

Pius XII and Received Wisdom

by James Como (December 2015)

Some months ago I attended a dinner party that included a man who had worked for Zbigniew Brzezinski when he was Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor. As the subject of commie-hunting in the fifties arose he, typically of his type, became mocking (and smug, assuming that all gathered were of his ilk). "Did they ever find even one?" he asked. I was dumbstruck. Having gone to school with and taught among Red Diaper Babies my whole life (one of whom bounced on the knee of Uncle Gus – that's Gus Hall, head of the Communist Party U.S.A.), I held my water and picked one figure, Carl Bernstein, whose memoir named his own father as one of them, pointing out that the old man begged his son not to tell the truth: American anti-Communists would be shown to have been right. To this day I come across true believers who insist that Alger Hiss was innocent.

This is nothing but political superstition soured into social and political bigotry, and it is all fed by what walks in daylight as Received Wisdom, so called, than which Invincible Ignorance has no better brother. In five years, "hands up, don't shoot," which we know never happened, will be Received Wisdom, helped on its way, probably, by a Michael Moore documentary. Is there any human landscape – sport, entrainment, history, religion – within which these siblings do not stalk?

Take the calumny still perpetrated against the Venerable Pope Pius XII, a timely subject because of Pope Francis's inclination to fast-track Pius's canonization. And timely, too, because yet another book – Mark Riebling's *Church of Spies: The Pope's Secret War Against Hitler* – has just been published. My purpose is not to re-litigate the charge against "Hitler's Pope," he of the infamous *Deputy*, but, by looking very briefly at three responses to the charge – Rabbi David Dalin's *The Myth of Hitler's Pope*, Dan Kurzman's *A Special Mission: Hitler's Secret Plot to Seize the Vatican and Kidnap Pope Pius XII*, and Riebling's book – to make a prediction: Separately and together (along with others for the defense) they simply will not matter. Received Wisdom, that is superstition and bigotry (some of it religious), will prevail, again.

Rabbi Dalin's book is a brief survey of scurrility and his responses to it. He

notes that much of the criticism of Pius is actually veiled anti-Catholic propaganda; reports on those Jews and Catholics in Nazi-occupied countries who counseled the pope not to speak out explicitly for fear of heightened persecution – which did happen in Holland; cites contemporaneous newspaper editorials (including both the *London Times* and the *New York Times*) that praised the pope for his anti-Nazi stance; and dissects (with the help of Ronald Rychlak's work) the depredations, as well as the Communist catalysts, of Hochhuth's *The Deputy*. Moreover, he shows that Pius not only had no prior knowledge of the roundup of Roman Jews but, when informed of it, took immediate action. Rabbi Dalin goes so far as to proclaim Pius vindicated by the Talmud itself.

Kurtzman, writing a few years after Dalin, delves more deeply into the Roman roundup. He interviewed Princess Enza Pignatelli Aragona, who described a call at 5 a.m. from a Christian friend living near the Jewish ghetto. The caller reported that he was seeing Jews rounded up. She then telephoned a German diplomat friend. He drove her to the ghetto, to which both were prohibited entry but from the edge of which she herself could see what was happening. The German – the irony was not lost on her – then drove her to the Vatican so that she could talk to her friend the pope directly.

In utter shock, he simply stared (and, Riebling claims, cried), then exclaimed, "but they promised me not to touch the Jews in Rome." When the pope complained bitterly to the German ambassador to the Vatican, Baron Ernst von Weizacker, the plot – including Hitler's plots both to invade the Vatican and to kidnap the pope – thickened considerably. At the end of the day, seven thousand of Rome's eight thousand Jews were saved, many having simply stayed at home or been hidden in Catholic buildings.

I focus upon this particular event because many, especially many Jews, lament (and worse) that it happened under the pope's own window as he watched. It is iconic. Of course, this is a hyperbolic claim. What matters is the implication: "*and he did nothing*," which is simply false. Riebling anatomizes the incident in considerable detail, all of which further exculpates Pius, but more importantly he provides a context even broader than Kurtzman's – broader in two ways.

First he describes with stunning specificity the vast network of spies and resistance that the Vatican had in place in opposition to Hitler, including the

pope's involvement in von Stauffenberg's failed attempt on Hitler's life. (We should not be surprised that Hitler both hated and feared Pius, whom he held responsible for Mussolini's fall.) Second he analyzes the diplomatic exigencies with which the (officially neutral) pope contended: surely anyone less bold and skilled than he would have caused many more Jews (and Catholics) to be murdered, such was the delicacy of his undertaking.

All of the many papal defenders – and this note is a small scratch on a large surface of a very deep trove of scholarship – report the many acknowledgments of, and expressions of gratitude for, the pope's actions. Indeed, when Yad Vashem named Cardinal Palazzini a Righteous Gentile, he demurred, saying it was all the work of Pope Pius, and Palazzini was not alone in saying as much. Many Jewish scholars – along with Jews present at the time – have agreed and given written testimony to that same end, among them Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir.

And yet . . . not long after the publication of his book, Kurzman gave a bookstore talk broadcast by C-SPAN. The audience, mostly aged and Jewish, listened respectfully. Then several people asked questions: skeptically, even angrily. Kurzman answered crisply, thoroughly. Nevertheless, at the end of the session many in the audience were visibly dismissive.

So much for disinterested due diligence. Much easier and more comforting is Received Wisdom. Coming soon to a controversy near you. Watch for it.

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