

Eugenio Pacelli and the Zionists

New discoveries in the Vatican Secret Archives confirm that the man who became Pope Pius XII intervened in favour of the Jewish settlers in Palestine

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No Pope of the 20th century, with the exemption of John Paul II and maybe Pius XI, so openly showed his love for the Jewish people as Pius XII. This makes it even more incomprehensible that no historical evidence but just a stage play was enough to change and even pervert the public image of this great pontiff. Suddenly he became “The Deputy”, “the Pope who remained silent” or even “Hitler’s Pope”; with authors like John Cornwell or Daniel Jonah Goldhagen calling him a latent or even open anti-Semite. The only reason is that during World War II and the Holocaust, Pius XII considered it wiser to act than to speak out. He preferred to save as many Jews as possible quietly rather than worsen their situation through loud but useless protests. He tried to avoid anything which would endanger the efficiency of the only institution which was able and willing to help the persecuted Jews in the times of the Shoah, the Catholic Church. His apparent silence, his feigned neutrality became the perfect cover for the biggest help- and rescue campaign in history, when more than 850.000 Jews were protected from the certain death in the Nazi gas chambers.

But who wants to understand the man Eugenio Pacelli must look further back into his past. Already in his adolescence he had a Jewish school friend, whose parents invited him to join their weekly Shabbat-celebrations, discussed their faith with him and borrowed him the works of important Jewish philosophers, which he read with enthusiasm. After he studied Theology and Canon Law and underwent his Ordination, Pacelli accepted a job in the Secretary of State of the Holy See. He made a rapid career and was promoted Undersecretary of the “Congregation for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs”, the Papal “State Department”, in 1911. In this position, in May 1917 he came in contact with the Zionist movement.

Nahum Sokolov, author, journalist and board member of the Zionist World Congress, came to Rome to gain support for the plan of a Jewish state in Palestine. That Pope Benedict XV. (1914-22) had vehemently condemned Anti-Semitism a year before was seen as a good omen. Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Gasparri sent him to Msgr. Pacelli who received him in a friendly mood and took the time to listen to him with patience and great personal interest. Later, in his report to the Executive Committee of the Zionists, Sokolov praised the heartfelt openness he experienced during his meeting with the Monsignor. And he admitted that he was completely surprised, when Pacelli asked him in the friendliest way if he would not like to present his issue to the Pope. Sokolov would have never dreamt that this would be possible for a Jew. But then, on May 6 1917, he was received for 45 minutes – longer than many heads of states – by Benedict XV.

“I don’t tend towards credulity or exaggerations”, Sokolov assured on May 12 in his report to the Zionists Executive Committee, “and still I can’t avoid to stress that this revealed an extraordinary amount of friendship: to grant a Jew and representative of Zionism with such a promptness a private audience which took so long and was of such a warmth and took place with all assurance of sympathy, both for the Jews in general and for Zionism in special,

proves that we don't need to expect any obstacles which can't be overcome from the side of the Vatican."

In a completely informal way the Pope asked Sokolov to explain him the program of Zionism just to assure him that "is a wonderful idea" and "providential. God willed it." Also in the question of the Christian sanctuaries in Palestine, the Pope had "No doubts that a satisfactory agreement will be reached". When Sokolov obviously reached the fulfilment of his wildest dreams, Benedict XV released him by repeating several times, as a confirmation, the words: "Yes, I believe we will be good neighbours."

Only a week after this encounter, in the Sistine Chapel, Eugenio Pacelli was ordained as an Archbishop by Benedict XV. Another week later he already sat in a train on the way to his new destination, Germany. The Pope had made him his new Nuncio in Munich, the only Nunciature in Germany. His first mission was to present a Papal Peace Plan to the government of the Imperial Reich in Berlin, to end the senseless slaughter of World War I – unfortunately without any success.

About another and this time successful intervention of the new Nuncio Pacelli during that time, the Israeli historian and diplomat Pinchas Lapid wrote in his book "The Last Three Popes and the Jews" (1967). In the Zionist Archive in Jerusalem, Lapid had located a copy of an official letter, sent by Pacelli as Nuncio in Munich to the Bavarian Secretary of State, Otto Ritter von Dandl, on November 16, 1917:

"The undersigned Apostolic Nuncio has the honour to inform Your Excellency that the Israelite Congregations of Switzerland asked the Holy Father to appeal for the protection of the sites and the Jewish population of Jerusalem. His Eminence, the Cardinal Secretary of State had ordered the undersigned to act accordingly and with all care and to draw this subject to the attention of the Imperial Government. The Undersigned requests from Your Excellency to enforce the realization of this purpose with everything in your capacity. In advance gratefully, signing with the assurance of my highest appreciation, Eugenio Pacelli, Archbishop of Sardes, and Apostolic Nuncio."

The Jews had all reason to be worried. The Ottoman Empire – modern-day Turkey – was an ally of the Reich and England had instigated the Arabian rebellion to force it into a two-frontline war. The Turks suspected the Jews to collaborate with the British. After the Turkish genocide against the Armenians, who were believed to be on the side of the Russians, they could expect the worst.

In April 1915, the Turkish Secretary of War, Enver Pasha, ordered the Deportation of great parts of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire into the Syrian Desert. What was officially declared a strategically necessary "evacuation" of a politically unreliable minority turned out to be the first great genocide of the 20th century? The Young Turk movement, which had taken over political power, intended to transform the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire into a national state according to the Panturkish ideology, which left no room for the Christian Armenians. Genocide became the final solution of this minority problem. Its executive became the Commander-in-Chief and Governor of Syria, General Cemal Pasha. In total, the number of victims exceeds 1, 5 Million. Some became victims of the Turkish massacres; most were forced into the Syrian Desert where they died of thirst, starvation, exhaust or diseases.

In 1917, Cemal Pasha turned brutally against the Jewish-Zionist settlements in Palestine. After Jewish settlers in Jaffa were accused of collaboration with the British, the Ottoman Governor ordered their deportation. Over 8000 Jews were expelled from their houses without

the permission to take any of their belongings or even food. In front of their eyes, their houses were looted by the Turks. Outside the Jewish Quarters, two Jews were hanged as a warning for all who dared to resist the looters. Eyewitnesses reported about the excessive cruelty of the soldiers. Later, dozens of Jews were found dead in the dunes of Jaffa. By the end of March 1917, the “Reuters” news agency reported that “masses of Jews” were expelled “to share the fate of the Armenians”. A Report of the Zionist Office in Copenhagen ends with the warning that after the threats of Cermal Pasha the Jews of Palestine could indeed expect the same treatment as the Armenians – being sent into the desert to die of thirst, starvation and epidemics.

On May 7, 1917, the German Member of Parliament Oskar Cohn brought the anti Jewish violence in Palestine on the agenda of the Reichstag in Berlin. Only one day later, Deputy Secretary Arthur Zimmermann of the State Department played the matter down. He called the order to evacuate Jaffa a mere “protective measure”. Furthermore, the Government of the Reich had no interest to get involved into affairs which were solely in the responsibility of the Turkish Forces. Obviously, it did intend to bother Germany’s Ottoman ally. This makes the intervention of the Apostolic Nuncio, quoted by Pinchas Lapide, even more significant.

Unfortunately, at least as far as I know, no other historian ever tried to investigate and verify it. Cornwell & Co. completely ignore the incident, since it does not fit into their claim of Pacelli being an Anti-Semite. The majority of the defenders of Pius XII either just quote Lapide or concentrate on his position towards National Socialism. Instead, the Pacelli-debunkers simply question Lapide's credibility. Without any reason, still, since he backs all his quotes with perfect citations, as this one too. The quoted document, Lapide states, can be found on “Microfilm K 179 90 293 in the Zionist Central Archive, Jerusalem”.

I trust Lapide, but still prefer to verify. I soon had the opportunity, when in November 2008, I was granted permission to do research in the Vatican Secret Archive. After I wrote a biography on Pius XII, “The Pope who defied Hitler”, I wanted to learn more about Pacelli’s position towards the Jews and his dealings with Anti-Semitism and National Socialism. The verification of the incident quoted by Lapide’s had a prominent position on my wish list.

After I introduced myself to the Prefect of the “Archivio Secreto”, Bishop Sergio Pagano, my work in the “Sala Studio”, the study room of the Archive, begun. The complete inventory of the Vatican Secret Archive – at least until 1939 – is catalogued. If you want to study one of the files, you first have to go through these voluminous catalogues, before one of the friendly co-workers gets the file for you. In one of these catalogues, which carefully lists the inventory of the “Archive of the Nunciature Munich/Bavaria” I found the promising entry: “Guerra Europe., Palestine # 1. Pop. Giudaica e della Citta Santa della Palestina” – “World War I, Palestine # 1, Jewish Population and those of the Holy City of Palestine”. After I wrote down the file title and number (Arch. Nunz. Monaco d.b. 385; Fasc. 2: Pos. XIII), I asked for it. I was not disappointed. Indeed it contained not only Pacelli’s handwritten draft for the letter quoted by Lapide; I also learned more about the background of this intervention.

On November 15, 1917 at 4.30 PM the Papal Cardinal Secretary of State, Pietro Gasparri, sent an encoded message to the Nuncios Pacelli in Munich, which was received and decoded it on the next morning at 7.30 AM. It stated: “The Israelite Community of Switzerland asked the Holy Father to commit himself to the protection of the sites and the Jewish population of Jerusalem. He asks Your Excellency through us, to influence the German government accordingly in the name of the Holy Father. Card. Gasparri”.

The decision to delegate this difficult affair to Pacelli was wise indeed. It was more than questionable if an intervention by the Pope himself would have any impact in Constantinople. Only Germany as their most important ally was able to stop the Turks from performing a massacre. That Pacelli always had an open ear for Jewish affairs he had already demonstrated when he met the Zionist leader Sokolov.

Indeed, Pacelli immediately acted. Still, it was a rather difficult affair. At that time, no diplomatic relationship existed between the Emperor's Germany and the Holy See. The only Nunciature on German soil was the one in Munich, the capital of the still semi-independent Kingdom of Bavaria. Any diplomatic approach had to go through the Bavarian government. Therefore, Pacelli presented his case on November 16, 1917 to the Royal Bavarian Secretary of State, Sir Otto Ritter von Dandl, and urgently requested an intervention of the Imperial State Department.

This time, other than half a year before, the Berlin State Department acted. Eleven days later, on November 27, 1917, we find the following note in their file "Jews in Turkey". According to the reply they received from Constantinople, "there is no reason to fear that the Turkish authorities in Palestine order measures against the Jewish population. We learned from the Turkish side that the Holy City and all sites which are subject of Christian and Jewish veneration are spared and respected as far as the military necessities by all means allow."

Consequently, the German government declared two days later: "According to the available information from the Turkish side, care was already taken for the protection of the the holy sites of Jerusalem which are also subject of veneration by the Muslims and also for the population. Of course this includes the Jews, who don't have to fear any exemptions."

Eventually, Ritter von Dendl reported to the Apostolic Nuncios on December 8, 1917: "Your Excellency allow me to reply to your precious note of the 16th of last month and to inform you that I did not miss to bring the request of the Israelite Communities of Switzerland regarding the protection of the sites and the Jewish population of Jerusalem to the attention of the State Department in Berlin. With regard to this, I received the reply that according to the information received, there was no reason to worry that the Turkish authorities apply any measures against the Jewish population."

Only three days later, on December 11, 1917, the British Forces under command of General Allenby conquered Jerusalem. The Jews of Palestine could indeed feel relieved.

According to Pinchas Lapide, the intervention of the Nuncio Pacelli contributed to "save the Jews of Jerusalem as well as the holy sites from an almost certain doom." It was even more significant, since at that time the Turkish troops in Palestine were under command of a German General, Erich von Falkenhayn. About him, his biographer Holger Afflerbach stated: "An inhuman excess against the Jews in Palestine was only prevented through Falkenhayns conduct, which has a special significance in respect to the German history of the 20th century." Since von Falkenhays was a man who strictly followed orders, it is reasonable to assume that his "conduct" was ordered from Berlin.

Indeed, Pinchas Lapide quotes a letter written by Dr. Jacob Thon, at that time leader of the Zionist Office in Jerusalem, in December 1917: "It was a special stroke of good fortune that in the last critical days General von Falkenhayn had the command. Cemal Pasha in this case – as he announced often enough – would have expelled the whole population and turned the country into ruins. We and the whole population, Christians as well as Muslims, must

remember P. (acelli) with deep gratitude, since he saved the civil population from doom when he prevented the planned evacuation of this area.”

Nine years later, in December 1926, in Berlin the “Deutsches Komitee Pro Palästina zur Förderung der jüdischen Palästina-Siedlung” (German Comitee Pro Palestine to Support the Jewish Settlement in Palestine) was founded. Among the founding members were Albert Einstein, the President of the Reichstag (Speaker of the House) Paul Loebe, the Cologne major (and post WWII-Cancellor) Konrad Adenauer and the novelist and Nobel Prize laureate Thomas Mann. The question arose if it is opportune for prominent Catholics to join this initiative. During the vehement discussion of the Balfour Declaration at the League of Nations the idea of a Jewish state was controversial in Catholic circles. The socialist ideas of some Zionists led to irritations in the Vatican, and its organ, the “Osservatore Romano”, on June 1st, 1922, called for “the protection of the holy sites against Jewish bolshevism”. At that time, the Holy See had already established diplomatic relations to the first German democracy, The Weimar Republic, and Pacelli resided as the first Apostolic Nuncio in Berlin. As Pinchas Lapid stresses, he “represented during that period the position of Pro Palestine”. He explicitly refused the Zionism-skepticism of leading Vatican circles and instead not only pleaded in favor of the Jewish settlements but even encouraged prominent German Catholics to join the Initiative supporting them. Even Pacelli’s closest friend, the Reichstag-member and Catholic Prelate Dr. Ludwig Kaas, became a Board member of this Committee.

How deep his sympathy was for the Zionists is revealed in the memoirs of the German Zionist Kurt Blumenfeld. In his autobiography “Living the Jewish Question” (1962), he describes how Nahum Sokolov, who was indebted to Pacelli for his Papal audience in 1917, visited Berlin in 1926. Sokolov at this point served as the President of all Zionist Congresses. When he planned a new initiative at the League of Nations, he remembered the former Undersecretary of the Papal State Department. His plan was to ask Pacelli for an instruction to the representative of the Holy See at the League of Nations in Geneva. But when Blumenfeld called the Nunciatures to set up an appointment, he learned that Pacelli was severely ill, stayed in the Hedwig Hospital in Berlin and was momentarily not available. Only when he eventually mentioned the name “Sokolov”, he was called back: His Excellency, the Nuncio, would be delighted to see Mr. Sokolov for five minutes.

Together Blumenfeld and Sokolov drove to the hospital. At the front desk, the doctor-in-charge welcomed them but insisted: “Mr. Sokolov alone and just for five minutes”. Blumenfeld walked in the hospital library and started to read a book. After one-and-a-half hours Sokolov returned. “It was obvious how interesting and uplifting the conversation with the Nuncio was, a discussion of historical questions, Jewish as well as Catholic”, Blumenfeld remembered.

Once again, the man who became Pope Pius XII proved to be a friend who always had an open ear for the affairs and problems of Jews.

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Nuntius Eugenio Pacelli in ca. 1925



Nahum Sokolov



Armenians, driven out to die in the desert. The Jews feared a similar fate in 1917.