29/01/2020

Three Greek Orthodox Christian Hierarchs who tried to stop the Holocaust in their country



Stories of death and annihilation are usually those associated with the Holocaust. But included are also those stories of humanity, when people across the continent risked their own lives to help a friend, a neighbor — even a stranger.

Included in these stories are several high-profile Greek Orthodox Church leaders who risked their own faithful, as well as the safety of their Christian flock, should their efforts to help Jews had been uncovered by the Nazis.

DAMASKINOS, the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece

“I have made my cross, have spoken with God, and decided to save as many Jews.”

The leadership role of the high-profile head of the country’s Greek Orthodox Church, the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, Damaskinos, was unprecedented in all of Europe. Not hiding behind cowardly “neutrality” of his counterparts at the Vatican and other European churches, Damaskinos openly and unabashedly opposed the deportation of the Jews of Greece and took drastic, and sometimes life-threatening measures to fulfill his mission.

With the support of the police chief of Athens, Archbishop Damaskinos oversaw the creation of several thousand “baptismal certificates”, and provided more than 27,000 false identify papers to desperate Jews seeking protection from the Nazis.

The forged papers gave them Christian names and allowed them free passage through Nazi checkpoints. The Archbishop also ordered monasteries and convents in Athens to shelter Jews, and urged his priests to ask their congregations to hide the Jews in their homes. As a result, more than 250 Jewish children were hidden by Orthodox clergy alone.

Damaskinos also spearheaded a direct protest to the Germans, in the form of a letter in a bold defense of the Jews who were being persecuted.

The letter incited the rage of the ferocious Nazi General Jürgen Stroop— the man responsible for the brutal suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the loss of 50,000 lives who had since been transferred to Greece. He threatened the Archbishop with death by a firing squad.

Damaskinos’ response was, ”Greek religious leaders are not shot, they are hanged. I request that you respect this custom.” The simple courage of the religious leader’s reply caught the Nazi commander off guard.

The appeal of the Archbishop and his fellow Greeks is unique; there is no similar document of protest of the Nazis during World War II that has come to light in any other European country. It reads, in part:

”In our national consciousness, all the children of Mother Greece are an inseparable unity: they are equal members of the national body irrespective of religion… Our holy religion does not recognize superior or inferior qualities based on race or religion, as it is stated: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek’ and thus condemns any attempt to discriminate or create racial or religious differences. Our common fate both in days of glory and in periods of national misfortune forged inseparable bonds between all Greek citizens, without exemption, irrespective of race…”

”Today we are… deeply concerned with the fate of 60,000 of our fellow citizens who are Jews… we have lived together in both slavery and freedom, and we have come to appreciate their feelings, their brotherly attitude, their economic activity, and most important, their indefectible patriotism…”

JOACHIM, the Metropolitan Bishop of Volos

“I am a Jew”

On September 30, 1943, the Jewish New Year, the chief rabbi of the central Greek city of Volos was ordered to report to the German military leader, Kurt Rikert, and submit a list of the names of the city’s Jewish community within 24 hours. At the time, there were 872 Jewish residents.

The rabbi turned to his friend, Metropolitan Joachim (Alexopoulos) who presided over the Greek Orthodox flock of the region and didn’t even blink an eye when asked to help.

He ordered every priest in his diocese to help any Jew who asked for it and signed his own name to a letter of introduction that the rabbi used to seek hiding. The letter read in part “I heartily recommend the teacher, bearer of this letter, and I ask every brother who is going to meet him, to listen to him carefully and in good will, and to give him any kind of assistance for anything he may be in need of for his life as well as for his flock, so they do not become victims of this difficult situation.”

Joachim mobilized the underground of the region and within 24 hours, 702 Greek Jews fled and were taken into the protective hands of strangers in the villages of the mountains surrounding the city. When he was asked for information about Jews from the Germans he firmly refused their requests for lists of Jewish residents, answering them, “I am a Jew”.

The 130 Jews who decided to remain behind were arrested by the SS and sent to Auschwitz. The Nazis blew up the synagogue and looted and pillaged the shops and homes in the Jewish neighborhood.

In November 1944 after the liberation of Greece and the Jews came out of hiding, Joachim issues a statement urging all local inhabitants to return to the Jewish residents any valuables they may have either taken during the looting or left in their hands for safe-keeping.

For saving the lives of some 700 people, he was recognized posthumously, in 1998, by the State of Israel with an inscription in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. and on the Righteous Honor Wall at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

CHRYSOSTOMOS, the Metropolitan Bishop of Zakynthos

”I will march together with the Jews straight into the gas chamber.”

Of course, there is also the timeless survival story of the ONLY Jewish community in all of Europe that didn’t lose a single soul during the Holocaust, on the Greek Island of Zakynthos— thanks to the efforts of the Metropolitan Bishop of the island, Chrysostomos.

When asked for the island’s Jews, he offered his own name, and that of the Mayor’s, as the island’s Jews and proceeded to tell the German commandant that he was prepared to march with his Jewish neighbors straight to the gas chambers if that were his destiny.

“The Jews of Zakynthos are Greeks, peace-loving and industrious. They are pure-blooded Zakynthians and totally harmless. I beg you to rescind the criminal order.”

When the commander remained persistent and threatened Chrysostomos and the

mayor with their lives, and severe reprisals against the civilian population of the island, they handed him a scrap of paper with their own two names scribbled on it.

“I am at your mercy,” Chrysostomos told the Nazi. “You can arrest me, not them. If this does not satisfy you, then know that I will march together with the Jews straight into the gas chamber.”

Three Greek Orthodox hierarchs, each with high-profile positions of moral authority, spoke to their God and responded with what they believed to be their moral and ethical responsibility to save fellow humans— regardless of religious background.

— Source: pappaspost.com