

THE HOLOCAUST AND THE 'HOLLOW' POPE

[Reproduced, with permission, from Fr Max Barrett's book
THE EIGHT-O-FIVER, The annals of train commuter extraordinaire,
Joseph A. Meagher]¹

"Ah! What a coincidence!"

Joe Meagher raised an inquiring eyebrow and looked aslant at the speaker who lowered herself into the seat beside him. Actually she lowered herself into half of Joe's allotted space as well, and momentarily the Eight-O-Fiver had the illusion of being in the path of an avalanche. About to make a sad observation on the current prevalence of anorexia, he suppressed the thought: the Meaghers' by-word was chivalry. Instead, he snatched a shallow breath and asked in a strained voice: "Coincidence?"

"Yes. You are reading up on the Holocaust, and I am soon to present my M.A. on *The Holocaust and the Hollow Pope*. Pius XII, that is."

Actually there was no coincidence. Richard Gleason, 8.05 regular and Joe Meagher enthusiast, had indulged in some match-making. The previous Saturday at a social function he had been irritated by a mature-age university student with mature age spread and one topic: her thesis. Richard was furious, and frustrated: obviously she had gulped down the libellous propaganda against Pius XII, but he did not have the real facts at his finger tips to deflate her. Then there came to him a marvellous, malevolent inspiration.

He handed the lady a large slice of Black Forest cake and a suggestion. "There's a doddering beanstalk of a man with whom I go to work, an old Johnny with a fixation on his hero, Pius XII. He never stops talking about his topic. You know how it is. Look, how about you join the 8.05 on Tuesday? You'll get no end of fun sorting him out." The thesis lady relentlessly pursued the remnant of Black Forest and the Gleason bait. "Wonderful idea. Should be fun. Tuesday? Can't wait."

Richard moved quickly. On Sunday he borrowed what he knew to be a recent and well-documented life of Pius XII. On Monday morning he handed it to Joe with the request that he read it and comment. On Tuesday morning he gave the merest nod of the head to the student lady who came in on cue. Richard opened his own tome on advanced accountancy. (The train reached Kirrawee before he noticed he was holding the book upside-down.)

The drop-out from weight watchers carried her thesis with the affection she normally bestowed only on her lap dog. Joe, still struggling for breath, maintained his old-world charm. "Now that's a fine looking manuscript you have put together. May I take a glance? Your supervisor? ... Ah, of course; a gentleman with decided views on this matter; a person who would write excellent fiction, don't you think?"

The lady wobbled several chins in puzzlement at Joe; what direction was this odd-bod coming from? That was exactly what the beanstalk was about to explain.

¹ Sydney, 2013. The chapter, *The Holocaust and the 'Hollow' Pope*, appears on pp. 49 to 54. Copies of the book are available from Redemptorist Publications, P O Box 370 Kogarah, NSW 1485 and the cost, \$17.00, includes handling, postage and GST.

"Now, in dealing with this kind of topic, it is vitally necessary to get the facts in focus; to understand the *sitz-im-leben*."

The lady said she was not strong on French, to which Joe replied that neither was he strong on German. He tried again. "But the German people—as well as people like our two selves—know how important it is to view a topic in its proper context, in the light of its own time. People in today's work-force—the commuters on this train, for instance—would not readily understand the *atmosphere* following the collapse of France, and Dunkirk, and the *Luftwaffe*, AND the expectancy of any any-day-now invasion of England. But mature age people like you and me..."

The lady cradling her thesis would have been probably thirty years younger than Joe and did not appreciate the carbon-14 dating. Richard Gleason was preening himself on his own sheer genius. Joe continued:

"I was still in primary school at the time I refer to. But I have a vivid recollection of the *mood*. It was nervous; a touch defeatist. I remember that our butcher scrawled what was meant to be a reassuring message on the window of his shop. In white chalk he wrote: 'Don't worry—he may not bother to come out here.'

"That was the context to which the addle-brained of later decades referred when they pontificated: 'Why didn't the Roman Pontiff tell Hitler to lay off the Jews.' *We are talking about a time when nobody was telling Hitler what to do.* Hitler was telling the world what to do—and it wasn't polite. But I'm sure you have already made that point painfully clear in your thesis.

The ample academic was adamant. "The Pope should have spoken out more strongly. He knew exactly what was going on." With no small bitterness she added: "He was Hitler's pope."

Joe was having some trouble coping with physical discomfort; but he spoke now with quite a different sort of pain.

"Look, I would dearly like to lend you this book, only it doesn't belong to me. But would you *please* listen. I'll give you some quotes. I'll provide the references. If you wish, I will have these bits photocopied and give them to you tomorrow morning.

"Eugenio Pacelli—Pius XII—used radio and the Vatican newspaper to condemn racist crimes. The Nazis' reaction was to dub him 'a mouthpiece of the Jewish war criminals'.

"The *New York Times* acknowledged the 'up front' stance taken by Pacelli. Its bold print headline of 14 March 1940 read: *Pope is emphatic about just peace. Jews' rights defended.* That newspaper's Christmas editorial for the following year, 1941, praised Pius for having 'put himself squarely against Hitlerism'. The *London Times*, October 1, 1942, gratefully acknowledged that the Holy Father 'condemns the worship of force... and the persecution of the Jewish race.' Twenty-three days later the same newspaper reported Goebbels as labelling Pius 'a pro-Jewish Pope'."

Joe was about to ask, "Are you with me?" but desisted. Siamese twins had more freedom of movement.

"The sheer horror of Hitler's *Final Solution* was at first too maniacal for the world to comprehend, and information of what was actually going on was hard to come by. (You appreciate this point, of course, because of what happened in 2003 in Iraq. United Nations teams search for months for weapons of mass destruction. No cache was found. The war

‘concluded’—and still no cache was found...) Even in mid-1943 the American Secretary of State was questioning the existence of Nazi gas chambers. It would seem that the Holy Father had a better intelligence service because, in his Christmas address of the previous year, Christmas 1942, he pleaded ‘for hundreds of thousands who, through no fault of their own but only because of their nationality or descent, are condemned to death’.

“All these facts and dates are verifiable. They would seem to indicate that Pius XII did not fail to protest. The Pope *led* the protest.

“Early the following year, when the extermination of Jews was begun in Holland, the Dutch bishops condemned the crime. The result: the persecution of Jews was moved up a gear. From that time, the Holy Father voiced no further condemnation, for fear of making the situation more unbearable. As was said at the time—and would you please bear with me while I read you another verbatim:

‘...we cannot treat these matters in normal ways. We are dealing with an insane man... and the group that surrounds him represents an example of a national psychopathic case. We cannot act towards them by normal means. That is why the problem is very difficult.’”

The lady with the M.A thesis seemed to be fighting for life now. “Wish-washy words,” she said with marked bitterness. “Typical Vatican double-talk.”

Joe replied, ever so mildly: “That was not Vatican talk. That was the then-president of the USA, Franklin D. Roosevelt.” Joe went on:

“Hitler perished, and the world was grateful to Pius XII. Then, about twenty years later, there began a diabolical effort to smear the name of Pacelli. ‘Diabolical’; I don’t use the word at random.

“Now, dear lady, you could likely overwhelm me with quotes from the denigrators of this pope. But you must realise that there are others who speak of the Pacelli pontiff with admiration... and gratitude.

“Albert Einstein, for instance. He said: ‘Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler’s campaign for suppressing the truth.’

“Field Marshall Lord Montgomery, staunch Anglican and son of an Anglican bishop, had two pictures in his room: one of his father; the other of Pius XII.”

Joe flipped the pages to his next marker. “When Pius XII died, Golda Meir—Israel’s redoubtable prime minister—expressed her sympathy in a letter to the Vatican and the letter read: ‘We share in the grief of humanity at the passing away of Pius XII. He upheld the highest ideals of peace and compassion. When fearful martyrdom came to our people in the decade of the Nazi terror, the voice of this Pope was raised for the victims... We mourn a great servant of peace.’

“And then, of course, there was Israel Zolli, chief rabbi in Rome during World War II. Zolli became a Catholic and, in baptism, took the name of Eugenio in honour of the man who was protector of so many of his fellow-countrymen.

“May I quote two renowned researchers? First, the Jewish historian Pinchas Lapide—did I mention he was Jewish?—champions the cause of the Pacelli pontiff because, (quote) ‘If fairness and historical justice are keystones of Jewish morality, then keeping silent in view of a slanderous attack on a benefactor is injustice... Far more than two million Jews did indeed survive, thanks to the help of the Church, bishops, laymen...’

“Then there is Gilbert—”

“As in Gilbert and Sullivan.” A fine salvo from the student.

“As in Sir Martin Gilbert, Winston Churchill’s official biographer and historian of the Holocaust and, by the way, a Jew. Sir Martin has just written a book entitled *The Righteous*. It is great stuff. Sir Martin explains that ‘the Righteous’ were those who put their own lives on the line in their bid to save Jewish lives. Among the Righteous, Gilbert says, ‘were many non-Catholic heroes... But essentially the predominant Church in Europe was the Roman Catholic Church... under the leadership of Pope Pius XII.’

“Gilbert has latterly been interviewed on his research and was asked about the Pope’s ‘timidity’. His answer amounted to: *what rubbish*. What the historian actually said was: you must appreciate the *sitz-im-leben*; the extremely dangerous circumstances at the time; the necessity to act with caution so as not to jeopardise Jewish lives.”

Joe plunged on. The thought that had been pestering him from the beginning, so out with it. “Dear lady, my hunch is that you have been an enthusiastic mature age student, a good student. You have been given excellent marks and you have deserved them. Then (I’m guessing) you went to your professor and said, ‘I have no idea of a topic for my thesis,’ and he said: ‘Write on the Holocaust and the Pacelli pope; I will line up the source material for you.’” An involuntary shudder from his neighbour suggested to Joe that he may not have been entirely wrong. “Don’t let them use you. Don’t let them...”

The train slid into Redfern and the thesis-bearing-student needed all available leverage to regain her feet. Momentarily, Joe had the painful illusion of having sustained a compound fracture. He also stood, watched the receding figure, massaged his side, hummed a few bars from the old Mavis Bramston show, *Togetherness*. Then his eye fell on Richard—and realisation dawned. “Et tu, Brute,” he breathed.

Richard grinned. “I don’t speak French.” But may I ask a question in the vernacular: ‘Why didn’t the Pope excommunicate Hitler?’”

Patently Joe explained: “My dear young friend, you can’t excommunicate someone who is not communicating. Adolf Hitler had as much religion as a bull ant.”
