

Where were you on October 16, 1943?

11:00 Germans entered Rome after a short battle, October 11th. It was a Saturday, the armistice took place on the 9th. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday they entered Rome. One of the first orders given by the Germans was to mobilize men for work camps... the Italian army was dispersed due to the armistice. Rome was declared "open city" (there is a beautiful work by Andrea Riccardi, "Roma città aperta" he sent it to me... we're in good relations with Andrea).

Tornielli?

No, we have many phone conversations with Tornielli. I sent him documents which prove help given to Jews. When they sent us away... when the Germans came there was this announcement where all those born between 1910 and 1922 were forced to present themselves to work I already knew about massacres in Russia. I told myself, "I won't let them find me at home in Monteverde..." For this reason, I went to live at my, I was betrothed to a girl, officially betrothed, I was supposed to marry soon after, but, anyways, I was young, I was 21, 22 years old... I went to their house. First of all, I did not leave the house in that morning of October 16.

The fiancée was Jewish?

Yes, she was Jewish, she lived in another part of Rome.

Her name?

Enrica Mieli... I still have her picture.

So you were not at home on that morning of October 16?

I was in that house... because in those days, everyone was afraid of the Germans, there was confusion... I had done some exercises, in case the Germans went into the house, of escaping from a window. Fortunately, it was not on a floor, it was like here. When in that morning of October 16, it must have been around 6:00 a.m., there were loud blows on the door, with rifles, we were all in bed. In one room was my fiancée with her mother, in another one her brother and I. They opened the door. In that house, they were the only Jewish family in the block, there weren't others, the doorman had shown where the numbers were... they did not know of the final solution, they thought of concentration camps, work camps. When they came in, they had given a piece of paper, I found the original one, because I've written everything down. I was the first to write the story of what happened in Rome with the Germans that day...

And then?

... I heard "money, gold" the mother had the readiness of saying a Jewish world... 18:00 interruption

19:00 the word *rechud*, literally it means permission. But we used to say, to do *rechud*, they would say to children when their parents left, that the children not see you... it means run away. I was in bed, without my pyjama top, it was a hot night like the nights in Rome used to be, I don't know today...

I ran away immediately, I jumped out the window. There was another entrance on the other side. People had started to gather, they were afraid, they thought the Germans were also taking non-Jews. "No, no, they're only taking Jews." "There is no danger," they said. Immediately, a woman said to me, "come, come to my house" I did not know her, she saw me there... she took me to her house on the third floor. Then my clothes arrived. Because the Germans had left the family there, the fiancée, the mother and the brother, they had said to be ready in twenty minutes because they were going to pick up another family in a nearby street. Instead of running

away, they were not able to run away: paralyzed... And they found the time to bundle with my clothes, it was a rainy day, a terrible rain.

...

21.40 That rain lasted the whole day... I never saw such a thick rainy day like that one. I did not know... I was confused. The house was not far from the Jewish cemetery of Verano, almost at the end of Verano, a road, all of a shelter wall under this rain, I walked down the street, all of it. It was Via Tiburtina, one of the strategic streets for the Germans, I was scared, I did not know the Germans, those who were in the army and those who were in the SS, because it was the SS who dealt with the Jews, I did not know where to go. I walked down all of the street, to San Lorenzo which had been bombed during July '43, three months earlier.

I didn't know where to go, I remember passing through Porta Maggiore, the one leading to St. John Lateran. For a while I took refuge at the Lateran Basilica. I had nothing, neither money, nor anything.

This is the end?

No, it's not over yet. At a certain point I thought: who can I ask for help? Someone I know. I thought of my Italian teacher, who I continued to get along with. She was a Benedictine oblate, I only know now, I did not know that then. She was partial to Saint Francesca Romana, there is the church of the white Benedictines at the Roman forum. When we went to school, she brought us there once on a day trip and she showed us Saint Francesca Romana. I went to their house, there were other two refugees, two elders, a Jewish man and his sister. I went there.

...

25.40 I stayed in the basilica for an hour, thinking on what I could do. She was not far, at the beginning of Via Appia. It was interesting because speaking to Andrea Riccardi, it came up that he knew the teacher, her family, they lived in the same house. I have a very good memory. I still remember the teachers telephone number in 1940-1943.

You still remember it today?

Yes, 73 030.

26.40 At their house we couldn't, there was no possibility of eating because everything was rationed. Those who had money could buy in the black market, the people, the poor, went hungry. We went looking. First thing she went to the church of St. Francesca Romana, she spoke to the abbot, I had met him, I don't remember why anymore. And then they killed the abbot, did you know?

Some questions I prepared. Pius XII is accused of being a collaborator of the Nazis and an anti-Semite. How would you comment on these notions?

28.30 It's not true at all. Because people wanted a great protest from the Pope, ... and I don't know what would have happened had this protest taken place. Without considering the role of politics, the Church was interested in saving Rome. We were better off in Rome, compared to other cities, it was better, politically. In the first place, they managed not allowing the fascist government to arrive. There wasn't one in Rome. The Vatican had not recognized Mussolini's government, but the Badoglio's government of the South...

They were victims of the campaign begun in 1963 by Hochbuth's "The Deputy". People were not in good faith. I think it was the communists who pushed this campaign against the pontiff. Because they went to the Jews, the Jews immediately accepted, but not all of them. I spoke to many of them, I have all their testimonies, which I send Tornielli, the last one I sent, by the head of the Jewish clandestine association of Rome, which worked from the convent of Capuchin friars in Via Sicilia, to assist refugees and hidden Jews... he said it very clearly: gratitude to the Church, for what it did and

especially to Pius XII. Palestine soldiers we were called then, incorporated Jews, now everything is in the last book, but people don't read... People only read propaganda written by laymen on the newspapers, etc. etc.

Can you give us two or three examples of how Pope Pius XII helped save the lives of the Jews?

32.05 The first thing he did, he looked for his schoolmate, from when he studied in the Visconti Secondary School, Prof. Attilio Ascarelli, who, when they opened the Ardeatine Pits (after the massacre with 335 victims on March 25, 1944, as a reprisal to the Via Rasella bombing where 32 German soldiers were killed) he was a Pathology professor and directed the victims' identification. And then I remember Christmas night during the months I was a refugee at St. John Lateran; we did not leave our rooms, we were recluses, we could not even walk on the halls. A priest came to call us, he said if we wanted to go out, if someone wanted to attend Mass, said Mons. Luigi Traia who was the Deputy Manager of Rome. He approached two Jews, other refugees as well, Italian soldiers who had deserted the army, anti-fascists, communists... because the communists had been welcomed in Rome's cathedral as well. And these two Jews said, thank you, thank you for what the Church does for us. And he said, the exact words I heard with my own ears: "thank the Holy Father who wanted it."

Where did you live after Lateran and your professor's house?

During nine months the Germans stayed in Rome I always lived in St. John Lateran: they had prepared rooms for the refugees. There's a book, then... written by the caretaker of these refugees... Cardinal Pietro Palazzini. I have it here.

Interruption

The whole bibliography, I have everything. These are the names of the refugees, according to which floor they were housed. There was the old part and the new part. This is me, the third Michele Tagliacozzo.

Pietro Palazzini "The clergy and the German occupation of Rome."

It's a good book, it tells the whole story.

37.20 Mons. Palazzini took care of us while we were there. However, when St. Paul's was invaded, do you know what they did in St. Paul's Basilica? The fascists invaded it. They took out all of the Jews during the night from February 3rd to 4th in 1944. We had to leave. Don Palazzini came and told us, "this is what happened. This place is not safe anymore. Those who want to stay can do so at their responsibility. We were afraid and left. Where to go? Where to go? With another Jew, the first night we left, on February 4, 1944, he had an apartment where he housed an Italian police officer he knew, who also guarded the house. We slept there that night. The second night we did not know where to sleep. I went to the pastor I had met of a Seventh Day Adventist Church. He was a young man who had studied Hebrew with me. He hosted me. The first night he didn't know where to put me. I don't know if it's still there. In Via Urbana there was a Baptist Church. The Adventists who celebrated on Saturday, did not have their own Church. However, there was a Baptist Church, who hosted them on Saturdays. They were very liberal. So he fixed me up there. On the place where the pastor preaches, which was made of wood, if one turned it over, there was a baptistery, where people were baptized. There was a niche there, they brought me some covers. I stayed there for two or three nights... Then I had to leave because I couldn't sleep inside the Church.

Can you say something in English about your appreciation of Pius XII?

I can't say anything, I told you, I read your whole article.

In Hebrew or in Italian.

In Hebrew? Summarize your evaluation of Pius XII in Hebrew?

Hebrew from 41 to 43.

Those who attack Pius XII say he was without courage, that he was a coward...

I will give you an example I found these days. The detractors brought as an example the Archbishop of Damaskinos, Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church. He had the courage to protest (I printed the article because I sent it to Riccardi). He did not protest to the Germans but he gathered signatures and protested to the head of the Greek government who was a collaborationist... He certainly did not go against the Germans, or General Tropp who had destroyed the Warsaw ghetto... So I tell myself, they don't tell people things as they went: people think he had the courage to denounce... they think he went to scold the Germans: look, you are not doing a good thing... instead it's not true at all.

PART II

45.00 The Pope had serious problems. Objectively he was in a dire position for many reasons: Rome was occupied, he had to deal with fascists, Italians and Germans, then Communists, who, as I recall, tried to occupy Rome before the arrival of the English and Americans and when the Germans were about to leave. It was a problem. We did not understand this then. Why? Because we did not perceive these movements.

I remember a few clergy speaking against the Germans. The Superior of the Lateran Penitentiaries was a Franciscan. In January he prayed a novena at the New Church, in Corso Vittorio Emanuele... I remember one evening he returned to St. John's. I had also gone back there after 20 days of "vacation" away from it. Don Palazzini found a place for me in the Lateran Penitentiary, the small building inside St. John's where Rome's Vicariate is today. They have rebuilt it now. He said that he'd come back, and that he had said what he had to say. He spoke in Latin the words: who wants to understand, will. He had it against the Germans, and also the German people... So, those were difficult times. What can they say against the Pope? That he loved the German culture, but one must recognize that German culture is the real European culture...

There is a specific place, here in the Yad Yashem museum in Israel, the memorial of the Holocaust.

There is a text with a writing that reads

"Pius XII's reaction to the murder of the Jews during the Holocaust is a matter of controversy. In 1933 ... when he was Secretary of the Vatican State he was active in obtaining a Concordat with the German regime to preserve the Church's rights in Germany even if this meant recognizing the Nazi racist regime.

When he was elected Pope in 1939, he shelved a letter against racism and ant-Semitism that his predecessor had prepared, even when reports of the murdering of Jews reached the Vatican, the Pope did not protest, either verbally or in writing. In December 1942 he abstained from joining the allied declaration condemning the extermination of the Jews. When the Jews were deported from Rome to Auschwitz, the Pope did not intervene. The Pope maintained a neutral position throughout the war, with the exception of appealing to the rulers of Hungary and Slovakia near the end. His silence and absence of guidelines forced churchmen throughout Europe to decide on their own how to react."

How would you comment this text?

01.03.50 Unfortunately today there aren't any people with historical knowledge of the Jewish state. That text was written by an American like yourself. What did they do? I have a newspaper published here, in Italian. A nice picture of Pius XII with German soldiers. Nobody knows, however, that this picture is from when he presented his credentials as Papal nuncio, in Germany before the Nazis came

to power. Those soldiers are from Weimar's republic... I told them, I wrote to them and they answered, "we received your letter". But what does "we received it" mean in historically terms? ... They don't study in depth, they don't elaborate on things.

But, personally, for the truth, do you think it is fair that this text is read everyday by thousands of people, by young Jews, young people from all over the world? Is it fair?

When I work in a smaller institution, the House of the ghetto fighters, they have two-three seminars a week, young people from middle and secondary schools attend. But they have no interest in history... today there is nationalism, they aren't interested in anything else... they think they are wasting time.

Yad Yashem, don't you think they should change this text?

Yes, but they won't do it!

Why can't they do it?

Because they don't want to, they say they need this, they need that, a Commission to investigate. You know, when someone does not want to do something, he won't stop saying no.

But is it fair it is written like that?

No, it is not fair because it's anti-historic, it does not reflect historical truth. One can say the Pope was cowardly and scared, someone could say that not knowing what happened. But who can reveal what went on behind the scenes, the things we do not know? Many documents have not been published. When they started bringing out documents, they started saying, the documents are not all here, there are others... they follow politics, today, everything is done in terms of politics.

Can you say the same thing in Hebrew? It is fair that the Yad Yashem text remains or not?

Hebrew – until 01.12.20

How can we judge Pius XII in the end? Can we condemn his attitude towards Germans or can we also applaud his deeds?

The problem is complex, it is not so easy... The Pope had millions of Catholics in Germany, one cannot act making one happy and the others as well... He did not have space to manoeuvre like a soldier. If the army is in one point and it attacks, it cannot attack from another point, it's difficult. When there is politics involved, nothing can be saved.