New book details Hitler plot to kidnap pope, foiled by Nazi general

WASHINGTON – An SS general close to Adolf Hitler foiled a plot to kidnap Pope Pius XII during World War II and to put the Vatican and its treasures under Nazi control, according to a new book.

The book, "A Special Mission" by Dan Kurzman, refutes arguments that Pope Pius XII maintained a public silence about Nazi actions during World War II because he was anti-Semitic or because he was sympathetic toward Hitler.

"They were bitter, bitter enemies. They despised each other," said Mr. Kurzman of the pontiff and the fuhrer in a May 31 telephone interview with Catholic News Service. The pope hated Hitler "not only for his inhumanity but because he threatened the whole church structure."

Hitler, for his part, "saw the pope as his greatest enemy" and as someone with whom he was "competing for the minds and souls that he wanted to control," the author added.

Mr. Kurzman also said he found no evidence that Pope Pius was anti-Semitic, noting that one of his closest childhood friends was a Jewish boy with whom he remained in contact throughout his life.

The book, published June 1 by Da Capo Press in Cambridge, Mass., is subtitled "Hitler's Secret Plot to Seize the Vatican and Kidnap Pope Pius XII." It details the actions of SS Gen. Karl Wolff, chief of staff to SS Chief Heinrich Himmler, in the months after the overthrow of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in July 1943.

Describing Wolff as one of "history's most successful opportunists," Mr. Kurzman said the general earned the "full confidence" of both Hitler, who ordered him in September 1943 to kidnap Pope Pius, and of the pontiff himself, whom Wolff warned about the plot during a secret meeting at the Vatican in May 1944.

Hitler ordered the kidnapping, according to the book, because he feared that Pope

Pius would speak out about Nazi actions against the Jews, and in particular against a proposed Nazi roundup of the Jewish community in Rome. Hitler was afraid the pope's words could trigger a "revolution" against the Nazis in Italy, worldwide and even within the Germany army, about 40 percent of which was made up of Catholics.

Pope Pius, for his part, was afraid that a strong public stand against the Nazis would force Hitler to take action against the Vatican and would also endanger the many Jews being sheltered in Italian monasteries, churches and convents.

The pope's behind-the-scenes actions also brought the roundup of Roman Jews to a halt, Mr. Kurzman said. Only about 1,000 of the 8,000 Jews living in Rome at the time were deported to Nazi concentration camps, he said.
Mr. Kurzman, who worked as a foreign correspondent for The Washington Post during the 1960s and early '70s, was the first journalist to interview Wolff in 1970 after the former general was allowed to return to his home town of Darmstadt in Germany. Wolff died in 1984.

"He claimed to me that he didn't know Jews were being murdered, which was of course a lie," Mr. Kurzman said. "He tried to close his mind to the reality" of the Holocaust by saying that his job was only to get the trains to destinations like Dachau and Treblinka on time, while ignoring what was happening to those who arrived at the Nazi concentration camps, the author added.

Although the Nazis were careful not to put any details of the plot to kidnap Pope Pius XII into writing, and Mr. Kurzman has not seen materials in the Vatican Secret Archives from that period, he said the plot and other details about the pope's actions during World War II were confirmed to him by Jesuit Father Peter Gumpel, who had read the archival material as "relator," or chief investigator, for Pope Pius' sainthood cause.

Despite criticism from some Jewish groups, work on the sainthood cause for Pope Pius XII has continued in recent years. In a vote Father Gumpel called "unanimous and totally positive," the Congregation for Saints' Causes recommended May 8 that Pope Benedict XVI formally declare the World War II-era pope venerable.

Mr. Kurzman, who has written 16 other books, said he had no opinion on whether

Pope Pius XII should be beatified or canonized, but wanted to clear up certain untruths contained in "Hitler's Pope," a 1999 book by English author John Cornwell.

"He was a human being and he made mistakes, but I found no evidence that he was anti-Semitic," Mr. Kurzman said of Pope Pius. He said a letter cited by Cornwell containing an anti-Semitic remark was not written by the pope but by an aide and did not reflect the pope's views.