

J. M. Oesterreicher in France

Johannes Oesterreicher (1904-1993) was born in Moravia when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father was a veterinarian in a small village. John converted from Judaism to Catholicism while he was a student in Vienna University's School of Medicine. In 1927 he was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Vienna. In 1934 he founded a bi-monthly journal *Die Erfüllung (The Fulfillment)*, whose purpose was to stand by the Jews in their time of need, to denounce Nazi persecution of the Jews and combat Hitler's glorification of race and hatred of Jews.¹ Interrogated by the Gestapo in March 1938, he departed in April by way of Switzerland to Rome and Paris, where he lived from September 1939 to June 1940. He fled to the south of France four days before the Germans entered Paris.

In Paris he broadcast a weekly program in German, using the Scripture texts of the Sunday Lectionary. He argued that Nazi ideology was not only anti-Jewish but also anti-Christian. A stenographer in Germany transcribed the messages; they were found in a Nazi archive and published in 1986.² His first book, *Racisme, Antisémitisme, Antichristianisme*, was published by the Dominicans in Paris (Editions de Cerf, 1939) but was confiscated by the Gestapo after the fall of Paris. It was republished in 1943 by La Maison Francaise in New York.³

The account of Oesterreicher's successful departure from France is given by Père Joseph N. Perrin, O.P. of Marseille. After three days in a police jail in Barcelona he went from Madrid to Lisbon and arrived in New York City on November 12, 1940.

Assisted financially by Mme. H. Suzanne Jobert, a French lady living in New York, Father Oesterreicher founded the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ on March 25, 1953. From this base he was able to contribute in a significant way to the preparation for the Second Vatican Council to accept the Declaration of the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*), promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965. This laid the ground for the Catholic Church to enter a new era in her relation with the Jewish people and adherents of the other world religions.⁴

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¹ See Erika Weinzierl, "The Beginnings of John M. Oesterreicher's Work for Christian-Jewish Understanding," *Standing Before God: Essays in Honor of John M. Oesterreicher* (ed. Asher Finkel and Lawrence Frizzell) (New York: Ktav, 1981) p. 13-19.

² *Wider die Tyrannei des Rassenwahns: Rundfunkansprachen aus dem ersten Jahr von Hitler's Krieg* (Wein: Gyer-Edition, 1986).

³ This book was translated into German and published under the title *Judenhass=Christushass: Hitlers Judenfeindschaft in zeitgeschichtlicher und heilsgeschichtlicher Sicht* (Klagenfurt: Hermagoras-Verlag, 1993). Fr. Oesterreicher's thesis that after the war Hitler would attack the Churches has been proven from evidence in Nazi archives.

⁴ Two recent studies on the often traumatic history of Catholic-Jewish relations in Europe during the past century: John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933-1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) and Olivier Rota, *Essai sur le Philosémitisme Catholique: Entre le premier et le second Concile de Vatican. Un parcours dans la modernité chrétienne* (Artois Presses Université 2012). The two persons presented in both books are Jacques Maritain and John Oesterreicher.