

What was your position in the apostolic nunciature in the Dominican Republic? How long were you there and where exactly were you?

I spent five years of my life there. I spent the first five serving the Holy See in Haiti and Santo Domingo. Puerto Rico was also in my jurisdiction.

What was your assignment?

I began my assignment as assistant at the nunciature, assistant of the embassy. It's the first level. For a year.

What year was it?

1939 – 40.

And I continued in this capacity until May of 1945, when I was transferred to the United States.

Who was the apostolic nuncio then?

Maurilio Silvani. Silvani was his last name.

Could you tell us about what happened when the nuncio got a call from the Holy Father about some Jews in Portugal. What happened?

It happened from the beginning. The Vatican cannot disclose many things, it cannot say these things because it cannot betray the confidence of people who protected Jews. There were also other issues. It is true that the Pope protected Jews because it was his duty. He considered it his duty. But the Pope couldn't say where he hid them for example. Some families in Rome did not want to compromise their safety, they did not want to get on Mussolini's bad side for example.

Of course.

About the Jews of Portugal. How did the Pope intervene?

The Pope intervened through the apostolic nuncio. I was in Lisbon for about a month, twenty-seven days to be exact, and I spent every day at the nunciature. I arrived fresh from Rome to document certain things. I arrived with verbal orders from Rome, to give instructions to the nuncio to push him to do all that he could.

Then a written order came from Rome for the nuncio.

Written items were sent to everyone, naturally, but in this case it was dangerous in case anyone were to lack discretion, so it was all verbal?

In writing...no!

What was the situation of the Jews of Portugal?

They were well off. They moved in society quite a bit. They were trying to leave as soon as possible. They were afraid Franco would give permission to the Jews to enter Spain. To Spain via Portugal and then they could escape. I visited once the President of Portugal, and I referred what Pius XII have told me: "People must understand, the world must understand that we should hurry up to save these people that they are allowed into Portugal as soon as possible. When I arrived in Portugal, I had to do my best with the apostolic nuncio because he too was intent on obtaining the necessary permits. Before I left, Pius XII said to me during an audience: "but Monsignor, see for yourself, how can the Spaniards not understand, how can the Portuguese not understand that we must save as many people as possible?"

You witnessed the Pope's insistence?

Yes. He [Pius XII] was unnerved and very concerned because he did not have the answers right away. I was his envoy first in Madrid and then in Lisbon, and I spoke with the nuncio. Because the nuncio received the written orders, but he did not see how upset Pius XII was.

Exactly why was he so upset?

Because they were not able to get what the Pope wanted quickly. What he would have liked.

What the Jews needed was passage across the Ocean?

Passage across the Ocean. First of all, permission to enter Portugal. But remember, at that point there were ten or twelve thousand fleeing Jews in Lisbon. I used to see them there all day, they used to walk up and down, keep watch, they tried everywhere to find room [in a boat] to leave. I myself was in Lisbon for a month before finding a place on a ship, because they were all taken by Jews who were escaping. The ship I took was an old ship from before World War I. It belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. That ship had place for 800 men and women. They put all the women in one part and all the men in another. Husbands and wives were separated because they needed to pack in as many people as possible. I was able to travel in the chaplain cabin, because on that Portuguese ship they had a chapel and the chaplain used to say Mass daily. The chaplain couldn't go and so I took his place. There were 7 Catholics and 800 Jews. The ship was called Serpa Pinto.

What year was it?

1940.

1940?

Yes.

One needed a visa to cross the Ocean to arrive on the other shore.

This was the problem, this was the problem. But not for everybody. I traveled without a visa only to get one on other trips, but the ship went to Bermuda and unloaded there. Then people continued to New York. I traveled with 800 Jews, around 780 – 690, and [in that ship] we Catholics were seven.

What instructions did the nuncio receive regarding the visa?

The nuncio of Haiti and the Dominican Republic had instructions to do everything possible [to get visas for the Jews] The government wanted to know who they were and what they would have been able to do.

How did these instructions reach the nuncio?

Rafael Trujillo was a dictator [in the Dominican Republic], but he saved many Jews. He did it, however, in the Pope's name. This was his request: he wanted to ensure that it was in the Pope's name. Sometimes the nuncio had to show him the telegram from Rome.

What did the telegram from Rome say?

Orders came to do everything possible, every single thing possible for these people: for this person, and that, and that....

To obtain the entrance visas?

Yes.

Were they unusual telegrams? What type of telegrams were they?

Encrypted telegrams.

Can you explain?

Cipher... everybody knows what was the cipher. There was a dictionary to cipher and decipher the text. The code was determined by one letter in a certain place of the text. As soon as we got the telegram, we looked at that place in the text because that was the key.

So there was secret information that had to arrive in code?

Yes, it had to arrive in code, but it was always this same message. They asked the nuncio again and again to do everything possible, but there were few encrypted telegrams.

But was the telegram that asked for the visas an encrypted telegram?

Yes, of course.

Were you present when that telegram was read to the nuncio?

I was the one who decoded it.

You even decoded it?

I arrived from Rome. I was already familiar with decoding such telegrams.

And so with this request....

One thing is important. I'm not sure if I should say it. But these encrypted telegrams were complicated. You might assume they were in Italian but they were not. The message was in another language in such a way that the spies who monitored the codes could not understand them. The nuncio did not write the message in Italian. The nuncio was Italian but he did not write the code in Italian. And one specific letter at one point between the lines indicated the key. If not, the text cannot be decoded. But this is something standard.

So this telegram regarding the fate of four hundred Jews in Portugal?

Each time that there was a substantial number [of Jews ready to leave], and that they would be accepted, the Vatican gave visas as far as Portugal, hoping that from there they will arrange things... Because the Vatican could not obtain visas to America. America was calm and cool. Roosevelt was still not sure if he was going to enter the war, they were not at war yet and took it slowly.

Once the nuncio received this encrypted telegram, what did he do with the local government?

The nunciature was in Haiti, Port-au-Prince. We had to go in person to Santo Domingo. This is very important. Trujillo wanted the precise words of the nuncio to be decoded and he wanted the nuncio to say it clearly: I come in Pope Pius XII's name to ask.... Trujillo wanted to be sure, he wanted it to be the Pope to ask, not the nuncio. The nuncio always had to say: the Pope is asking you this favor.

So the nuncio went personally to Trujillo?

Yes. Every time we had to achieve something, that was the condition.

And you went with the nuncio?

I used to go with the nuncio.

Can you describe what this trip was like?

The trip was long and tiring. Exhausting. It could not be done in one day. We used to leave the nunciature in Port-au-Prince early in the morning and arrive around noon in the Dominican Republic, but not in the capital. We spent the night in a girl's school run by Spanish nuns. There was a chapel there and separate lodging for the chaplain off the premises.

The nuncio was not in good health as I understand it?

The nuncio's health had deteriorated since he was in Italy. In the first three years, the nuncio lost 27 kilos. He was a strong man. But when his sister saw him get off the train in Rome, she burst into tears. I was at the station, I was still a student in Rome at the time. He had lost 30 kilos.

In order to undertake such a trip, there must have been an urgent, important reason.....

Because Trujillo always wanted the nuncio to do the asking, he wanted the head of mission to ask. He did not want any sort of mediator. He wanted the nuncio to speak and to say that it was in the Pope's name. He used to record it.

How did the encounter between the nuncio and Trujillo go?

The nuncio went many times because every time something was needed it had to be the nuncio to go in person.

And in this case did Trujillo accept the Pope's request?

Yes. More than once. Because each time he gave visas, it was for a specific number. On my way out of Europe, I stayed for 27 days in Lisbon and the nuncio in Lisbon also got pressure from Rome to keep refugees there, those who were leaving for the Dominican Republic. There was not always space available on the ships. The ships were ancient, old things. I know. I traveled on those ships.

Did Pope Pius XII have a direct role in saving these Jews?

Yes. Because the governments wanted it to be the Pope. Trujillo for example. I am a witness to what Trujillo did. Trujillo wanted this act to be done in the Pope's name. If it wasn't in the Pope's name, forget it.

To your knowledge, did any of the Jewish refugees know about what the Pope did for them?

All the Jews knew because they were told: "Wait, because the Pope has to decide, wait, the Pope has to decide." It even meant protection for the nuncio. For the nuncio on the ground, it's dangerous, anything can happen to him. He had to ask for favors in the Pope's name. Sometimes the nuncio had problems because he did not know who he was dealing with, he did not know how to help the Jews who arrived there. He did not have instructions from Rome on that.

Do you know what become of these Jews? Did they stay in the Dominican Republic or did they go somewhere else?

In general, they all tried to get to the United States. In Haiti, where there were Jews, as well as the Dominican Republic. That was the first step: to escape from there. They were afraid of the invasion. So there was danger because there were German submarines in the Caribbean and in the whole area. They kept an eye on the ships and the ships were afraid of them since there were 800 Jews on these ships.

Did the nunciature maintain a relationship with the Jewish refugees after their arrival? Did you have contact later?

Yes, we had contact. In general, they adjusted right away. But they all, I repeat, everyone tried to get to the United States. And they got there thanks to Cuba. From Cuba to Mexico. I must say that Trujillo's government, as well as Haiti and Cuba, tried to make sure the Jews reached the United States. Some had relatives there who guaranteed their entrance into the United States. When we in Port-au-Prince were trying to help the Jews depart, they used to say: "We would like to go to Cuba, we want to go to Cuba." The response from Cuba was: "Make sure you will be able to go to the United States, that you have all the necessary paperwork; to those who don't, the answer is no." The American Jews did everything they could to make sure these people got the necessary documents. One hundred Jews arrived in America per week. It was a critical moment. It was 1939, 1940.

Let's go back to the figure of Pius XII. You had several private audiences with the Pope. What kind of person was he?

He was a man who went straight to the point. Right away. People knew that about him. The pope had to know beforehand who is going and for what purpose. In that way, he wanted to be able to say: I have heard firsthand. If a document had to be carried, you brought it, but they did not put it in the records. He decided what was to be written, and he himself took notes. When a date was given, or facts, or specific names.

The pope showed a lot of determination to help the Jews. He was determined on this point.

During an audience with Pius XII, at a certain point Pope Pacelli said: but why the Americans don't want to understand that...he lost his patience.

What did the Americans not want to understand?

That everything possible was to be done.

You mean to help the Jews to leave Europe?

Yes. This is something well known. At least, I heard that from all parties involved.

Did you personally see this reaction from the Pope?

Yes, yes, yes. Before a diplomat was to depart from the Vatican, he was personally received by the Pope, who brought up all the possible issues. And I remember it was like that for me. But my response was this: "Holy Father, in my office where I worked this is the situation: it seems the governments are having trouble accommodating the Jews and they are hesitant. Then there was the issue that in some countries there were people who were fighting to keep the Jews out, because of professional competition, etc. We also knew that. I knew that. There were obstacles. Trujillo was very demanding in this regard and it must be said that the Jews that were in his country were treated well and slowly they found a way to go to Santo Domingo and then Canada. Many left that way.

Trujillo kept them willingly but it was understood if they made it that far, that they would continue their journey. There were some that got down at Santo Domingo and left from Puerto Plata which was another port. The ship was ready. They usually went to Cuba and from Cuba to Florida.

Did the Pope take these matters to heart?

Yes, very much so! I remember Pius XII, but the Americans did not understand... I remember he asked, but don't the Americans understand that the best thing is to save as many people from this vibrant community as possible? Literally the Pope said this to me. I was prepared. I knew where I was going. He knew everything and they told me so: look, the Pope will ask you many questions. But what kind of questions will he ask me if I don't know anything yet? And I left for the Dominican Republic. I was new and I went there and entered a new field which I was unfamiliar with. In the Secretariat, they told me: try to find all the officials of the Vatican who have assignments. Take a look around, try to find out certain things. I saw with my own eyes convents of nuns that kept Jews hidden. But I said, can I say it? No, because if I say anything, I will endanger these people's lives.

But on the ground in Haiti and Santo Domingo you can say it to the governments, naturally to the people in charge who are willing to receive you. The Pope recommends these people and these people, he used to give names. If they wanted... Those who left, left relieved. They used to depart for Spain and for Portugal. But then the problems began.

He (?Pius XII) was a very moderate man, very delicate, but this fact is not remembered.