

Pius XII: Sympathy for Zionism

Eugenio Pacelli, who in 1939 became Pope Pius XII, actively supported Zionism during World War II. German historian Michael Hesemann claims in his book "The Pope Who Defied Hitler. The Truth About Pius XII." Hesemann, who is one of the few historians with access to the Vatican Secret Archives, states he found evidence that Pacelli in 1917 as Apostolic Nuncio in Munich, successfully intervened in favor of the Jewish settlers in Palestine. He located five documents in the collection of papers from the "Nuntiatura Apostolica Baviera", which under the headline "Guerra Europa, Palestina # 1, Pop. Giudaica e delle Città Santa delle Palestina" (European War, Palestine # 1, Jewish Population and the Holy City of Palestine) documents his demarche. Originally, the Jewish Community of the neutral Switzerland had approached Pope Benedict XV., asking him to use his influence to prevent a Turkish aggression against the Jewish population of Palestine, which at that time belonged to the Ottoman Empire.

Instead of approaching the Ottoman government in Constantinople, the Pope decided for a clever diplomatic move. The Muslims Turks would not care too much for the Pope, but certainly had an open ear for their most powerful ally, the German Reich. Since the Holy See did not have a Nuntiature in Berlin, but in Munich at that time, Pacelli would be responsible. Benedict XV. knew that his Nuncio always was friendly towards Jewish affairs.

Only a few weeks before he was sent to Munich, when Pacelli was Undersecretary of State of the Holy See, responsible for Foreign Affairs, Zionist leader Nachum Sokolow came to Rome to learn about the Holy See's position on the question of a future Jewish state in Palestine. When he was received by Pacelli, he was deeply moved by his warmth and openness towards Zionism. To his uttermost surprise, Pacelli suddenly asked him if he would like to meet the Pope. Sokolow never thought this would be possible for a Jew. Thanks to Pacelli, he had a private audience with Benedict XV a few days later, which lasted for 45 minutes. The Pope called the Zionist initiative "providential" and "in accordance with God's will" and released Sokolow with the words: "I am sure we will be good neighbors".

But only a few months later, the Zionist settlers were in danger. The Turks suspected the Jews to be collaborators of the British, who had supported the Arab revolt and opened a second front in the southwest of the Ottoman Empire. In a similar way, two years before, the Armenians were suspected to be collaborators of the Russian, another enemy of the Turks.

Cemal Pasha, the Turkish Commander who was responsible for the Armenian genocide with its 1.5 Million victims, threatened the Jewish-Zionist settlers. In Jaffa, more than 8000 Jews were forced to leave their homes, which were sacked by the Turks. Two Jews were hanged in front of the town gate, dozens were found dead on the beach. In March, Reuters news agency reported a "massive expulsion of Jews who could face a similar fate as the Armenians". A report of the Zionist Office in Copenhagen expressed the worry that the Jews of Palestine would face extermination by hunger, thirst and diseases.

When on May 7, 1917 the Social Democrat representative Oskar Cohn, a Jew, brought the Anti-Jewish violence in Palestine on the agenda of the Reichstag, the German government refused to bother the Turkish ally. The deportation of the Jews was called a simple "security measure". "This makes the Vatican initiative even more important", Hesemann states, "another element of pressure had to force the German government to act. This came from the Catholic Church, with its 25 Million believers an important power in the Reich."

On the same day, when the Papal Secretary of State requested if he could “act for the protection of the Jewish sites and population of Jerusalem”, Pacelli drafted and sent a letter to the Bavarian Secretary of State, Ritter von Dandl, asking him for an urgent intervention in Berlin. A copy of both, the draft and the final version, Heseemann located in the Vatican Secret Archives – as well as the surprising reply.

Other than half a year before, this time, the Berlin State Department reacted and sent a demarche to the Ottoman government. On November 27, 1917, according to an internal memorandum, they received the reply from Constantinople that “there is no reason to fear that the Turkish authorities in Palestine order measures against the Jewish population.”

Consequently, Ritter von Dandl and through him Pacelli were informed 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.”

On December 11, 1917, when the British Forces under command of General Allenby conquered Jerusalem, the Jews of Palestine could indeed feel relieved.

The discovery of Pacellis correspondence in this matter confirms the claim of the Israeli diplomat and historian Pinchas Lapide (1922-1997), who claimed already in 1967 that Eugenio Pacelli contributed to “save the Jews of Jerusalem as well as the holy sites from an almost certain doom.” According to Lapide, the Vatican demarche was of vital importance for the safety of the Jewish settlers, since at that time the Turkish troops in Palestine were under the 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.”

The Zionists were aware of Pacellis demarche. Dr. Jacob Thon, head of the Zionist Office in Jerusalem, wrote in December 1917: “It was an 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.”

Eugenio Pacelli continued to be a friend of Jews and Zionists, even when the Holy See adopted a rather sceptical policy. In 1922, the Vatican’s official newspaper “L’Osservatore Romano” expressed worries about the socialist ideas circulating among Zionist settlers. But only four years later, Pacelli encouraged German Catholics to join and support the “German Comitee Pro Palestine to Support the Jewish Settlement in Palestine”, founded in 1926. Among its board members was not only Albert Einstein, but also Pacelli’s closest friend and advisor, the German politician and Catholic Prelate Dr. Ludwig Kaas.

The Nuntius also met Sokolov again. When the Zionist Leader visited Berlin in 1926, he wanted to see Pacelli and ask him for advice. Although the Nuntius was severely ill and at the hospital at that time, his physicians allowed a five-minutes-visit. Eugenio Pacelli let him leave only after ninety minutes. “It was obvious how interesting and uplifting the conversation with the Nuntius was, a discussion of historical questions, Jewish as well as Catholic”, the German

Zionist Kurt Blumenfeld, who waited for Sokolov in the hospital library, revealed in his autobiography "Living the Jewish Question" (1962).

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.