

Telling the Truth About How Pius XII and the Diocese of Assisi Helped to Save Jews

by Sabrina Ferrisi

Few people know the extent to which the Catholic Church, under the orders of Pope Pius XII, worked to save Jews during World War II. In order to underscore these heroic actions, the Pave the Way Foundation held an event at Temple Israel in New Rochelle on April 5 to present "Museum of Memory, Assisi 1943-1944."

The event was to present and discuss how the Diocese of Assisi saved every Jew within its borders during World War II through a network of clergy and citizens. Panelists included Rabbi Jay Rosenbaum of Temple Israel, Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino of Assisi, Gary Krupp, president of the Pave the Way Foundation, Johan Ickx, a longtime Vatican archivist and foremost scholar of the Vatican record during World War I and World War II, Elizabeth Bettina, author of *It Happened in Italy*, and Stefania Proietti, mayor of Assisi.

What Happened in Assisi

In 1943, thousands of refugees fled to Assisi, including 300 Jews. Immediately, Bishop Giuseppe Nicolini of Assisi formed a working committee to safeguard Jews by placing them in convents and monasteries. Everything possible was done to help — including the provision of food, clothes and the hiding of religious Jewish objects. In fact, Bishop Nicolini placed these sacred objects in the basement of his own residence and walled it up with his own hands.

The Brizi family helped create false identity papers for the Jews with a pedal-operated printing press. They did everything they could to help Jews at the risk of their own lives. Luigi Brizi even added seals of various Southern Italian regions to give his documents greater authenticity. Jews were given different last names and new places of birth in the south of Italy.

Jewish rescues in Diocese of Assisi

Another object that was to prove invaluable during this time was the bicycle of champion cyclist Gino Bartali. Bartali had won the Giro d'Italia in 1936 and 1937 as well as the Tour de France in 1938. He was one of the most famous Italians at the time of World War II and trained all over Italy.

Bartali was a devout Catholic and friends with Florence's Cardinal Elia Dalla Costa, who officiated at Bartali's wedding. One day, Cardinal Dalla Costa asked Bartali to help the Church's quest to save Jews, and from that day forward, Bartali began to bike between Assisi and Florence, picking up and delivering false identity papers. The papers were rolled up and hidden inside the frame of his bicycle. Every Jew in Assisi was saved, as well as countless others in the north of Italy, through these efforts.

Changing People's Minds

When Gary Krupp grew up in Queens, he was told in school that Pope Pius XII was bad. "But my uncle had met Pope Pius XII twice, and he told me that he [Pius] had been a good man," said Krupp. Krupp and his wife, Meredith, through their Pave the Way Foundation (PTWF), began to research this question in 2006: Had Pope Pius XII actually done all that he could to save Jews during World War II? After years of researching this issue with a team of international scholars, including pouring through 76,000 documents from archives around the world on matters related to Pope Pius XII, Krupp and his team concluded that the Pontiff may have done more than any other person to save Jews.

Krupp looked at the archives of *The New York Times* and *The Palestine Post* from 1939 to 1958 on Pius and the Jews. "I could not find one negative article," he said. "In 1963, Operation Seat 12 began. This was the Russian

operation to destroy the reputation of Pope Pius XII because Khrushchev and Stalin hated him and the Catholic Church.”

The operation’s fabricated stories about Pope Pius XII changed public opinion with regards to this particular pope toward the negative. “I call it the worst character assassination of the 20th century,” said Krupp. “Growing up Jewish, the worst character flaw you can have is ingratitude. This Russian disinformation campaign robbed the Jewish people of the dignity of showing gratitude to the man who actually saved — according to the Jewish historians who lived through the war — 847,000 Jewish lives; who were saved by the Catholic Church under the pontificate of Pope Pius XII,” said Krupp.

The Vatican Archives

Johan Ickx spoke about many findings that have emerged during his research into the Vatican Archives. “Not long ago, we made a surprising discovery. It was what we call ‘Pacelli’s list’: 2,800 names of Jewish people who were writing to the Pope directly during World War II. These letters came to the secretary of state and were all responded to,” said Ickx.

The Vatican’s Secretariat of State wrote letters to bishops throughout Europe telling them that they had to do whatever they could to support the Jews and do it with the maximum of secrecy. “These were direct instructions from Pope Pius XII,” said Ickx. In other files, 15,000 names of Jews were discovered in the archives of internal affairs. The letters had come from all over Europe with requests for help.

“From 1938 to 1946, there was a bureau inside this Vatican ministry that followed all of these requests. Jews were brought to Spain and Portugal to escape. This was done personally by bishops and nuncios, sometimes in collaboration with Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, nuns or laypeople of goodwill. Sometimes it made the difference and people were saved. Not always. Sometimes it was too late,” he said.

Other discoveries were that false baptismal certificates were created in St. Peter’s in Rome to save Jewish babies. “This gives a completely different picture of what was happening in the room of Pope Pius XII and his direct entourage during these years. These were the best friends of the Jews,” said Ickx. “Believe me.”

An Open Mind

Rabbi Eric Silver from Connecticut recalled a conversation he had with Krupp several years ago. “I got a call from Gary about a symposium he had organized in Rome on matters dealing with His Holiness Pope Pius XII. This was two weeks before the beginning of the Jewish high holy days. It would have been like asking an accountant to do this on April 1,” said Silver.

Silver told Krupp to count him out because of the holiday, but also to put him down as a negative vote. He had nothing but negative feelings for Pope Pius XII because he felt that he could have done more to save the Jews. Then Krupp said, “Look, you always say to people that you have an open mind. Are you going to go on in that fashion or are you going to look at the evidence?” That challenged Silver in a way that he could not say “No.”

Silver went to Rome and looked over the evidence and began to pour over the documents in the Vatican Archives. He studied, and he read. “And then I went to the grave of Pope Pius XII and prayed for forgiveness. I came away convinced that no man had done more for the Jews. During Yom Kippur service, we read names of our deceased. I read the name of Eugenio Pacelli,” he said.

Silver regrets that this campaign of calumny against Pope Pius XII has gone on for so long. “I discovered that 17 babies were born in his own bed. One cardinal complained that you could not walk anywhere within Vatican City without stumbling over Jews because it was off limits to the Germans,” Jews, said Silver, are sadly very knowledgeable about innuendos and its effects: “We have paid a heavy price, and we should not be doing that to another, particularly to a man who did so much to save so many lives.”

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