‘Jews’ series of Historical Archives of Secretariat of State published online

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23 June 2022. At the request of Pope Francis, the virtual reproduction of a collection preserving the requests for help addressed to Pope Pius XII by Jews from all over Europe after the beginning of Nazi-Fascist persecution is now accessible to all. It consists of a total of 170 volumes, or nearly 40,000 files. Only 70% of the total material will be initially available, but will later be supplemented with the final volumes currently being prepared.

“If I am writing to You today, it is to ask you to help me from afar”. Thousands of archived files that give voice to desperate calls for help. Like this one, from a 23-year old German university student “with Israelite origins”, who was baptized in 1938, and who, on 17 January 1942, made a last effort to free himself from detention in a concentration camp in Miranda de Ebro, Spain. He finally had the opportunity to join his mother who had fled to America in 1939, “*to prepare a new life for me*”, he wrote. Everything was ready for departure from Lisbon. The only thing missing was the intervention “*of someone from outside*” so that the authorities would consent to his liberation. “*There is little hope for those who have no outside help”*, he explains with few, but eloquent words. He then writes to an old Italian friend, asking her to ask Pope Pius XII to have the Apostolic Nuncio in Madrid intervene in his favour, knowing that: “*with this intervention from Rome, others had been able to leave the concentration camp*”.

In the following two documents, we discover that the Secretariat of State had addressed the case in a few days, “newly” bringing it to the attention of the Nuncio in Madrid. Then the paper trail is interrupted. It is silent about the fate of this young German student. As for the majority of requests for help witnessed by other cases, the result of the request was not reported. In our hearts, we immediately inevitably hope for a positive outcome, the hope that Werner Barasch was later freed from the concentration camp and was able to reach his mother overseas.

In this specific case, our wish was granted: an internet search reveals traces of him in 2001. Not only is there an autobiography that recounts his memories as a “survivor”, but among the online collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, there is even a video with a long interview, in which Werner Barasch tells his incredible story in person, at the age of 82 (Oral History N. RG 050.477.0392). We thus learn that he was released from the Miranda camp the year after his appeal in a letter to the Pope, and that in 1945, he was finally able to join his mother in the United States. There, he continued his studies at University of California, Berkeley, MIT and University of Colorado. He then worked as a chemist in California. Thanks to ever more rich online resources, this time we can draw a breath of relief.

The documents

A special documentary heritage that distinguishes itself from other archival series, already from the name assigned to it: “Ebrei” (Jews). A heritage that is precious because it gathers the requests for help sent to Pope Pius XII by Jewish people, both the baptized and the non-baptized, after the beginning of Nazi and fascist persecution. A heritage which, at the request of Pope Francis, is now easily accessible to the entire world thanks to a project aimed at publishing the complete digitalized version of the archival series.

It is the “Ebrei” series of the Historical Archive of the Secretariat of State – Section for Relations with States and International Organizations (ASRS). The series of 170 volumes in total are part of the *Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs* Collection (AA.EE.SS.) related to the Pontificate of Pius XII — Part 1 (1939-1948), and already available for consultation since 2 March 2020, in the Reading Room of the Historical Archive, by worldwide scholars.

The then *Sacred Congregation for the Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs* (from which the archival Collection gets its name), equivalent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, charged a diplomatic minutante (Msgr Angelo Dell’Acqua) to manage the requests for help that were addressed to the Pope from all over Europe, with the aim of providing all the help possible.

Requests could be made to obtain visas or passports to expatriate, find asylum, reunify families, obtain liberation from detention and transfers from one concentration camp to another, receive news regarding deported people, supplies of food or clothing, financial support, spiritual support and much more.

Each of these requests constituted a case which, once processed, was destined for storage in a documentary series entitled “Ebrei”. It contains more than 2,700 cases with requests for help almost always for entire families or groups of people. Thousands of people persecuted for their membership to the Jewish religion, or for merely having “non-Aryan” ancestry, turned to the Vatican, in the knowledge that others had received help, like the young Werner Barasch himself writes.

The requests would arrive at the Secretariat of State, where diplomatic channels would try to provide all the help possible, taking into account the complexity of the political situation in the global context.

After the pontificate of Pius XII was opened to consultation in 2020, this special list of names was given the name, “Pacelli’s list, (Pope Pius XII), echoing the well-known “Schindler’s list”. Although the two cases differ, the analogy perfectly expresses the idea that people in the corridors of the institution at the service of the Pontiff, worked tirelessly to provide Jewish people with practical help.

Online publication of the Archival Series

As of June 2022, the “Ebrei” series will be available for consultation on the internet in its virtual version, freely accessible to all on the website of the Historical Archive of the Secretariat of State – Section for Relations with States and International Organizations.

In addition to the photographic reproduction of each individual document, a file with the analytical inventory of the series, including all the names of the recipients of help reported in the documents, will also be available online. Seventy percent of the material will initially be available online, which will be followed with the latest volumes currently being worked on.

As for the request of Werner Barasch, the majority of the over 2,700 cases that reached the Secretariat of State, which today narrate the many stories of attempts to flee racial persecution, leave us with baited breath, and sources with further information cannot always be found. Making the digitalized version of the entire “Ebrei” series available on the internet will allow the descendants of those who asked for help, to find traces of their loved ones from any part of the world. At the same time, it will allow scholars and anyone interested, to freely examine this special archival heritage, from a distance.

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