

“Operazione ODESSA: la svastica e la croce. Complicità nella fuga dei criminali nazisti verso il santuario argentino”

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At the end of World War II, the Allies, the governments and police forces of Italy, Austria and Switzerland, as well as members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and even the Red Cross were responsible for aiding the escape of Nazi war criminals. Barbie, Eichmann, Mengele, Pavelic and Priebke all escaped through the infamous "ratlines", carefully established between Germany and Buenos Aires via Austria, Switzerland, Milan, Genoa and Rome. The escape of the Nazis in Latin America has been analyzed by historians as well as exploited by novelists, filmmakers and political parties. It is undoubtedly one of the most obscure and complicated chapters of recent history. Many false information and legends have been built around this sensitive subject: it has long been talked about mysterious submarines loaded with treasures as well as about mysterious war treasures sent from Nazis to Argentina. Thus, the aim of this dissertation is to shed light on the so-called operation ODESSA, still very sensitive for both Argentina and the Vatican. I specifically focused on the responsibilities of the Catholic Church, the government of Perón, the International Red Cross as well as the American and British secret services. The questions I set out to answer are the following: what kind of organization was ODESSA? Who collaborated with its members? And more importantly, what were the real reasons that led them to become its accomplices?. Following the analysis of all specialized articles and books at my disposal, I have come to hardly refutable conclusions: ODESSA was indeed an organization made up of SS but his undoubted success largely depended on the network of contacts that its members managed to establish during the final years of the conflict. In fact, on August 10th, 1944, seventy-seven men, including important Nazis, bankers and businessmen met in Strasbourg in occupied France to discuss the war aftermath. All of them were fully aware of the situation and began to discuss how to contain the fall of the regime as well as how to save their own lives and enormous wealth. Among them, number two in the hierarchy of the regime, Martin Borman, the minister of armaments, Alber Speer, the military commander, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, big industrialists such as Krupp Messerschmidt, Bussing Reihmetal, VW Wercke, Rochling, Farben, Siemens, the magnate Fritz Thyssen, as well as bankers, financiers and entrepreneurs in the field of insurance. All these people, who in 1933 had sided with Hitler were now perfectly aware that the war was irretrievably lost. Indeed, many had already begun

transferring their money by opening bank accounts in Switzerland and Spain, from where large sums were then exported to Argentina. Through these operations they managed to secure the Nazi “treasure”, so that they could finance the birth of a new German Reich, the Fourth Reich. This considerable wealth was estimated at about four billion gold marks and also served to finance ODESSA. Entrepreneurs would fund the escape of the hierarchy, which would secure the wealth transferred abroad. Those convened in Strasbourg then proceeded to draw up meticulous escape plans for the hierarchy. When designing these plans they considered all socio-political situations of the chosen countries. They established three main routes: the first one started from Monaco of Bavaria, was linked to Salzburg and then arrived in Madrid, the other two paths started both from Monaco and, via Salzburg or through the Tyrol, got to Genoa, where the leaders could leave for Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, or Argentina. Everything had been accurately planned: along these paths it was possible to travel without encountering major risks, thanks to an extensive network of conniving individuals as well as the availability of means of transportation and hospitality in monasteries and convents scattered along the entire route. One of the safest routes to get to Italy from Germany was the one that passed through the Vorarlberg, in between Germany, Austria and Switzerland, which soon became the Eldorado of the fugitives. The Swiss and Austrian police, although aware of the smuggling, turned a blind eye, often because the fleeing Nazis were in possession of valid documents, given the administrative resources at their disposal. The meeting at the Maison Rouge was, therefore, the first step towards the birth of the ODESSA organization, the organization of members of the SS. As I already stated, the success of the operation derived in large part from the connivance of a multinational network of valuable contacts mostly based in Italy and Argentina. Part of this network were prominent members of the Catholic Church as well as members of the Argentine government close to President Perón. The first ones helped facilitating the escape of Nazi war criminals from Europe, the other ones happily welcomed them in their own country. Though, the connivance of the Austrian and Swiss authorities as well as the contribution of other small clandestine organizations such as the Nazi secret movement "Spinne" and "Sechsgestirn" should not be underestimated. The "Organisation der SS- ehemaligen Angehörigen", whose acrostic gives ODESSA, began to fully operate in 1946, when most of the major members of the regime were already in prison camps. Somehow they were able to contact old comrades who proceeded with the establishment of “relief committees” for the detainees. Among the flood of refugees and prisoners, in addition to the jobless and homeless, were former Nazis and war criminals from all over Europe: from the Croatian Ustasha to Ukrainian, Lithuanian and French members of pro-Nazi governments. Under the

cover of alleged humanitarian aid, these committees smuggled letters and raised funds, all under the eyes of the unsuspecting Allies and with the collaboration of the Catholic Church. If during the Nazi era, the Vatican had not done much for those imprisoned or deported to concentration camps, it suddenly began to carry out its "humanitarian duties ". Thanks to these many forms of complicity, between 1945 and 1950, at least three hundred thousand people managed to escape from the devastated Europe to Latin America, through Spain, Portugal and especially Italy. Many major Nazi war criminals and leaders of pro-Nazi regimes such as Ante Pavelic, head of the Croatian fascist state and Pierre Daye, member of the Belgian far-right movement that collaborated with the Nazis after the occupation, left for Argentina. Despite the large number and the importance of those who managed to escape, ODESSA remained concealed from the Allies for a long time. Members of the organization were in fact professionals, members of the Security Service, former counterintelligence agents, men who had distinguished themselves in the administration of the Third Reich. As I already stated, at the beginning of 1944, many Nazis started establishing useful contacts with the Vatican, Peron's government and the US Secret Service. These contacts proved to be of outmost importance when setting up the secret getaways. Therefore, in the first chapter of the paper, I considered in detail the role played by the Catholic Church in aiding the escape of criminals; the direct involvement of the Vatican is confirmed by the actions of individual bishops and prelates; after escaping from Germany, all fugitives had to reach Milan, then Rome and finally Genoa. Once in Rome, bishop Hudal, a Nazi sympathizer, provided them with false identity papers and sent them to his friend and colleague archbishop Siri in Genoa. A large seaside town, Genoa also hosted offices of the International Red Cross. Almost all Nazis managed to get valid, even though temporary passports thanks to the Red Cross. After obtaining a passport they were able to ask for visas, happily given to them by Peron's immigration offices soon established in Italy. Only the Catholic Church was able to successfully coordinate such a large and risky operation. It must be said that the "ratlines" scandal began with good intentions: at the end of WWII, the innocent victims of Nazism in Europe were already hundreds of thousands. Many of these were Catholic, so it was no surprise that the Vatican tried to help them out. Though, many Nazi war criminals were hiding among the masses of innocent civilians. The pivotal contribution of the Church to ODESSA began in August 1944, when the Pope demanded permission for a bishop appointed by him to visit the refugees in the camps. The chosen bishop was Alois Hudal. According to Hudal himself, it was him who worked hard to track down former Nazis and war criminals hiding in the camps and to help them escape by providing false travel documents. Why had the Pope chosen Bishop Hudal? Austrian

Bishop Alois Hudal was Rector of the Teutonic College of Santa Maria in Piazza Navona, in Rome, and by his own definition "spiritual leader of German Catholics in Italy." Big supporter of Hitler, he had attempted to merge Christianity with Hitlerism. In 1937 he wrote a defense of Nazism, *"The Foundations of National Socialism"*, in which he stated that Hitler was acting with the aim of consolidating a Christian Europe. He soon became the confidant of Hitler in the Vatican. In his own memoirs, *"Roman Diaries"*, Hudal did not hesitate to acknowledge the help he gave to criminals on the run and boasted himself for having "rescued" many of them. Based on his statements, he acted on behalf of the Vatican. Among the witnesses who can prove the conscious involvement of the Vatican in the escape operations is the secret message sent in May 1947 to U.S. Secretary of State, George Marshall, from Vincent LaVista, military officer in Rome. In the memo, he defines the Church as "the leading organization involved in the illegal movement" of people and provides details on its gigantic escape network. ODESSA boasted a network that allowed refugees to obtain asylum, money and documents, before being shipped to safe shores. The escape network in which the Church intervened, the one that stretched from northern Italy to Rome and Argentina was definitely the most effective of all, and was dubbed "ratline" because priests, especially Franciscans and Trappists, used to secretly move fugitives from one convent to the other, until they were welcomed in Rome by the convent of Sicily, which belonged to the Franciscan Order and became a regular transit center for Nazi criminals. Generally, they remained in these religious institutions until they were provided the required travel documents and were able to leave from Genoa, Cadiz or Vigo. According to reliable estimates, at least 5000 Nazi leaders managed to escape thanks to the services of the organization. Its headquarter in Rome was masterfully handled by Bishop Hudal, where he worked under the cover of the Pontifical Commission of Assistance. The Vatican has always denied involvement in these escapes and has always claimed to be unaware of the true identity of the Nazis rescued by various ecclesiastics. However, what is clear from other evidence besides that of LaVista, reveals a very different reality. For example the one of Franz Stangl, commandant of the death camp of Treblinka. Captured by the Americans and subsequently imprisoned in Linz, Austria, he managed to escape and went to Rome; here, according to his own words, he was given asylum by bishop Alois Hudal, who also gave him a new passport, a passport of the International Red Cross, through which he was able to sail for Syria. Was the case of Stangl an isolated case, a mere error of judgment or was it part of a well-organized network of aid provided by the Church to Nazi criminals fleeing Europe?. According to Simon Wiesenthal, responsible for the capture of Stangl in Brazil in 1967, it was not a mistake at all: the Vatican had created an effective network of escape in a very short

time, and this is also confirmed by the fact that the Nazis knew about these escape routes and knew they needed to go to Rome and seek help from Bishop Hudal. According to Father Robert Graham, it was just a series of mistakes made by Hudal in an attempt to save innocent victims of the conflict and the Pope had nothing to do with it. Though, according to Father Jacob Weinbacher , dean of the “Collegio dell’Anima” of Rome since 1952, Hudal and Pius XII were very close friends since the '20s. Therefore, the Church, actively helped criminals escape from Austria to Italy. Another glaring testimony is a letter addressed by the bishop to Argentine President Juan Perón, in which he asked for as many as 5000 visas for "soldiers" in Germany and Austria. It was not refugees but fighters whose anti-communist "sacrifice" of war had saved Europe from the Soviet domination. In other words, it was German and Austrian Nazis. Among the clergymen involved in the operations there also was Cardinal Eugène Tisserant, a key figure in the relationship soon established by the Vatican with Argentina. In a letter addressed to the Argentine ambassador he wrote: "When His Eminence Cardinal Caggiano (then primate of Argentina) and His Excellency Monsignor Barrere (bishop of Tucumán , in the North of Argentina) were in Rome , I have hinted that the Government of the Argentine Republic would be willing to accept French whose political attitude during the recent war would expose them, returning to France, to austerity measures or private vendettas ". Thanks to the efforts by Tisserant, Caggiano and Barrere, most French war criminals gathered around Charles Lesca managed to escape justice. Shortly after the visit of the two clergymen, in June 1946, the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, raised the issue with Argentina's ambassador to the Holy See. Montini expressed the interest of Pius XII in organizing the emigration of not only Italians in Argentina, defined as the only country in which the emigrants could have found a satisfactory solution to their needs. Why did the Vatican help such criminals? Many priests saw in the Nazi regime a power structure in the fight against secularization and the dangerous spread of Bolshevism. Quite simply, Catholics and Nazis had common enemies: Jews and Communists. After the end of the conflict, facing the dangerous spread of Communists in Europe, the former enemies, the Nazis had suddenly turned into friends. Even in the opinion of LaVista, the Vatican acted this way in order to infiltrate anti-Catholic men in European countries and in Latin America. Next to the Church, a proven leading role was also played by the Red Cross. It was with documents issued by the International Committee of the humanitarian institution that most Nazis managed to get to Argentina. It was tacit pact signed by the Allies and by the Church, and honored by the Red Cross. A covenant which Peron soon joined, for reasons that certainly had to do with his sympathies for the Nazi ideology but also with other interests. In my view, when

defining Argentina as the main and safest place for immigration, Bormann and his ODESSA "colleagues" took into consideration two different elements. The first is that Germans had always enjoyed great respect and veneration among Argentine governments, despite the temporary severance of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Members of ODESSA could therefore count on a warm welcome reserved for fellow fugitives in Argentina, especially if technicians or scientists. The second element is related to the Catholic religion and the common hostility towards the rampant Bolshevism. White, Hispanic and Catholic, Argentina had been ruled for years by fomented nationalists and blind admirers of the Nazi regime who felt that they could form together with Spain and the Vatican a sort of "triangle of peace" that would preserve "the spiritual values of civilization" till the end of the conflict. The project was to create a new world order which included very Catholic countries such as Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Italy, Spain, Portugal and France of Vichy, ruled by the Vatican with the support of the Nazi regime. Since 1930s onwards, Argentina housed the headquarters of the Nazi secret service in South America, as well as a big community of German citizens who fled the inflationary crisis that swept the German economy since '29. It must not be overlooked that President Perón as well had always had a thing for Nazi ideology and that, being himself a colonel, he felt a blind admiration for the technological genius of Hitler's army. The link between the two nations became stronger and stronger over time especially since Germany started selling weapons to Argentina before, during and after the war and financing Perón's lavish presidential campaign in '46. It is natural to ask ourselves: where did the money needed to set up the operations come from?. The answer is almost intuitive: the funding came in part from the "treasure" that the Nazis had accumulated during the war, in part from assets seized from the exterminated Jews, in part from contributions of the Catholic Church itself and in part from the American intelligence service. Is it fair to say that the allied secret services were aware of the escape plans set up at the end of the war? British and American intelligence services were fully aware of the existence of clandestine escape routes through Italy, but instead of intervening and neutralizing them, they chose to use them. A report by the U.S. Secret Service on Pavelic, the Ustasha leader, would be most explanatory: "Today, in the eyes of the Vatican, Pavelic is a militant Catholic, a man who has made a mistake, but who now fights for Catholicism. It is for this reason that he now enjoys the protection of the Vatican". In wartime, everything is permitted. In my view, most involvements in the escape of Nazis from Europe were exclusively dictated by the interests of individuals and by a cynical calculation of all costs and benefits at stake. All parties had something to gain from a successful operation: the Church would have acquired new "friends" in order to fight the dangerous spread of communism and

secularization, the government of Perón would have received in their industries German scientists of great value, the American and British intelligence services could have taken advantage of the already efficient and well-established "ratlines" during the approaching "cold war". Through the "ratlines" they would smuggle to the West Soviet defectors and spies, as well as former Nazis trained to destabilize communist regimes like that of Josip Tito in Yugoslavia. That's the reason why governments and intelligence agencies chose to ignore the smuggling of Nazis and to leave the Church unpunished. Without the help of the Vatican, such complex and risky operations wouldn't have been successful. It is therefore not surprising at all that police forces, governments, intelligence services and the Vatican were in this together. Moreover, in time of war, all actions are known to be subject to the rules of "Realpolitik". All of them had a common goal: stopping at all costs the dangerous spread of Bolshevism in Europe. Investigations and trials against former Nazis were eventually set aside and the latter even protected because anti-communists and, consequently, useful regardless of the crimes they committed. It was not a matter of compassion or humanity, nor of Christian charity. It was an exchange of favors dictated by sheer opportunism at the expense of justice. Millions of people were brutally exterminated and many of those responsible lived for years unbothered in the "argentinian paradise" thanks to the shameful indulgence of the Allies.