

The "Rat Lines" and the Pope

By Michael Hesemann

The release of documents pertaining to the pontificate of Pius XII, from the Vatican Archives on March 2, 2020, has prompted historians all over the world to further investigate the background of the so-called "rat lines": What role did the Vatican and the Pope play in helping Nazis escape Europe after the Second World War?

On June 2, 1945, just weeks after the end of the war in Europe, Pope Pius XII (1939-1958), in a speech to the College of Cardinals, clarified his position regarding National Socialism. After enumerating Nazi crimes and hostile acts against the Church, he also found conciliatory words. During his time as a nuncio in Germany (1917-29), he "got to know the great qualities of this people." Now he hoped that "if it recognizes the satanic face of National Socialism, it could find a new dignity and a new life, after the guilty have atoned for the crimes they committed." Pius XII expressly welcomed the Nuremberg war crimes trials. He did not offer protests when death sentences were handed down. In 1925, he had already described National Socialism as "probably the most dangerous heresy of our time." In 1930, he supported the excommunication of NSDAP members by some German bishops. In 1937, as Cardinal State Secretary, he persuaded his predecessor, Pius XI, to condemn the Nazi ideology in his encyclical "Mit brennender Sorge." Between 1939 and 1944, Pius XII was in contact with the German resistance and approved their plan to overthrow the Nazi regime, which failed so dramatically with the unsuccessful assassination attempt by Graf Stauffenberg.

Nevertheless, the Vatican is accused of helping senior Nazis flee to South America. Did this really happen and what did the Pope know about it?

When hostilities finally ended in Europe in May 1945, thousands of National Socialists escaped to countries such as Argentina, Bolivia and Syria. They had access to a professional network of smugglers in Austria and Italy, which the CIA soon called "the rat line," before they set sail, mostly from Genoa. Among the fugitives were prominent war criminals, such as the architect of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann and the commandant of the Treblinka and Sobibor extermination camps, Franz Stangl. Monks and dignitaries of the Catholic Church helped eagerly in the exodus of the murderers.

An irony of fate was that the Nazi refugees benefited from a network that had been set up for a very different purpose during the war. Courageous churchmen had previously smuggled thousands of Jews from the "Ostmark" and the German Reich to Rome on the "monastery route" (Klosterroute) across the Alps. The Vatican had negotiated with the Mussolini regime that no Jews would be sent to the Nazis. They lived in relative safety in Italian refugee camps, or Pallottine monks helped them escape to South America, often with falsified papers. This escape route closed in September 1943, when the Germans occupied Italy, following the coup d'état against Mussolini.

Did the Vatican help Jews *and* Nazis in its' principle "to assist all victims of war regardless of religion, race or nationality," or did Nazi war criminals benefit from the naivete of monks, by simply providing false names and overly sentimental conversion stories in order to obtain the desired papers? Both factors may have played a role. Even in times of the internet, opportunists and criminals cannot be identified in the flow of refugees.

Whether by Vatican intent or by Nazi subterfuge, two points of contact existed in Rome for Nazis and other fascist elements fleeing Europe. One was the "Illyrian College San Girolamo," whose cardinal patron was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Santiago Luis Copello. The Croatian priest Krunoslav Draganovic, a former Ustasha officer, resided at the college. In 1943, Ante Pavelic, the fascist leader who headed the Croatian state subservient to Germany and Italy during World War II, sent Draganovic to Rome. It was there that Draganovic made his first contacts to Argentina through Cardinal Copello.

The second contact was the Croatian section of the Pontifical Aid Commission (PCA), which was responsible for "refugee and prisoner care" and was subordinate to Giovanni Montini, later Pope Paul VI, also based in San Girolamo. Draganovic took advantage of this when he declared Ustasha war criminals to be Croatian Catholics who had fled from the advance of the Red Army. Even the dictator Pavelic, whom the Pope had never recognized as head of state, escaped to Buenos Aires in this way. There he founded an exile government and served Peron as a security advisor.

Draganovic had been working for the American intelligence agency CIC since 1947 to organize escape routes for Nazi collaborators who could be useful in the beginning of the Cold War. In return, the CIC smuggled Draganovic's clients out of Germany and Austria - including the "Butcher of Lyon," Klaus Barbie.

Draganovic's most important partner in Rome was the Austrian bishop Alois Hudal, who led the German-Austrian priestly college "Santa Maria dell'Anima." Hudal had become persona non grata in the Vatican in 1936, when he pleaded for a dialogue with National Socialism. In 1943, during the German occupation of Rome he intervened, at the Pope's request, to the German city commander to stop the deportation of the Roman Jews. He procured for Pius XII 550 certificates declaring religious houses to be Vatican territory, thus prohibiting German soldiers from entering. Approximately 4,300 Jews were hidden there. Hudal also supported men of the Italian resistance. The Vatican thus allowed Hudal to help Austrian refugees and provide shelter after the war.

When Bishop Hudal offered, "in the name of the Pope," to visit German prisoners of war in the Allied camps, he was refuted by Pope Pius XII. Bishop Montini let Hudal know that he should do so only in his own name. From then on, Hudal acted on his own. In his 1976 memoir, "Roman Diaries," he confessed:

"After 1945, all of my charitable work was primarily dedicated to the so-called 'war criminals' who were persecuted by Communists and 'Christian' Democrats ... although many of the accused were innocent, but only the executive organs of the orders of their superiors and thus the atoning sacrifices for the undesirable developments of the system. To help here, to save some, without opportunistic and calculating considerations, selflessly and bravely, was in these times the most natural demand of a true Christian, which knows no Talmud hatred, but only love, kindness and forgiveness and no final judgments about the actions of the actual human being left to political parties, but to an eternal judge who alone can examine the hearts, motivations and ultimate intentions." (Translation by Michael Hesseman)

While he later could not recall ever having met Eichmann, Hudal frankly admitted that he accommodated SS General Otto Wächter and helped the Treblinka-Commander Stangl escape to Syria. The Vatican responded with outrage. As early as 1946, Montini demanded that the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Innitzer, withdraw Hudal, the "Brown Bishop". When Hudal wanted to accompany an Austrian pilgrim group to a papal audience during Holy Week 1949, he was asked to leave by a Papal servant: "Your presence here is undesirable; if you don't go away, the Pope won't come." Hudal's attempt to justify himself was dismissed by Montini: "There is no defense for a Nazi bishop." Under increased pressure from the Vatican ("The Holy Father demanded that Bishop A.H. move away from the anima ...") Hudal was asked to resign in 1951 by the Austrian Bishops' Conference, and indeed did so a year later. After increased pressure from the Vatican, the Holy Father demanded Bishop Hudal's removal from the anima. Hudal was asked to resign in 1951 by the Austrian Bishops' Conference, and indeed did so a year later. Bitterly, he retired to Grottaferrata in the Alban Hills. In his memoirs, Bishop Hudal admitted, "After this last aid, which soon earned me the title of a 'Nazi, fascist bishop' in the Roman Curia - 'troppo tedesco' (too German) - I was eventually considered unbearable for the Vatican policy."

When asked in 1961 by an Austrian newspaper about Eichmann, the planner of the Holocaust, Hudal said: "After 1945, more than 40 people came to me on some days. These were refugees with Nansen passports, which were issued first in Geneva, then in Milan. All of these refugees declared that they were persecuted by the Soviets as anti-communists and were in great danger. As a priest, I am neither a policeman nor a gendarme and my duty as a Christian was to save what could be saved in this confused time, also to prevent the poor from staying in Rome, where they could be mainly dangerous. I can neither say nor deny that Eichmann was among those refugees, because nobody told me about his past in the Third Reich and because, at that time, no photographs of Eichmann were known."

In May 1950, Eichmann was smuggled into Italy on a bicycle by the parish priest of Sterzing, Johann Corradini, a Nazi sympathizer, and initially housed in a Franciscan monastery. There he converted to Catholicism, not out of conviction, but to obtain a baptismal certificate as an "official" document with his new name Ricardo Klemente. As Ricardo Klemente, he applied for a provisional passport with the Red Cross before setting out to Argentina from Genoa. He never entered Rome and therefore never met Hudal.

Consequently, there *was* a ratline, but it was neither supported nor endorsed by the Vatican. It was Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal who stated clearly: "There is no evidence that Pius XII knew about it or even ordered it."

Dr. h.c. Michael Hesemann

www.michaelhesemann.info