historic importance”* (Lichten, p.130).

The Chief Rabbi of Rome, Israel Zolli, also made a statement of thanks: *“What the Vatican did will indelibly and eternally be engraved in our hearts. . . . Priests and even high prelates did things that will forever be an honor to Catholicism”* (Amer-Jewish Yearbook p.233). After the War Zolli became a Catholic, and to honor the Pope for what he had done for the Jews and the role he had played in Zolli’s conversion, he took the name “Eugenio” the Pope’s given name, as his own baptismal name. Zolli stressed that his conversion was for theological reasons, which was certainly true, but the fact that the Pope had worked so hard on behalf of the Jews no doubt played a role in inspiring him to look at the truths of Christianity.

Lapide writes: *“When Zolli accepted baptism in 1945 and adopted Pius XII’s Christian name of Eugene, most Roman Jews were convinced that his conversion was an act of gratitude for wartime succor to Jewish refugees, and repeated denials notwithstanding, many are still of this opinion. Thus, Rabbi Barry Dov Schwartz wrote in the summer issue, 1964, of Conservative Judaism: ‘Many Jews were persuaded to convert after the war, as a sign of gratitude, to that institution which had saved their lives’”* (Lapide, p.133). Lapide estimated the total number of Jews that had been spared as a result of Pius XII’s throwing the Church’s weight into the clandestine struggle to save them. After totalling the number of Jews saved in different areas and deducting the numbers saved by other causes, such as the praiseworthy efforts of some European Protestants, *“The final number of Jewish lives in whose rescue the Catholic Church had been the instrument is thus at least 700,000 souls, but in all probability it is much closer to . . . 860,000”* (ibid., p.215). This is a total larger than all other Jewish relief organizations in Europe combined, were able to save. Lapide calculated that Pius XII and the Church he headed constituted the most successful Jewish aid organization in all of Europe during the War, dwarfing the Red Cross and all other aid agencies.

This fact continued to be recognized when Pius XII died in 1958. Lapide’s book records the eulogies of a number of Jewish leaders concerning the Pope, these Jewish leaders praised the man highly (following quotes taken from Lapide, p.227-228): *“We share the grief of the world over the death of His Holiness Pius XII. . . . During the ten years of Nazi terror, when our people passed through the horrors of martyrdom, the Pope raised his voice to condemn the persecutors and to commiserate with their victims”* (Golda Meir, Israeli representative to the U.N. and future prime minister of Israel).

*“With special gratitude we remember all he has done for the persecuted Jews during one of the darkest periods in their entire history” (Nahum Goldmann, president of the World Jewish Congress).*

*“More than anyone else, we have had the opportunity to appreciate the great kindness, filled with compassion and magnanimity, that the Pope displayed during the terrible years of persecution and terror” (Ellio Toaff, Chief Rabbi of Rome, following Rabbi Zolli’s conversion).*

Finally, let me mention an important quotation from Lapidé’s record that was not given at the death of Pius XII, but was given after the War by the most well-known Jewish figure of this century, Albert Einstein: *“Only the Catholic Church protested against the Hitlerian onslaught on liberty. Up until then I had not been interested in the Church, but today I feel a great admiration for the Church, which alone has had the courage to struggle for spiritual truth and moral liberty” (Ibid, p.251).*

To *“those who reflexively criticize . . . should ponder the words of Robert Kemper, the American who served as deputy chief of the Nuremburg war-crimes tribunal: ‘All the arguments and writings eventually used by the Catholic Church against Hitler only provoked suicide; the execution of Jews was followed by that of Catholic Priests.’*

*William Rubinstein, author of the new book, The Myth of Rescue, similarly maintains that the Church could not realistically have done more to save Jews during the war. To those who say that the Church could have done more, it is time to say, ‘had others done as much, more Jews would have been saved’” (Catalyst, p.4).*

*“A sounding protest, which might turn out to be self thwarting-or quiet piecemeal rescue? Loud words or prudent deeds? The dilemma must have been sheer agony, for whatever course he chose, horrible consequences were inevitable. Unable to cure the sickness of an entire civilization, and unwilling to bear the brunt of Hitler’s fury, the Pope, unlike many far mightier than he, alleviated, relieved, retrieved, appealed petitioned, and saved as best he could” (Graham, p.90).*

*‘Who but a prophet or a martyr could have done much more? The Talmud teaches us that “whosoever preserves one life, it is accounted to him by scripture as if he had preserved the whole world.” If this is true, and it is as true as that most of Jewish of tenets, the sanctity of human life, then Pius XII deserves that forest in the Judean hills which kindly people in Israel proposed for him in October, 1958. A memorial forest, like those planted for Winston Churchill, King Peter of Yugoslavia and Count Bernadotte of Sweden- with 860,000 trees’ (Lapide, p.267).*

### **Bibliography**

Patrick Madrid, (1997,June). “Bad News for Bigots.” Envoy Magazine, p.15.

Gerry Matatics, (1990, Sept). "How to stop fuzzy thinking." This Rock magazine, p.14.

Robert Graham, S.J., (1988). Pius XII and the Holocaust. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: A Catholic league Publication.

Michael O'Carrol, (1980). Pius XII: Greatness Dishonored, A Documented Study. Dublin: Laetare Press.

Joseph Lichten, (1963). A Question of Judgement: Pius XII and the Jews. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference.

Pinchas E. Lapide, (1967). Three Popes and the Jews. New York: Hawthorne Books.

American Jewish Yearbook, (1944-1945). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

William A. Donohue, (1998, April). "Vatican document on Holocaust deserves Praise." Catalyst Journal, vol.25, No.3, p.4.