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 wave 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."

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
Jewish war against Rome.” Another reason for shifting blame lay in the missionary activities of the young Christian church.

In the decades after the crucifixion... the church shifted blame away from potential Christians, the Romans, and toward the Jews who had rejected Christianity. In shifting blame, the gospels represent this missionary concern of their own period rather than the historical realities of Jesus' time.5

There was no point telling Hercules Harry any of this. But because the evidence is so conclusive, I hope that the Hercules Harrys of the world will eventually pay heed to these and other historians, such as William Nicholls, who ends his detailed examination of the Gospel narratives with the following exhortation.

The time has come, and came long ago, for Christians to drop all accusations against the Jewish people in the death of Christ.... There can be no doubt that the Romans bear the responsibility for Jesus' death, which they and not the Jews brought about. If any person is to blame for Jesus' death, it is Pontius Pilate, so implausibly represented in the Gospels as his defender. In any scholarly inquiry, many conclusions remain uncertain. This is not one of them. The Jews are innocent of Jesus' death.4

The outrage of it all. The Romans committed a political murder that the Gospel authors transformed into an act of deicide committed by the Jews. Amplified by Christian antisemitism that was centered in the Roman Catholic Church, the charge of deicide reverberated through history, culminating in the deaths of six million Jews, including Luigi's mother, who in 1943 was arrested by the Nazis and deported to Auschwitz with hundreds of other Roman Jews. There she was gassed to death. Unlike the death of that famous Jew in Palestine two thousand years ago, the death of Luigi's mother was ignominiously obscure, recorded as just another entry in the Nazis' meticulously kept log.5

The Dove of Creativity

Giovanni Jona-Lasinio is a physicist and was one of my hosts at the University of Rome. Upon entering his office, I was greeted by his Jewish face. When I asked him whether "Jona" was a typical Italian name, Giovanni immediately decoded my question and answered that he was half Jewish on his father's side. His mother's grandfather, Fausto Lasinio, had been a famous scholar of Semitic languages. On 16 October 1943, the day on which Luigi's mother was thrown into a Nazi truck parked on Via del Portico d'Ottavia in the Jewish Ghetto, Giovanni's father escaped down the back stairs of his building and was saved by a Christian janitor. Giovanni explained to me that during the war there were intensely strong anti-German emotions in Rome. Saving a Jew was saving a neighbor.

Giovanni expressed interest in a book I had bought on Italian Jewish history. From it I learned that "the Jews are arguably the only inhabitants of Rome who can claim an uninterrupted presence in the city for over two thousand years."6 It was the oldest Jewish community in the Western world. That evening I bought a copy of the book in Italian and gave it to Giovanni the next day. When he asked why I did this, I replied that it was to honor his father's escape from the Nazis in 1943.

It was not just his father, of course. For many centuries enough Jews have escaped the swords of their oppressors to assure not only the survival of the Jewish people, but also their continuing impact on Western civilization. In the vast panorama of world history, in which the city of Rome has played a major role, there is no larger deviation than this one. Interacting with Jews, writing about Jewish topics, and teaching Jewish texts allow me to celebrate the miracle of that survival and to help perpetuate it.

My visit to Rome confirmed what years of travel and involvement in Jewish learning had already revealed. A network of chasms — spiritual, cultural, artistic — separates Judaism from Christianity, all rendered nearly abyssal by the centuries of antisemitism that has been promulgated by the Vatican. However, during my visit to Rome, I also found hope. Today, through a series of initiatives involving reconciliation with the Jewish people and self-examination, the Church is finally facing its legacy of antisemitism and hatred.

Despite these initiatives by the Church, the wounds are still raw. That is why Luigi, Giovann, and all the other Jews I met in Rome opened up to me with their life stories and why I listened in rapt attention. In the continent-wide cemetery of Europe created by Hitler, we Jews are drawn together out of an ancestral need to protect one other, to communicate with one other, to comfort one other. For in Europe, the impossible happened: our people were marked for slaughter and six million died. Nearly 60 years ago, while Pope Pius XII remained silent, our people were arrested on these streets of Rome, deported to Auschwitz, and gassed to death.

While the demon of antisemitism haunted me in Rome, it was not the sole focus of my stay there. My experiences also included the two visits I made to the Palazzo delle Esposizioni to view an exhibition of the art of El Greco, my favorite artist of Christian themes. His work reveals to me a contemplative, spiritual side of Christianity otherwise inaccessible to outsiders. Over my desk at home there hangs a reproduction of his 1597 painting, The Annunciation, which depicts the Virgin at the moment she is being told by the Archangel Gabriel that she will bear the Son of God. As in many of El Greco's paintings, the gate between heaven and earth stands open. At the top a celestial orchestra celebrates the sanctity of the moment as the dove of the Holy Spirit, ablaze in the center of the painting, descends. For me, the dove is a symbolic representation of creativity descending upon the artist.

But in spite of my love of El Greco's art, the history of mistreatment of my people at the hands of the Church has affected my perceptions. These perceptions are summarized in a simple but poignant formula: Christian Europe frightens me. All of the European Jews I met understood this fear. However, back home in America, where no one in my family and none of my Jewish friends ever experienced flagrant antisemitism, it was difficult to convey how painful it could be for an emotional, historically aware Jew to travel in Europe, where two millennia of Christian antisemitism exploded in the twelve years of Hitler's murderous antisemitism.

How closely are the two related? Intimately, according to Hans King, the Roman Catholic priest and theologian and the author of such books as Judaism: Between Yesterday and Tomorrow and Why I Am Still a Christian. In a 1997 article in The New Yorker, James Carroll reported on a meeting in which he asked King to comment on the Church's behavior during the Holocaust. King answered:
"I realized the problems for the first time when I was at the Second Vatican Council. I then saw it as a major issue, because it was no longer possible to say the Nazis were responsible without saying the Church is co-responsible. In the balance of the Council, I wrote that Nazi anti-Semitism would have been impossible without two thousand years of Christian anti-Judaism. It was not racial. It was religious."8

Nazi antisemitism, of course, was of a fundamentally different character from Christian anti-Judaism, for the Church never intended to exterminate the entire Jewish people. Nevertheless, because the Church promulgated the poison of anti-Judaism that the Nazis transformed into genocide, the Church bears a heavy burden of guilt. In his book on Judaism, Künig elaborated on this issue, writing: "And is it not the case of the Austrian Catholic Adolf Hitler the most abysmal example of this? Even now many people do not recognize the religious roots of his anti-Semitism."9

Because of the difficulty I felt expressing my feelings about Christian Europe back home in America, I wrote this essay. The idea of doing so came to me during an early morning walk soon after my return. While arguing with Hercules Harry for the hundredth time, I saw El Greco's Virgin smile as the dove of creativity descended upon me, and the opening paragraphs began to form.

That dove — in Hebrew yemah, in Italian colomba — is the symbol of my pilgrimage to Rome. Other doves flutter through my mind. The dove of the Torah portion of Noah. The dove of the family name of the Genoese explorer, Christoforo Colombo, who opened up the New World in the same year that the Jews were expelled from Spain. The "Jona" in the hyphenated last name of my Italian host, a name that he shares with Giuseppe Jona, the president of Venice's Jewish community during World War II, who, when ordered by the Nazis to produce a list of the names of Venice's Jews, killed himself, an act of self-sacrifice that saved hundreds by giving his fellow Jews the chance to escape.

From Hitler's Vienna to Rome

Two days after Hercules Harry informed me, in St. Peter's Square, that the Jews murdered Christ, I met Raina and Philipp Fehl. They left Hitler's Vienna in the late 1930's and emigrated to the US, where they did important work in art history. Now living in Rome, they continued their scholarly work at the Vatican. Everyone at the Vatican was extremely kind to them, Philipp told me.

I was given Philipp's name and phone number by my niece, who was editing a volume of memoirs written by Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe. Philipp contributed an essay to that volume. Raina, Philipp, and I arranged to meet at an exhibition of the great Baroque artist, Gian Lorenzo Bernini. It was being held at the Palazzo Venezia, from the balcony of which Mussolini used to address the crowds in the square below.

After we viewed the exhibition, a taxi took us to a restaurant near the Fehl's apartment, where I told them about my experience with Hercules Harry. This led to an hours-long discussion of antisemitism, Christianity, and relations between Jews and Catholics today. When I mentioned the little I had read concerning the Roman Jewish Ghetto and the role of the Church in setting up and perpetuating it, Raina confirmed my facts, but cautioned me against thinking that the Church was a monolith.

"The Church is so many things," she said. "And as for the attitude of the popes toward the Jews, it has varied enormously. The Jews were sometimes ignored; sometimes treated harshly; sometimes, in fact often, protected." It was a fundamental historical insight that I occasionally forgot during my stay in Rome, so easy was it to get caught up in the negative aspects of Jewish-Christian relations.

As I wrote this section of the essay, recalling these two gentle, creative people who shared with me their stories and their wisdom, I could hear again the Viennese lilt of their precise English. I reread Philipp's contribution to the volume of essays being edited by my niece. It is entitled "Life Beyond the Reach of Hope: Recollections of a Refugee, 1938."10

Phrases floated through my mind. "What I have to say is in praise of silence." Later in the same paragraph: "[P]eople loved prepared themselves for death...." A few pages below: "There were so many suicides." A non-Jew helped Philipp escape from "a whole row of storm troopers walking in step along the width of the street, a net of men spread out to catch Jews, to arrest them as they came upon them." His fear of death: "Once in the night after a number of terrible things had been reported and friends had disappeared, I all of a sudden was seized by a desperate fear. I lost all nervous control. I so desperately wanted to be saved."

The last paragraph of the essay tells of Philipp's escape to Czechoslovakia and his farewell from his mother.

As the train pulled out of the station I bent out the window ever so far to see my mother once more and she, who had kept her poise all along and was tall and beautiful as she stood there talking to me — so she wanted to be remembered — now was a lonely figure on the platform, her hands clasping her face and weeping. I had seen her weep only once before, when her mother died. I sat down in my compartment, and was all alone.

A mother bids farewell to her son as he departs on a railroad journey. In ordinary times a routine event, but in Vienna in September 1938 a sign of the impending doom. As I tried to imagine that scene in the train station, again I mourned the myriad who did not survive. •

Notes:
A Jew in Rome: Christian Antisemitism and the Holocaust (Part 2)

Richard S. Ellis

One of the goals of my visit to Rome was to walk the streets and learn the history of that seven-acre section of the city known as the Jewish Ghetto. With this in mind, I called the office of SIDIC, an acronym for Service International de Documentation Juédéo-Chrétienne, and spoke with a nun named Sister Margaret. Although my guidebook indicated that SIDIC offered walking tours of the Jewish Ghetto, these tours were no longer available. However, Sister Margaret said that she would fax me a map and a detailed history of the ghetto.

I was perplexed. Why would an organization within the Catholic Church publicize the history of the Jewish Ghetto, which had been established under order from a pope? A letter accompanying the fax explained that SIDIC had been founded in 1965 after the Second Vatican Council. “Underlying SIDIC’s work is the call of the Church to understand and esteem the Jewish people as it understands itself and to deepen Christian faith through the study of the faith of that people Pope John Paul II referred to as the ‘elder brothers’ of Christianity.” I resolved that before leaving Rome I had to meet with Sister Margaret.

The Roman Jewish Ghetto was established by Pope Paul IV on 14 July 1555, following the example of the compulsory quarter set up in Venice in 1516. The Roman ghetto lasted 315 years. Pope Paul IV explained his actions in the Cum nimis absurdum bull, which began with the following words: “Since it is absurd and utterly inconvenient that the Jews, who through their own fault were condemned by God to eternal slavery...” My book on Jewish Italian history listed some of the measures proposed by the pope.

The ghetto abuts the Tiber, which frequently overflowed, flooding the homes of the inhabitants. Just outside the northeast gate of the ghetto, there was a church, Sant’Angelo in Pescheria, where the Jews were forced to listen to conversion sermons. Jews exiting the ghetto through the southeast gates were confronted by an anti-Jewish inscription on the façade of the Church of San Gregorio alla Divina Pietà, which stood directly opposite those gates. The inscription, from Isaiah 65:2-3, speaks of “a rebellious people, which walketh in a way which was not good, after their own thoughts; a people that provoketh Me to anger continually to My face.” Its placement on that church was no accident.

Today the Roman Jewish community has 15,000 members and seems to be thriving. The center of their religious and cultural life, and a masterpiece among the houses of worship in Rome, is the great synagogue built in the area of the ghetto between 1901 and 1904, some 30 years after the ghetto had been dismantled and the Jews of Rome emancipated. I attended Friday night services there under tight security. Because of a terrorist attack in 1982 that killed a two-year-old boy and wounded 40 worshippers, the synagogue is now guarded around the clock. The dedication in the Shabbat prayer book recalled other recent Jewish suffering as it mentioned a path to God opened up during that suffering: “To Rabbi David Izhak Parzioni, because of whose merit the prayers did not cease flowing from our lips during the days of the persecution and the years of the war.” In this city, history is everywhere, multilayered and complex.

After my first of many walks through the Jewish Ghetto, I strolled over to the nearby Campo dei Fiori. In the middle of the square stands a statue of the philosopher Giordano Bruno, who used Copernican principles in formulating his cosmic theory of an infinite universe. Bruno was burned at the stake by the Church in February 1600 for heresy, immoral conduct, and blasphemy. In this same square, during the Jewish New Year of 1553, the Talmud was burned. Thus were the words of Heine actualized: “Where books are burned, in the end people are also burned.”

The Nun of SIDIC, Healing Christianity

Near the end of my stay in Rome, one day before the tour of the catacombs with Hercules Harry, I met with Sister Margaret at the office of SIDIC. It was located in a converted palace not far from the Palazzo Venezia, where I had met the Fehls for the Bernini exhibition. The waiting room of SIDIC was filled with Judaica. On the recep-
First we discussed Edith Stein, who was born Jewish, converted to Catholicism, became a Carmelite nun, and was murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz. Her canonization in October 1998 upset many people, both non-Jews and Jews, who viewed it, in the words of James Carroll, as “another attempt by the Church to Christianize the Holocaust — to present it as something that happened as much to the Church as to the Jews — and ... to deflect criticism of its relationship to the crimes of the Nazis.”

Sister Margaret told me that she certainly understood why people could be angry over the canonization, but added that many Christians were pleased that a former Jew accepted Christ. The tact of this response and her ability to see the issue from more than one perspective were indicative of her manner during our entire conversation.

The silence of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust remains a topic of heated discussion. Concerning events in Rome, the historical record is clear. From Vatican City no voice was raised in protest as the Nazis arrested hundreds of Roman Jews on 16 October 1943, took them to a temporary jail located only two hundred yards from Vatican City, and then deported them to Auschwitz. In our conversation, Sister Margaret admitted that there was much controversy around the figure of Pius XII. She also pointed out some of the pressures acting on him — for example, the risk of worse persecution both of Jews and of Catholics if he had spoken out. The general uncertainty about what was happening to the Jews in the camps might also have been a factor. She added that during the war, priests, monks, and nuns saved many Jews of Rome in convents, seminaries, and the buildings of the Vatican itself.

Near the end of our conversation, I observed that Christianity does what in an individual would be psychologically extremely damaging: namely, it denies its origins and represses its past. (In his book, Judaism, the theologian Hans Küng wrote, “I am concerned with that past which will not go away, a past which still continues to determine the present and which is still virulent today among large sectors of the nations. A repressed past easily becomes a curse.”) How many Christians, I asked her, somewhat heatedly, knew or cared that Jesus was born a Jew and died a Jew; that the Gospels were not historical narratives but theological interpretations of historical events; that, until fairly recently, the Church openly supported antisemitism; that significant aspects of Church ritual and dress derived from Judaism; that the Gregorian chant is believed by many scholars to have originated in Jewish liturgical music?

Sister Margaret’s response was significant. “Relations between the Church and the Jewish people have often been marked by anti-Judaism and discrimination. We must look to the future by trying to educate and to enlighten.”

Echoing Raina Fehl, Sister Margaret also emphasized that the Church was not a monolith, but a complicated institution with a complicated history. And things were changing, she added. The following partial list of initiatives by the Catholic Church is based on what Sister Margaret described.
Margaret told me and from what I read after returning home: the declaration by the Second Vatican Council in 1965 of Nostra Aetate, which among other changes lifted the collective charge of deicide against the Jewish people, promoted improved relations with Judaism and other religions, and inspired the foundation of SIDIC; an annual torchlight procession from a church square to the old ghetto area, in solidarity with the Jewish community of Rome, on the anniversary of the Nazis' arrest of Roman Jews on 16 October 1943; the visit by Pope John Paul II to the main synagogue in Rome in 1986, an act of reconciliation unprecedented in the history of the Roman Catholic Church; the establishment of diplomatic ties between the Vatican and Israel in 1993; the emphatic and repeated denunciations of anti-Semitism by Pope John Paul II ("Anti-Semitism, like all forms of racism, is a sin against God and humankind."); the concert sponsored by the pope at the Vatican in 1994 to honor the memory of the victims of the Shoah, a concert at which the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff, was the guest of honor; the issuance in 1998 of the document, We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah, in which the Church tried to come to terms with its own actions during the Shoah; the pilgrimage by Pope John Paul II to Israel in 2000, during which he visited Yad Vashem "to pay homage to the millions of Jewish people who were murdered in the Holocaust." My discussion with Sister Margaret did not allay my fears or make my anger disappear. However, our discussion did convince me that there were significant elements in the Church trying to address the grievous problems of the past and trying to improve relations and promote understanding with the Jewish people. Meeting with her would have been a conciliatory ending to my stay in Rome and to my grappling with the demon of anti-Semitism while I was there. However, the demon was not to disappear. As I described above, on the day after my visit to the office of SIDIC, fate conspired to have my path cross that of Hercules Harry a second time on the tour to the Domine Quo Vadis Church and the Catacombs of Saint Sebastian. Meeting Sister Margaret must have contributed to my self-confidence and boldness in confronting him there.

Welcome Home

I returned to the US through New York. "Welcome home," the customs agent said as he waved me through. His greeting was so casual, so friendly, so American. While over the Atlantic Ocean, I found an article in the Herald Tribune that for me as an American captured the spirit of this land in another, more fundamental way.

A federal judge in Missouri has ordered the city of Republic to remove a fish symbol, known as an ichthys, from its seal, holding that the symbol unconstitutionally depicts Christianity as the city's official religion. Judge Russell Clark wrote that to include what is called the "Christian fish" in the city logo "impermissibly excludes other religious beliefs or non-beliefs." The city is considering an appeal.

"Thanks," I said to the customs agent. "It's a long journey from Rome to New York."

As I waited in the departure lounge for my connecting flight, I thought once again of Hercules Harry, the morning sun highlighting his bronze complexion near the obelisk in St. Peter's Square. That day, my second in Rome, I had gone to the Vatican intending merely to be a tourist. But the statement by Hercules Harry that the Jews murdered Christ destroyed this intention. It also transformed the nature of my participation during the rest of the trip, giving it the focus on Jewish-Christian issues that would probably have been absent if I had not met him.

Hercules Harry and I met again on the tour to the Catacombs of Saint Sebastian. Why did I put myself in the uncomfortable, and perhaps dangerous, position of confronting him after we left the Domine Quo Vadis Church? I confronted him out of anger. I confronted him because anti-Semitism is a sin against God and humankind. But there was another, even more Jewish reason. After we left the church, I confronted Hercules Harry to honor the memories of those Roman Jews whom the Nazis arrested during the iniquitous roundup in October 1943 and whom no one, including Pope Pius XII, helped as they were being deported to their brutal deaths.

As I waited in the departure lounge, I reread, in the material that Sister Margaret had faxed to me two long weeks ago, the translation of the inscription on a medieval house on Via del Portico d'Ottavia in the Jewish Ghetto.

On 16 October 1943, here began the merciless gathering of 2,091 Jews, Roman citizens who were sent to an atrocious death in the Nazi extermination camps, where they were joined by 6,000 other Italians, victims of infamous racist hatred. The few who survived the extermination, and many people, in solidarity, cry out with fervor for love and peace and ask from God forgiveness and hope.

Amen, I whispered to myself. Amen.

Notes: