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Box 42, Folder 7, Paul VI [Pope] - Golda Meir meeting, 1973.

THE POPE PAUL VI-GOLDA MEIR MEETING  
- DIPLOMATIC COUP OR DISASTER?

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Was the meeting between Pope Paul VI and Israeli Premier Golda Meir a diplomatic achievement or a disaster? That question has arisen in the minds of millions of people, who are naturally bewildered by the confused reports that have appeared in the mass media in the past week.

On the morning of Monday, January 15, the announcements of the surprise visit left a generally positive impression, suggesting expectation and hopeful new initiatives, including the possibility that the audience might be a first step toward official diplomatic recognition of Israel by the Holy See. By late afternoon, newspaper headlines and radio-TV newscasts were describing the meeting as "cold," the conversations as "tough talk," and the entire event as "a diplomatic slap in the face of Israel."

What had transpired behind the scenes that led to create this troublesome confusion? The following information is based on trans-Atlantic telephone calls, within 24 hours of the Pope Paul-Premier Meir meeting, between AJC officials and members of the Israeli delegation that accompanied Mrs. Meir to Rome, as well as informed sources in Vatican City.

Contrary to later press reports from Rome, the meeting between the Pope and the Israeli Premier was cordial, and characterized by mutual respect and reciprocal understanding. When Mrs. Meir and her party arrived at Vatican City, they were received with the same high order of protocol and diplomatic ceremony as was accorded to President Nixon on his last meeting with the Pope. When Mrs. Meir entered the Pope's library, the Pontiff greeted her by saying that he blessed her personally, and blessed the State of Israel.

Then Pope Paul VI said that this meeting was a historic occasion, and Mrs. Meir voiced her agreement. They both clearly acknowledged that this was the first time a Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church had received the head of the Government of the sovereign State of Israel.

When he started the conversation, Pope Paul spoke feelingly about the history of the Jewish people, and particularly about their sufferings and persecutions. He deplored hatred and anti-Semitism, reaffirming the Church's views as expressed in the Vatican Council Declaration on Non-Christian Religions.

The Pope then presented the humanitarian concerns of the Holy See regarding the refugee problems affecting all peoples in the Middle East, but with specific emphasis on the need for ending the plight of the Palestinian refugees. He also indicated interest in the welfare of Christian and Muslim communities in the Holy Land. In his discussion of the importance of the holy places to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, he expressed strong appreciation of the constructive way in which Israeli authorities have cared for the sacred sites and their assurance of free access for all visitors and pilgrims.

The Pope then discussed the "sacred and universal character" of the City of Jerusalem, and its religious importance to the monotheistic faiths. But contrary to press reports, he did not mention in any way the political proposal for the internationalization of the city of Jerusalem.

As can be seen below in the full text of the communique, Prime Minister Meir presented the views of the State of Israel on a variety of issues: the importance of direct negotiations between Israel and the Arab states to the achievement of a lasting peace; the international problem of terrorism (which the Pope had condemned in a Sunday homily the week before); and the human rights issues raised by the situation of Jews in the Soviet Union and the Arab countries.

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The Pope's response on each of these questions was sympathetic.

The audience concluded with Pope Paul's expressing his "warmest wishes" that justice and law, and peace and co-existence among all peoples in the Middle East would prevail. He indicated to Mrs. Meir that the Holy See would do all within its possibilities to reach these common goals.

A joint communique was then prepared by the Vatican Secretariat of State and members of the Israeli delegation, and its text was approved by the Pope and Mrs. Meir.

Prior to the audience, and while it was going on, several ambassadors from Arab governments who are accredited to the Holy See registered strong formal protests against the meeting. It is understood that they spoke to members of the Vatican Secretariat of State in such terms as "betrayal," and implied threats of reprisal against Christian minorities in their countries. (Several weeks ago the Muslim Brotherhood burned a Coptic church in Cairo, so such threats must be taken seriously). The Arab ambassadors demanded from the Vatican an immediate clarification of policy on the issues being discussed by the Pope and Mrs. Meir.

Literally before the audience had ended, Dr. Frederico Alessandrini, a press secretary in the Vatican Secretariat on Communications and an editor of L'Osservatore Romano, hastily called a press conference at which he made a fervent verbal declaration of "Vatican policy." His statements, which were an obvious response to demands by the Arab ambassadors that the Pope-Premier Meir meeting be completely discounted, fundamentally misrepresented and distorted everything that had taken place during the audience, both in spirit and in substance. Dr. Alessandrini, an old-line conservative journalist, did not need to stretch too hard to assume this role, for during Vatican Council II, as well as in subsequent public statements on Jerusalem, he had already revealed a strong anti-Israel and anti-Jewish bias. It was he who coined such potential phrases as "the Judaization of Jerusalem," and "the suffocation of Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem by the Israeli authorities."

Alessandrini, according to available press reports of his spoken statement, made the following points, none of which are factually correct:

- 1) The Pope made clear to Mrs. Meir that the 1947 proposal for the internationalization of Jerusalem - "corpus separatum" - was still official Vatican policy. The facts are that the Pope did not even mention the word "internationalization." (In 1972, Vatican sources informed the AJC that the Vatican had given up that proposal as "unrealistic" and "unworkable.")
- 2) The sole purpose for which the Pope granted the audience was to pressure the Israeli Premier on the Palestinian refugee question. The facts are that the Pope raised this question on a humanitarian basis, urging that a speedy and constructive solution be found, and that Mrs. Meir agreed to the need for finding such a solution. At the same time, the Pope also expressed sensitivity to and concern for the plight of Jewish refugees from Arab countries, and for Jews now being oppressed in Arab countries.
- 3) The audience was granted by the Pope solely as a result of Israeli pressure, that it was a last-minute concession because Mrs. Meir was already in Paris. The facts are that the audience was agreed upon by common consent during a long series of regular consultations between the Vatican Secretariat of State and Ambassador Amiel Najar, Israel's envoy to Italy. (Ambassador Najar informed AJC's Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum in Geneva last month that "de facto" diplomatic relations exist between the Holy See and Israel, and ties have never been better nor more mutually respectful.)
- 4) The audience changed nothing in Vatican policy toward the Middle East. The facts are that neither the Israeli Government nor the Vatican planned or expected that anything would change. This audience was a symbolic action to ratify publicly the growing diplomatic ties between the Holy See and Israel, and the meeting and the joint communique served exactly that agreed-upon purpose.

Nevertheless, from the Arab point of view, Dr. Alessandrini's action was effective for he managed to seize the headlines in the world press to create the impression that the meeting was a diplomatic "failure." In fact, Religious News Service (January 16) reports that the Arab and East European Communist press have

launched a massive propaganda campaign describing the audience as "a failure." The extent and vehemence of that Arab-Communist reaction is the best indication of how successful that meeting turned out to be.

Charging that certain Vatican officials had contrived to permit or encourage Dr. Alessandri to misinterpret the substance of the papal interview, Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff of Italy described the action as "a grave discourtesy" to Israel. The discrepancy between the joint communique and Dr. Alessandri's comments appear to support Rabbi Toaff's charge, and to require further explanation.

It is important that the full text of the joint communique be made available to key persons who mold public opinion in order that they understand what actually transpired in Rome - namely, that historic event of unprecedented dimensions between the Catholic Church and Israel took place which no propaganda campaigns can change.

Following is the full text of the joint communique:

"This morning Jan. 15, 1973 at 12:15 His Holiness Pope Paul VI received Mrs. Golda Meir Prime Minister of Israel who was accompanied by the Israeli Ambassador in Italy H.I. Mr. Amiel E. Najar.

"The conversation which lasted for about an hour covered the situation in the Middle East and the specific problems concerning the Holy Land.

"His Holiness after having reviewed the history and the suffering of the Jewish people presented the Holy See's point of view on the problems which have to a large extent relevance to its humanitarian mission such as the refugee problem and the situation of the various communities which live in the Holy Land and those which are directly related to its more specifically religious mission regarding the Holy Places and the sacred and universal character of the city of Jerusalem.

"The Prime Minister emphasized Israel's desire for peace and amply described the position of the possibilities in reaching a peaceful solution in the Middle Eastern conflict through negotiations between the parties and on the above mentioned subjects and also referred to the phenomenon of terrorism as well as to the special conditions concerning Jewish communities in certain parts of the world.

"His Holiness finally in expressing his warmest wishes that justice and law would establish peace and coexistence among all peoples of the Middle East once again declared the intention of the Holy See to do all within its possibilities in order to reach these goals."

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## POPE PAUL VI AND GOLDA MEIR

WINS COMMENTARY BY RMHT

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Was the meeting between Pope Paul Vi and Israeli Premier Golda Meir a diplomatic achievement or a disaster? That question, which has arisen in the minds of millions of people, will probably not be answered definitively until the complete record of that dialogue is made available for scrutiny. Even the several press interviews with Mrs. Meir following her audience with the Pope are contradictory and confusing. Despite these confusions, I tend to believe that that unprecedented audience was a significant, even historic, diplomatic achievement, and for the following reasons:

Within 24 hours of the meeting between Pope Paul and Mrs. Meir, I talked with high-ranking Catholic and Israeli sources in Rome, and was informed that the meeting was held in a generally friendly and constructive spirit. The statement by the Vatican press secretary, Dr. Frederico Alessandrini, I was told, fundamentally misrepresented and distorted ~~and~~ both the spirit and the substance of the meeting. To judge the actual importance of this event, it is necessary to read the full text of the official communique prepared jointly by the Vatican Secretariat of State and Israeli officials, which is the authoritative position of both parties. It is terribly unfortunate that Dr. Alessandrini's propaganda concession to Arab extremist views was allowed to dominate the world's press headlines, leaving an altogether negative impression of what was essentially a positive experience. Had it not been so, it is difficult to believe that both the Pope and Mrs. Meir would have called their meeting historic, and agreed to continue the dialogue between the Holy See and Israel.



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Contrary to the assertions of Dr. Alessandrini made under the intense pressure of Arab diplomats, the facts are that the Vatican proposal for the internationalization of Jerusalem has been discarded and was in now way advocated by the Pope. In fact, Pope Paul thanked Mrs. Meir three times for protecting the religious rights of Christians in Israel and for guarding Christian holy places. On welcoming Mrs. Meir to his office, Pope Paul VI blessed Mrs. Meir, and then blessed the State of Israel, a spirit that was also reflected in the fact that Mrs. Meir was received with the same high order of diplomatic ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ protocol that was accorded to President Nixon on his last visit to Rome.

Since that historic audience, the Arab and East European Communist press have launched a vehement propaganda effort to negate the meeting as a total failure--and that is probably the best indication that more than likely it was a meaningful success.