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I Owe My Life to The Pope

JANUARY 25, 2012 BY [INSIDE THE VATICAN STAFF](#)

By Herman Herskovic

My name is Herman Herskovic and I am 43 years old. My parents were Jews and 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.



Herman Herskovic in 1964

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 10 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 and 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 11 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 Czechoslovak 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

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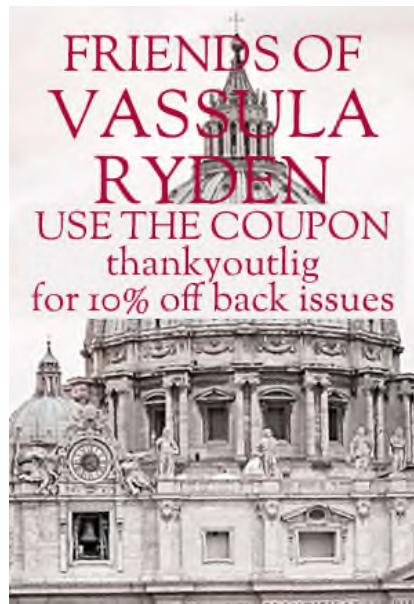
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