

**Writing sample:**

## 5. Help from the Pope?

---

*16th October - after the early mass*

\* \* \*

### *Alerting the Pope*

On Saturday morning, 16 October, Pope Pius was getting up as always at 6:15 a.m. Only a few hours' rest lay behind him. As usual, he had not finished his paperwork until two o'clock in the morning. Then, he allowed himself the only sleep after a long day. Toward midnight, Pius had returned to his paperwork after his daily meditation in his private chapel in front of the tabernacle. Shortly afterward, he would have repeatedly heard isolated gunfire from a distance. It came from the soldiers who would intimidate the Jews in the old ghetto. Rome had been more and more paralyzed since the 10th of September. No engine noise disturbed the silence over the city at night. The report of rifle salvos could be heard far over the roofs of Rome, and the window of the pope's study faced the old ghetto.

For the moment, however, Pius had no cause for greater concern. Neither could he locate the shooting exactly nor were skirmishes unusual in these days. When Pius went to bed, the shooting faded away. A little later, the SS police forces were woken up for the raid and sent to the ghetto.

It is not known who in particular had the idea to alert the Holy Father shortly after the raid had begun. If somebody could help right now, then it would be the pope. A woman who lived near the Tiber and the ghetto was acquainted with the young Principessa Enza Pignatelli d'Aragona Cortes and knew that Donna Pignatelli had access to the pope. The principessa had known Pope Pius since her childhood. When Pacelli was still

a member of the Vatican Secretariat, he had prepared her for the Holy Communion and had had closer contact with the private church school, which little Enza had visited. During the Second World War, she engaged in charitable work and talked about it with Pius from time to time.

Later, in several interviews, Donna Pignatelli reported how she had been alarmed and how she had informed the Holy Father.<sup>1</sup> Early on Saturday morning, her telephone had rung in a penetrating way, and she woke up with a start. A concerned woman was calling and reported about the arrest of Jewish families in the old ghetto. Entire streets were closed. Trucks were on the riverside road, and a lot of people had to line up at Portico d'Ottavia.

“You have access to the pope,” the signora said. “Please hurry to him at once! Don’t waste any time!”

The call did not take long. Donna Pignatelli was confused. She could not simply go to the Holy Father without a carefully planned audience even early in the morning. She would be rejected politely but categorically at the entrance. Besides that, she was not sure how much she could believe the concerned woman on the phone.

The principessa knew that the Jews were somehow in danger under the German occupation in Rome. Would the arrests be the great blow of the Nazis against the Jewish community? If so, the pope would have to know and intervene immediately.

Donna Pignatelli decided to hurry to the Apostolic Palace. On her way, she wanted to get her own impression of the situation at the ghetto, but she needed a car, which was a luxury in occupied Rome. Quickly, she used her good contact with Karl-Gustav Wollenweber, who was a diplomatic employee at the German Vatican Embassy. At an early hour, she rang him out of bed, described the situation, and asked for chauffeur services. Wollenweber realized the great danger. He immediately agreed to take the principessa to the Vatican in a diplomatic car.

Wollenweber got himself a car and personally sat behind the wheel. After picking up Donna Pignatelli, the two of them drove off toward the ghetto. They had to check whether an SS action against the Jews was in progress. It is not clear whether Wollenweber took the eastern Tiber street directly to the presumed location of the raid,

or whether he chose the road on the western side of the Tiber at Trastevere.

To see the events at the synagogue and at Portico d'Ottavia more closely, the two were probably driving along the Lungotevere dei Cenci. Donna Pignatelli confirmed that she had looked at the ghetto on the way to the Vatican and that she had actually seen the round-up with her own eyes. Wollenweber was not allowed to interfere. As a representative of the embassy, he was on the road without the knowledge and order of Weizsäcker. A “discussion” with the officer in charge would have quickly become public.

The ghetto district was not far from the Vatican. With his diplomatic license plates, Wollenweber drove straight into the court of Damasus. The privileged archivist and co-author of the ADSS documentary collection, Robert Graham, SJ, found the situation bizarre. “Principessa Pignatelli went to the Vatican in a car of an anti-Semitic government, accompanied by an official representative of the German Empire to protest at the Pope against an anti-Semitic action.”<sup>2</sup>

The Swiss Guard let the diplomatic car pass without any problems. Then, the principessa had to make clear to Maestro Di Camera, Monsignor Arborio Mella di Sant'Elia that she had to go immediately to the Holy Father. The maestro was the master of the always meticulously elaborated schedule of the pope, and he was responsible for its execution. Pope Pius had not yet started his daily business. He was just reading his private early mass. At this hour, an audience was impossible!

The petite principessa must have pressed hard to the stern Maestro Di Camera that she had to go exactly now to the pope. It was not long until Monsignor Mella gave up. The principessa was allowed to go up to the papal chambers to wait for the end of the holy mass.

On the top floor of the Apostolic Palace, Donna Pignatelli hurried to the apartment of Pius XII. There also was the papal private chapel. Discreetly, she waited kneeling at the door of the chapel. Pius had already finished the early mass and was at the thanksgiving prayer. As he went out, he noticed the principessa at the door. He had misgivings. At once he rushed to her and asked surprised:

“What are you doing here at this time? What happened?” Donna Pignatelli did not

waste any time and reported concerns about the raid in the ghetto.

“That's impossible,” Pius replied, surprised. “The Germans have promised that they would not touch the Jews.”

The principessa implored the Holy Father to do something. He should quickly go to the Portico d'Ottavia and intervene. Pius remained silent on this request. He pursued a different strategy.

“Let's make a call,” he said to Pignatelli.

He grabbed the shoulder of the principessa and pushed her to the telephone in his private library. Donna Pignatelli said that the pope had been very nervous and that she had seen tears in his eyes. In fact, Pius had been shocked by the message. Otherwise, he would never have violated strict etiquette and touched the principessa's shoulder.

In his office, Pius telephoned Cardinal Secretary Luigi Maglione, while Pignatelli was present.

“Eminence,” Pius said, “things are happening without our knowing. They are arresting the Jews at Portico d'Ottavia.” During the telephone call, the principessa must have retreated. She did not give more quotes, but the next steps are known.

Pius instructed his secretary of state to immediately summon the German Ambassador Weizsäcker. The cardinal should receive him and demand a stop of the raid. The arrests were an affront to the pope. The question of a protest of the Holy See against the Jews' deportation loomed large.

...