

## VALERIAN TRIFA

*Date:* 1984, *Location:* Green Lake, Michigan

*Significance:* The first American citizen to be deported for war crimes,

Archbishop Valerian Trifa had his background mercilessly exposed in a most unexpected and ingenious manner.

In the years after World War II, the United States opened its arms to a vast wave of European immigrants. Most had endured unimaginable levels of hardship and deprivation; a few had not. For this tiny minority, migration to America meant more than a chance to carve out a new life; it was their opportunity to bury the sins of the past.

One such man was Rumanian-born Viorel Trifa. Arriving from Italy, he entered the United States on July 17, 1950. Immigration officials listened with sympathy as this thirty-six-year-old priest of the Rumanian Orthodox Church recounted harrowing details of his ordeal in Nazi concentration camps. They granted him immediate residency status. Trifa moved to the Detroit area, where thousands of his countrymen had settled. Ambitious and impatient, he advanced quickly through the church hierarchy, and in 1952, he was consecrated as a bishop. At the same time, he adopted the first name of Valerian, a saint who was commemorated every January 21. It was a date that had figured prominently in the life of the man from Rumania.

In 1957, Trifa was naturalized as a U.S. citizen. Thereafter, outside the confines of his church, he was virtually unknown and anonymous, and he probably would have remained so had it not been for the unstinting efforts of a few people determined to ensure that justice would be done.

The first uneasy murmurings about Bishop Valerian Trifa had surfaced in 1952. Letters received by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) contained accusations that not only had Trifa been a Nazi sympathizer in wartime Rumania, but that he had instigated the Bucharest pogrom of 1941. Why, asked the writers, since the 1948 Displaced Persons Act forbade entry to "any person who advocated or assisted in the persecution of any person because of race, religion or national region," had this murderer been allowed entry into the United States? Surely having perjured himself on his entry application, he was now liable to deportation? This was not a belief shared by the INS. They brushed aside every allegation, saying, "This Service cannot interfere in religious matters."

### **Brutal Pogrom**

To describe the events in Bucharest in 1941 as "religious matters" was stretching incredulity to the breaking point. On January 21 — St. Valerian's hordes of green-shirted Iron Guard, Rumania's virulently pro-Nazi political party, scythed through the Jewish quarter of Bucharest, laying waste to everyone and everything. The madness lasted three days and left almost six thousand dead. An eyewitness wrote, "Perhaps the most horrifying single episode was the 'kosher butchering' of more than 200 Jews in the municipal slaughterhouse. The Greenshirts forced them to undress and led them to the chopping block, where they cut their throats in a horrible parody of the traditional Jewish methods of slaughtering fowl and livestock."'

Among the leaders of this massacre was a squat, heavily built man named Viorel Trifa. Later that year, to escape reprisals, Trifa sought and received sanctuary in Germany. Tried *in absentia* for his part in the atrocities, he was condemned to life imprisonment with hard labor. His whereabouts for the postwar years were shrouded in mystery until his arrival in America in 1950. For two decades, campaigners waged an unceasing struggle to have Trifa's citizenship revoked. Finally, in 1975, the U.S. Department of Justice instituted deportation proceedings against Trifa, alleging that he concealed material facts in obtaining his citizenship.

By this time, Trifa had been elevated to the rank of archbishop and was in no mood to surrender easily to governmental pressure. In 1980, stripped at last of his citizenship, he admitted membership in the Iron Guard but insisted that claims of high-level connections with Nazis were nonsense. Then, in May 1982, came the evidence that undid him. After searching its archives, the West German government made available to the FBI's Identification Division numerous documents pertaining to Trifa. One such document was a postcard, dated June 14, 1942, allegedly authored by Trifa and addressed to Heinrich Himmler, head of the Nazi SS. Trifa emphatically denied writing the card.

Mindful of Bonn's request that the card not be damaged or defaced, the FBI fingerprint department turned to its latest weapon. With laser technology, a sample can be examined for prints without being dusted or treated in any other way. The argon laser is turned on, and the sample passes under the viewing area. By looking through a protective filtering lens, the examiner can detect latent fingerprints. In this case, the postcard yielded a clear impression of a left thumbprint. When compared to Trifa's, it was identical. The disgraced archbishop's forty-year-old lie was over.

On August 13, 1984, Valerian Trifa left the United States for good. He settled in Portugal, undisturbed by the authorities.

### **Conclusion**

Of the millions of Jews slaughtered in World War II, 425,000 were Rumanian. Those who survived the horror of Bucharest in 1941 wanted only one thing: justice. Few could have imagined that they find it in a high-tech beam of light.