

POPE PIUS XII: FRIEND AND RESCUER OF JEWS

The astonishing, almost unknown story of hundreds of Jewish refugees, shipwrecked in the Aegean Sea, who turned to Pope Pius XII for help

■ BY WILLIAM DOING JR.



Editorial Note:

There has been no major figure of the World War II period (1939-1945) more inaccurately depicted than Eugenio Pacelli-Pope Pius XII (1939-1958).

Perhaps the worst of these attacks come from a provocative 1960s play, and from a 1990s book which claimed to be scholarly.

The first is Rolf Hochhuth's stage drama, *The Deputy* (1963), which presented Pius as a cold, heartless bureaucrat, standing aloof from the horrors of the Holocaust as he engaged in secret business dealings to enrich the Church. After creating a brief sensation, *The Deputy* was revealed to be a pure piece of propaganda—as contrived and inaccurate as the anti-Catholic fabrications once put out by the Nazis themselves.

The second assault on Pius' character was John Cornwell's

Hitler's Pope (1999), a purported work of scholarship, but, as

respected historians showed, clearly a compendium of inaccuracies and prejudices. Cornwell argued that Pacelli assisted Hitler's consolidation of power, and then, once the Holocaust began, failed to adequately resist it. Both primary archives and first-hand witnesses have demolished Cornwell's thesis; and even Cornwell himself has corrected some of his most outrageous judgments. But the misconceptions of that book, like those of *The Deputy*, continue to resonate with a media little interested in historical truth, particularly when it involves the papacy.

The result has been a grave historical injustice: over and over, Pius XII has been presented to the general public as the most reprehensible Churchman imaginable—the Pope who remained silent during the genocide, or who actually colluded with the Nazis in the deaths of millions of Jews. Outstanding scholars—and many others of good will—know how untrue these allegations are; and the

facts about Pius XII's impressive record are reaching more people all the time. But the truth is that there is still widespread bias against Pius, and it will take considerable time to reverse and correct it.

We will not try to explain why Pius XII has been maligned for more than 50 years; that is a story requiring its own review—one that examines our age's abysmal prejudice against Catholicism. We simply state this essential fact: more than 50 years of painstaking research, much of it by Jewish scholars, has repudiated every main charge against him, and proved him a singularly dedicated rescuer of Jews.

Last month, this magazine made the case that the almost irrational campaign against Pius was continuing, even in the face of

massive evidence against it. This month we offer one clear, compelling example of Pius XII at work to embrace and care for Jews. The example we give has been partially known ever since *Inside the Vatican* published a newsflash about it in 2006, with commentary by William Doyno, a highly-regarded Pius specialist (*see pp. 17-18*). That story received wide attention, much praise, some criticism, and, appropriately, requests for additional evidence. Now, after considerably more research, we present the full story behind the original newsflash. It is now a testimony with ample documentation, which we believe every fair-minded reader will find extraordinary. If ever a story deserved to be heard, bearing upon Pius XII's conduct and character, and his true attitude toward the Jewish people, this is it. —*The Editor*

And now, my Jewish friend, go with the protection of the Lord, and never forget, you must always be proud to be a Jew!"

The words are striking and unforgettable. They serve as a comfort to anyone who has ever been the victim of anti-Semitism, and at the same time, as a rebuke to those who've sanctioned it. They were spoken to a young Jewish refugee in the fall of 1941, after he had just fled Nazi and fascist persecution and was in desperate need of help. The man who spoke them—loudly, clearly, and in German, to a crowd filled largely with German soldiers—was none other than the Vicar of Christ himself.

The story of how Pope Pius XII embraced this young Jewish refugee—and what he said and did for him—is one of the most inspiring acts of the Second World War, but one that—amazingly—remains largely unknown. The dramatic encounter was first recorded by the young Jewish man himself, in an anonymous article entitled, "A Papal Audience in Wartime," for the *Palestine Post* (today's *Jerusalem Post*), on April 28, 1944, nearly three years after it took place; expanded upon in that same man's subsequent German memoir (published in Israel at the end of the War)(1); and again in an English version, entitled, *Long Journey Home*, produced in 1966, which was apparently offered to major publishers but never—evidently—actually published.(2) The latter memoir is now stored in two prestigious historical institutions—the Leo



Baeck Institute in New York (www.lbi.org), which makes it available in digitized form online, and the Wisconsin Historical Society (www.wisconsinhistory.org). It is from

From Yad Vashem Archives: above, Heinz Wisla; left, Wisla's signature on a document requesting a visa to Bolivia.

Below, Ferramonti Di Tarsia Internment Camp, in Calabria (southern Italy), where the *Pentcho's* refugees stayed after being helped off Rhodes by Pius XII

these sources, and separate corroborating documents, that this account is based.

THE WITNESS OF HOWARD "HEINZ" WISLA

The name of our hero—the Jewish refugee who met Pius XII—is Howard Heinz Wisla, known simply as "Heinz" during his early years in Germany. Five years ago, when ITV promoted the aforementioned *Palestine Post* testimony in our newsflash, we did not know the man's name, since the article was signed simply

"Refugee." But, thanks to his largely forgotten memoir, we now know what his name is—and much more.

Born in Germany in 1920, Heinz Wisla seem destined for a normal life, attending the universities of Berlin and Cambridge, majoring in languages, journalism and literature. With anti-Semitism rife at the time, however, life was a challenge for any European Jew, especially one living in Germany. Bravely remaining there even after Hitler obtained power in 1933, Wisla's fortunes changed radically as Hitler's persecutions increased. In 1940, the Gestapo arrested Wisla, and threw him into the Sachsenhausen concentration camp (in Oranienburg, just north of Berlin), where hundreds of thousands were interned and tens of thousands perished. Torture, starvation and summary executions were daily occurrences, an experience Wisla later described as an unrelenting "nightmare." His life was saved only because his father, a decorated veteran of the Great War, reached out to his military friends, who were able to successfully intervene for his son.

Emaciated and near the point of death, Heinz was released on condition he never speak of Sachsenhausen again, lest he be seized and executed, and that he leave Germany at once. As soon as he was physically able, he did so, though his parents and younger brother were not permitted to go with him: they remained behind, consigned to a forced labor factory, awaiting their own uncertain future.

Once outside the Reich, Wisla sought to escape Europe entirely, praying his family would survive, and trusting he would reunite with them later, after the terror passed.

A break came when he found out about the *Pentcho*, a clandestine steamer preparing to transport 500 Jewish refugees from

Slovakia to Palestine. Through grit and good fortune, Heinz was able to secure a spot on board, believing it his ticket to freedom. His joy was shared by fellow passengers, who boarded the vessel singing the *Hatikvah* ("The Hope"), now the national anthem of Israel:

*As long as in the heart, within,
A Jewish soul still yearns,
And onward, towards the ends of the east,
An eye still gazes toward Zion...*

The *Pentcho* left Bratislava in the middle of 1940, en route to the ancient Jewish homeland. But what should have taken a month, and should have been a liberating journey, became a harrowing trial of hardship and despair. Neither the *Pentcho* nor its passengers were prepared for anything like what occurred on sea.

Their story is recounted in John Bierman's remarkable book *Odyssey* (1984), which sheds further light on Wisla's testimony. Historian Milton Meltzer summarizes the ship's ordeal:

"Down the Danube they sailed on the rickety, leaking boat, past one country after another which refused to let them come in for food and water. After weeks aboard, the refugees were filthy and starving. Many jumped overboard to swim ashore, but they were forced back.

"It took almost five months to reach the Black Sea. With no lifeboats, no life preservers and no radio, the ship began a wild, aimless journey among the Greek islands.

"Then one day the boiler exploded,

and the engine stopped. Bunk sheets were gathered, and the women sewed them up into sails.

"A storm drove the *Pentcho* onto the rocks of an uninhabited island in the Aegean Sea. The passengers managed to scramble ashore and watched the ship break into pieces and sink. Scouring the

island for food, they could find no birds, no animals and no fresh water.

"Eleven terrible days passed. Then an Italian warship rescued them, only to put them into a concentration camp on the island of Rhodes."⁽³⁾

Unlike the notorious camps run by Germany, the one at Rhodes wasn't designed for death, and most of the local Italians treated the internees well. But they were still in a fascist camp, with restrictions; and because of an Allied blockade of this Axis-controlled island, food, medicine and other basic goods barely got through. The result was hunger, fever, disease and—tragically—death. Despite the best efforts of the Italian doctors on hand, a number of the *Pentcho* refugees perished; and many of the rest awaited an identical fate. As their isolation and agony increased, the internees

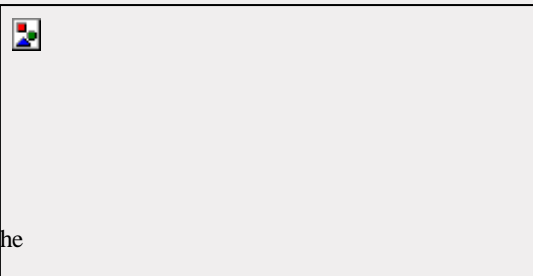
sent open telegrams to the world's leaders, hoping they would

POPE PIUS XII AIDED JEWISH PRISONERS OF FASCIST CONCENTRATION CAMP

June 4, 2009

The June 4 edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* includes a review of Mario Rende's *Ferramonti di Tarsia*, a new book that chronicles an Italian fascist concentration camp where Jews were treated with relative humanity, thanks to the efforts of Paolo Salvatore, the camp's director, and Capuchin Father Callisto Lopinot, the camp's chaplain. In an

audience of October 29, 1944, Jan Hermann, speaking on behalf of other former prisoners, thanked Pope Pius XII for his "remarkable and generous gifts" twice given through Cardinal Francesco Borgongini Duca, for his open "support [for] our rights to human dignity," and for preventing the prisoners' deportation to Poland in 1942.



Top, the book *Ferramonti di Tarsia* by Mario Rende.

Above, Father Callisto Lopinot, the camp's chaplain

respond favorably.

Occasionally, rumors of a rescue would arise, only to quickly dissipate. Four of the male internees tried to flee Rhodes, for nearby Turkey, but two were immediately accosted, and the other two drowned. The internees felt doomed, virtually without hope.

What happened next is crucial to understanding the evils of anti-Semitism, and how Pius XII reacted to them.

In the summer of 1941, Wisla—suddenly and unexpectedly—received news that relatives had secured a special transit visa for him, enabling him to escape detention at Rhodes and travel to Rome. Elated, but sorrowful to leave his fellow Jews behind, Wisla bid an emotional farewell to them, promising

WISLA KEEPS HIS PROMISE

Having immediately taken to Rome and its people, Heinz soon found allies for his mission. A kindly German priest arranged for Heinz to meet Pius XII at one of his special audiences, allowing for a direct appeal to the Pope for the imprisoned, shipwrecked refugees back at Rhodes. When the dramatic moment came, Wisla was part of a large gathering, including many German soldiers passing by, and the last to approach the pontiff. Noticing how shy and anxious the young man was, the Pope immediately put Heinz at ease. The exchange that followed brought forth Pius XII's compassion, and full awareness of what it meant to be Jewish at that time, in a world overcome by hatred. The language used by the Pope is important, for it speaks directly to Pius XII's love for his fellow human beings—God's children, as he saw them—without distinction of race, color or creed.

love has often been questioned, particularly by those ready to believe the worst of the Roman pontiffs. Academic authors Atkin and Frank Tallett, for example, claim that Pius XII had "a predisposition toward anti-Semitism which

clouded his judgment."⁽⁴⁾ But Wisla's first-hand testimony shows the exact opposite to be the case. After Heinz told the Pope who he was, and what he believed could be accomplished through papal intervention, Wisla recorded Pius XII's extraordinary response:

"Then Pope Pius XII said to me: 'You have done well, my Jewish friend, to have come to me and told me what has happened down there in the Italian islands. I have heard about it before. Will you come back, my son, in a few days with a written report and give it to my secretary of state who is dealing with this particular refugee problem? But now to you, my young friend. You are Jewish. I know what that means in these times we live in. I do hope that you



he would do "everything possible" to them once he arrived in Rome.



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"And then the Pope raised his voice so that everybody in the room could hear it even more clearly: 'My son, whether you are worthier than others, only the Lord knows, but believe me, you are at least as worthy as any other human being on our earth before the Lord. And now, my Jewish friend, go with the protection of the Lord Almighty, and never forget: Be always proud to be a Jew.'"(5)

A more heartfelt and eloquent repudiation of anti-Semitism could hardly be imagined; and that it was done in front of German officers during the Holocaust makes it all the more significant. What is particularly striking, from a historical and theological perspective, is Pius XII's unqualified assertion of the equality of Jews and Christians—a correction to the centuries-old "teaching of contempt," which led so many Christians to think themselves superior to Jews, and to abuse them relentlessly.

Following Pius XII's encouragement, Wisla followed through with a report to the papal secretariat of state, and was not disappointed. A short time later, in the winter of 1941-1942, he wrote excitedly of "some good news, too. Owing to the personal intervention of Pope Pius XII, a Red Cross ship has picked up the starving 500 refugees from the internment camp on the isle of Rhodes and brought them safely to the Italian mainland. Here they are now being placed in a comfortable internment camp in southern Italy"—the Ferramonti di Tarsia camp, near Cosenza, in the region of Calabria—and "the Vatican issued directions to the Italian government to treat my former comrades there with special care."(6)

The importance of this intervention cannot be overstated, for if the shipwrecked Jews at Rhodes had not been transferred to the humane camp at Ferramonti in 1942, they would have either starved or suffered the same fate of the island's indigenous Jews two years later. As Yad Vashem's Holocaust Center notes: "The Allies invaded Italy in September 1943; just days later the German army occupied Rhodes. In June 1944 Anton

Burger, one of Adolf Eichmann's assistants, arrived in Rhodes to supervise the deportation of the island's Jews. The Jews were ordered to appear at various assembly centers by mid-July.

"On July 20 the Jewish males were arrested (only a few avoided arrest and joined the partisans). Accompanied by their wives and children, the prisoners were sent to Athens, and then on to Auschwitz. Upon arrival, 400 of the 1,800 Jews were



Left, Rhodes monument to the passengers of the shipwrecked immigrant ship, the *Pentcho*, who died there.

Middle, passengers of the *Pentcho* arrive in Rhodes after their ship capsized and an Italian warship transported them.

Below, a picture of the *Pentcho* before it sank

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chosen for hard labor; the rest were executed immediately. Only 150 survived the War."(7)

Equally remarkable is that the Holy See went out of its way to help Wisla get to Spain (from whence he would travel to Portugal, then out of Europe altogether), as he learned from the Spanish consulate in Rome: "Obviously, when I called on Pope Pius XII and later presented my memorandum to his minister of state, I must have

told them about my visa difficulties. They must have instructed their Nuncio in Madrid to intervene on my behalf, who then did just that successfully."(8)

How Wisla survived over the next several years, moving from one location to the next, often underground as a black marketer and even spy, are all stories unto themselves—detailed in the rest of his memoir—but we limit ourselves here to the narrative related above.

In early 1944, Heinz, still in Portugal, finally received an official British mandate permit to enter Palestine Thanks to the persistence and generosity of his friend Wilfrid Israel—a little-known but heroic businessman who helped many persecuted Jews flee wartime Europe(9)—Wisla was able to board the *Nyassa*, a famous refugee ship, which reached Haifa (now the largest city in northern Israel) in February of that year.

One can only imagine the exhilaration Wisla felt when he at last reached the Promised Land, but his joy was tempered by tragedy: in the summer of 1943, his last letters to his parents and brother in Berlin were returned, stamped "Addressat Unbekannt" (Address Unknown). Neighbors then wrote Heinz to tell him the heartbreaking news: his family had been "sent to the East." Knowing what that invariably meant—death in the Nazi extermination camps in Poland—Wisla found himself in a state of shock, and spent days walking alone on the beaches of Portugal, trying to heal from the pain. Now, in his new home of Palestine, his recovery continued, as he tried to build a new life.

With all this going on, it is astonishing that Heinz made it a point to set down in writing, and just a few months after reaching the Holy Land, his gratitude to Pius XII in his *Palestine Post* testimony. Whether it was his decision, or an editor's, to sign the piece as "Refugee," is unknown—but it is a beautiful recollection, and one that deserves recognition in any discussion of Pius XII.

According to US government records, Howard Heinz Wisla (he apparently Anglicized his name after emigrating to America) was a sales manager. He passed away in 2004. Were his account the only testimony of Pius XII's goodness, some might doubt

it. But there is additional evidence which confirms essential elements of his narrative.

In his aforementioned book, *Odyssey*, John Bierman mentions Wisla in passing, but documents his audience with the Pope:

"One internee who did leave Rhodes at about this time [1941] was an Austrian [actually, he was German] named Heinz Wisla. Having acquired a Portuguese visa, he was allowed to leave for Lisbon via Rome. Before he left, the governing committee drew up a petition which he promised he would try to present to the Pope.

"In a letter to Rhodes from Lisbon some weeks later, Wisla reported that he had taken the petition to the Vatican, where he was granted an audience with Pius XI."

Bierman then quotes Wisla, describing Pius XII's welcome reception: "After the Pope had blessed them [the audience] I was able to present the petition. *He promised to do what he could.*" (emphasis added)(10)

Even earlier than Bierman, Perez Leshem, writing about Rescue efforts during the War, for the 1969 *Leo Baeck Yearbook*, mentions Wisla's 1945 German memoir: "Wisla later wrote a book on his experiences as a refugee and his emigration on the SS *Nyassa* [under the pen name] Ben-Zwi Kalischer (Heinz Wisla), *Vom Konzentrationslager nach Palastina Flucht lurch die halbe Welt* [From Concentration Camp to Palestine: Flight Halfway Around the World](11); and in 2002, the Italian anthology, *L'ombra lunga dell'esilio: ebraismo e memoria* ["The Long Shadow of Exile: Judaism and Memory"] published an essay by Klaus Voigt on the writings of Jewish refugees, which comments:

"The book by Heinz Wisla, *From Concentration Camp to Palestine: Flight Halfway Around the World*, is worthy of mention above all for the description of the audience granted to the author by Pius XII. Except for the description of the situation of the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen, the text has conserved elements characteristic of a diary. Wisla was among the passengers on the 'Pentcho,' the vessel that was shipwrecked in the Aegean on the way to Palestine. The more than 500 refugees were saved by the Italian military navy and then interned on Rhodes. Wisla was the only one who had permission to take an airplane to Italy, since he possessed a visa for Cuba, before the entire group was transferred to Ferramonti-Tarsia. The audience with the Pope took place in the middle of, or amidst, German soldiers in uniform. The Pope agreed to his request for help for the shipwrecked interned on Rhodes and concluded the colloquy with the words that could be heard even by the soldiers, 'Always be proud of being a Jew.' From Italy, Wisla went by air to Barcelona and from there, with false documents to Portugal, which he left in the spring of 1944 with the first transport to Palestine organized by the Jewish Agency."(12)

These obscure references to Wisla are brief and scattered, but

key to establishing the contours and outlines of his testimony.

Above, arrival of the SS *Nyassa* in Haifa, northern Israel. Opposite, right, Herman Herskovic; left, US troops entering Rome as liberators in 1944



Far more important, however, is that there is a second witness—another passenger of the *Pentcho* and internee at Rhodes—who has reinforced Wisla's testimony.

THE SECOND WITNESS: HERMAN HERSKOVIC

In 1964, in the wake of Hochhuth's malicious attack, the *L'Osservatore della Domenica*—a weekly edition of the Vatican newspaper—put out a special 80-page issue in Italian documenting the humanitarian interventions of Pius XII. At the time, the Associated Press called it "the most comprehensive defense of Pius XII's wartime role to appear in a Vatican publication."⁽¹³⁾

Though very difficult to obtain, a full copy was acquired by ITV. Entitled (in English) "The Pope, Yesterday and Today," it contains articles and first-hand accounts, by both Catholics and non-Catholics, testifying on behalf of Pius.

Among them is a gripping article entitled, "*Devo la Vita al Papa*," [in English, "I Owe My Life to the Pope"; see full text in the box on p. 15] by one Herman Herskovic (1921-1983), originally from Czechoslovakia, who recounted how he had been part of a group of Jews, fleeing wartime Europe for Palestine, who had been adrift on a former cattle boat for months; who were cast up on a tiny island, and finally ended up in an Italian prison camp at Rhodes.

In all essentials, Herskovic's narrative converges with that of Wisla's, especially when Herskovic describes how "the father of one of my comrades obtained the freedom of his son." The latter—obviously Wisla—during his journey to the north, "was received in audience by Pius XII," continues Herskovic. "Pius XII listened attentively to him and promised his intervention with the Italian government. Two weeks later, we were transferred to a safer concentration camp in Calabria"—the Ferramonti di Tarsia camp.⁽¹⁴⁾

That camp, which preserved the lives of the *Pentcho's* Jewish refugees—and several thousand more—has been described by the *Jerusalem Post* as "an unexpected haven" during the Holocaust. It was "a place where they could avoid the horrors of the German concentration camps."⁽¹⁵⁾

What is especially significant about this camp is how much Pius XII and his representatives protected its internees. As Herskovic's testimony recounts, and as Mario Rende notes in his book, *Ferramonti di Tarsia* (see p. 12), the inmates' fear of being handed over to the Germans was constant (especially after the Allies landed at Sicily, and the Germans began to retreat south). But, as Rende shows, the Vatican appealed to the Italian government numerous times to prevent deportation of its internees, and thus helped save them. Not only were Ferramonti's prisoners not handed over to the Germans, but there was no random violence against them, as there was in so many other Axis-run camps. The surviving Jews were extremely grateful.⁽¹⁶⁾

L'Osservatore Romano is not the only place Herskovic shared his dramatic testimony. In 1975, he gave a series of five interviews

to the late Judah Rubinstein (a chronicler of Jewish life) for a Holocaust Survivors project, and the transcripts of these interviews are now stored at the New York Public Library oral history division.(17)

In the second interview of the series, dated January 29, 1975, Herskovic recounts his whole harrowing journey on the *Pentcho* in considerable detail, describing how it sank, how the refugees washed up on a forsaken island, and how they were then picked up by the Italian forces and interned at Rhodes until they were at last taken to the life-saving Ferramonti camp on the Italian mainland. At that point—just as Wisla affirms in his own memoir—Herskovic states: "The Pope arranged with the Red Cross that they should transfer us from the island [Rhodes] to the motherland."(18)

Herskovic also mentions how another one of the Jewish internees—evidently, someone other than Wisla—contacted his father, who knew a Slovakian bishop, who in turn "got in touch with Pope Pius" for help.

This may explain why Pius XII told Wisla, after hearing his plea for the refugees on Rhodes, "I have heard about it before," and that his secretary of state was dealing with the crisis. That the Pope—and one of his bishops, in a land scarred by anti-Semitism—were so open to Jewish appeals during the War speaks volumes about their good will.

Of the Red Cross ship(19) which moved them to the Italian mainland, then to Ferramonti, Herskovic continued, "We got a hot meal, we had a blanket," and "we could sleep on a bed." The starving refugees, whom Pius XII had successfully helped transfer to safety, "realized what living again means," said Herskovic.(20)

**ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS:
THE HOLY SEE'S ACTES ET
DOCUMENTS AND THE RED
CROSS**

The oral and written testimonies by Wisla and Herskovic are stunning and stand by themselves; but there are additional documents not to be overlooked.

The Vatican has published eleven thick volumes (actually twelve, since one is in two parts) of wartime *Actes et Documents*, with the remaining wartime archives to be released in the next few years: although not an exhaustive collection of every one of the Pope's humanitarian acts during the war (there were far too many, and/or some were done secretly, or



I OWE MY LIFE TO THE POPE

By Herman Herskovic

My name is Herman Herskovic and I am 43 years old. My parents were Jews and I lived in Czechoslovakia. During the last war, I was forced to abandon the country to flee from the Nazi persecution. Today I live in Cleveland where I am a furniture dealer. But I would never have reached America if it had not been for Pope Pius XII.



I read that Hochhuth, in his *The Deputy*, accuses Pope Pacelli of indifference with regard to the fate of millions of Jews. This accusation immediately seemed to me profoundly unjust toward a person who had done so much for others. So I said to myself: "If Pius XII were alive, he could defend himself. But since he is not, you must at least recount how the Pope saved your life and how he saved the lives of several hundred Jews who were with you

In 1940, with a group of fellow Jews, we prepared a plan to take refuge in Palestine. We rented a vessel, normally used to transport cattle. And we engaged a captain, known as a cocaine addict. Given the risks of the undertaking, he was the best who could be found for the job. The 15th of June, we embarked from Bratislava, 500 of us, men, women and children.

The plan was to sail down the Danube to the Black Sea and there transfer to a larger vessel. According to the calculations, the river journey was to take four days. Four months later we were still on the little boat, sleeping on the benches, hungry, without water, and without radio communications. Having arrived at the mouth of the Danube, we had a rude surprise. The ship we were supposed to transfer to, had left. We pointed the prow of the old and unsafe boat toward the south and entrusted our lives to the Lord.

They were terrifying days. The old boat was like a box of matches. Everyone had to remain quietly in his or her place. If ten people got up to move around at the same time, the boat would have capsized. In Istanbul, a police craft prevented us from entering the port to replenish our food and water supplies. After having traversed the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, we reached the Aegean Sea.

The misadventures were not over. The boiler did not stand up to the strain and cracked. The ship wandered for hours and hours before striking against the rocks of an island and sinking. By swimming we reached the shore. For eleven days, our only food was raw fish. We were then collected by an Italian ship and transferred to a prison camp on the island of Rhodes.

From there, some of my companions were able to contact family members at home. The father of one of my comrades obtained the freedom of his son, with permission to travel to Switzerland. During his journey to the north, the young man stopped in Rome and was received in audience by Pius XII. To the Pope he recounted all of our story and he told him also of our fears due to the presence of German troops on the island of Rhodes. Pius XII listened attentively to him and promised his intervention with the Italian government. Two weeks later, we were transferred to a safer concentration camp in Calabria.

When the Allies landed in Sicily, our fears were renewed, We feared that the Germans, while retreating, would massacre us. It was then that the Church intervened to help us. The chaplain of the "lager" persuaded the guards to allow us to escape prior to the arrival of the SS. For three days we hid in a forest. And when we came back to the camp, it was already under the control of Allied soldiers.

With all the healthy men of the group, I enrolled in the Czechoslovakian brigade of the British Army fighting until the liberation of Europe. At the end of the war I emigrated to the United States. Toward the Germans, despite everything, I do not feel any excessive anger, because I think that the majority of the population was misled. I know however for certain that many people, in many places, did not help the Jews. It is not just to accuse Pius XII for something that was not under his control. Personally I owe him a great deal and I thought it right to tell my story.

L'Osservatore della Domenica, June 26-28, 1964, page 72

orally, and never preserved on paper), volume 8 of *Actes* does contain several important references to the *Pentcho* refugees, two of which stand out. Document 348, dated April 14, 1942, from the Jewish internees at Ferramonti (including the *Pentcho* refugees, recently arrived from Rhodes) expresses deep thanks to the Pope for his bountiful gift of clothing, following money he had already sent, distributed by his representative, Father Callisto Lopinot: "This wonderful gift is a fresh proof of the concern of Your Holiness, which all the world admires, for your care not only for Catholics but for all people of the world."

The papal gift, said the internees, fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back..."

Document 371, dated May 8, 1942, from "the families of the group of the shipwrecked of Rhodes, who, after so many travels and sufferings, have found a loving welcome in Ferramonti," is equally effusive: "The Holy Father has demonstrated once again his paternal concern for all those suffering from the sorrowful events of the moment, without distinction of confession; he has filled with joy their hearts and they will never, ever forget the goodness of the Holy Father which will remain impressed forever in their hearts."

In addition, since both witnesses mentioned the Red Cross in their testimonies, ITV contacted the International Red Cross Committee (ICRC) in Geneva, to see if they—or their affiliate, the Italian Red Cross—had any information whatsoever about the *Pentcho*, its passengers, and their internment at Rhodes and Ferramonti.

After months of generous cooperation and research, the ICRC's archivist sent us a file pertaining to the *Pentcho* and its passengers, the most important of which was a letter dated January 24, 1941. It was sent by the governor of the Italian islands in the Aegean Sea, and communicated to the Prisoner of War Office of the Italian Red Cross, attached to a list of prisoners ship

wrecked from the *Pentcho*, who had been collected at the San Giovanni Camp at Rhodes: number 53 on the list was "Heinz Wisla"; number 59 was "Hermann Herschkowitz" (spelled slightly differently than his English spelling). There is precious little else about the conditions under which the Jewish refugees were held at Rhodes, or how they were transferred to Ferramonti, because of the "personal intervention of Pope Pius XII" to quote Wisla; but Wisla and Herskovic's respective testimonies—along with Bierman's book, *Odyssey*—provide the crucial missing details.

One of the most moving passages in that work is Bierman's description of what happened when the Jewish refugees' faced their most anxious moment: "Then a rumor swept Ferramonti that the Italians were going to transfer all to a camp in northern Italy, prior to handing them over to the Germans. Greatly alarmed, the camp committee sent an urgent plea to the Vatican, begging for the Pope's intervention. At the instructions of Pius XII, the papal nuncio, Cardinal Borgongini Duca(21), travelled to Calabria to reassure the internees. The children of Ferramonti lined up to greet him with a song of welcome... and the cardinal told them that so far as the Holy See was aware no such move was intended. If it were, he

promised, the Pope would vigorously oppose any attempt to have them moved. He concluded by quoting the 137th Psalm — 'By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept when we remembered thee, O Zion'—and predicting, 'God willing, you will return to the Promised Land one day.'"(22)

The cardinal was a prophet: many of the *Pentcho* refugees, including Wisla, did indeed reach the Promised Land; and others, like Herskovic, found hope and freedom in America, where they began new lives. Now, thanks to this astonishing evidence, so long forgotten or overlooked, we know who was one of their greatest benefactors and kindest friends: Pope Pius XII. 0



The papa I nuncio, Cardinal Francesco Borgongini Duca, former official of the Roman Curia and cardinal priest of the Title of Santa Maria in Valli cella

Endnotes

1. Heinz Wisla's 159-page German memoir is entitled, *Vom Konzentrationslager nach Palästina: Flucht durch die halbe Welt* ["From Concentration Camp to Palestine: Flight Halfway Around the World"], under the pen name, Ben-Zvi Kalischer, Edition Olympia-Martin Feuchtwanger, Tel Aviv 1945 (Hebrew version, *Ba Derech l'Eretz Israel*, Am-oved, 1945).

2. The 100-page (single-space typed) English-language manuscript at the Leo Baeck Archives is stamped "Bertha Klausner International Literary Agency" indicating it was marketed; but we could find no evidence that it was ever accepted or published by an American publisher. The Library of Congress does not list it in its collections. The World Catalog (www.worldcat.org) does, but mentions only its computerized form, available, as indicated, from the Leo Baeck Institute, under the aegis of the Center for Jewish History (www.cjh.org) in New York.

3. Milton Meltzer, *Never to Forget: The Jews of the Holocaust* (HarperCollins, 1991), p. 47.

4. Nicholas Atkin and Frank Talbot, *Priests, Prelates and People: A History of European Catholicism Since 1750* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 260.

5. From Wisla's English-language memoir, *Long Journey Home*, "Roman Experiences and the Pope," Chapter 9. Note that the description of what Pius XII said is virtually the same as the account Wisla published, under the name "Refugee," for the *Palestine Post* on April 28, 1944, and reprinted in ITV's October 25, 2006 newsflash, "Pope Pius XII: Be Proud to be a Jew!" (See pp. 17-18).

6. From *Long Journey Home*, Chapter 10, "Underground in Italy as Blackmarketeer and Assistant Spy:"

7. "Rhodes," Shoah Resource Center, via www.yadvashem.org

8. *Long Journey Home*, Chapter 10.

9. For more on Israel, see Naomi Shepherd's biography, *A Refuge from Dark-*

ness: *Wilfrid Israel and the Rescue of the Jews* (Pantheon Books, 1984). Shepherd mentions Wisla and his interaction with Israel briefly: see pp. 241, 249 and 251.

10. John Bierman, *Odyssey* (Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 157-158.

11. See endnote #1.

12. "La memorialistica dei profughi ebrei in Italia dopo il 1933" ["The Memorializing of Jewish Refugees in Italy after 1933"] by Klaus Voigt, pp. 167-189, at page 177, in *L'ombra lunga dell'esilio: ebraismo e memoria*, edited by Maria Antonietta Santora, et al., Casa Editrice Giuntina, 2002).

13. "Vatican Weekly Defends Pius XII," AP, June 26, 1964, as published in *The Washington Post*, June 27, 1964, p. E22.

14. *L'Osservatore della Domenica*, June 26-28, 1964, p. 72.

15. "An Unexpected Haven," via the *Jerusalem Post's* internet website, in collaboration with *Italy Magazine*.

16. For additional details on Rende's book, see, "Il lager che salvò migliaia di ebrei," by Gaetano Vallini, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 9, 2009.

17. 150 pages of the Herskovic transcripts from the five interviews he gave: Oral Histories, Box 185 no. 1, New York Public Library.

18. Page 50 of the Herskovic transcripts.

19. The "Red Cross ship" could also have been an Italian troop or navy ship with authorized Red Cross workers on it. Italy's wartime government and its country's Red Cross often worked together.

20. Page 50, Herskovic transcripts.

21. Francesco Borgongini Duca (1884-1954) was the apostolic nuncio to Italy during World War II, when he was an archbishop; he became a cardinal in 1953.

22. John Bierman, *Odyssey*, p. 198.

POPE PIUS XII: "BE PROUD TO BE A JEW!"

in a remarkable historical find, testimony has lemerged revealing that, in 1941, Pope Pius XII received a German Jewish visitor at the Vatican who was seeking help for certain Jews who were being held in an Italian internment camp. After welcoming the young man and promising him help, Pius told him not once but twice—in emotional language, in front of a large group that included German soldiers—"Be proud to be a Jew!"

The amazing testimony, written as a first-hand account by an anonymous Jewish author in wartime Palestine, originally appeared on April 28, 1944 in *The Palestine Post* (now *The Jerusalem Post*), the most influential Jewish publication in the world at that time.

According to longtime *Inside the Vatican* contributor William Doyno, who discovered the testimony in an archive maintained by Tel Aviv University, the testimony has apparently been forgotten, because, as far as I know, no leading Holocaust authority or biographer of Pius XII has ever cited it"

As the article reports, the Jewish author attended a papal audience in the autumn of 1941. He entered the papal chamber along with numerous other people, including a group of German soldiers. (It was common for soldiers to visit the Pope early in the war era. Later, when Hitler learned of what the Pope told them, he put an end to this practice.)

The author was the final individual to approach the Pope that day. He wanted to tell Pius about a group of Jews who were being interned by Italy's Fascist government on an island, in danger of starvation. He tried to speak in broken Italian, but the Pope invited him to use his native language, assuming that it would be German. "You are German, too, aren't you?" asked the Pope. The author then explained that he was born in Germany, but that he was a Jew.

Pius invited the author to finish his story. He listened intently, then said: "You have done well to come to me and tell me this. I have heard about it before. Come back tomorrow with a written report and give it to the secretary of state who is dealing with the question. But now for you, my son. You are a young Jew. I

know what that means and I hope you will always be proud to be a Jew!"

Pius then raised his voice so that everyone in the hall—including the German soldiers—could hear it, and said (in a "pleasant voice"): "My son, whether you are worthier than others only the Lord knows, but believe me, you are at least as worthy as every other human being that lives on our earth! And now, my Jewish friend, go with the protection of the Lord, and never forget, you must always be proud to be a Jew!"

The significance of this testimony, particularly for the cause of Pius XII, is still too early to gauge, but Doyno believes "it may well be the most explicit single testimony about Pius' personal feelings toward Jews that has ever been recorded. It is not too far removed from Pius XI's famous declaration of September 1938: "No, it is not possible for Christians to take part in anti-Semitism.... Spiritually, we are all Semites." But Doyno notes one great difference between the statements: "Pius XI's remark to a group of Belgian pilgrims was given wide publicity and is often quoted; Pius XII's statement has been lost to history—until now."

"For Pius XII to make this statement to a German Jew, in 1941, in private, would have been remarkable enough," continued Doyno. "That he did

it in public, with his voice raised so that 'everybody in the hall' could 'hear it clearly,' in front of German soldiers, as well as cardinals, bishops and other high dignitaries of the Vatican government, is more astonishing still. It doesn't merely reveal Pius XII's kindness and Christian compassion; he goes well beyond that and affirms the young man's Jewishness, the very core and dignity of his being."

On the next page is the original article, as it first appeared in the pages of *The Palestine Post*, in 1944, describing events that had occurred three years earlier.

Note: the original article can be found online by accessing the archives of the *Palestine Post*, run by Tel Aviv University. Follow the instructions to access the April 28, 1944 issue of the *Palestine Post*, forward to page 6, and go to the article entitled, *A Papal Audience in Wartime*, by "Refugee."



The Palestine Post, April 28, 1944; Page 6

APAPAL_AUDIENCEASLWARTIME

By "Refugee"

The author of this article arrived in this country in the refugee ship *Nyassa*. It is on a sunny Wednesday morning in the autumn of 1941. An up-to-date Roman bus takes me from the center of the Eternal City to the Vatican. In the pocket of my dark suit I have a permit to enter the Palace of Vatican City for an audience with His Holiness Pope Pius XII.

As the bus crosses the Tiber, I can see the complex of Hadrian's Tomb. A moment later we arrive at the huge square in front of St. Peter's.

The *portal di bronzo*, leading to the Governmental Palace, is guarded by foot soldiers, who look like the lansquenets of some centuries ago. They are the Swiss Guards, and their multicolored uniforms and polished halberds and swords seem to be taken from a museum. An officer with a big moustache gives me the pass permit, the Guards take up their halberds and salute while I enter the Palace and mount a staircase. On the second floor a footman, in tight velvet trousers, shows me into a vestibule, where about 80 people are waiting. Among them are many German soldiers, in field uniform, their caps in their hands. For about an hour I stand around or pace the parquet floor among those warriors of Herr Hitler—probably on their way to Benghazi and Tripoli, anxious not to miss the chance of taking a papal blessing with them for further heroic deeds.

After some time we are led into another hall, its walls decorated with oil paintings, antique engravings and maps. We then pass through a corridor into another antechamber, and, finally we stand before huge double doors ornamented with gold.

One of the papal undersecretaries appears and gives us instructions about what to say to His Holiness and how to behave. Then one after the other, we are allowed to enter the richly-furnished hall, where the Pope receives visitors.

I am the last one to enter, after the German soldiers. The Pope, sitting in a throne-like armchair, dressed in magnificent vestments, resembles some wise doctor, a good friend. His eyes shine in a friendly way through gold-rimmed glasses as each petitioner kneels to kiss the ring on the thin fingers of the Father's right hand.

The Pope speaks to everybody—asking the soldiers in fluent German from which part of the Reich they come and whether they have a special wish. And he speaks so naturally and so simply that one cannot but feel his benevolent influence. Afterwards the Holy Father gives his benediction and hands over the peti-

tions to his retinue: cardinals, bishops and other high dignitaries of Mother Church, officials of the Vatican government, secretaries and diplomats. They stand respectfully in the background behind the audience chair, dressed in richly-colored garments of medieval style.

At last it is my turn. I step forward, feeling very uneasy and shy. Then I kneel down on a velvet cushion, bow over the papal hand, and breathe a kiss on the ring.

Then I look up and address him, stammering some Italian phrases.

But the Pope interrupts me: "My son, you can speak your own language with me; you are German, too, aren't you?"

"No, your Holiness, I was only born in Germany. But I am not a German any longer—I am a Jew."

"So you are a Jew. What can I do for you? Tell me, my son!"

I begin to explain why I have come. I report about the shipwrecked Jewish refugees, saved by Italian warships in the Aegean Sea and now starving in a prisoner of war camp on one of the islands. The Pope listens carefully to my explanations of how to help these poor people either by taking them to Palestine or by bringing them back to Italy to avoid epidemics and further starvation. Then Pius XII says:

"You have done well to come to me and tell me this. I have heard about it before. Come back tomorrow with a written report and give it to the secretary of state who is dealing with the question. But now for you, my son. You are a young Jew. I know what that means and I hope you will always be proud to be a Jew!" And the Pope raises his voice that everybody in the hall can hear it clearly, "My son, whether you are worthier than others only the Lord knows, but believe me, you are at least as worthy as every other human being that lives on our earth! And now, my Jewish friend, go with the protection of the Lord, and never forget, you must always be proud to be a Jew!"

After having pronounced these words in his pleasant voice, the Pope lifts his hands to give the usual benediction. But he stops, smiles and his wonderful fingers only touch my head. Then he lifts me from my kneeling position.....

I join the others by the wall, not caring for the expression on their faces. Have they heard it too?

Now the Holy Father, Pope Pius XII, rises from his chair, spreads out his hands over us and speaks the general benediction. I bow my head.

Afterwards, after leaving the Palace, I walk alone across the piazza before St. Peter's, back to the Tiber embankment. I sit down on a bench looking at the Eternal City, at Rome, her ruins and palaces, at the capital on which the sun shines brightly from a Roman sky. •

