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Jewish Group Seeks Vatican Probe of Nazi's Escape

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NEW YORK, May 9—A Jewish scholarly organization based in California asked the Vatican today to investigate whether the late Cardinal Idefonso Schuster, archbishop of Milan during World War II, helped an accused Nazi war criminal escape from Italy to Chile almost 30 years ago.

Walter Rauff, now 78, a former Nazi official, is still living in Chile.

"Outside of the infamous Dr. [Josef] Mengele, Walter Rauff is the most notorious of all the accused Nazi war criminals still at large today, a man who symbolizes the Holocaust to millions of Jews," Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center at Yeshiva University in Los Angeles, said.

"We believe it is incumbent on Pope John Paul II to launch a formal inquiry to find out if there was any connection between Rauff's escape from justice and high Vatican church officials," Hier said.

Rauff was a colonel in the Nazi SS who has been accused of developing and directing the mobile gas vans by which the SS Einsatzgruppen murdered 250,000 Jews in Poland and the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1943. Rauff then was transferred to Milan, where he headed the SS in northern Italy.

Arrested by U.S. Army counter-intelligence troops in 1945, Rauff escaped from the Allied Detention Center in Rimini in December, 1946, and allegedly made his way to Rome, where he hid for almost a year and a half before leaving from Genoa on a ship bound for South America. Rauff and his family eventually settled in Chile.

State Department and U.S. Army documents released by the Simon Wiesenthal Center suggest that Rauff had numerous meetings and exchanged letters and even gifts with two high-ranking Catholic church officials while he lived in Milan. One was Msgr. Don Giuseppe Bicchierai, who is still living in Milan; the other was Schuster, who died in 1954.

At the time of his death, the New York Times said Schuster was "one of the outstanding churchmen of Italy who was regarded as a possible choice" for pope in 1939.

There have been numerous charges that anticommunist Catholic priests helped Nazis escape capture and find refuge after the war. The charge leveled today, however, is the first time high-ranking church officials have been mentioned in the context of a so-called "Vatican escape route."

The documents released today, which were acquired through the Freedom of Information Act, show that Rauff knew Bicchierai and Schuster while he was SS leader in Milan. Bicchierai was Schuster's secretary, the documents show.

The two acted as envoys for the Vatican while Germany and Italy

negotiated secretly with the Allies to surrender. The documents also disclose that Rauff was involved in these negotiations and often discussed prisoner exchanges and releases with Bicchierai and Schuster.

Hier said the documents contain "no smoking gun," but added, "Let's find out if there is one."

In a telephone interview, Dr. Eugene Fisher, secretary for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National

Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the documentation "does not indicate any special intimacy between Rauff and Cardinal Schuster outside of the fact that they arranged prisoner exchanges and were involved in surrender negotiations together."

"The documentation comes nowhere near to validating the charges that have been made," he said.

Meanwhile, the editors of the National Catholic Reporter have called for an independent, interfaith panel to examine Roman Catholic involvement in the Holocaust.