

Historian, Milan Priest Reject Jewish Charges

By John Thavis
And Sister Mary Ann Walsh

Rome (NC) — A Church historian and a Milan priest have sharply repudiated new allegations by an American Jewish agency that the Church may have knowingly aided in the 1947-48 escape of an accused Nazi war criminal, former SS officer Walter Rauff.

In Rome, Jesuit Father Robert Graham, a historian specializing in World War II Vatican activities, called the whole thing a "publicity stunt," and in Milan, Msgr. Giuseppe Bicchierai, a priest who is at the center of allegations, said they were "lies."

The allegations were made at a New York press conference May 9 by Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean of the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center. The center documents Nazi war crimes against the Jews, seeks to track down unpunished war criminals and fights anti-Semitism. It wanted Rauff, (who died May 14), and was accused of having overseen the murder of some 200,000 Jews in mobile gas chambers, extradited from Chile to face trial in West Germany or Israel.

Saying new evidence "makes it difficult to believe" that important Church officials did not help Rauff escape after the war, Rabbi Hier urged Pope John Paul II to open up the Vatican archives for a full investigation into the matter.

Most of the documentation released at the press conference centered around the wartime relationship between Rauff, who headed Gestapo operations in northern Italy, and Father (now Msgr.) Bicchierai, secretary of Cardinal Ildelfonso Schuster of Milan.

In a telephone interview with NC News May 11, the now-retired Milanese priest acknowledged his wartime contacts with Rauff but denied playing any role in his postwar escape. He said that nothing he knew would implicate any other Church officials in the escape, either.

Such allegations are "absolutely unfounded, as far as I know," he said.

While confirming some of the information contained in the declassified U.S. State Department and intelligence documents released in New York by Rabbi Hier, Msgr. Bicchierai said certain details needed clarification.

He said that as one of three aides to Cardinal Schuster during the war, his job was to act as a representative of the cardinal to the occupation German army, the Allied army and forces of Italy's anti-Fascist partisans.

He had regular contacts with all three organizations, because it was "a mission that I had to do in order to save the people, save Milan and save the situation."

Msgr. Bicchierai confirmed that part of his job involved negotiating with Rauff on better prison conditions, seeking the release of political prisoners held by the Nazis, and arranging prisoner exchanges between partisans and Nazis. Some of these exchanges, he said, were arranged at the request of Sandro Pertini, a partisan leader who is now president of Italy.

Msgr. Bicchierai also confirmed that he and Cardinal Schuster tried to arrange a surrender or withdrawal of the German army in the final days of the war, so that Milan and northern Italy would be spared the damages of war.

He disputed Rabbi Hier's evidence in one instance that the rabbi cited in an effort to argue that Rauff's relationship with the priest involved friendship as well as official dealings. A summary of the documentation released to reporters said, on the basis of a 1946 book by Cardinal Schuster, that "Gestapo Chief General Harster once issued an arrest order for Monsignor Bicchierai, but...Rauff prevented the order from being executed."

In the original Italian passage, photocopied in the documentation released to journalists, Cardinal Schuster told of the arrest order in the context of reporting the extent of dissension among Nazi officials in the final days of the war, and he used the subjunctive: "but Col. Rauff would not have executed it (the order) or would have stopped it from being carried out."



Shouting "Heil Hitler," Nazi sympathizers give the traditional salute during burial services in Santiago, Chile, for former SS Col. Walter Rauff who died

May 14. Rauff was said to be responsible for the deaths of 200,000 Jews in mobile gas chambers during World War II. (NC Photo)

In fact, said Msgr. Bicchierai, Harster's order for his arrest was dropped when he claimed immunity as a diplomat and refused to be interrogated.

Father Bicchierai said that when the war ended in 1945, his job as representative of the Milan Archdiocese also ended, and he dropped all contacts with the three organizations that he had negotiated with during the war. Right after the war he was made head of Catholic Charities for the archdiocese, a post he held until his retirement last year.

"It is impossible that either Cardinal Schuster or I would have helped Rauff escape," he said. On the basis of what he knew, he added, "charges or insinuations that the Church aided Rauff in his escape are lies."

In a separate interview in Rome, Father Graham, an American Jesuit who has spent 20 years researching the Vatican archives and other sources on the Holy See's activities in World War II, expressed indignation at the new allegations. He said that, like similar allegations published in The New York Times last January, they are all "speculation."

"We look like fools when we rise to everything someone says in New York City," he said. "It's a publicity stunt... It's all speculative."

Father Graham denied that Vatican officials even knew who Rauff was during World War II.

"Nobody even heard of Rauff in Rome in those years," said the priest, one of the three historians responsible for the Vatican's official, multi-volume documentary, "Acts and Documents of the Holy See Relative to the Second World War."

Father Graham said that Rauff might well have stayed in a Rome convent or convents, as he claims to have done, during

his 18-month stay in Rome after he escaped from an Allied detention camp in 1947.

But the priest added that everyone stayed in Rome convents in those days.

"Many convents in Rome were practically hotels, 'pensiones' (inexpensive boarding houses)," said Father Graham.

Those who cite that as evidence of collaboration by high Church officials in Rauff's escape "think you can't stay at a convent without credentials from the pope," Father Graham commented. "Everybody lives in them, and did so especially during those years."

The historian said he was familiar with the work of then-Father Bicchierai in the war.

"We published some of Father Bicchierai's reports," he said. "He never mentioned Rauff. In those days they never mentioned names because correspondence was being opened by the Germans. Father Bicchierai was negotiating between Mussolini and the Allies."

Father Graham also rejected Rabbi Hier's call to open up the Vatican's archives of that era in order to respond to the allegations. He explained that Vatican archives are opened by pontificates and in chronological order.

Currently, the Vatican is opening its archives of Pope Pius X, who headed the Church from 1903 to 1914.

"We haven't even opened the archives of World War I yet," the priest said. "Why should the Vatican make an exception for some group in Los Angeles? Is all of Rome supposed to get excited because somebody calls a press conference in New York City? We are dealing with religion, and with religion 100 years is like yesterday. It is not like political regimes which come and go."

Diocesan Communicators: Deacon Thomas Kluchko

Following is the second in a series of reports from the diocesan Communications Committee.

By Mary Frances Collins

Deacon Tom Kluchko, is a senior systems analyst for the Eastman Kodak Company and has been on the communications committee for about a year. A Rochester native and a St. John Fisher graduate, Deacon Kluchko lives with his wife, Joyce, and their four children Tom 17, Christine 11, Robert 10, and Amy 3, at 78 Luddington Lane in Greece. With an economics background and an interest in the electronic media, Tom had begun to serve his parish, Mother of Sorrows, on the Liturgy and Stewardship Committees and taught Confirmation classes. Through renewal experiences, a gradual progression began leading him toward closer service. After hearing a homily about the Permanent Diaconate, he was moved to apply and was accepted. In 1983, he was ordained and assigned to support the diocese in evangelization and communication. His wife, Joyce, went through the

program with him and supports him enthusiastically.

"She also provides objective feedback," he said with a laugh.

In June of last year, Deacon Kluchko assisted on the planning committee for the immensely successful day of evangelization, "Harvest a Hundredfold."

Tom's particular vision of communication usage is that of a "sleeping giant," just waiting to be fully utilized.

"Catholic tradition is being challenged," he said, "and television provides the opportunity to reach people who would otherwise never hear the Good News. Christians from other denominations are now able to experience Catholic witness and teaching in the privacy of their own homes, and shut-ins can stay in touch with the larger Christian community. TV can never substitute for personal contact and witness, but it certainly can supplement the work of the Church, by reaching out to those who otherwise might not be reached. The Protestant traditions have been doing this for some time now, and

Catholics are starting to produce professional and timely programming of excellent quality."

"Evangelization in the Modern World," was mentioned often as having a powerful influence on Deacon Kluchko's efforts and vision for a far-reaching communications plan, and he quoted Paul VI.

"Mass media, put at the service of the Gospel, are capable of increasing almost indefinitely, the area in which the word of God is heard. The Church will feel guilty before the Lord if she does not utilize these powerful means," the pope said.

Deacon Kluchko said, "John 4:35 tells us to 'lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for the harvest. But the 'modern crop' today has moved indoors: all those shares needing to be gathered in, all those sheep waiting to be led, are no longer in the fields; they are firmly planted in front of the great one-eyed household idol - the TV set. We must get into the homes of the people to reach them where they are to tell them of

God's great love for them and draw them into the light."

"American Catholic" with Father John Powell is one effort to utilize available programming, which Deacon Kluchko initiated. He made the contact, screening many options and the committee

voted and made selections. He would like to expand the viewing time available on commercial cable channels and is most enthusiastic about the quality of programs already available through other dioceses.

When asked his own perception of who the

"prophets" of this age are, those people who have a vision and interpretation for today, he mentioned Pope John XXIII, Paul VI, Martin Luther King and Gandhi.

In his limited spare time, he enjoys playing golf occasionally, swimming and "playing with" computers.



TOUR - Seton Tour of Homes, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday, June 2 to benefit St. Mary's Hospital. For more information contact Public Relations Office at hospital.

SENIOR MATINEE - "When My Baby Smiles at Me" starring Betty Grable, Dan Dailey, 1:30 a.m., Thursday, May 24, George Eastman House.

PLANETARIUM - Presents "Pink Floyd Laser Show" combining selected hits from Pink Floyd with planetarium

and laser visuals and features the world premiere of a computer laser graphic system; premieres Tuesday, May 29 and will continue through Labor Day every night at 9 p.m., Stransburgh Planetarium.

CLASSIC FILM - "A Woman of Distinction" starring Rosalind Russell and Ray Milland, 2 and 8 p.m., Tuesday, May 29, Eisenhart Auditorium. Free with general museum admission.

EXHIBITS - "The Lion at the Falls: Waterpower and the Rise of Rochester", museum third floor; "Face to Face: Encounters with Identity", museum second floor; "Rochester: The Flower City," now through May 31,

Polyhedron Theater; "Work in Stoney's Rochester," June 1 through Aug. 17, Polyhedron Theater. All at Rochester Museum and Science Center.

MEETING - The United Cancer Council's Wayne County Make Today Count, 7:30 p.m., Wednesday, May 23, Newark-Wayne Community Hospital. For more information call (315) 946-4058.

CONFERENCE - "The Sexually Abused Child," featuring Foster W. Cline, M.D., director of Evergreen Consultants in Human Behavior, 9:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. May 30-31, Nazareth Arts Center. For more information call 586-7042.