

THE SECRET LETTER

At 90 years old, Don Aldo Brunacci is a key witness to Pope Pius XII's intervention to assist Jews during World War II. Inside the Vatican's Robert Moynihan and Delia Gallagher went to Assisi, Italy, to question Brunacci about the day his bishop showed him a letter from Pius XII...

We met Don Aldo at a residence just outside of Assisi. After we shared a noon meal with him, we sat down to talk for two hours about Assisi during World War II, the persecution of Italy's Jews during those years, and the role of Pope Pius XII. Though he is past 90, Don Aldo's mind was still clear and quick as he told his remarkable story....

Don Aldo, you are an eyewitness to a key historical event: a letter sent from the Vatican during World War II to the Catholic bishop of Assisi, Giuseppe Nicolini (bishop of Assisi from June 22, 1928 to November 25, 1973) in which Pope Pius XII made clear that he wanted the bishop to help Jews about to be rounded up by the Nazis.

This letter, if it existed, would be a rare, solid proof that Pius XII acted to help the Jews during the period of Nazi persecution.

We would like to understand better the story of this letter, because many say that Pius XII was not interested in the destiny of the Jews, that he was "silent"....

DON ALDO BRUNACCI: This is the greatest falsity that could be said! The first president of the State of Israel officially thanked Pius XII for what he did.

When I was in America recently, in Buffalo, a journalist asked me about the "silence" of Pope Pius XII, and I responded: "Let me ask you, what is better — to do or to say?" "To do," he responded. "Well," I said, "then let me tell you what Pius XII did for the Jews, in all the convents of Rome, in the Vatican and in the extraterritorial zones of the Vatican — there were Jews hidden in all of those places and surely all of these convents could not have done what they did without the Pope knowing." In the Roman seminary, where I was for seven years, there were 500 refugees, between Jews and those politically persecuted. In short, the clergy everywhere in Italy did a bit of what we did in Assisi.

But to return specifically to this letter, which you reportedly saw. When did this letter from Pius XII arrive? How did you come to see it? And how can you be certain it came from the Pope?

BRUNACCI: It was on the third Thursday of September of 1943. The bishop called me to tell me about this letter he had received from Rome. Obviously I didn't ask him to show me the signature! He told me it was a letter from the Secretariat



Don Aldo Brunacci with *Inside the Vatican's* Delia Gallagher in Assisi, May 2003 (Photo by Robert Moynihan)

of State on behalf of the Holy Father.

I would like to go directly to the main point, one that has become contested: In her book, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (Yale University Press, 2001) Susan Zuccotti, who says she interviewed you, maintains that you never actually saw the text of the letter from the Vatican to Bishop Nicolini....

BRUNACCI: Ah, Zuccotti! Yes, I did speak with her. What should I say? It is true, I did not make a photocopy of the text....

Did you actually see the letter?

BRUNACCI: I did not actually see the text of the letter, but look, I was alone with the bishop in the room, he held the letter up and showed it to me. He said he had received the letter from Rome, and he read what it said — that the Holy Father wanted us to see to it in our diocese that something would be done to ensure the safety of the Jews — and the bishop wanted to consult with me on what to do....

So you never actually read the letter?

BRUNACCI: No, the bishop read the letter to me....

Then, as Zuccotti suggests in her book, it might be possible that the letter was not what Bishop Nicolini told you it was, that he was in some way deceiving you?

BRUNACCI: (Laughs) Impossible, impossible. (Laughs again) It is not possible that Bishop Nicolini was deceiving me. I am certain of that.

Look, we were alone in the room and he read the letter to me. It was clearly from the Vatican, there is no doubt of that. Not from the Pope himself, personally, but from the Secretariat of State.

It was a letter asking the bishop to do all he could to help the Jews, and the bishop wanted me to advise him on the best way to carry out that request.

In fact, this same order went out to many other dioceses in Italy. I have spoken with many historians, and they tell me that these letters were sent out and I think they will emerge in the coming years. I think many new documents will appear in the future, especially from the papers of Montini.

The work of Pope Pius XII was a majestic work, a work of deeds, not of words.

Zuccotti doubts that Pius XII could have issued such an order because she is persuaded by the campaign launched against Pius in 1963. But that campaign has been filled with

slanders and calumnies. Still, Signora Zuccotti is persuaded by it, and so cannot accept that this letter was sent out, and she has to invent the story that the bishop deceived me to explain it away. But the letter was sent out. I saw it with my own eyes, in my bishop's hands, as he read it to me. It was a letter from the Vatican asking the bishop to take measures to help protect the Jews. And we took those measures.

Don't take Zuccotti too seriously. She cites the book *Assisi Underground* which is just a tissue of lies from start to finish. I know what was behind that book. But she accepts it and cites it as a reliable source.

Why did the bishop call you to see the letter?

BRUNACCI: Well, I was called aside by the bishop after our regular working meeting, held on the third Thursday of each month. Two steps away from the chapel where the conference had just finished was a room which he called me to secretly. He told me he wanted me to carry out the request of the letter, which was to help the Jews.

What exactly did the bishop say?

BRUNACCI: He gave me this job in the utmost secrecy. Not even the priests most close to me knew or imagined anything. Even to a person to whom I was most close, who was like a teacher to me, and saw me looking a bit distracted, I revealed nothing, because it was very dangerous.

The bishop told me I had to help him with this work. We already had centers for Italian evacuees, so it was easy to hide Jews among four or five thousand evacuees. Those who had money, once they were given false papers, could even go to a hotel.

Anyway, during that time I saw the bishop nearly every day. These centers for evacuees were located in the various buildings of the diocese and they were full. Sometimes even the young people of Assisi came to sleep there at night because in the morning the Germans rounded them up to make them work in the airfields at Sant'Egidio, between Assisi and Perugia.

In fact, 27 young people died in a famous bombardment of Assisi. I was the only one who went to collect their bodies with a small truck.

What was the political situation in Assisi at that time?

BRUNACCI: Well, in 1939 the Second World War began, but Italy remained out of it until 1940. I remember like it was yesterday the day we entered. I was in the study of my parish with the pastor and a professor. The piazza outside was packed with people shouting Mussolini's name, happy that he had declared war. We three were near tears, because we knew what the war would bring.

Remember, Assisi was occupied not only by the Germans, but there were also fascists who allied themselves with the Germans and became even more dangerous than before. Assisi was full of fascist spies and we had to work in the utmost secrecy. The fascists had a secret organization, *Opera*, to uncover traitors; they would arrest you if they heard you speaking against them.

How many fascists were in Assisi?

BRUNACCI: I didn't count them. There weren't many but they were dangerous. You know, in a city this small, even a few bad people can do great damage! I remember one episode. I was in the cathedral and one of these fascists came to find me because he wanted the key to one of the churches we had nearby to use for a German storehouse. I told him, I

am not the boss of that church, I must ask permission of the bishop. He began to curse the bishop and put a gun to my throat. I turned to the German official and began to explain and the German lowered the arm of the fascist holding the gun at my throat and said I must ask the bishop.

What were relations like with the Jews in Assisi before the war?

BRUNACCI: Before the war, there were no Jewish families resident in Assisi. After September 8, 1943, we began to welcome them, but before that we were welcoming the refugees from other parts of Italy, who were fleeing their cities that had been bombarded. At a certain point, the number of refugees equaled the number of residents.

How many Jews were refugees in Assisi?

BRUNACCI: Unfortunately, I didn't keep any records at that time. It was too dangerous. But if I calculate that in Assisi we had one center, then another in Perugia with a parish, I would say a total of 250-300 Jews.

Of these 250-300, how many were taken by the Nazis?

BRUNACCI: None. Last summer I went to New Jersey for a conference with 350 people in a synagogue and I concluded my talk citing a Paduan professor, of Jewish origin, who said, "We will tell our children the story of Assisi, because all those who passed through were saved; no one was lost." The New Jersey newspaper that reprinted my talk entitled it, "No one was lost."

Where were they housed?

BRUNACCI: All over. Mainly in the guest houses of the convents. I remember taking the first family to a convent of German nuns. I am still in contact with the daughter of this family who lives in Israel. She sent me a book she wrote about the time there.

They were also housed privately with families. They needed identification papers in order to go out and especially to get food. Bread, sugar, everything was rationed. So we had to provide them with false papers, citing free cities in the south of Italy as the place of birth.

The Germans didn't catch on to the false documents?

BRUNACCI: They were very well done! They were made by a typographer in Assisi who had a manual machine. We gave each one a family name from the south of Italy.

You personally were involved in distributing false documents?

BRUNACCI: Of course!

How?

BRUNACCI: I remember once I gave my bicycle and 50 lira to the typographer and his son to go to Foligno to my friend who would stamp and wrap them. A young Jewish boy was in charge of keeping all the papers in order at my house so they would be ready for me to distribute.

What happened to the original Jewish documents?

BRUNACCI: The real documents of the Jews, along with their valuables and jewelry, were put in the cellar of the bishop's house. The door was covered over with a wall that the bishop himself had built with his own hands. The bishop was a holy man and followed the precept "*ora et labora*," and he knew how to do manual work. While he constructed the wall, I held the candle because there was no electricity in the cellar.

What happened when the cellar was opened?

BRUNACCI: All the documents and valuables were given back.

When did that happen?

BRUNACCI: After the war. A few times, during the war, I had to re-open the wall because some families moved. I opened and closed it immediately, always at night. I used to go from Perugia to Assisi by bicycle carrying documents to families that had moved. We made appointments at the Church of Santa Susanna in Perugia. I went there at night and slept in the attic with some of the young Jews in hiding and left early in the morning to be back for school at 8:30 a.m. To make it up the hills, I sometimes grabbed on to German army trucks and let them carry me up! Back then, priests often travelled by bicycle, so I didn't raise any suspicions.

Is it possible to visit the cellar of the bishop's house?

BRUNACCI: Well, the house was completely redone after the earthquake. For four years, the bishop didn't live there. The cellar area still exists, but it has been made into offices and cleaned up.

Just before the war ended you were arrested....

BRUNACCI: Yes, Assisi was liberated June 17, 1944, but I wasn't there. I had

been arrested May 15, 1944, and was put in a type of concentration camp. Thanks to the intervention of the archbishop of Perugia, and the fact that they were moving the camp, I was able to escape 10 days later.

Why were you arrested? Did they discover something?

BRUNACCI: Nothing in particular; they were very suspicious but didn't have any evidence. They threatened to take me north but didn't have time.

Then you were summoned to work in Rome?

BRUNACCI: I went to Rome at the end of May. (Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini had asked me to work at the Vatican in the Relief Office. The Relief Office took care of political prisoners so in a certain sense I continued the work I was doing in Assisi.

I remember once after celebrating Mass for some young people at the end of May, the police arrested me as I was coming out of the church. They accompanied me back to my house before taking me to the camp, and I remembered that in my study I had a Jewish university professor and his wife who were

looking for another place to stay because they did not feel safe where they were. Fortunately, the police waited for me at the bottom of the stairs and did not come up to my study. I took my things and closed the door behind me.

I am still in contact with the daughters of this couple: one lives in Israel and is married to a diplomat — she called me just a few nights ago. The other is in Rome, and one of her sons is a famous rabbi who lectured, together with Cardinal Martini, at the University of Milan.

Do you remember the liberation of Rome?

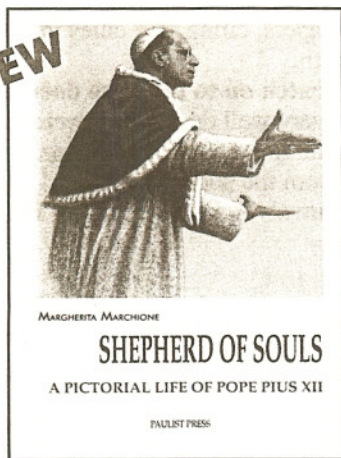
BRUNACCI: Yes, June 4th, 1944, was the liberation of Rome and from the Relief Offices which were near the front of St. Peter's I could see General (Mark) Clark coming up the stairs of St. Peter's in his jeep.

I saw St. Peter's Square and the Via della Conciliazione fill up with crowds who had come to thank Pius XII. There were many Jews among them!

The question of Pius XII arose after 1963, and no one knows why; for what reason did they need a scapegoat?

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