

European "Bystanders"

Excerpt from interview with Professor David Bankier

Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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Interviewers: Amos Goldberg and Adi Gordon

Q- How did the church in Germany and other places react to the Nazis?

B- The Church behaved as a political institution. It understood that there were issues on which it was worthwhile trying to oppose the Nazis. This was the case with the removal of crucifixes from Catholic schools, and with euthanasia as well. The church knew that if it opposed the Nazi policy of removing the crucifixes from the schools, it would have the backing of the Catholic population. People would demonstrate in the streets, as actually happened in 1941, in wartime, against this regulation by the Gestapo. Likewise with the euthanasia program: The church knew very well that if it were to protest on this issue, it would have the support of the German population in its anti-Nazi stand.

When it came to the "Jewish question," however, the church knew very well it would have no support on that point, and that is why it did not protest. Here the church acted as politicians, not as theologians. A politician will not engage in an issue that he is bound to lose. So the political calculation was that if they were going to lose this battle against the Nazis on the extermination of the Jews, they would not engage in it to begin with.

This was also the reasoning of other churches, including the Pope himself in Rome. I do not believe that Pope Pius XII was a fanatic antisemite of this sort; he was simply a coward. What was perhaps allowed to the church on a local level was not permitted to its leader. He could not make political calculations such as, "If I have no popular support on a policy against the Nazis and the

Jewish question, I will not engage in it." He was the Vicarius Christi, the representative of Jesus in this world, and as such, should have acted without any political considerations.

Q- Can we create a typology of those nations that saved Jews, and those that didn't? Why, for example, were the Jews saved in Bulgaria, but not in other places?

B- I do not believe in the notion of national characteristics; there is no such thing as the Germans, the Bulgarians, the Italians, and so on. There are individuals, and there are different cultures. The resistance to the extermination policy was not related to a national character, but to the time when this policy was executed. From 1943 onward, anybody could foresee that the Germans were not going to win the war. People did not know whether the war would end with the total defeat of the Germans, or in a compromise of peace, but in any case it would not be won by Germany.

If the Germans were not going to win, there was no reason to willingly participate in a genocidal policy. Therefore, the Bulgarians decided in 1943 not to participate in such a policy. So also the Hungarians under Horthy, and the Rumanians – all of them "conventional" antisemites. Why would they do something genocidal without any gains? The prospects of a Nazi victory in 1943 were not those of 1941, when it was believed that Germany would win and would establish a European empire in which they would share in the spoils and there would have been some benefits from the policy.

Q- In Italy, for example, it seems that there was aid for the Jews from the first moment?

B- This was not tested in Italy. To begin with, fascism is not Nazism. For as long as Mussolini was in power, until July 1943, he applied antisemitic fascist, not Nazi, policy; and fascist politics did not include extermination. That policy

started when the Germans took over in Italy.

All those attempts by the Italians to rescue the Jews in the occupied areas in France, in Yugoslavia, in Greece and in Northern Africa, had to do not with the more humanitarian stand of the Italian fascists, but with their national pride. They knew that, in their territory, the Germans were not going to tell them what to do. They were going to control the area, not apply a policy they didn't agree with.

The fascists were not humanitarians. They gassed the Ethiopians in the war in the thirties; and the Italians killed tens of thousands of Slovenes and kept them in concentration camps on the Adriatic Sea. Generals Roatta and Graziani were war criminals. The fact that they were not put on trial after the war is connected to American policy after the Second World War, which was to pardon them because of the Cold War and to keep the government in Italy stable. But by any criteria for war crimes, all those generals in Italy were also war criminals. They didn't kill Jews, but they did kill others.

So the resistance of the various countries in Europe to the Nazi extermination policy had to do with opportunism and not with any special humanitarian feeling in those countries.

Q- What motivated those who collaborated with the Germans?

B- The collaboration involved a wide spectrum of motivations. Some people were really motivated by careerism, and some identified with Nazi ideology. They simply were Nazis of French extraction, of Belgian extraction, of Norwegian extraction or whatever, but who believed in the Nazi ideology.

Q- Was there more collaboration with the Nazis in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe?

B- Yes, definitely. There was much more collaboration in the East, but this

also had to do with the fact that these countries were under Bolshevik occupation, and the mythomania about the Jews identified with Bolshevism. Some of them regarded the Germans as liberators and not as occupiers: to the Lithuanians and the Ukrainians, the Germans were liberators; to a Frenchman, they were occupiers. So a different reality in the East motivated these people to collaborate with the Germans.

Q- Does the fact that the "Final Solution" took place in the East say anything about the nations of Eastern Europe?

B- No, it has to do with the concentration of Jews. Had there been a larger concentration of Jews in the Balkans, the extermination would have taken place there. Since most of the Jews were in Poland and Russia, the main killing centers were in those areas.

Source: Multimedia CD 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.