Eugenio Pacelli 1876–1917

[In one way, though, he was different from other children of his age: he was nearly always alone. He preferred to keep to himself—to remain detached...the boy seemed to find his own company sufficient.

Prince Constantine, *The Pope: A Portrait from Life*, 168

The Pacelli Family

Eugenio Pacelli’s family history is an important part of the study of the future pope’s actions and reactions during the Holocaust. His attitudes toward the Catholic Church and the wider world were in no small part shaped by his family history and environment. The convergence of religious, historical, political, and social matrices with those of the Pacelli family gave Eugenio the foundation on which he built his own worldview. Family history is not used here to “explain away” Pius XII, but as a vehicle to help the historian understand the personal environment of the man who became the highest moral authority in the world during the years of, arguably, the greatest acts of immorality in recorded history.

The origins of the Pacelli family are obscure. They first appear in Onano in the far north of the province of Lazio toward the end of the seventeenth century. The name underwent a change sometime during the early eighteenth century, becoming the familiar Pacelli. By 1763, the family had their own stemma, or coat of arms, which appeared over the main door of Casa Pacelli on the street known today as Via Cavour. What is known is that the family enjoyed a reasonable standard of living, and although not listed in the noble families of the region, was prosperous and esteemed. Various members of the family owned property throughout the town, along with several farms.

On January 8, 1774, Maria Domenica Pacelli, daughter of Marco Antonio, married Francesco Caterini. The Caterini were a prominent Onano family. Six children were born of this union. The youngest was Prospero (1795–1881), who was to play an important role in the life of
Eugenio Pacelli’s grandfather, Marcantonio. Twenty-four years later, Maria Domenica’s brother Gaetano Pacelli married Maria Antonia Caterini, sister of Francesco. Of this union, five sons and one daughter were born. The third son, Marcantonio, the future grandfather of Eugenio, was born on April 15, 1804.

Prospero Caterini was judged to be of sufficient caliber and promise to be sent to Rome to study for the priesthood. Most biographers agree that Prospero encouraged several of his cousins to join him in Rome, where prospects for careers were more positive than in provincial Onano. In 1819, Marcantonio left the village with his brother Giuseppe (c.1806–1894) and moved to Rome, settling in Rione di Parione just across the Tiber from St Peter’s. Parione is one of the oldest inhabited parts of Rome, nestled between Colonna, Pigna, and Ponte. It is a small suburb marked by narrow winding streets, tall storied apartment buildings, *piazze*, churches, and baroque splendors such as Chiesa Nuova.

The Pacellis lived less than ten minutes’ walk from Piazza Navone in Via degli Orsini 34, known in the early nineteenth century as via Monte Giordano, in the Palazzo Pediconi. It was a short walk of about fifteen to twenty minutes from Via degli Orsini across Ponte Sant’Angelo to San Pietro. It was another short walk of about the same time to reach the Sant’Angelo *rione* to the south of Parione—the Jewish ghetto.

**Marcantonio Pacelli**

Marcantonio advanced rapidly under the patronage of his prominent cousin. In 1824, he received his doctorate in law, *ad proemium*, and began practicing within the papal courts. By 1834 he was an advocate with the tribunal of the Holy Roman Rota, the ecclesiastical courts that dealt with marriage.¹ Marcantonio married at this time and had ten children.² Filippo, the second son and future father of Eugenio Pacelli, was born on September 1, 1837 during a cholera epidemic.

Pacelli’s devotion to the Holy See and the person of the pope made him a loyal servant of Pius IX. Revolution and the emergent Italian nationalist movement were alien sentiments to him. When Pius IX was forced to flee Rome in the wake of the insurrection of November 24, 1848, the faithful Pacelli joined him as a legal and political adviser.³ Until the French sponsored restoration of papal power in April 1850, Pius, and presumably the antiliberal Pacelli, remained in the Neapolitan city of Gaeta as the guests of the local abbot. A furious, humiliated, and impotent pontiff thundered invective against the “outrageous treason of democracy.” The pope returned to Rome, helped by French bayonets and Rothschild money, with an implacable suspicion of liberalism and the modern world. It is probably safe to say that his faithful servant, Marcantonio Pacelli, shared the same opinions, including the reconstruction of the Roman ghetto and the reinstitution of conversion sermons.