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A towering force against anti-Semitism

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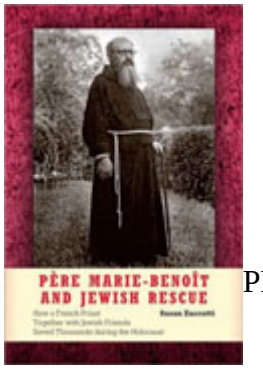

PÈRE MARIE-BENOÎT AND JEWISH RESCUE: HOW A FRENCH PRIEST TOGETHER WITH JEWISH FRIENDS SAVED THOUSANDS DURING THE HOLOCAUST
By Susan Zuccotti
Published by Indiana University Press, $35

With *Père Marie-Benoît and Jewish Rescue*, we have before us a book that, in marvelous detail, describes the righteous behavior of a French priest. The author establishes first the history and geopolitical realities that shaped the circumstances that molded the man. The mold was large -- both literally and figuratively. Literally, Père Marie-Benoît was tall and stout. He towered over everyone with a gentle physicality. Figuratively, he was a scholar and theologian of immense proportions.

He was born in 1895, in impoverished, rural western France, far removed from the Enlightenment and the educational potential of Paris.

Conflicts that arose between the Protestants and the Catholics as a result of the 1789 French Revolution had, a century later, developed as divisions between the more urban, republican, Protestant elements and the more rural, monarchist, Catholic elements. Republican laws restricted the Catholic church?s role and influence, especially in education. Sadly, one of the results of this increasing friction was the rise of anti-Semitism among the Catholic laypeople and clergy, for they came to view the Jewish population as urban, republican and allied with the Protestants. (The infamous Dreyfus affair, with obvious anti-Semitic overtones, was unfolding during the first 10 years of Marie-Benoît?s life.)

France?s restrictive laws meant the 12-year-old future priest went to Belgium to begin his studies for ordination as a Capuchin priest. At the onset of World War I, he returned to France as a 19-year-old to serve in the French army -- primarily as a medic on the front lines. After the war, he gained his doctorate in philosophy and theology at the Gregorian University in Rome, where he remained to teach seminarians.

Then Mussolini and Hitler came to power. In 1940, French citizen Marie-Benoît, now 45, was repatriated back to France as Italy declared war on his homeland. He was assigned to a Capuchin monastery in Marseille, then part of the ?free? Vichy French government -- a Nazi puppet regime in the south of France.

Now the stage was set for the emergence of this most remarkable man in a period when official Catholic policy was to remain aloof from the ?Jewish problem? (unless the conversation was about conversion). Marseille was flooded with Jews, both French and non-French, desperately trying to escape the German-led menace.

I am an American Jew whose genealogy includes several relatives who were victims of the Holocaust. I grew up in a closely knit, classically warm and sheltering American Jewish extended family of the 1950s and ?60s that included my Uncle Morris, a survivor of the horrors in Eastern Europe due to the goodness and humanity of a Polish Catholic neighbor who hid him (and his two cousins) for 23 months. My feelings and emotions toward those who risked so much in the face of overwhelming evil and were capable of righteous behavior and action are difficult for me to set aside.

Marie-Benoît understood that assistance to the refugees could only be accomplished through coordination with existing Jewish organizations and personnel. The Capuchin priest insisted there?d be no attempts at conversion. He would actively and purposefully advise the desperate folks he was helping to maintain the beliefs of their own tradition as he participated in numerous ?paper-only baptisms? that allowed many Jews to escape as part of the ?converted ones.?

A sophisticated organization rotated around his talents. He learned how to procure legitimate blank documents and then to forge them into the near-perfect documents necessary to hide, move and liberate thousands of Jews (and others fleeing the Germans). An American reader cannot escape the parallels to the ?underground railroad? of the mid-19th century as Marie-Benoît located and organized many French and later Italian non-Jews to hide, feed, care for and move the desperate refugees along to freedom.

Author Susan Zuccotti, skillfully and in fine detail, describes the Capuchin?s help in raising money from non-Jewish sources. Even more remarkably, he developed a sophisticated system to ?launder? Jewish money, both local and from around the world. Through his loyal Jewish contacts, he became the conduit for documents, money, food, clothing, shelter and transportation.

When Marseille became too dangerous, Marie-Benoît moved the operation to Nice and then on to Rome. Along the way, many of his Jewish ?cadre? were caught and executed or sent to concentration camps. Thousands of his fleeing refugees made it to safety; many, many others did not. Numerous of his non-Jewish cadres were also caught by the fascists and executed.

After the war, our hero was once more a Capuchin, teaching. He found time to energetically promote the opening of dialogue between the Jewish and Catholic worlds, and conducted a vibrant level of communication by mail and a series of visits with those from his Jewish cadre network. His befriended refugee survivors had come to refer to him as the ?Father of the Jews.? Accolades and honors flowed his way, including the status of the Righteous Among Nations awarded him by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, where a tree is planted in his honor.

After a 1958 trip to Israel, Marie-Benoît longed to live in the Holy City; his age and health and his superiors said, alas, no. But he lived another 22 years, well-remembered and praised, in a Capuchin monastery in his native, rural western France, until his death in 1990 at age 95.

What a story. How can one not recommend a well-researched and clearly written book that elevates us by illustrating the power of the human spirit in the face of evil and adversity?

[Reviewer Allen Coven lives in Maryland.]

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