

Thursday in the First Week of Lent

February 25, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Esther 14:1–6, 12–14; Psalm 138; Psalm 51:11; Matthew 7:7–12

Eleanor Emily Hodgman Porter was an American author, best known for two children’s books, *Pollyanna*, published in 1913, and *Just David*, published in 1916.¹ She died in December 1968. Her famous character, Pollyanna, had an optimistic outlook on everything. However, it wasn’t a book read to me and my two siblings, all of us born in the 1950s. In the book, Pollyanna loses both of her legs and finds a way to play what she and her father call “The Glad Game.”²

The paring of Queen Esther’s story with the passage from the Sermon on the Mount has been hard for me ever since we took the youth group of the parish that I served in Indiana to see the National Holocaust Memorial Museum. I remember, in particular, seeing a railroad car and imagining the terror, the pain, and the cruelty experienced by everyone packed into it. When a train stopped, occupants would ask for water and food for their children. Asked, and it was not given, sought, but not found, knock, and the doors opened to extermination camps.

It’s important to remember in France, for example, that parents and children were packed into railroad cars by French police, in Italy, by Italian police, and by the collaborators, in every country, Hitler’s Germany occupied during the Second World War with two exceptions. I knew before visiting the museum that the Danes, with the help of the Swedes, saved the Jewish nationals of their country.³ Two bishops of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church spearheaded a movement that prevented the deportation of Jews living within Bulgaria. It did not keep them out of work camps or save their property. The bishops could not prevent their political leaders

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleanor_H._Porter, (accessed 25 February 2021).

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pollyanna>, (accessed 25 February 2021).

³ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/rescue-of-danish-jews-fall-1943>, (accessed 25 February 2021).

from deporting Jews in the parts of Greece and Yugoslavia where Bulgarian soldiers were stationed as allies of the Germans.⁴

What philosophy calls the problem of evil remains a great challenge to those who have encountered real evil in their own lives or the lives of others. I was horrified, but not surprised, preparing for the horrified, but not surprised, when preparing a homily for the Martyrs of Japan, to learn that their Japanese guards crucified captured allied soldiers. One Australian famously survived. The suppression and persecution of Christianity in Japan began on February 5, 1597, with the crucifixion of six Franciscan friars and twenty converts.

I was born in a Navy town, Norfolk, Virginia, and we lived there or in Virginia Beach until I was twelve years old. Little boys of my generation played army and navy. Ridiculously, we practiced hiding under our desks during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I don't know that I will ever visit Germany or Japan.

My first visit to Italy was made with friends, a couple, and their son, mainly to visit Rome and meet with the late Sofia Cavalletti. The original atrium organized by her and the late Gianna Gobbi was and is in Sofia's home.

Now that Pope Francis has opened the sealed archives of Pope Pius XII, I hope I live long enough to know what was going on behind the scenes when Rome's Jews were being transported for extermination. Pius XII was the first Roman-born pope, and the son of a noble Roman family loyal to the papacy since Clement X became pope in 1670. The Vatican is very close to the ancient Jewish ghetto—closed briefly by Napoleon and then reopened when he was defeated by the pope when he returned to power. The Jewish ghetto was only ended in 1870 when Italy took over from the Roman Catholic Church. This profoundly anti-Semitic institution would only begin to be shaken up as the Holocaust was revealed. We know that our American government collaborated with former Nazis after the war to

⁴ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/rescue-of-danish-jews-fall-1943>
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/bulgaria>, (accessed 25 February 2021).

help our military missile program. One can't help but wonder how history might have been different if Pius XII had walked to the former ghetto with a small group of Swiss Guards the day the roundup of Jews began, October 16, 1943.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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