

Interview with JURAJ ADAM

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Today, when I started to talk to the Pope I told him sincerely that, I turned 85 years last January, but the most overwhelming moment and the biggest joy in my life is that I have had the possibility to speak with him today. And I'm also thankful for being invited here and having that opportunity.

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During the fascist regime my father was a well known man. He was a Chief of Commerce Agriculture and Industry Chamber, and he died unexpectedly in 1933 after the first catastrophic speeches of Adolf Hitler. My mother became widow and I was 10 years old at the moment. I had one year younger sister Alzbeta.

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In that period, it was not allowed to talk about the fascist regime yet. The town we lived in was Komarno, situated close to Danube and between Vienna and Budapest. During that period Komarno was part of Czechoslovakia.

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In 1938 as a consequence of the agreement between Ribbentrop and Ciano, the German and Italian Foreign Ministers, this town and other parts of the territory again became part of Hungary. Hungary lost these territories with the Treaty of Triaton in 1920. This means that, I lived on the Hungarian territory from 1938 to 1945.

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And this was the fascist regime I experienced. I completed my diploma at the Benedictine High School in Komarno in 1941. The Benedictine High School was well known for its excellent education in Hungarian language.

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On the 19th of March in 1944 the most difficult period began, when the fascist army occupied the Hungarian territory (*Operation Margarethe*). Komarno, the town where I lived, was occupied as well. Until then, Hungary used to be a country for refugees of already occupied neighbouring countries between the years 1941 and 1944. Before the German occupation in 1944, Poles and people from other neighbouring countries used to come to Hungary where they still could find a normal life and were not persecuted.

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But on the 19th of March in 1944, the catastrophic situation started with the arrival of the German army in Komarno and the rest of the country. My mother and my sister continued to live in Komarno and my sister at that moment was about to complete her diploma at the Benedictine High School as well.

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On the 5th of April in 1944, when Jews were ordered to wear signs identifying themselves, I escaped at night from Komarno across the Danube Bridge into Budapest. I used to study at the Faculty of Law at the Peter Pasma University in Budapest from 1941 until the German occupation. Even though I was Jewish, I was allowed to study there because of my outstanding grades and the 'numerus clausus' for Jewish students introduced by the University. So I spent 6 semesters there.

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I escaped from Komarno and returned to Budapest where I used to have a private residence and I wasn't known as Jewish, since I managed to obtain some false identity documents. Living in Budapest was still not a problem during that period.

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Starting from the 15th of October in 1944 everything changed, when the President Horthy broadcasted his speech and announced the withdrawal of the Hungarian army from the war. Therefore Hungary was no longer the fascists' ally. The German response to the speech was an immediate occupation of Budapest and the rest of the country.

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On the 2nd of July in 1944, the first Anglo-American air attack of Budapest took place. In that moment some good friends helped me to stay at the student's hall where I was hiding. **(Noted later 00:23 This students' hall was affiliated with the Catholic Church and I couldn't live there because of my religion. For that reason my friends helped me to hide there). The air attack was terrible and I remember a well known Catholic church at the Bakacz Square which was attacked by mistake by the Anglo-American air army. After the attack, during which I was hiding under the bed, I was shocked and realized that I cannot hide anymore at the students' hall. A couple of good friends accompanied me to the city centre and we saw destroyed city and injured people. *(Noted later 00:23 My friends were not Jewish but they didn't want to leave me alone. We used to study together at the Benedictine High School and they took care of me during this situation).*

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That night, I did not know where to go. **Here, Juraj explained details on students' hall and school mates from the High School.*

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It could be around 10 pm when my friends suggested that I go back to the students' hall with them. Even if it was dangerous they thought I didn't have another alternative. But I didn't want to take any risks by going back with them. While still in the city centre I noticed the sign of the Apostolic Nunciature. I didn't know much about them but I knew they could give asylum for people escaping from the fascists. So I had an idea and that night I rang doorbell to the Apostolic Nunciature.

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When the guardian saw me and realized he did not know me, he tried to close the gate but I managed to enter the building. I sat down close to the entrance and said I'm not going to leave. After maybe ten minutes the doorbell rang again and the guardian went to open the door to the Vatican diplomat Gennaro Verolino. When he entered the gate and saw me, he just passed by and asked the guardian about me and my late entry.

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The guardian explained to Gennaro Verolino my situation that I don't know where to go and that my mother and sister have been killed. To my big surprise, the guardian returned to me and told me to follow him and he took me to the office of Gennaro Verolino. I noticed the amount of food and fruits at his desk and he invited me to eat and drink before we talked.

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When I finished eating we talked and meantime the guardian was asked to prepare a room for me for that night. I felt already much better after dinner and I was very glad for the small visitors' room they prepared for me where I could rest and calm down.

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The next day at around 11 am they brought me a breakfast and told me that Apostolic Nuncio Angelo Rotta returned from the summer estate. Angelo Rotta was about 70 years old and he was a supervisor of Gennaro Verolino. Gennaro took me to Angelo Rotta's office where we talked and they told me that this situation is quite unusual because normally I couldn't stay there. I don't know if it was because of my honesty or hopelessness, but they decided that I could stay with them for another two days.

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I told them that for now this was the only place I could stay in, but they promised they will look for another safe place for me. They contacted the Vatican secretary of state who later approved my stay at the Apostolic Nunciature, which is Vatican territory.

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So I was allowed to live at the Apostolic Nunciature. After some time, Gennaro Verolino invited me to his office where, on my big surprise, he gave me an identity document, issued by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This document stated that I was an employee of the Vatican Apostolic Nunciature. From that moment I officially became an employee of the Apostolic Nunciature.

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The early morning after the broadcast of President Horthy, on the 16th of October 1944, I saw the presidential car parked in the front of the Apostolic Nunciature. The driver asked to be received by Angelo Rotta. I saw the president's family getting out of the car and Horthy's daughter in law explained me that, the President made some arrangements with Angelo Rotta. That arrangement ensured the political asylum for Horthy's family when necessary. I told them that Angelo Rotta was not in the office but I made the office of Verolino available for them.

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At that moment, the guardian, a few sisters and I were the only present employees in the Apostolic Nunciature building. After some time the door bell rang again and the German officer Edmund Veesenmayer was standing at the gate. I knew him only from the newspapers, because he was a delegate of President Horthy when Hungary was still in war as Hitler's ally.

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He asked to speak to Angelo Rotta or Gennaro Verolino, but I explained to him that they were not able to return from the summer estate the evening before, because of the unrest on the streets relating to President Horthy's broadcast.

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I told officer Edmund Veesenmayer that if he wished to talk to them both, he could have helped them to come back to Budapest. He explained he has been sent by President Horthy to accompany his family members, which I received earlier, to the presidential castle. I told him that it's impossible because they have asked for political asylum and they don't want to leave the Apostolic Nunciature.

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I had a feeling he was not telling the truth and that the President is surely not asking him to take his family out of Apostolic Nunciature. He asked me who I was, and I said to myself, if he's dishonest I will do the same. I told him that I'm the vice Secretary of Apostolic Nunciature. After that he left with his armed guards. The Horthy's family members were worried, since they listened to our conversation at the gate, but I managed to calm them down.

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Later that morning both Verolino and Rotta returned and Horthy's daughter in law told them what happened before their arrival. Verolino appreciated the way I dealt with the situation.

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President Horthy's family remained with us, but later the German officials tried to make a deal with them. They suggested that if they left the Apostolic Nunciature, they could join President Horthy and leave the country together. Otherwise he will be deported to Germany without them.

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At the end, the President Horthy's family decided to leave the Apostolic Nunciature later that day. The country was in hands of a fascist government which initiated the deportation of Jews. In fact by July 1944, 450 000 Hungarian Jews had already been deported.

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It was known that 90% of deported Jews were killed in gas chambers. Usually, Jews were deported on the trains, on which they travelled for three or four days. After arrival they were asked to leave all the

personal items and clothes because they were told to take a shower. But instead of water the showers spread the killing gas.

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During June and July in 1944 the deportation of Jews from Budapest was slowed down, but later about 100 000 Jews from Budapest were killed in one of the brick factories. They were not deported on the trains. Every day, thousands were brought to the factory where they were killed.

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In that period there was a signed agreement between the Vatican Apostolic Nunciature and the new fascist Hungarian leaders, that about 25 000 Jews would have been freed if they had been baptised in the past, or if they had some Catholic relatives or were very old. And in fact, they freed about 100 people from the brick factory every day. It was my responsibility to deal with the liberation of Jews. I used to go to the brick factory every day and I presented the list of 300 or 400 people certified by the Apostolic Nunciature. The people on my list were freed and were under protection of the Vatican.

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The reason why the fascist leaders in Hungary signed this agreement with the Vatican Apostolic Nunciature was that they thought they would have more credibility in Europe by having an agreement with the Vatican. These fascist leaders were collaborators of the German SS army and they took lead of the country immediately after Horthy's deportation. Their Hungarian leader was Ferenc Szalasi (*leader of the Arrow Cross Party*).

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So I continued my assignment and whoever was on my list was freed and brought to the safehouses in Budapest. I had the certified lists ready and I just needed to insert the names of people to be released on that day.

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Once, there were two fascist soldiers who didn't want to respect the agreement and didn't want to free the people on my list. They took me to one of their base camps. Fortunately, my driver saw what just happened and he followed the car I was in and found out the place they brought me to. He called my supervisors who were able to free me after an hour so I could finish my assignment for that day. The two fascist soldiers who made trouble earlier were probably punished; I didn't see them again the rest of the day.

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There is also something important that happened regarding the Vatican. The Russian army was entering Budapest in December 1944 and slowly liberating the parts of the city. One side of the Danube River was still in hands of German army and it was where the Apostolic Nunciature was situated. Several Russian armies' bombardments took place to free that part of the city from Germans. During January 1945, the situation was very dangerous around the Apostolic Nunciature. Gennaro Verolino used to visit German soldiers and tried to convince them to leave and free the territory before the Russian army's arrival.

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In the evening on the 14th of February 1945, one SS soldier came to the Apostolic Nunciature representing the major SS official and he asked to see Angelo Rotta. Gennaro Verolino, Angelo Rotta and I received him and he informed us about the decision of his supervisors to leave the territory. This decision was due to Verolino's constant visits to their base camp and SS officials asked Angelo Rotta to kindly assist them during the disarmament. The assistance they asked for was to smooth the operation and help injured soldiers.

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Gennaro Verolino thanked the officer for the good news, but as for the required assistance he said it would be very hard, since there was no diplomatic relationship between Russia and the Vatican, but he would have tried his best.

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For all this, Gennaro Verolino is considered an important figure during the Second World War who helped reduce the number of people who were killed. He is well known, particularly in Italian circles. Four years ago, the Swedish government and the Swedish royals honored Gennaro Verolino with the highest award in Sweden. They awarded him personally in Rome on the 1st of October 2004.

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During the award ceremony Verolino gave an important speech and he dedicated some parts of it to me.

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An hour after the German army left we heard bombardments and we hid in the Apostolic Nunciature. Since the building was quite destroyed we needed to hide within the monastery of English sisters who made available the first floor of their building for us. So our office was transferred there.

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To my big surprise, Angelo Rotta and Gennaro Verolino asked me to come with them to the temporary office at the English sisters' monastery, even if I didn't consider myself an important employee of the office. So four of us moved in – Rotta, Verolino, a Hungarian priest, and I.

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We stayed at this place temporarily until April 1945 when the agreement was signed to close the Apostolic Nunciature in Budapest. Rotta and Verolino returned to Vatican and I stayed behind.

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When they left at the end of April in 1945, I returned to Komarno where I found our house destroyed and I didn't find anyone.

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In January 1953, after lunch at the friends' place, two civil officials met me on the street they asked me if I was Juraj Adam and if I had an identity card. They took my identity card without even checking it and asked me to follow them. They were with the state police. They took me to the prison in Komarno where I spent the night without any explanation. The morning after, on the 2nd of January 1953 police came to take me and I was blindfolded. They took me to the prison in Nitra.

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Inside Nitra prison, they used to change my co-prisoners and I found out later that the majority of them were members of the state police.

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I realized they kept me because they wanted to prove I was an undercover agent for the Vatican. They used to treat me bad during the days and nights. Their accusations were not true but the inspection and my incarceration lasted for almost 10 months. I would have preferred to die than admit to their lies.

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Their argument was that, my supervisors at the Apostolic Nunciature surely asked me some favours as an exchange for their kind caring for me. One night, when they took me to another inquisition, there were also two Czech police officials ** (who confronted me with another prisoner, a dentist doctor from Komarno I knew – *this happened later, as Juraj corrected at 01:06 during his second imprisonment*).

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** (This dentist made some statements, telling the police I openly admitted my undercover activities with the Vatican – *01:06 during his second imprisonment*). The Czech agents offered me an agreement, since they felt responsible for my imprisonment for 10 months. They didn't have any evidence of my undercover activities with the Vatican but they wanted me to admit at least that I wanted to escape from Czechoslovakia illegally.

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They had the false testimony of a woman who stated that I asked her to help me escape from Czechoslovakia. The police officials explained to me that if I admit that I escaped illegally from Czechoslovakia the case would be closed.

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Since I had no alternative, I signed the statement where I admitted my illegal escape from Czechoslovakia with the help of this woman. This has been brought to the Regional Court in Nitra and I was sentenced to two years in prison for attempting an illegal escape from the country.

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When I was in the prison, on the 6th of March 1953, Stalin died and Gotwald died a few days later. Zapotocky became president and applied one year amnesty to all prisoners. They brought me to the prison close to the German border in Jicin where I stayed until I finished my sentence till January 1954.

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Since then I was free but on the 9th of April 1958 they came from Nitra to take me back to prison. They confronted me with the dentist from Komarno I knew and I could read all his false statements. ** *Here the figure of dentist doctor appeared.*