

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE:

CHURCH ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE
"SOLUTION OF THE JEWISH PROBLEM" IN HUNGARY

by

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The destruction of Hungary's Jews was indicative of the free world's helplessness in 1944, when, with the end of the war in sight, the world knew of the deportations and even the Vatican had from time to time received reliable reports concerning the fate of the Jews in the occupied areas. According to the documents relating to this subject, the Vatican made strong protests over the deportations in Slovakia and Hungary, both of which were predominantly Catholic with close ties with the Vatican.

The Catholic Church was the biggest and the oldest in Hungary and its influence was felt in all spheres of life, the social, the economic and in its Parliament. In 1920, when Jews were first limited to working in certain occupations, this was done with a view to retaining the Christian character of the country. The first two anti-Jewish laws were passed in Hungary in 1938 and 1939 with the consent of the heads of the Church. In 1941, Parliament passed the third anti-Jewish law defining Jew in racial terms, similar to the Nuremberg laws, against which the heads of the Church unsuccessfully protested as being contrary to the principles of Christianity.

Sympathy with the Third Reich was then at its peak in Hungary and five days after Germany declared war on Russia, Hungary followed on June 27, 1941.

Despite the anti-Jewish laws with their depressive effects on the economic and moral state of the Jews, and despite some severe atrocities which were a long time in reaching the free world, Hungary became a lone island of refuge to the Jews of central Europe. 70,000 Jews took shelter there. In January, 1943, at a meeting between Pope Pius XII and Miklos Kallay, the new head of Hungary's government, the Pope condemned Germany's brutal treatment of the Jews, and expressed satisfaction at Hungary's treatment of the Jews and confidence that a nation of Catholics would never submit to Germany's pressure to deport them. Hungary had until then resisted this pressure from Germany through a fear that deportation of the Jewish population would have an adverse effect on the economy.

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צמדת הואטיקאן והפנסיית פהונגריה ל"פתרון השאלה היהודית".

On March 19, 1944, the Wehrmacht entered Hungary with the cooperation of the new Hungarian government. Eichmann's new commandos started their mass deportations of Jews from the Carpathian mountains on May 14.

Unlike the deportees, neither the Papal Nuncio, Angelo Rotta, nor the heads of the local churches, Catholic as well as Protestant, believed the labour camp fiction, and protested to the government. The heads of the local churches emphasised that their primary concern was for those that had converted to Christianity.

Unlike Poland or occupied France where the clergy was frequently active in the underground movements, Hungarian clergy, partly out of fear of Bolshevism, identified completely with the government, and this was reflected in their attitude to the question of the Jews. There were exceptions to this, notably Aaron Marton, the Catholic Bishop of Transylvania.

During the following two months (mid-May to mid-July) in which about 500,000 Jews from the country districts of Hungary were being deported, a pastoral letter that might have clarified the stand taken by the Church was being held up, as Primate Seredi hesitated over expressing open opposition to the government, despite a warning by the Bishop of Gyor, dated May 27, that many Catholics, not knowing the Church's stand were actively cooperating in the dissemination of the brutal racial laws and that the Church must take responsibility for this.

When the 250,000 Jews of Budapest realised that the Jews in the surrounding areas had been deported, they issued a circular letter which was a cry for help to the Hungarian Christian public. Antisemitic propaganda, however, between 1920 and 1944 had prepared the ground psychologically for the events of 1944. The Hungarian middle classes in particular, cooperated in the deportations.

Until June, 1944, the free world demonstrated no significant reaction to the events, and by that time the deportations had already been carried out from the country areas of Hungary. (The World Jewish Congress had appealed to the neutral countries and to the United States as well as to the Pope to make a broadcast, warning the Hungarian nation of the consequences. On May 22, 1944 the two Chief Rabbis of Eretz Israel called to the Pope for his immediate intervention. At this period, however, all eyes were turned on the events of the war.)

The Auschwitz Protocol reached Switzerland in the second half of June, 1944. This was an authentic description of the death camp by two young Slovakian Jews, the first to have escaped. After being publicised in Switzerland, it reached the rest of the world and letters and cables of protest from Pope Pius XII, President Roosevelt and others were sent to Budapest. The Pope's cable was the first to arrive and was the first public protest over the Jews' persecution that the

Pope made. In his cable, he did not mention the Jews by name but referred to them as people persecuted for racial reasons. On account of these external as well as internal pressures, Horti took a firmer stand and from mid-July to mid-October the deportations stopped, which saved the lives of some of the Budapest Jews.

When Szalasi came to power on October 16, the Jews' suffering started once again and did not cease until the liberation of the Jewish ghetto by the Red Army on January 18, 1945. During this time, the Vatican concentrated its efforts with the block of neutral Legations such as that of the Vatican Sweden, Switzerland etc. The biggest achievement of this block, which was headed by the Papal Nuncio, Angelo Rotta, was the assurance of rights to any Jews who were granted "protection" by these Legations. The Nuncio's last memorandum was sent on December 20, 1944 and concerned children outside the Jewish ghetto when Budapest was already under siege. While the heads of the churches made several unsuccessful attempts at persuading the government to stop its persecution of the Jews, there were individual priests and nuns, who of their own initiative carried out valuable philanthropic work at this point.

The period between March and October, 1944 had been one of greater importance, however, since outwardly at least, Hungary was still a sovereign state, thus open to diplomatic intervention and it might still have been possible to change public opinion. But the local churches were too hesitant and too moderate. On June 8, the Papal Nuncio told the head of the Catholic Church that the Pope considered the Bishops' stand too passive.

On May 9, 1946 the Protestant Church at its congress in Hungary, issued a statement admitting its guilt at not taking a more decisive stand against the government. The Pope, while using diplomatic means through Rotta from early on in the occupation, had intervened personally and at the highest level only on June 25, 1944. In so doing, he was deviating from his war-time policy of neutrality, which however, was no longer seen to be binding. This step can, on the other hand, be interpreted as a gesture towards all those that from the outset of the war, had vainly asked him to make a public statement condemning the Nazi crimes.

Summary by Ruth Reich