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On The Cover

Pope Pius XII: The Case For - and Against -Canonization

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A Connecticut rabbi joins the discussion at the Vatican



By Cindy Mindell



CHESHIRE - The dispute has raged for nearly 50 years: Was Pope Pius XII, whose pontificate began with the outbreak of World War Two, "Hitler's pope" or "the Jews' pope?"

Some say he turned a blind eye to the Nazis and forsook the Jews. Others insist that he saved more Jews than any other leader in Europe, perhaps as many as 860,000.

Since 1965, the Church has been working to canonize Pius, but has slowed the process because of serious doubts raised about the pope's legacy, by Jews and Catholics alike. From Sept. 15 to 17, as Catholics were marking the 50th anniversary of Pius's death, Pave the Way Foundation (PTWF) held a symposium at the Vatican to try to put the controversy to rest. Among the 80 participants from around the world - Jewish and Christian clergy, historians, journalists, and authors - was Rabbi Eric Silver of Temple Beth David in Cheshire. Silver had been with PTWF in 2005 when Pope John Paul II granted his last private audience.

"We studied the documents in the Vatican's archives and had eye-witness interviews, and what we learned was truly world-shaking," Silver says. "There is nobody who did more to rescue Jews than Pius."

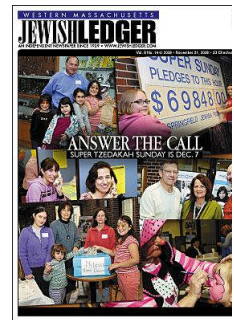
SUBHEAD - Buidling bridges

Pave the Way Foundation was created by Gary Krupp, the only Jew to hold two papal knighthoods. The Long Island-based non-profit organization works to increase tolerance and understanding between religions through cultural, educational, and intellectual exchanges.

Krupp's interest in Jewish-Catholic relations began in 2000, when he received the Knight Commander in the Order of St. Gregory the Great from Pope John Paul II. With the honor came a realization that he could serve as a bridge between the two religions. "I had to do something with this position within the Papal household to benefit the Jewish People and the State of Israel," says Krupp.

The distinction also brought access to the massive Vatican archives, home to one of the world's largest collections of original Judaic texts. Krupp arranged for groups of Jewish clergy to view the Mishna Torah and the original copy of Maimonides's Commentaries, and brokered the first loan of the manuscripts to the Israel Museum.

Krupp and his wife, Meredith, established Pave the Way in 2003. In 2007, Krupp was knighted by Pope Benedict.



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A year earlier, Krupp unwittingly entered the fray surrounding Pius. Like many Jews in post-war America, "I grew up in a Conservative home hating Pius," he says. But when Krupp received a call from author Dan Kurzman, the tables began to turn.

Kurzman needed help with research for his book, *A Special Mission: Hitler's Secret Plot to Seize the Vatican and Kidnap Pope Pius XII*. Krupp contacted an archivist at Yad VaShem, who wasn't aware of the story; nor was the Israeli ambassador to the Vatican. "I thought, 'Something's wrong here,'" says Krupp, who was eventually put in touch with a nun in New Jersey. "She told me, 'Not only was he not a Nazi collaborator or an antisemite, but he did more to save more Jews than anyone else,'" Krupp recalls.

The winds fo history shift

After the war, there seemed to be a consensus among Jewish leaders about Pius. On Dec. 1, 1944 the New York Times reported that the World Jewish Congress publicly thanked the Holy See's protection of Jews, especially in Hungary. In October 1945, the World Jewish Congress made a financial gift to the Vatican in recognition of Pius's work to save the Jews. In May 1955, the Israel Philharmonic played at the Vatican as a gesture of thanks to the pope for his services to Jews during the war.

When Pius died on Oct. 9, 1958, the public accolades continued. In fact, the New York Times received so many tributes over the next three days that it could only publish the authors' names, among them, leaders of major Jewish organizations. Two days later, the Times cited memorial services for Pius in several New York City synagogues.

Last month, at a meeting of the Vatican's synod of bishops, Haifa's Chief Rabbi Shear-Yashuv Cohen advised that Pius "should not be seen as a model" or be canonized. Israeli social affairs minister Isaac Herzog called the canonization process "unacceptable."

What sparked the sea change? Most historians mark 1963 as the year that soured public opinion, with the production of a play, "The Deputy, A Christian Tragedy."

"It was a trash job that was taken seriously, and it accused the pope of being antisemitic and pro-Hitler," says Dr. Eugene Fisher, retired associate director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and panelists at the September symposium.

Written by then-unknown West German playwright Rolf Hochhuth, the eight-hour play debuted in the Eastern Bloc and portrayed Pius as a "cold-eyed" collaborator. It was later revealed that "The Deputy" was part of "Operation Seat 12," a KGB effort to discredit the anti-Communist Pius, and was based on KGB-forged documents. But the play had already been widely produced and its message was lodged in the mainstream consciousness.

(In 2005, Hochhuth was back in the news when he defended Holocaust denier David Irving in an interview with a German newsweekly.)

In response to the play, Dr. Joseph L. Lichten, then-director of the International Affairs Department for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, wrote "A Question of Judgment: Pius XII & the Jews," a monograph published by the National Catholic Welfare Conference, forerunner of the United States Catholic Conference.

"Lichten talks about what the pope was doing, what he could do and what he couldn't, and what he thought he could do versus what he did," Fisher says.

Proponents claim that Pius was responsible for hiding Jews on Vatican property, including his own residences, and for issuing similar orders to priests and nuns throughout Italy, and to Vatican representatives in other countries. As a result, they claim, hundreds of thousands of Jews were hidden in churches, monasteries, and convents, given forged baptismal certificates and passports, and smuggled out of Europe to safety - all by the pope's direct decree or, at the very least, with his knowledge.

Where is it written?

One problem for scholars and others looking at Pius's legacy is the lack of clear

documented evidence of his efforts to save the Jews. With no records, it's easy to point to what he didn't do, says Rabbi Silver. "But my question is this: Does it take a rocket scientist to figure

out why there is no paper trail? Rome was occupied by the Nazis, there were German spies in the Vatican, so what would have happened if they had found physical evidence of the pope's actions? There is not a paper trail linking the Final Solution to Hitler. If you don't want to give credit to the pope because there was no paper trail, you can't blame Hitler for the Final Solution, because there was no paper trail there either."

There are some 16 million documents in the Vatican's archives pertaining to Pius's pontificate, catalogued so far into 11 volumes. Opponents of the canonization - including organizations such as Yad VaShem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum - want access to all documents through 1945.

A statement released by the U.S. Holocaust Museum notes that the museum "views with concern recent indications that definitive conclusions are being drawn regarding the record of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust. Such pronouncements, and any actions that might follow, can only be substantiated when the archives of the Vatican from this period are fully opened to the public for in-depth scholarly research."

While Fisher acknowledges that opening the archives would move the discussion along, he maintains that the 11 volumes contain most of the "meat" of the period in question. "There are no smoking guns or 'gee whiz' amazing things in there," he says. "Everybody feels that everything's out on the table."

But the U.S. Holocaust Museum maintains that the 11-volumes "are not a complete record of the Vatican's actions during the Holocaust."

Yad Vashem agrees.

"Pope Pius XII's activity during the Holocaust is an issue debated among historians around the world," reads a statement released by the Jerusalem institution. "...the opening of Vatican Archives on the relevant period would help further research on the subject, which would clarify this historical issue."

Speaking up

Another criticism is that Pius kept silent as the Nazi machine rolled on, or didn't speak out boldly or often enough. "No matter what the pope said, Hitler didn't care what he thought, nor did the pope have a whole lot of influence over governments in Europe," Fisher says. "This image of the pope speaking and something magically goes away - that doesn't happen."

Silver cites Hitler's foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, who allegedly claimed at the Nuremberg Trials that he had "a whole desk full of protests" from the pope, and from no other European leader. "Eichmann, in his diary, records that his efforts are being frustrated by the pope; he just can't prove it," Silver says.

"People say, 'Why didn't the pope speak out? He should have denounced Hitler,'" Silver says. "That was easy for FDR to do 4,000 miles from Rome. The Vatican is 110 acres, the world's smallest country, and it was ringed by German-occupied Rome, with the closest German 200 yards away. If the pope speaks out and Hitler invades the Vatican, Pius can fight back with his 22 Swiss Guards. Dutch clergy ran up a trial balloon by speaking out, and immediately, 40,000 Dutch Jews were rounded up, including Edith Stein."

Speaking out

The Pave the Way Foundation invited representatives of the Jewish and Israeli organizations that oppose Pius's canonization to the Sept symposium, to no avail. Participants reviewed a number of supporting documents from the Vatican archives, as well as pre-war and wartime newspaper accounts, and Nazis' propaganda and personal writings. A group of 20 participants presented the symposium's conclusions to Pope Benedict in a private audience. Krupp says he's recommending accelerated cataloguing of the Pius-related archives, but supports Benedict's deliberately slow pace in the canonization process.

A book is planned on the symposium proceedings and findings. "This is the greatest character assassination in the 20th century," Krupp says, "I'm doing this for the Jewish people - for when the Holocaust happens again, not if it happens. If the guy who did so much for us last time is demonized, what will the next guy who wants to help us say?"

Silver says the symposium "completely turned me around. It turns out that Pius wasn't a

collaborator or in collusion; he didn't keep quiet in exchange for the safety of Christians. In August 1942, the murders in the concentration camps were publicized, and the Allies did nothing. Anyone who wants to examine what Pius did or didn't do needs to do so in the context of what others did or didn't do, and for that you don't need access to the Vatican archives."

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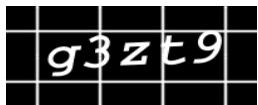


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