

A Jew in Rome: Christian Antisemitism and the Holocaust (Part 1)

Richard S. Ellis

Dedicated to the memory of Philipp Fehl (1920-2000)

I am a Jew by birth, a mathematician by profession, and a student of Jewish history and literature by choice. My Jewish obsession is the Holocaust. My mathematical passion is probability theory; in particular, the study of rare events via the theory of large deviations and applications of that theory to statistical models of turbulence. During a recent two-week visit to Rome, these strands of my life became unpredictably and intricately intertwined. While I lectured on a large deviation approach to turbulence at the University of Rome, outside the lecture halls I was buffeted by the turbulent currents of Jewish history in a series of mostly unplanned but intense confrontations, the synchronicity of which can only be characterized as a large deviation.

It all began with the man I called Hercules Harry, who was a Greek statue come alive: six-foot-four athlete's torso, bronze complexion, bulging biceps and pectorals, matted wavy hair. On the morning of my second day in Rome, I joined a tour at the Vatican for which Hercules Harry was the guide. In his booming voice he informed us, while we were standing in St. Peter's Square under an intense July sun just before the pope appeared in a high window, that the Jews murdered Christ.

That same evening, a Friday, I sat next to Luigi at Shabbat services in the Via Cesare Balbo Synagogue. After we exchanged pleasantries, Luigi informed me, in his broken Italian English, that during the Nazi raid on the Roman Jewish Ghetto on 16 October 1943, his mother was arrested and deported to Auschwitz with hundreds of other Roman Jews. There she was gassed to death.

The confluence of those two interactions on the same day — Hercules Harry's antisemitic accusation in the morning about the murder of Christ and Luigi's revelation in the evening about the murder of his mother — forced me to face an inescapable historical truth, aspects of which were to engage me almost continuously during the remainder of my stay in the Eternal City and for weeks thereafter. Christian antisemitism made the Holocaust possible.

On that Friday morning in July, the nearly infinite sea of people engulfing me in St. Peter's Square prevented me from responding to Hercules Harry. But I did not miss my chance a week and a half later when fate conspired to have our paths cross a second time. This time Harry was the guide on a tour to the Catacombs of Saint Sebastian. He

first led us into the Domine Quo Vadis Church, genuflected before the altar, and crossed himself. After quietly saying a prayer, Hercules Harry told us about the death of Christ. The work of the Sanhedrin Jews and Jewish priests, he said. They wanted that troublemaker dead. He added that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, was innocent of Christ's death. Pilate acted merely to placate the Jews.

I was furious. It was his haughty tone, his certainty, just like at the Vatican. Amidst the crowd of tourists inside the church, my hand shot up. I wanted to shout that he was a bigot, that blaming the Jews encouraged antisemitism, that his statements contradicted history and Church teachings. But he didn't ask for any questions.

I met him at the bus. "Harry, I am Jewish and I strongly object to your version of the story of the death of Jesus."

Hercules Harry stared at me in disbelief. "I only speak the truth," he asserted. "And I'm not going to avoid controversy." I felt intimidated. He towered over me. After shepherding the people onto the bus, he climbed on, picked up the mike, and eyes on me, declared, "I tell it how I see it. Like Mother Teresa telling Bill Clinton to stop murdering innocent babies."

I wished I had the mike, but I was stuck in the middle of the bus. So I stood up and called out to Hercules Harry over the sea of heads. "You are blaming the Jews for killing Christ," I said. Now all eyes were on me. I continued, "Don't you realize that the crucifixion of Jesus has been used to justify two millennia of antisemitism sponsored by the Church? Where's your sensitivity?"

"Sorry, mister," he replied. "It's all in the Gospels, and I take everything in the Gospels as the literal truth."

I gave up. There was no point speaking any further with this antisemite. There was no point telling him that the Church has rejected the charge that the Jews murdered Christ. (*Nostra Aetate* 1965) There was no point telling him that modern scholarship has revealed numerous historical inaccuracies in the Gospel texts, especially in portions alleging Jewish complicity in Jesus's death.

We must conclude from this evidence that Jesus was not tried by a legally established Jewish court.... Pontius Pilate arranged Jesus' [s] conviction.... Then he convicted Jesus of being a revolutionary and sentenced him to crucifixion, the punishment reserved for political crimes. This conviction is reflected accurately in the sign over Jesus' [s] cross, "King of the Jews." In Pilate's eyes, Jesus was planning to replace Roman rule over the Jews with his own rule.¹

Although the Romans were responsible for Jesus's death, the Gospel authors shifted blame onto the Jews "so as not to provoke the Romans in the aftermath of the unsuccessful

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